



Key findings from the 2015 IDRS: a survey of people who inject drugs

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KEY FINDINGS

- 888 participants were interviewed for the 2015 IDRS.
- Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice for participants who inject drugs.
- The proportion who reported recent heroin use remained stable however the frequency of heroin use significantly increased. Heroin was reported to be 'very easy' to obtain and of 'low' purity.
- Proportions reporting the recent use of any form of methamphetamine remained stable. An examination of the different forms of methamphetamine shows a significant increase in the recent use of ice/crystal and significant decrease in speed powder. The frequency of use of all forms of methamphetamine remained stable. All forms were considered 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain. Ice/crystal and base were reported as 'high' in purity, while speed powder was of 'medium' purity.
- Nationally, the recent use of cocaine remained stable. NSW remained the only jurisdiction where sizeable numbers of participants were able to comment on cocaine. Recent use, frequency of cocaine use and price remained stable in NSW. Nationally, cocaine was reported as 'very easy' to obtain and the purity considered 'medium'.
- Large proportions reported the recent use of cannabis which remained stable. Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market.
- Extra-medical use and injection of pharmaceutical preparations continued to occur, with jurisdictional differences in patterns observed. Nationally, the proportions reporting the recent use of morphine and oxycodone significantly decreased. Small numbers nationally reported the recent use of fentanyl.
- Sharing of injection equipment was common. Less than half of the participants re-used their own needles in the last month.
- Nearly half of the national sample self-reported having had a mental health problem in the last six months, with depression the most commonly reported, followed by anxiety.
- Over one-third of the national sample reported involvement in a criminal activity in the last month, mainly drug dealing or property crime. Around one-third had been arrested in the last year.

INTRODUCTION

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) monitors emerging trends in the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. In addition to a survey of people who inject drugs (PWID), the annual data collection also includes a survey of key experts (KE) who are professionals in the field of illicit drugs and the analysis of existing indicator data on drug-related issues. Since 2000, all three components of the IDRS were conducted in every state and territory in Australia.

The key findings of the 2015 IDRS participant (PWID) surveys are presented in this bulletin. Regular PWID were recruited as they are considered a sentinel group able to provide information on a range of illicit drug trends and related issues. The information from the PWID survey is therefore not representative of illicit drug use in the general population, and is not representative of other illicit drug users (e.g. in other geographical areas, occasional users, etc), but it is indicative of emerging trends that may warrant further monitoring and/or investigation.

Notes on interpretation:

- 'Recent' refers to the six months preceding interview
- 'Frequency' data refers to the number of days on which those participants had recently used the drug (maximum days = 180)
- ↑ Significant increase ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2014) compared with current year (2015)
- ↓ Significant decrease ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2014) compared with current year (2015)

NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Demographics

In 2015, a total of 888 participants were interviewed for the IDRS survey. The mean age of the participants was 42 years, ranging from 17-71 years. Around two-thirds of the participants were male. The majority were unemployed,

with a mean income of \$426 per week. Nearly half of the participants reported been in current treatment (mainly methadone maintenance). Around half of the participants reported a prison history (Table 1).

Drug use patterns

Among the national sample the mean age of first injecting was 20 years (range 6-55 years). The main drug of choice and drug injected most often in the last month was heroin followed by methamphetamines and morphine. These results are similar to the 2014 IDRS (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the national sample, by jurisdiction, 2014-2015

	National	
	2014 (N=898)	2015 (N=888)
Mean age (years)	41	42
% Male	69	67
% Unemployed	83	83
Mean income/ week (\$)	(N=882) \$416	(N=867) \$426
% Prison history	55	55
% Currently in drug treatment	47	47
Mean age first injected	20	20
% Drug of choice		
Heroin	50	52
Any methamphetamine [#]	24	25
Speed	8	9
Base	2	1
Ice/crystal	14	15
Morphine	10	10
Oxycodone	1	1
Methadone	4	3
Cocaine	1	1
Cannabis	5	4
% Drug injected most often last month		
Heroin	41	41
Any methamphetamine [#]	30	34
Speed	6	5
Base	1	1
Ice/crystal	22	28
Morphine	16	13
Oxycodone	2	1
Methadone	4	4
Cocaine	<1	1

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

[#] includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine

Recent use

Heroin

In 2015, over half (58%) of the national sample reported use in the preceding six months on a median of 90 days (Figure 1 and Table 2). Daily use was reported by 31% of recent heroin users (18% of the national sample). While the proportion who reported recent use of heroin was stable, the frequency of use significantly increased between 2014 and 2015 (72 days versus 90 days).

Methamphetamine

Nationally, the proportions reporting the recent use of any methamphetamine remained stable between 2014 and 2015 (Figure 1). An examination of the different forms of methamphetamine shows a significant increase in the recent use of ice/crystal and significant decrease in speed powder between 2014 and 2015 ($p < 0.05$; Table 2). The proportion of recent base use remained low and stable.

