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Drug Use Trends Among Injecting Drug Users (IDU) Findings from the Australian Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) Survey, 1999-2003

Key Points

- Heroin was the most frequently reported last drug injected in all years except 2001 and was most commonly reported in Victoria. Reports of heroin injection decreased considerably from 2000 (56%) to 2001 (30%), then increased marginally to 36% in 2002 and 2003.
- Reports of amphetamine as the drug last injected increased from 2001 following the nationwide reduction in availability of heroin and remained stable at 33% in 2003. Amphetamine was reported most frequently as the drug last injected in South Australia and Queensland in most years.
- Reporting cocaine as the type of drug last injected remained low around one to two percent during the period except 2001 (7%) and was reported most commonly in New South Wales every year.
- Morphine injection increased annually from 1999 (4%) to 2003 (9%), and was reported as the drug last injected most frequently by respondents from the Northern Territory in all years.
- Reports of methadone as the drug last injected increased from 1999 (3%) to 2003 (6%), and was reported most commonly in Tasmania every year.

Introduction

Since 1995, the collaboration of Australian Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) has participated in sentinel surveillance of drug injecting and related risk behaviour and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) prevalence among injecting drug users (IDUs). The surveys are carried out annually over one week in October. All clients attending selected NSPs complete a brief self-administered anonymous questionnaire and provide a finger-prick blood sample for HIV and HCV antibody testing. This issue of the *Drug Trends Bulletin* reports National, and State and Territory drug trends in the Australian NSP Survey from 1999 to 2003. The number of participating NSPs increased annually from 1999 (34) to 2003 (48) and recruited around 2,500 respondents each year. Over the period, the survey response rate ranged from 42% to 50% (see sample distribution by jurisdiction on page 3).

National Trends

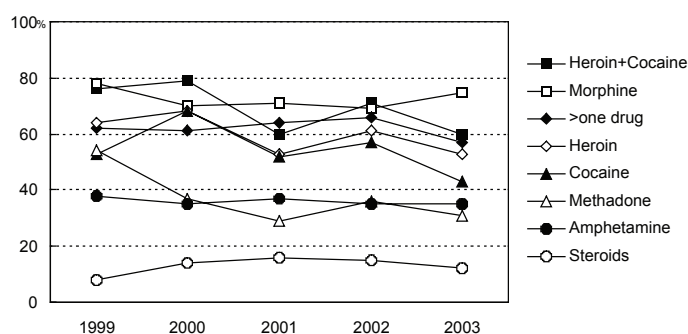
Demographic characteristics

In each year, around two-thirds of the respondents were male. The median age at the time of the survey and duration of drug injection respectively increased annually from 2000 (28 and 8 years) to 2003 (31 and 11 years). This trend, coupled with a decline in the proportion of young survey respondents (<25 years), possibly reflects an aging cohort of IDUs attending participating NSPs. The median age of first drug injection (18 years) remained stable.

Frequency of injection

The proportion of respondents reporting daily or more frequent drug injection in the preceding month decreased from 1999 (55%) to 2003 (46%). Respondents from Queensland (44%), Tasmania (45%) and South Australia (49%) were less likely than those from other jurisdictions (ranging from 53%, Western Australia to 71%, Northern Territory) to report daily or more frequent injection. The prevalence of daily or more frequent drug injection was higher among respondents reporting morphine or heroin with cocaine as the type of drug last injected than other drugs (Figure 1). In 2003, morphine (75%) and heroin with cocaine (60%) injectors reported more frequent injection than poly drug (57%), heroin (53%) or cocaine (43%) injectors.

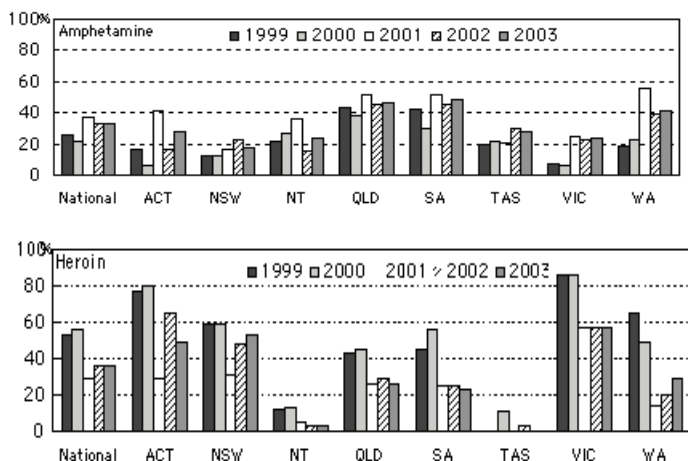
Figure 1:
Prevalence of daily or more frequent drug injection last month by type of drug last injected and year of survey



Amphetamine injection

Nationally, reporting of amphetamine as the type of drug last injected was higher in recent years (33% in 2003) than in the period immediately prior to the reduced availability of heroin between December 2000 and January 2001 (22% in 2000, Table 1). Levels of amphetamine injection were similar between 2002 and 2003 in most jurisdictions except in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and the Northern Territory (Figure 2). Reporting of amphetamine injection increased from 2002 to 2003 in the Australian Capital Territory (16% to 28%) and the Northern Territory (15% to 24%) and decreased in New South Wales (23% to 18%).

