



ADAPT STUDY

Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

WAVE 2 BULLETIN

OCTOBER 2020

Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats' (ADAPT) Study Wave 2

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 impacts** 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**.

BACKGROUND

What does the ADAPT Study involve?

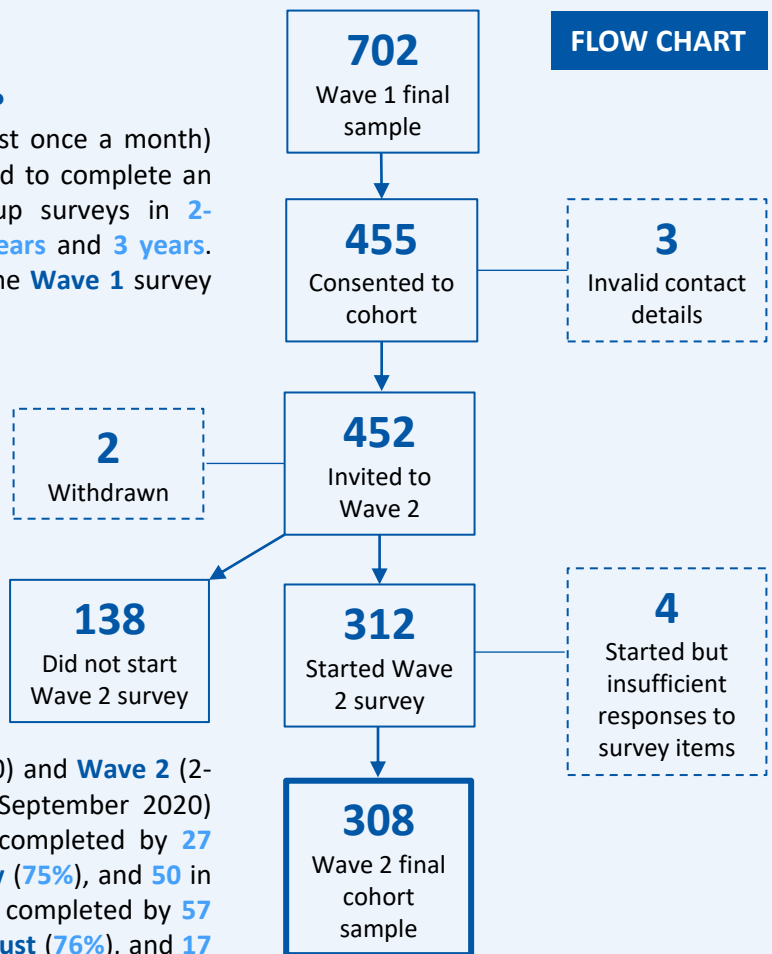
Australians who regularly (i.e. at least once a month) used illicit drugs in 2019 were invited to complete an **online survey** initially and follow-up surveys in **2-months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years** and **3 years**. Participants could opt to complete the **Wave 1** survey only.

What have we found so far?

452 people consented to be followed up over time and provided sufficient information for us to be able to contact them. We invited this group to complete their **Wave 2** survey; **308** completed this survey (**68%**).

This bulletin outlines preliminary findings from the **308** participants who completed both the **Wave 1** (baseline: 29th April – 15th June 2020) and **Wave 2** (2-month follow up; 29th June– 22nd September 2020) surveys. The **Wave 1** survey was completed by **27** participants in **April (9%)**, **231** in **May (75%)**, and **50** in **June (16%)**. The **Wave 2** survey was completed by **57** participants in **July (19%)**, **234** in **August (76%)**, and **17** in **September (6%)**.

FLOW CHART



Citation: Sutherland, R., Baillie, G., Memedovic, S., Hammoud, M., Barratt, M., Bruno, R., Dietze, P., Ezard, N., Salom, C., Degenhardt, L., Hughes, C. & Peacock, A. (2020). Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT)' Study Wave 2. ADAPT Bulletin no. 2. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.



WAVE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF COHORT PARTICIPANTS

The below table presents a comparison of those who were invited and completed or did not complete the **Wave 2** survey. The latter group were **younger, more likely to be male,** and **less likely to have completed tertiary/university qualification** compared to the former; this should be considered in all interpretation of findings.