Nationally, the frequency of use of any form of methamphetamine remained stable at 24 days. The proportion of all participants who reported daily use of any form of methamphetamine (among those recently used) was stable at 9% nationally (8% in 2014).

The 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey¹ also found an increase in ice/crystal as the main form used among those who used any methamphetamine in the last 12 months (22% in 2010 to 50% in 2013; AIHW 2014). Data from the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service² also reported an increase in the number of detections and weight for ice/crystal in 2012/13 and 2013/14 (Figure 2).

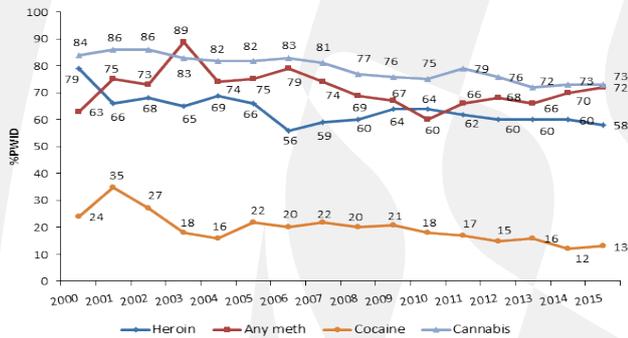
Cocaine

Nationally, the proportion reporting the recent use of cocaine was stable (13%, Figure 1 and Table 2). The frequency of cocaine use was also stable and remained low and sporadic in all jurisdictions except NSW (34% in NSW, 13% or less in the other jurisdictions).

Cannabis

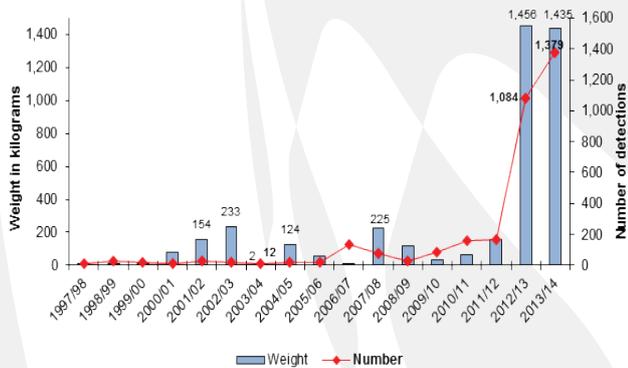
As in previous years of the IDRS, cannabis use among this group was common. Nationally, large proportions (73%) reported recent cannabis use (Figure 1 and Table 2). Frequency of cannabis use increased from 96 days in 2014 to 120 days in 2015, however this result was not significant. Cannabis remained readily available in all jurisdictions. Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market.

Figure 1: Recent use of heroin, any methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis, nationally, 2000-2015



Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

Figure 2: Weight and number of detections of crystalline methamphetamine (ice) made at the border by the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, 2000/01-2013/14



Source: Australia Custom and Border Protection Service

Pharmaceuticals

Nationally, the proportions reporting the recent use of morphine and oxycodone significantly decreased between 2014 and 2015 (Table 2). Morphine remained the most commonly injected pharmaceutical opioid among the national sample (28%). Reports of this

behaviour remained highest in the NT (71%) and TAS (48%), the jurisdictions where heroin has traditionally been the least available. The proportions recently injecting morphine and oxycodone also significantly decreased (morphine: 35% in 2014 to 28% in 2015; oxycodone: 28% in 2014 to 19% in 2015).

Table 2: Recent use of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2014-2015

	National	
	2014 (N=898)	2015 (N=888)
% Recent use		
Heroin	60	58
Any Methamphetamine#	70	72
Speed	30	25 ↓
Base	12	10
Ice	61	67 ↑
Cocaine	12	13
Morphine	37	31 ↓
Oxycodone	33	25 ↓
Fentanyl	9	10
Cannabis	73	73
Median days of use^		
Heroin	72	90 ↑
Any Methamphetamine#	24	24
Speed	6	11
Base	6	7
Ice	20	20
Cocaine	2	4
Morphine	36	35
Oxycodone	11	10
Fentanyl	3	5
Cannabis	96	120

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews
includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine
^ among those who had used; maximum number of days, i.e. daily use = 180

Table 3: Recent use and perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2015

	Heroin (N=471)	Methamphetamine			Cocaine (N=62)	Cannabis	
		Speed (N=178)	Base (N=54)	Ice/crystal (N=501)		Hydro (N=442)	Bush (N=188)
% Availability (n)							
Very easy	49	40	30	56	42	55	34
Easy	39	37	32	39	32	37	42
Difficult	10	19	30	4	21	7	21
Very difficult	2	4	9	1	5	0	4
% Purity/potency (n)							
High	1	28	40	40	27	52	32
Medium	34	34	25	27	39	32	47
Low	42	24	15	15	26	5	15
Fluctuates	14	14	15	18	8	11	6

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

Price, purity and availability

Heroin

The price of heroin varied among the jurisdictions ranging from \$200 (NT; small numbers commenting) to \$600 (WA) for a gram and \$50 (NSW, ACT, VIC, SA, QLD) to \$100 (WA) for a cap. The availability of heroin was reported as 'very easy' to obtain in the last six months. Purity varied with the majority of jurisdictions reporting purity as 'low' (Table 3).

