

Executive Summary

The Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and via word-of-mouth in Canberra, ACT. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2023 from April-June. Interviews from 2020 onwards were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, 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 2023 EDRS sample (N=100) recruited from Canberra, ACT, were a significantly younger group compared to 2022 (median 22 years versus median 26 years in 2022; $p=0.008$), although resembled the age observed in 2021 and prior. Gender and sexual identity remained stable in 2023. There was a significant change in employment status between 2022 and 2023 ($p<0.001$), with fewer participants being unemployed (18%; 28% in 2022) and more employed part-time/casual (52%; 34% in 2022) and full-time (29%; 26% in 2022). Ecstasy was most commonly endorsed as the drug of choice (22%) followed by cannabis (15%). One third (33%) of participants reported that cannabis was the drug used most often in the last month, followed by 26% reporting alcohol.

Ecstasy

Recent use of any ecstasy significantly increased in 2023 (96%) relative to 2022 (87%; $p=0.040$), although frequency of use remained

stable at a median of seven days, although remains lower compared to 2020 and prior years. Capsules remained the most commonly used form of ecstasy. In 2023, significantly more participants reported use of the powder form (32%) compared to 2022 (19%; $p=0.038$), although it remained the least commonly used form of ecstasy. The price of a pill increased from \$25 in 2022 to \$30 in 2023 ($p=0.023$) and the price of powder increased from \$200 per gram to \$225 ($p=0.044$). There was a significant change in the perceived availability of capsules ($p=0.001$) and crystal ($p=0.003$). More participants perceived both forms to be 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain in 2023, relative to 2022.

Methamphetamine

Use of any methamphetamine has historically been declining. In 2023, significantly fewer participants reported recent use (23%) relative to 2022 (39%; $p=0.024$). This decrease was driven by the decline in the use of the crystal form (14% versus 31% in 2022; $p=0.006$). Frequency of use of any methamphetamine remained stable at a median of six days, although was higher for methamphetamine crystal (median 24 days). There was no change in the price, perceived purity or availability of methamphetamine powder or crystal in 2023, relative to 2022.

Non-Prescribed Pharmaceutical Stimulants

Half (51%) of the sample reported recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants, the highest percentage since monitoring commenced, although stable relative to 2022. Frequency of use also remained stable at a median of 10 days. The majority (88%) of those who had recently used non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants reported using dexamfetamine. Price and perceived availability remained stable relative to 2022.

Cocaine

In 2023, 78% reported recent cocaine use, stable relative to 2022 (76%). In 2023, participants reported using cocaine on a median of five days, a significant decrease from six days in 2022 ($p=0.043$). The median price for a gram of cocaine has remained stable since 2006 at \$300. The perceived purity and perceived availability of cocaine remained stable between 2022 and 2023.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

At least three in four participants have reported any recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products each year since monitoring commenced. In 2023, 80% reported recent use on a median of 55 days, stable from 2022. There were no significant changes in the price or perceived purity of hydroponic or bush cannabis. There was, however, a significant change in the perceived availability of hydroponic ($p=0.036$) and bush cannabis ($p=0.011$). More participants perceived both forms to be 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain in 2023, relative to 2022.

Non-Prescribed Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of non-prescribed ketamine significantly increased to 56% in 2023 from 39% in 2022 ($p=0.026$), reaching the highest per cent since monitoring commenced. Frequency of use remained stable at a median of five days. There was no change in the price, perceived purity or perceived availability between 2022 and 2023. Recent use of LSD remained stable in 2023 (42%; 31% in 2022). Frequency of use remained low at a median of two days. There was a significant change in the perceived availability of LSD in 2023, relative to 2022 ($p=0.001$). More participants

perceived LSD to be 'difficult' to obtain compared to 2022, and fewer participants perceived it to be 'very difficult'. Recent DMT use (13%) and frequency of use (median: 2 days) remained stable in 2023, relative to 2022.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Eighteen per cent reported recent use of at least one form of NPS (including plant-based NPS), stable relative to 9% in 2022. 2C substances have consistently been the most commonly used NPS with 8% reporting recent use in 2023, a significant increase relative to 2022 ($n\leq 5$; $p=0.035$).

Other Drugs

Half (49%) of the sample reported recent use of hallucinogenic mushrooms, the highest per cent since monitoring commenced, although stable relative to 2022. Seven per cent of the sample reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD on a median of one day in the past six months. Recent use of alcohol (94%) and tobacco (70%) remained stable, although there was a significant decrease in median days of tobacco use from daily use (i.e., 180 days) in 2022 to twice weekly (i.e., 48 days; $p<0.001$) in 2023. Significantly more participants reported recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes in 2023 (72%; 57% in 2022; $p=0.043$), however, median days remained stable at 100 days. Recent use of nitrous oxide (53%) and amyl nitrite (46%) remained stable in 2023, relative to 2022.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, 86% of participants in 2023 reported concurrent use of two or more drugs.
- Significantly more participants reported having tested the contents of their illicit drugs in the 12 months preceding interview (53%; 29% in 2022; $p < 0.001$).
- There was a significant increase in the mean AUDIT score in 2023 relative to 2022 (12.2 versus 11.6 in 2022; $p < 0.001$).
- Seven per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose and 15% a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol) in the 12 months prior to interview, stable relative to 2022.
- Nearly three fifths (58%) reported that they had heard about naloxone.
- Reported past month injecting drug use remained low ($n \leq 5$), as did current drug treatment engagement (6%).
- In 2023, 12% of those who reported recent ecstasy use obtained an SDS score of 3 or more, whilst 35% of participants reporting recent methamphetamine use obtained a score of 4 or more, indicating possible dependence on these substances.
- Three quarters (77%) of the sample reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past four weeks, of which 21% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they did not know the HIV status of their partner. One third (36%) of the sample reported having a HIV test in the six months preceding interview, and 34% reported having a sexual health check-up in the six months prior to interview.
- Mental health remained stable relative to 2022, with 58% (67% in 2022) reporting experiencing a mental health problem in the six months preceding interview, with anxiety (69%) and depression (67%) most commonly reported.
- One fifth (20%) of the sample reported very high psychological distress.
- Three in ten (30%) participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview, and 29% of the sample reported experiencing stigma in any setting in the six months preceding interview.
- In 2023, two thirds (67%) had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, with 32% of participants testing positive to COVID-19 in the 12 months preceding interview.
- Amongst those who had recently driven, one third (32%) reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol and two fifths (41%) reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the prior six months.
- One third (33%) of the sample reported 'any' crime in the past month. Drug dealing and property crime were the main forms of criminal activity reported in 2023. Few participants reported having been arrested in the 12 months preceding interview, however 19% reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest.
- Face-to-face contact was the most popular means of participants arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview (74%; 68% in 2022). Most participants continued to report obtaining illicit drugs from a friend/relative/partner/colleague (84%; 83% in 2022).