	Invited and completed Wave 2 survey (n=308)	Invited but did not complete Wave 2 survey (n=144)
Median age (IQR; n)	26 (IQR=22-34; 308)	24 (IQR=21-28; 144)
Gender % (n)		
Women	48.2% (147)	44.4% (63)
Men	45.9% (140)	54.2% (77)
Non-binary	5.2% (16)	1.4% (2)
Sexual orientation % (n)		
Heterosexual	56.8% (168)	59.6% (84)
LGBQ+	43.2% (128)	40.4% (57)
Completed tertiary/university qualification % (n)	65.7% (201)	58.3% (84)
Mental health rating W1 W2 % (n)		
Excellent/very good	18.5% (55) 19.1% (57)	12.9% (15) N/A
Good	20.1% (60) 24.8% (74)	20.7% (24) N/A
Fair/poor	61.4% (183) 56.0% (167)	66.4% (77) N/A
Area% (n)		
Capital city	77.9% (239)	73.4% (105)
Regional/rural/remote	22.1% (68)	26.6% (38)
Jurisdiction % (n)		
NSW	30.8% (95)	31.9% (46)
VIC	29.5% (91)	23.6% (34)
QLD	16.9% (52)	24.3% (35)
WA	8.8% (27)	5.6% (8)
SA	6.8% (21)	5.6% (8)
ACT	2.9% (9)	3.5% (5)
TAS	2.9% (9)	4.9% (7)
NT	1.3% (4)	0.7% (1)
Frequency of illicit drug use in 2019 % (n)		
Monthly	14.0% (43)	6.9% (10)
> Monthly < weekly	15.6% (48)	18.8% (27)
≥ weekly < daily	41.9% (129)	44.5% (63)
Daily	28.6% (88)	29.9% (43)
Drug of choice W1 W2 % (n)		
Cannabis	39.7% (122) 41.8% (124)	39.9% (57) N/A
MDMA	12.4% (38) 11.4% (34)	14.7% (21) N/A
LSD	8.8% (27) 7.4% (22)	7.0% (10) N/A
Alcohol	8.5% (26) 8.1% (24)	8.4% (12) N/A
Methamphetamine	6.8% (21) 6.1% (18)	11.2% (16) N/A
Cocaine	7.8% (24) 8.8% (26)	8.4% (12) N/A



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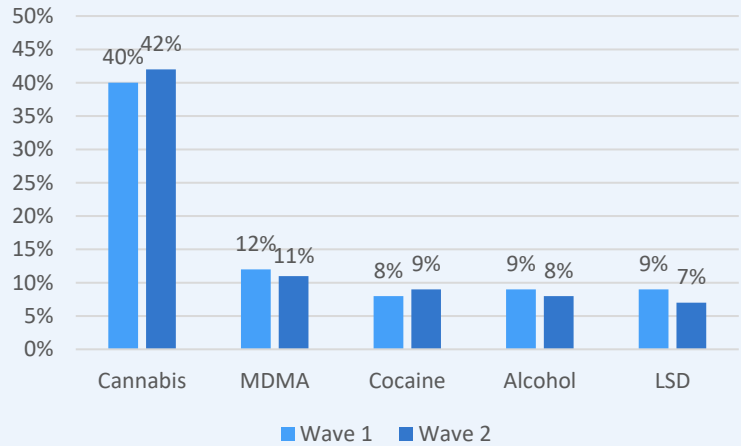
Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

DRUG USE

Cannabis remained the main drug of choice at **Wave 2** (42%, vs 40% at **Wave 1**), followed by **MDMA** (11%, vs 12% at **Wave 1**) and **cocaine** (9%, vs 8% at **Wave 1**).

Of the 308 people who completed both **Wave 1** and **Wave 2**, 13% reported that their **drug of choice** had changed from **Wave 1**.

