Key findings from the ‘Australians’ Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats’ (ADAPT) Study

BACKGROUND

What are the aims of the ADAPT Study?
The Australians’ Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT) Study is exploring the short and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of Australians who use illicit drugs. Findings will be used to ensure drug-related issues during COVID-19 are better understood and more accurately represented, so as to better inform drug treatment and harm reduction in Australia.

What does the ADAPT Study involve?
Australians who regularly (i.e. at least once a month) used illicit drugs in 2019 were invited to complete an online survey initially and follow-up surveys in 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years and 3 years. Participants could opt to complete the Wave 1 survey only.

What have we found so far?
The information below outlines findings from the 702 eligible participants who completed the Wave 1 survey from 29 April to 15 June 2020.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The ADAPT sample mostly comprised young, well-educated (62% completed tertiary/university qualification) capital city dwellers, although notably one-quarter (25%) of participants reported living in regional/rural/remote areas.

Participants ranged in age from 18-67, with a median age of 25 years. Similar proportions of men and women took part, with 4% of participants identifying as non-binary.

COVID-19 STATUS

Most participants (86%) reported that they had not experienced any COVID-19 symptoms, nor been tested, at the time of interview. 10% had been tested, with no participants reporting that they had tested positive (<1% awaiting results).

10% of the sample were tested for COVID-19

Cannabis and alcohol use had most commonly increased since the beginning of March (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions) as compared to before.

MDMA, cocaine, and ketamine use had most commonly decreased since the beginning of March (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions) as compared to before.

Use of pharmaceutical opioids, GHB, benzodiazepines, e-cigarettes & LSD had most commonly remained stable since the beginning of March.
Most participants continued to receive their drugs in person (76% in Feb 2020 vs 66% past month).

There was a small increase in the proportion of participants who had their illicit drugs delivered to them (36% Feb 2020 vs 41% past month).

There was a small increase in those who did not obtain illicit drugs post March 2020 (4% in Feb 2020 vs 10% in past month).

8% reported injecting any drug since the beginning of March 2020 (10% past year, 16% lifetime).

In response to COVID-19 restrictions (i.e., since March 2020, n=685):
- 25% Stocked up on illicit drugs
- 12% Stocked up on prescribed medications
- 36% Washed hands before handling drugs/money
- 16% Wiped down drug packages with soap/sanitizer
- 11% Prepared drug themselves
- 24% Avoided sharing drug use equipment

Note: 10% reported engaging in other HR behaviours, and 30% reported engaging in none of the listed HR behaviours.

4% reported accessing drug treatment in the past four weeks

3% Tried but were unable to access drug treatment

Mental health services since March 2020
- 37% Had accessed help for mental health reasons in the past four weeks
- 8% Tried but were unable to access mental health services

In response to COVID-19 restrictions (i.e., since March 2020, n=592):
- 23% 24% Mental health (n=592)
- 21% 38% Physical health (n=567)

Note: 10% reported engaging in other HR behaviours, and 30% reported engaging in none of the listed HR behaviours.

4% reported an overdose since the beginning of March 2020 (13% past year, 31% lifetime)
SUMMARY

• The ADAPT sample comprised mostly young, well-educated capital city dwellers. Being a convenience sample, findings from the ADAPT study cannot be considered representative of all people that use drugs.

• Cannabis and alcohol use had most commonly increased relative to before March 2020, while use of MDMA, cocaine and ketamine had most commonly decreased.

• Participants reported engaging in a range of behaviours to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 and/or minimise impact of COVID-19 restrictions since March 2020, including washing hands before handling drugs/money and avoiding sharing drug equipment.

• More than half of participants reported poorer mental health in the past four weeks relative to before March 2020, with almost two-fifths reporting that they had accessed help for mental health reasons in the past four weeks.

• A small proportion of the sample reported that they had tried but been unable to access drug treatment and/or mental health services post March 2020.

• It is critical to continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on different populations who use drugs (e.g., through the SuperMIX and IDRS interviews with people who regularly inject drugs).

• Findings from future surveys of the ADAPT sample will be reported on in future outputs.

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