

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs ≥ 6 days in the preceding six months and resided in Canberra, ACT. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle and syringe programs (NSP) and other harm reduction services, as well as via peer referral. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in June 2022. Interviews in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were delivered face-to-face and/or via telephone or teleconference calls, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2022 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Canberra, ACT in 2022 was relatively consistent with samples recruited in previous years. The 2022 sample predominantly identified as male (70%) with a mean age of 45 years (SD=10), stable from 2021 (70% male; 44 years; SD=9). The majority (89%) reported being unemployed at the time of interview and most (92%) had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview, similar to previous years. Drug of choice remained stable in 2022, with 49% nominating heroin as their drug of choice (46% in 2021) and 42% nominating methamphetamine (40% in 2021). Almost half (49%) of participants nominated methamphetamine as the drug injected most often in the past month, stable from 47% in 2021. Weekly or more frequent use of heroin, methamphetamine and cannabis remained stable relative to 2021.

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of any heroin was reported by 66% of the 2022 sample, the lowest percentage recorded since monitoring began, although not significantly different to 2021 (78%). Frequency of use was equivalent to every second day (i.e., median of 90 days),

stable relative to 2021 (72 days). Weekly or more frequent use (80%), among those who had recently used heroin, also remained stable relative to 2021 (74%). The median maximum amount of heroin used per day was 0.30 grams which was a significant decrease relative to 2021 (0.50 grams; $p=0.016$). There were no statistically significant changes in the price, perceived purity or perceived availability of heroin relative to 2021.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has remained relatively common over time, with 81% of participants reporting recent use in 2022. This mostly comprised use of methamphetamine crystal (81%). Small numbers reported use of powder and base methamphetamine ($n \leq 5$, respectively), the lowest percentages since monitoring began and significant decreases relative to 2021 (13%; $p=0.001$ and 8%; $p=0.019$, respectively). In 2022, participants reported using methamphetamine on a median of 48 days. The median price for one point (0.10 grams) of crystal methamphetamine remained stable at \$50, as did the perceived purity of crystal methamphetamine. The perceived availability of crystal methamphetamine significantly changed between 2022 and 2021 ($p=0.028$), with more participants perceiving availability as 'very easy' in 2022 compared to 2021 (70% versus 48%, respectively).

Cocaine

Historically, recent use of cocaine has typically been reported by one in five or fewer participants in the Canberra sample. In 2022, 17% of the sample reported using cocaine on a median of two days in the past six months. Injecting and snorting were reported as the most common routes of administration, similar to previous years.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

At least three in four participants have reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or

cannabinoid related products each year since monitoring began (77% in 2022). The median frequency of use remained stable in 2022, at 180 days. Half (54%) of participants who had recently used non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products reported daily use. The price for a gram of hydroponic or bush cannabis remained stable at \$20, respectively. The perceived potency of hydroponic and bush cannabis remained stable in 2022 relative to 2021. Most participants reported potency to be 'high' (hydroponic: 65%; bush: 49%). The perceived availability of hydroponic cannabis significantly changed in 2022 ($p=0.006$) but remained stable for bush cannabis. In 2022, more participants perceived hydroponic cannabis to be 'very easy' to obtain (65% versus 39% in 2021).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Morphine was the most commonly used non-prescribed opioid in 2022 (10%), followed by fentanyl (9%), methadone (8%) and oxycodone (6%). Significantly fewer participants reported recent use of any (i.e., prescribed and/or non-prescribed) buprenorphine-naloxone in 2022 (8%) relative to 2021 (22% in 2021; $p=0.003$).

Other Drugs

Recent use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) was reported by one in ten participants (9%) in 2022, with significantly fewer participants reporting use of 'new' drugs that mimic the effect of cannabis ($n\leq 5$ versus 12% in 2021; $p=0.040$). In 2022, recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical drugs (other than opioids) remained mostly stable. In 2022, 7% reported past six month use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD. The per cent reporting tobacco use remained high and stable (88%) and recent use of alcohol was reported by 62% of participants. Almost one-quarter (23%) of participants reported recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes, most of which contained nicotine (83%).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

Two-thirds (64%) of participants reported using two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding interview. Almost one-fifth (18%) reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, most

commonly heroin (12%). Ninety-three per cent of participants had heard of naloxone, 81% had heard of the take-home naloxone programs and 56% had been trained in naloxone administration. Six per cent reported distributive sharing of needles/syringes in 2022, the lowest percentage since monitoring began, and small numbers ($n\leq 5$) reported receptive sharing in the past month. Three in ten participants (30%) reported any past month injection-related health problems in 2022, stable from 2021 (18%). Fifty-seven per cent of the sample were currently in any drug treatment, stable relative to 2021 (52%). In 2022, significantly fewer participants had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody (41% versus 64% in 2021; $p=0.003$) or RNA/PCR test (27% versus 52% in 2021; $p=0.001$) in the year preceding interview. Nine per cent of participants reported having a current HCV infection. The majority (75%) reported having an HIV test in their lifetime (21% within the past six months). Significantly more participants reported experiencing a mental health condition in the past six months (68% versus 42% in 2021; $p=0.002$), most commonly depression and anxiety. Eighty-seven per cent of those who had driven recently reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months, stable relative to 2021 (86%). In 2022, one-fifth of participants (19%) reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drug(s) in Australia in the past year. Two-fifths (39%) reported past month criminal activity, with property crime (23%) and selling drugs for cash profit (22%) remaining the most common crimes. In 2022, 57% of the sample reported a lifetime prison history, and 15% reported being arrested in the past 12 months, a significant decrease relative to 2021 (28%; $p=0.038$). In 2022, 87% of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 by the time of interview and 25% had been diagnosed with the virus. The majority (62%) of participants were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and 50% reported that they had quarantined for at least seven days due to a positive test or possible exposure in the past 12 months. The majority (85%) had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by the time of interview.