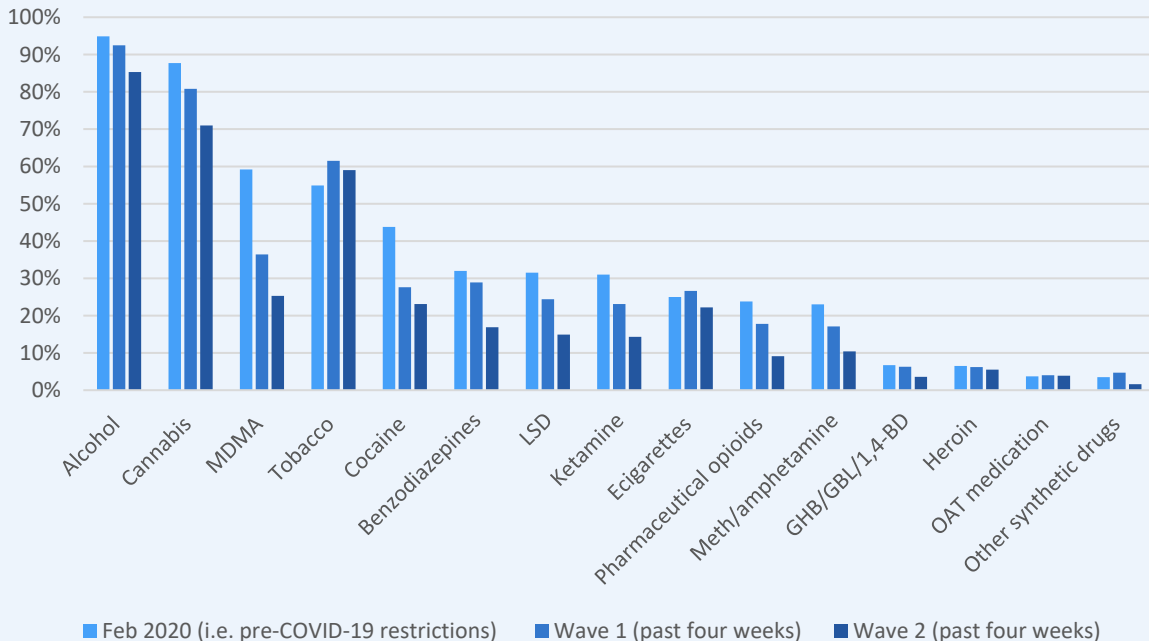
Drug of choice



Most commonly used drugs in the past four weeks

In **Feb 2020** (prior to the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions), the most commonly used drugs were **alcohol** (95%), **cannabis** (88%), and **MDMA** (59%). At **Wave 1** (i.e., post COVID-19 restrictions, approximately April-June) and **Wave 2**, the most commonly used drugs in the past four weeks were **alcohol** (93%, 85%), **cannabis** (81%, 71%) and **tobacco** (62%, 59%).

