Executive Summary

The Melbourne, Victoria (VIC) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants, recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and word of mouth in Melbourne, VIC. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs or drug use in the general population. **In 2023, data were collected from April to June. Interviews between 2020 and 2023 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone and video conference, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission; all interviews prior to 2020 were conducted face-to-face. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2023 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The EDRS sample (N=100) recruited from Melbourne was similar to the sample in 2022 and in previous years. The gender distribution was similar in 2022 and 2023, with 54% identifying as male (52% in 2022), and participants had a median age of 29 years, a significant increase from 2022 (25 years; p=0.006). Significantly more participants (p=0.005) reported being in full-time employment in 2023 (51%; 29% in 2022), and fewer reported part time/casual employment (32%; 52% in 2022). Most participants held tertiary qualifications (71%; 62% in 2022). The distribution of participants' accommodation status was similar in 2023 and 2022, with 69% of the sample reporting living in a rental house/flat (69% in 2022) or residing with their parents/at their family home (19%; 26% in 2022) at the time of interview. There was a significant change in drug of choice between 2022 and 2023 (p=0.032), with more participants nominating ecstasy (32%; 18% in 2022). There was also a significant change in

the drug used most often in the month preceding interview between 2022 and 2023 (p=0.004), with more participants (27%) nominating ecstasy (7% in 2022).

Ecstasy

In 2023, a significantly higher proportion of participants reported recent (in the six months prior to interview) use of any ecstasy (99%; 90% in 2022; p=0.010). Frequency of use increased for ecstasy capsules, from a median of three days in the previous six months (IQR=2–7) in 2022 to five days (IQR=3–10) in 2023 (p=0.041). The perceived availability of pills and capsules increased significantly between 2022 and 2023 (p=0.011 and p<0.001, respectively): more participants perceived availability to be 'very easy' in 2023 (28%; 9% in 2022, 40%; 10% in 2022, respectively). The median reported price of ecstasy capsules increased significantly from $25 (IQR=20–30) in 2022 to $30 (IQR=25–30) in 2023 ($p$=0.017).

Methamphetamine

Twenty-nine per cent of the Melbourne sample reported recent use of any methamphetamine, a significant decrease from 2022 (49%; p=0.008). Frequency of use remained stable at a median of two days use in the previous six months in 2023 (3 days in 2022). Recent use of methamphetamine powder significantly decreased from 45% in 2022 to 23% in 2023 (p=0.002). Thirteen per cent of the sample reported recent crystal methamphetamine use. Methamphetamine powder was largely reported to be 'very easy' to obtain (43%).

Non-Prescribed Pharmaceutical Stimulants

The percentage of participants reporting any recent non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulant (e.g., dexamphetamine, methylphenidate, modafinil) use has increased since the commencement of monitoring, from

9% in 2007 to 47% in 2023, although the figure for 2023 represents a significant decrease from 64% in 2022 (p=0.022).

Cocaine

Reports of recent use of cocaine have increased over the years of monitoring, to 90% in 2023. Frequency of reported use remained similar to previous years, at five days in the previous six months. The median price of a gram of cocaine was reported as $350 in 2023, similar to previous years.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

Sixty-seven per cent of the sample reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis in 2023, a significant decrease from 2022 and the lowest recorded in the Melbourne EDRS (82% in 2022; p=0.021). Frequency of use also significantly decreased from a median of 33 days of use in the previous six months in 2022 to 24 days in 2023 (p=0.045). Weekly or more frequent use amongst those who reported recent non-prescribed cannabis use remained stable at 51%.

Non-prescribed Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine remained stable at 82% in 2023, although frequency of use in the previous six months significantly decreased from a median of 10 days in 2022 to six days in 2023 (p=0.003). There was a significant difference in the perceived availability of ketamine from 2022 to 2023 (p<0.001), with more participants reporting it to be 'very easy' to obtain (42%; 15% in 2022). Recent use of LSD remained stable, with 55% reporting recent use. There was a significant fall in the proportion of participants reporting LSD purity to be 'high' in 2023 (39%; 59% in 2022, p=0.049). The median frequency of use of LSD remained low in 2022 at two days. Few

participants (n≤5) reported recent use of DMT in 2023, a significant decrease from 18% in 2022 (p=0.007).

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Twelve per cent reported recent use of any NPS (including plant-based NPS) in 2022. Dissociatives were the most frequently reported NPS used in 2023 (7%).

Other Drugs

Reports of recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines significantly decreased from 47% in 2022 to 31% in 2023 (p=0.033). There was also a significant decrease in reported recent use of hallucinogenic mushrooms (49%; 64% in 2022; p=0.049). Recent use of tobacco also decreased significantly in 2023, to 56% (71% in 2022; p=0.044).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

Most participants (86%) reported concurrent use of two or more drugs on the last occasion of ecstasy or other drug use, most commonly stimulants and depressants. Two-thirds (66%) of participants reported ever having tested the contents of their illicit drugs in Australia, with 51% reporting doing so in the past year, most commonly using colorimetric or reagent test kits (90%). Hazardous alcohol use remained common, with 74% of the sample scoring above the hazardous range in the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). Fourteen per cent reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose, and 17% a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol), in the past year. Few participants reported past month injecting drug use in 2023, and small numbers (n≤5) reported receiving drug treatment. Four-fifths (80%) reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past four weeks, of whom 82% reported use of alcohol/drugs before or during sexual activity, and 14% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they

did not know the HIV status of their partner. Half (52%) of the sample self-reported experiencing a mental health problem in the preceding six months. Of those participants, the most common problems identified were anxiety (71%) and depression (67%). Of those who had driven a motor vehicle in the past six months and commented (n=79), 16% reported driving while over (what they perceived to be) the legal blood alcohol concentration, while 30% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed substance (most commonly cannabis). Twenty-nine per cent of participants reported 'any' crime in the past month in 2023, with property crime being the main form of self-reported criminal activity (23%), followed by drug dealing (15%). The most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit drugs remained social networking applications (82%), followed by face-to-face (63%). Almost all (97%) participants reported obtaining illicit drugs face-to-face. Almost all (97%) of the sample reported having been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the 12 months preceding interview in 2023, with 86% reporting having been diagnosed with COVID-19. All (100%) participants reported that they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine (median of three doses).