Methamphetamine

Prices for speed powder, base and ice/crystal varied across the jurisdictions. Overall, the three main forms of methamphetamine were generally considered 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain. Four percent (ice/crystal) to 30% (base) nationally also reported all forms as 'difficult' to obtain. Of the three forms, ice/crystal and base were reported to be of 'high' purity, while speed powder was commonly reported to be of 'medium' purity (Table 3).

Cocaine

The price of a cap of cocaine remained stable at \$50 in NSW, which remained the only jurisdiction where sufficient numbers (i.e. >10 people) were able to comment. Nationally, the availability of cocaine was reported as 'very easy' to obtain and the purity as was considered 'medium' (Table 3).

Cannabis

The price per gram varied by type (hydroponic or bush cannabis) and by jurisdiction. Hydroponically grown cannabis continued to dominate the market. The use of bush (outdoor grown) cannabis was also noted in all jurisdictions. The availability of hydroponic cannabis was reported as 'very easy' to obtain while bush cannabis was reported as 'easy' to obtain. The potency of hydroponic cannabis continued to be rated as 'high' and bush cannabis as 'medium' potency (Table 3).

Injecting risk behaviours

Among the national sample, similar proportions to the 2014 IDRS reported either borrowing a needle or lending a needle in the last month. Twenty-four percent of participants reported sharing injecting equipment (excluding needles). The main equipment shared among those who reported sharing other injecting equipment were spoons and tourniquets (62% and 30% respectively). Less than half of the national sample reported re-using their own needle in the last month. The proportion of participants re-using their own injecting equipment remained stable (56% in 2014

and 53% in 2015). Among those who re-used their own injecting equipment the majority reported re-using spoons (81%), followed by tourniquets (42%). The arm was reported as the last site of injection (73%), followed by the hand (13%; Table 4).

Table 4: Injecting risk behaviour in last month, nationally, 2014-2015

	National	
	2014 (N=898)	2015 (N=888)
% Borrowed a needle	6	6
% Lent a needle	12	11
% Shared other injecting equipment [#]	25	24
% Re-used own needle	41	41
% Re-used own injecting equipment	56	53
% Injecting equipment reused [#] (n)	(N=507)	(473)
Spoons	81	81
Filters	9	10
Tourniquets	40	42
Water	15	13
Swabs	3	4
Wheel filters	4	4
Other	2	2
% Last site of injection (n)	(N=868)	(N=852)
Arm	76	73
Leg	4	6
Hand	13	13
Foot	2	1
Groin	2	2
Neck	3	4
Other	1	1

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

[#] includes spoons, water, tourniquets and filters

Self-reported mental health

Nearly half (44%) of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. Among those who self-reported a mental health problem, depression was the most common followed by anxiety. The majority (74%) reported attending a health professional for their self-reported mental health problem (Table 5). No significant differences were found between years.

Criminal activity

Thirty-seven percent of the national sample reported a criminal activity in the last month. The most common criminal activities reported were drug dealing and property crime. Over one-third of the sample had been arrested in the last 12 months (Table 6). No significant differences were found between 2014 and 2015 for involvement in crime in the last month or being arrested in the last 12 months.

Table 5: Self-reported mental health problems experienced in the preceding six months, nationally, 2014-2015

	National	
	2014 (N=882)	2015 (N=843)
% Self-reported mental health problem	39	44
% Problem [#] (n)	(N=346)	(N=371)
Depression	68	70
Anxiety	48	51
Manic-depression/Bipolar	13	13
Schizophrenia	15	13
Panic	11	12
Paranoia	7	7
Drug induced psychosis	7	7
% Attended health professional for mental health problem [#]	72	74

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews
[#] among those who reported a mental health issue

Table 6: Proportion of PWID that reported criminal activity, nationally, 2014-2015

	National	
	2014 (N=898)	2015 (N=888)
% Crime in the last month		
Drug dealing	25	26
Property	18	16
Fraud	4	4
Violence	5	4
Any crime	38	37
% Arrested last 12 months	33	30

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

MORE INFORMATION

For more detailed information on the prevalence of use, price, purity/potency and availability by this group, including key expert and indicator data in each jurisdiction please refer to the national and jurisdictional IDRS Drug Trends annual reports, which will be available through NDARC in early 2016. Previous years' reports are available on the NDARC website, www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au (click on 'Drug Trends').

Participating researchers and research centres

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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