Substance use in the past four weeks



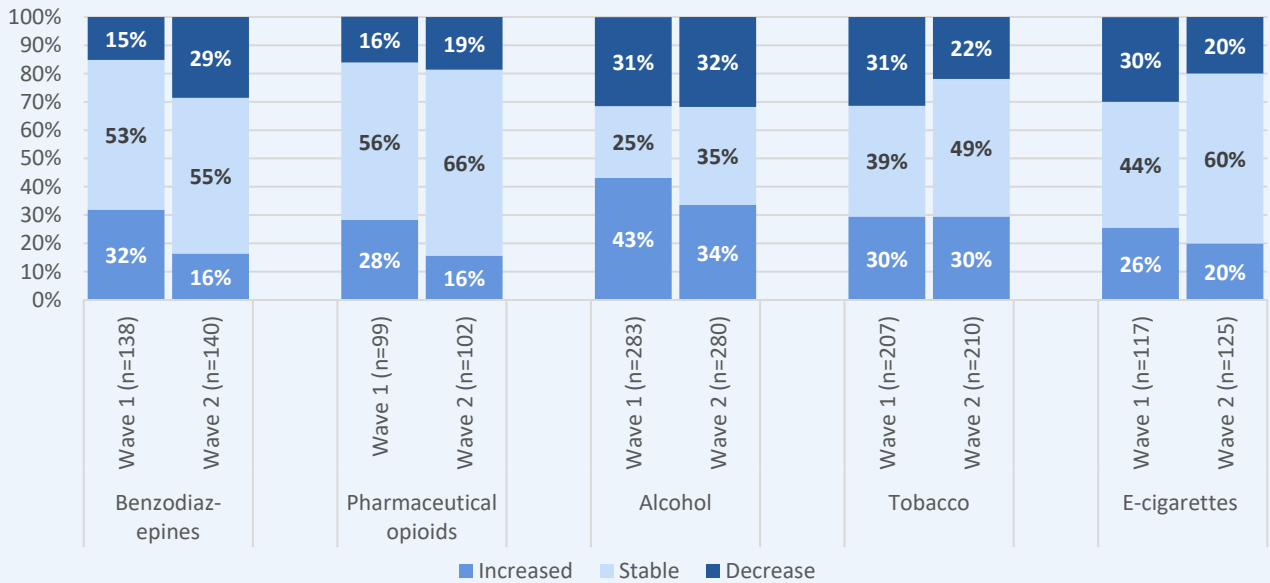
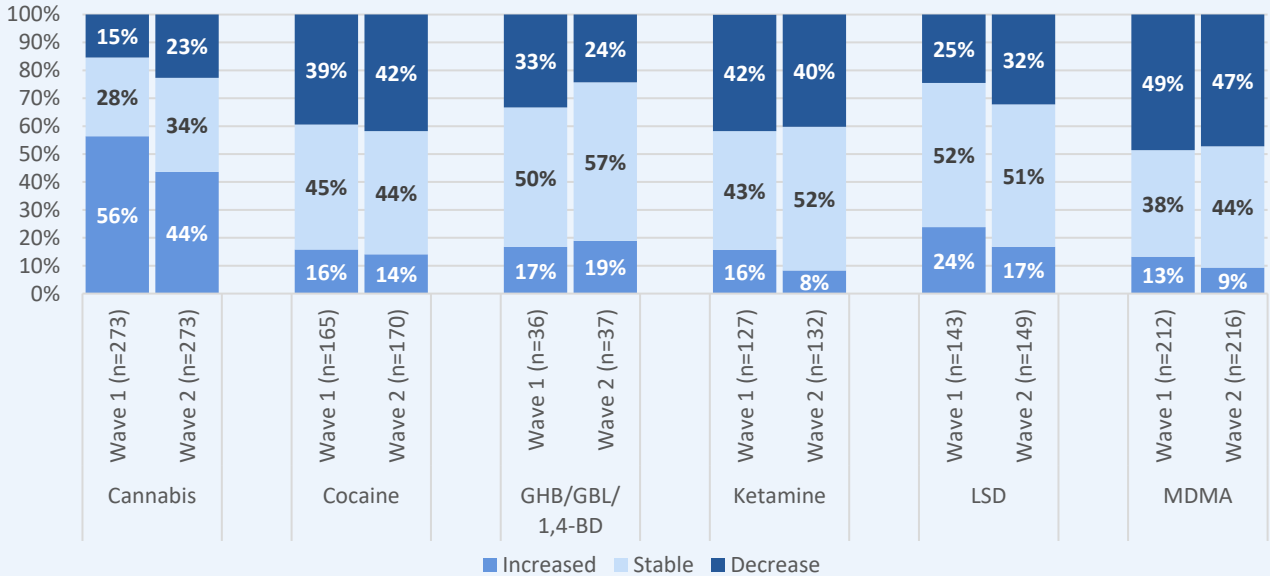
Note: Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines. OAT: opioid agonist therapy
Note: 'Feb 2020' data was collected at Wave 1 and is not a separate timepoint



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Wave 1 and Wave 2 Perceived changes in drug use since March as compared to before



Note: Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines.

Perceived Changes in Drug Use

Cannabis continued to be the substance with the largest proportion of participants reporting that their use had **increased** since the beginning of March 2020 (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions) as compared to before, although the percentage had declined (**44%** in **Wave 2**, versus **56%** in **Wave 1**).

Similarly, **MDMA (47%)**, **cocaine (42%)** and **ketamine (40%)** remained the substances that had the **largest proportion reporting decreased use** since the beginning of March (since COVID-19 restrictions) as compared to before, while non-prescribed **pharmaceutical opioids (66%)** and **e-cigarettes (60%)** had the largest proportion reporting use as **stable**.

Individual-level perceived change in drug use since March as compared to before

Cannabis % (n)		Wave 2		
		No change	Increased	Decreased
Wave 1	No change	64.9 (50)	24.7 (19)	10.4 (8)
	Increased	21.2 (32)	58.3 (88)	20.5 (31)
	Decreased	24.4 (10)	24.4 (10)	51.2 (21)

Among those who reported that their **cannabis** consumption had **increased** at **Wave 1** as compared to before March 2020, almost three-fifths (**58%**) reported that their use **remained elevated** at **Wave 2** as compared to their 'pre-COVID' consumption. However, **two-fifths** reported that, by the time of the **Wave 2** survey, their cannabis consumption had either decreased or return to pre-COVID levels of consumption.

