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## Examining differences between younger and older injecting drug users (IDU) in the 2003 National IDRS sample.

### Key Points

- Younger IDU were more likely to be female and the older IDU were more likely to have a prison history and be unemployed.
- Younger IDU reported initiating injecting earlier, consistent with other research indicating a decline in the age of initiation of drug use.
- Younger IDU were more likely to report methamphetamine as the first drug they injected and their drug of choice.
- Patterns of drug use were similar, although younger IDU were more likely to have used the more potent forms of methamphetamine, base and ice.
- Frequency of drug use was similar among the younger and older IDU.
- Younger IDU were more likely to report engaging in risk behaviours and harm associated with their drug use.

Participants of the 2003 IDRS survey were regular IDU residing in the capital city of each state and territory. All participants in the survey were recruited using the same eligibility criteria. For more detail on the IDRS project and the 2003 National and Jurisdiction results refer to the NDARC website (<http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/ndarc.nsf/website/IDRS>). This bulletin provides a closer look at the injecting drug user (IDU) survey results, focusing on differences between younger and older IDU. An analysis of the effects of age was carried out as it was hypothesised that there may be differences between the more experienced older IDU and younger IDU surveyed. A similar analysis was conducted on the party drug users in the Party Drugs Initiative study and reported in the April Bulletin (<http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/ndarc.nsf/website/IDRS.partydrugs>).

Data from each of the jurisdictions was pooled, and the national 2003 data was split into two groups based on the median age of the national sample (32 years). The younger group comprised participants between 16-31 years and the older group were between 32-62.

An analysis of demographic data revealed some differences between the two groups (Table 1). The older IDU were significantly more likely to be male than the younger IDU. Older IDU were more likely to have a prison history and be unemployed than younger IDU.

Similar proportions of younger and older IDU identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and similar proportions also reported current involvement in sex work. There were no differences between younger and older IDU in their likelihood of being in some form of drug treatment.

**Table 1:**  
**Demographics**

	Younger IDU <32 years n=468	Older IDU 32+ years n=502
% male	60	68*
% ATSI	15	14
% sex work	7	7
% unemployed	73	79*
% completed Yr 12	2	3
% in treatment	39	42
% prison history	33	52**

\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

\*\* significant at  $p < 0.001$

The younger IDU reported initiation of injecting an average of three years earlier than older IDU (Table 2). The younger IDU were more likely to report methamphetamine (speed, base and crystal) as the drug they had first injected, while the older IDU reported heroin. The older IDU were also more likely to report heroin as their drug of choice. Consistent with drug of choice, larger proportions of young IDU reported methamphetamine as the drug they had used most in the month preceding interview, while more older IDU reported heroin. It could be argued that the drug of choice may be reflective of the range of drugs the user had ever tried, however, both younger and older IDU were polydrug users that had used a range of drugs. There was no difference in the number of drugs tried in their lifetime or the number of drugs used in the six months preceding interview.

**Table 2:**  
**Drug use history**

	Younger IDU <32 years n=468	Older IDU 32+ years n=502
<b>Mean age first injected</b>	17.4	20.7*
<b>Drug first injected</b>		
% heroin	34	48*
% methamphetamine	54	45**
% morphine	8	3
<b>Drug of choice</b>		
% heroin	53	62**
% methamphetamine	26	20***
% morphine	5	6
% cannabis	6	5
<b>Drug of choice injected most in last month</b>		
% heroin	39	43
% methamphetamine	37	31
% morphine	10	15
# drugs ever tried	11.2	11.7
# drugs used recently	7.2	6.8

\* significant at  $p < 0.001$     \*\* significant at  $p < 0.01$     \*\*\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

The majority of younger and older IDU reported lifetime use of heroin, however older IDU were significantly more likely to have used heroin (Table 3). Recent heroin use (i.e. in the past six months) was similar among younger and older IDU. Younger IDU were more likely than older IDU to have used the more potent forms of methamphetamine, base and ice, that have come on the market in recent years.

Larger proportions of the younger IDU identified ice as the form of methamphetamine that they had used most in the six months preceding interview (47% younger vs 40% older). More of the older IDU reported speed as the form they had used most (30% younger vs 41% older).

Older IDU were more likely to report lifetime use of cocaine although equal proportions of younger and older IDU reported recent use.

There were also some differences in the use of pharmaceuticals among younger and older IDU. Younger IDU were more likely to report the recent use of benzodiazepines. More older IDU reported they had used illicit methadone at some time in their life. Licit use was defined as use of a drug from a prescription in their own name; illicit use includes buying on the street or using a friend's/family member's prescribed medication. The younger IDU were more likely to have used and injected illicit buprenorphine in the six months preceding interview than older IDU.

Frequency of use was remarkably similar between the groups for most drugs, however younger IDU reported more frequent use of cannabis.