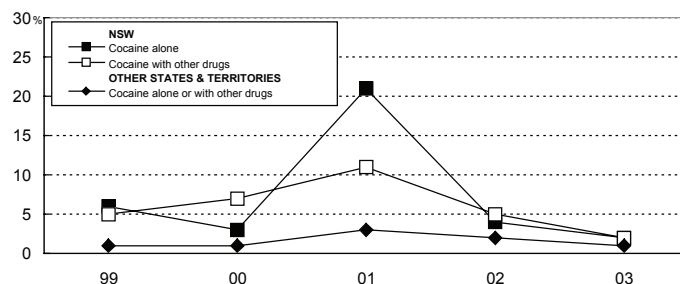
Figure 2:
Prevalence of amphetamine and heroin injection by jurisdiction, 1999-2003



Cocaine injection

Over the period 1999 to 2003, cocaine injection was most frequently reported in New South Wales (7%). One percent or less was reported from other jurisdictions and zero in Tasmania. In New South Wales, cocaine injection increased in 2001 (21%), then decreased in 2002 (3%) and 2003 (2%, Figure 3). There was also decreased reporting of cocaine injection in combination with another drug, usually heroin, from 2001 to 2003 (10% to 2%). In 2003, cocaine injection in combination with heroin was reported by one percent or less of respondents from Queensland, South Australia and Victoria, but it was not reported in the remaining jurisdictions.

Figure 3:
Prevalence of cocaine injection in NSW and other jurisdictions, 1999-2003



Heroin injection

Prior to the period of reduced heroin availability, heroin was the most frequently reported type of drug last injected (Table 1). Reports of heroin injection decreased considerably from 2000 (56%) to 2001 (30%), then increased marginally in recent years (36%). This pattern was found in most jurisdictions except the Northern Territory and Tasmania. In 2003, the proportion reporting last injecting heroin was higher in Victoria (58%), New South Wales (53%) and the Australian Capital Territory (50%) than in other jurisdictions. There were very low levels of heroin injection reported in Northern Territory (3%) and Tasmania (1%) in 2003 and this decreased from 1999 to 2003 (Figure 2).

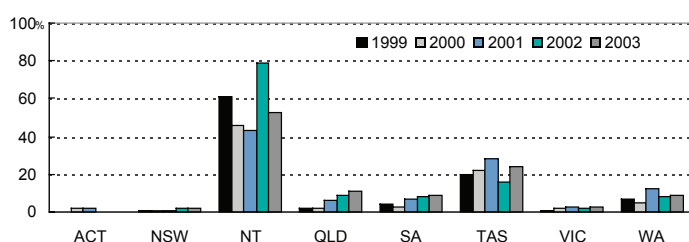
Methadone injection

Nationally, reporting of methadone injection was similar in 2003 (6%) to 2002 (7%). Most jurisdictions also reported similar levels of methadone injection in 2002 and 2003 except Northern Territory (increased from zero to 8%) and Western Australia (decreased from 5% to <1%). Methadone injection was reported most commonly in Tasmania in all years (ranging from 15% to 40%).

Morphine injection

Reporting of morphine as the type of drug last injected increased from 1999 (4%) to 2003 (9%). Reports of morphine injection increased from 1999 to 2003 in Queensland (2% to 9%) and South Australia (4% to 8%). In each year, the proportion reporting last injecting morphine was higher in the Northern Territory (ranging from 43% to 79%) and Tasmania (17% to 29%) than in other jurisdictions (less than 10%, Figure 4).

Figure 4:
Prevalence of morphine injection by jurisdiction, 1999-2003



Anabolic steroid injection

Reporting of anabolic steroid as the type of drug last injected was infrequent and remained stable at two percent (Table 1)

Table 1:
Type of drug last injected, 1999-2003

| | 1999 n=2491 | 2000 n=2694 | 2001 n=2454 | 2002 n=2445 | 2003 n=2495 |
|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Amphetamine (%)* | 26 | 22 | 37 | 33 | 33 |
| Anabolic Steroids (%) | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Cocaine (%) | 2 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 1 |
| Heroin (%)** | 53 | 56 | 30 | 36 | 36 |
| Methadone (%) | 3 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 6 |
| Morphine (%) | 4 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 9 |
| > one drug (%) | 8 | 10 | 11 | 10 | 8 |
| Other drugs (%) | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Not reported (%) | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |

“Other” drugs

In each year, a small proportion of respondents reported benzodiazepines (<1%) as the type of drug last injected. Reporting of buprenorphine injection remained low in 2003 (0.6%) and was reported most commonly in Victoria in both 2002 (5%) and 2003 (3%). A minority of respondents in the Australian Capital Territory (2%), the Northern Territory (2%), Queensland (0.3%) and New South Wales also reported buprenorphine injection in 2003, but it was not reported in the other States.

Summary

Reporting of last drug injected generally remained stable between 2002 and 2003 following considerable variation in 2001 as a consequence of reduced heroin availability. Patterns of drug injection also varied between jurisdictions, most likely reflecting local market conditions, including availability of different types of drugs. Reporting of daily or more frequent injection in the month prior to survey decreased from 1999 to 2003, and was highest among respondents who reported morphine or heroin with cocaine as the drug last injected.

Sample size distribution

The number of IDU surveyed varied between jurisdictions and across years. Some jurisdictions have been omitted from comparisons due to small sample size. Please refer to the table below for sample sizes by jurisdiction, 1999-2003

| Jurisdiction | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| ACT | 94 | 163 | 44 | 62 | 60 |
| NSW | 907 | 911 | 691 | 760 | 785 |
| NT | 102 | 95 | 94 | 47 | 62 |
| QLD | 834 | 750 | 817 | 715 | 745 |
| SA | 250 | 312 | 276 | 318 | 355 |
| TAS | 25 | 27 | 28 | 151 | 118 |
| VIC | 214 | 293 | 340 | 265 | 237 |
| WA | 86 | 143 | 164 | 127 | 133 |
| Total | 2503 | 2694 | 2454 | 2445 | 2495 |
| <i>Response</i> | <i>45%</i> | <i>50%</i> | <i>46%</i> | <i>42%</i> | <i>45%</i> |
| No of sites | 34 | 35 | 38 | 46 | 48 |