MDMA % (n)		No change	Increased	Decreased
Wave 1	No change	66.3 (53)	10.0 (8)	23.8 (19)
	Increased	32.1 (9)	25.0 (7)	42.9 (12)
	Decreased	27.5 (28)	4.9 (5)	67.6 (69)

Cocaine % (n)		No change	Increased	Decreased
Wave 1	No change	54.3 (38)	10.0 (7)	35.7 (25)
	Increased	46.2 (19)	26.9 (7)	26.9 (7)
	Decreased	30.2 (19)	11.1 (7)	58.7 (37)

Ketamine % (n)		No change	Increased	Decreased
Wave 1	No change	73.6 (39)	5.7 (3)	20.8 (11)
	Increased	30.0 (6)	20.0 (4)	50.0 (10)
	Decreased	39.6 (21)	1.9 (1)	58.5 (31)

Of those who reported that their use of **MDMA**, **cocaine** or **ketamine** had **decreased** at **Wave 1** compared to before March 2020, the majority (**67.6%**, **58.7%**, and **58.5%** respectively) reported that their consumption levels **remained lower** at **Wave 2** compared to pre-COVID, although approximately one-third (**27.5%**, **30.2%**, **39.6%**) reported that consumption had returned to 'pre-COVID' levels of consumption.

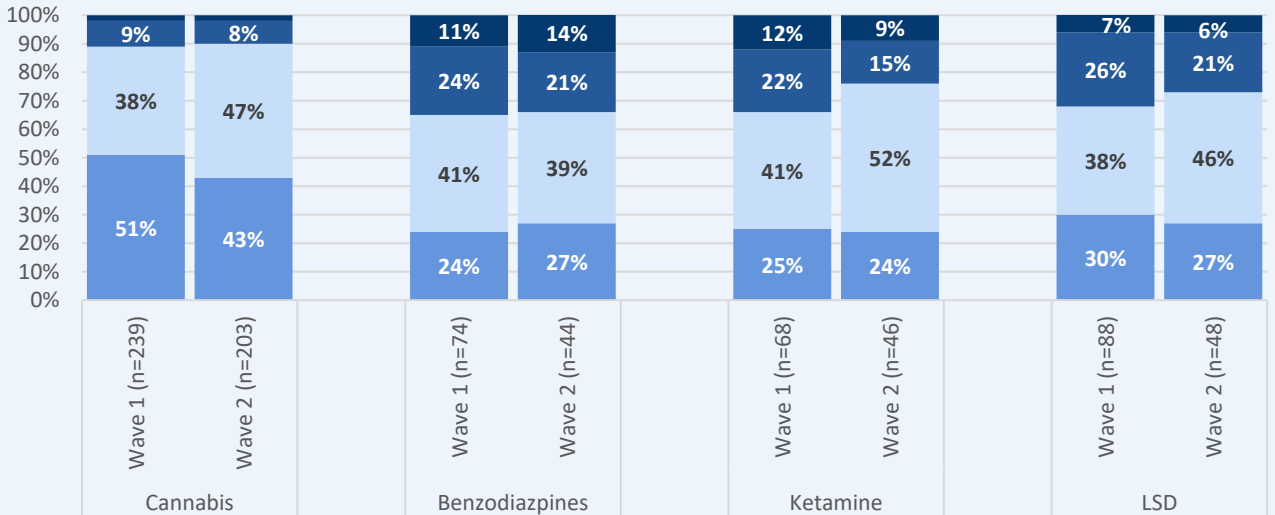
Overall, individual perceived changes in drug use since the beginning of March as compared to before **remained largely consistent** across **Wave 1** and **Wave 2**.



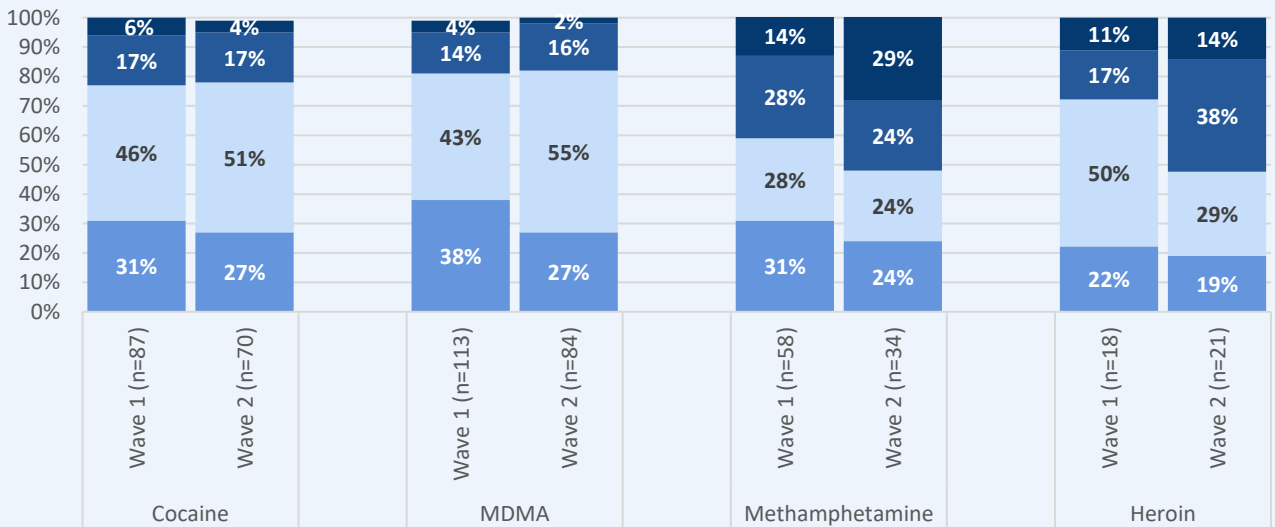
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Wave 1 and Wave 2 Perceived availability in the past four weeks