**Table 3:**  
**Patterns of recent drug use among younger and older IDU**

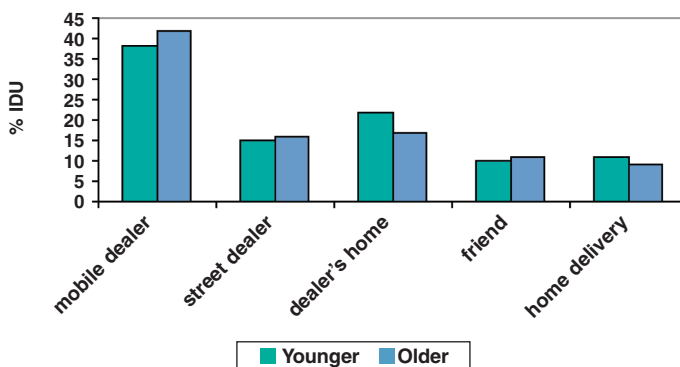
	Younger IDU <32 years n=468	Older IDU 32+ years n=502
<b>Heroin</b>		
% ever used	86	94*
% used last 6 months	62	68
Median days used	72	72
<b>Speed</b>		
% ever used	89	90
% used last 6 months	57	53
Median days used	10	10
<b>Base</b>		
% ever used	63	52**
% used last 6 months	40	30**
Median days used	7	10
<b>Crystal</b>		
% ever used	78	68*
% used last 6 months	61	47*
Median days used	10	12
<b>Cocaine</b>		
% ever used	61	74*
% used last 6 months	18	18
Median days used	3	4
<b>Cannabis</b>		
% ever used	97	96
% used last 6 months	84	82
Median days used	180	160**
<b>Benzodiazepines</b>		
% ever used	83	82
% used last 6 months	68	61**
% injected last 6 months	18	16
Median days used	24	24
<b>Illicit Methadone</b>		
% ever used	38	47**
% used last 6 months	19	21
Median days used	6	6
<b>Illicit Buprenorphine</b>		
% ever used	19	15
% used last 6 months	14	9**
% injected last 6 months	11	7**
Median days used	3.5	3

\* significant at  $p < 0.001$  \*\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

The vast majority of IDU had used drugs the day prior to interview (94% of younger and older IDU). There was no difference in the amount that younger and older users had spent on drugs the day prior to interview. On average younger IDU spent \$115 and older IDU spent \$114.

Similar proportions of younger and older IDU reported sourcing heroin from mobile dealers, street dealers and the dealer's home (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
**Usual source heroin**



An analysis of problems associated with injecting drug use suggests that older IDU were significantly less likely to report they had lent others their needles, less likely to report sharing other injecting equipment, and less likely to report injection related problems (Table 4).

Older IDU were also less likely to report having committed a crime in the past month and were less likely to have been arrested in the year preceding interview. Similar proportions reported having attended a mental health professional for issues other than drug dependence.

**Table 4:**  
**Self reported problems among younger and older IDU**

	Younger IDU <32 years n=468	Older IDU 32+ years n=502
<b>Problems in the past month</b>		
% overdosed	5	2
% borrowed needles	8	9
% lent needles	20	13*
% shared equipment	38	31**
% reporting injection related problems	72	63*
% any crime	53	45**
% arrested in past year	43	34**
% attended mental health professional in past six months	29	28

\* significant at  $p < 0.01$  \*\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

## Conclusions

There were differences and similarities identified in the 2003 National sample between younger and older IDU. Larger proportions of the younger IDU were female. Older IDU were more likely to be unemployed and have a prison history than younger IDU.

The younger IDU reported earlier initiation of drug use consistent with previous research indicating a decline in the age of initiation to drug use in Australia (Degenhardt, Lynskey and Hall, 2000).

Both groups were polydrug users, reporting they had tried a similar number of drugs in their lifetime and in the past six months. However, younger IDU were more likely to report methamphetamine as the first drug they injected and their drug of choice, while older IDU reported heroin. Consistent with this finding, younger IDU were more likely than older IDU to have used the more potent forms of methamphetamine, base and ice, that have come on the market in recent years. In addition to this larger proportions of younger IDU reported ice as the form of methamphetamine they had used most in the six months preceding interview. However substantial proportions of the older IDU also reported ice as the form most used, evidence to support the recent increase in the use and availability of this drug.

Frequency of use was remarkably similar between the groups for most drugs, however younger IDU reported more frequent use of cannabis. In addition younger and older IDU reported spending similar amounts of money on drugs on the day before interview. However there is some indication that younger users engage in more risky behaviours and report more harm associated with their drug use than older users. Younger IDU were more likely to report lending needles, sharing equipment and committing crime in the past month than older users. They were also more likely to report harms associated with drug use including injection related problems and having been arrested. Harm reduction strategies targeting younger users are needed to address the higher rates of lending needles and sharing equipment.

## References

Degenhardt, L., Lynskey, M. & Hall, W. (2000) Cohort trends in the age of initiation of drug use in Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 24 (4), 421-426.