Very easy Easy Difficult Very difficult



Very easy Easy Difficult Very difficult

Note: Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines
Data not presented for substances where <15 people answered at each wave

Perceived availability

Most drugs were reported as **easy** or **very easy** to obtain in both **Wave 1** and **Wave 2**, with no major changes noted across the two waves. The exception to this was the perceived availability of methamphetamine and heroin, although small numbers mean these figures must be interpreted with caution. In **Wave 2**, **53%** of those who were able to answer reported the perceived **availability** of **methamphetamine** as **difficult** or **very difficult** (**42%** in **Wave 1**).



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DRUG USE BEHAVIOURS



At **Wave 2**, most participants continued to receive their drugs in person in the past four weeks (**61%**, vs **70%** at **Wave 1**), although this still represents a decline from **Feb 2020** (**82%**).



The proportion who did not obtain illicit drugs in the past month has continued to rise (**14%** in **Wave 2**, **10%** in **Wave 1** and **5%** in **Feb 2020** i.e pre-COVID-19 restrictions).



The proportion of participants who had their illicit drugs delivered to them in the past four weeks increased between **Feb 2020** (**39%**) and **Wave 1** (**49%**) but has since decreased in **Wave 2** (**29%**).



At **Wave 2**, **8%** reported injecting any drug in the past four weeks (**10%** in **Wave 1**).

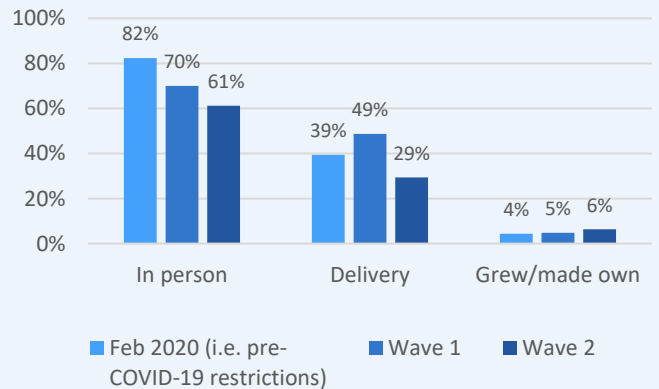


At **Wave 2**, **6%** reported purchasing their drugs online in the past four weeks (using surface websites or dark-web markets) vs **5%** in **Wave 1** and **Feb 2020**, respectively.



62% reported that they had **used drugs alone** in the past four weeks (vs **66%** in **Wave 1**).

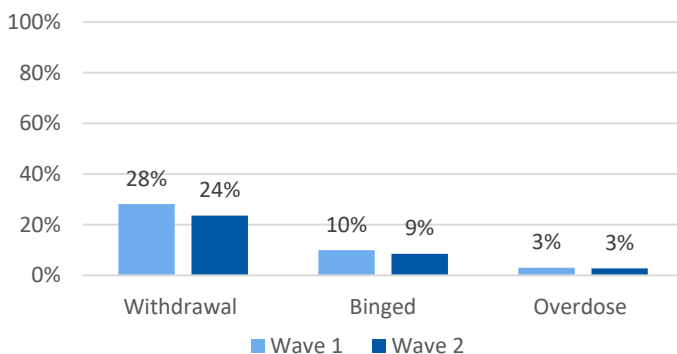
Methods of receiving drugs in past four weeks



Note: 'Feb 2020' data was collected at Wave 1 and is not a separate timepoint

DRUG-RELATED HARMS

Drug-related harms experienced in the past four weeks



Note: 'Binged' defined as using drugs for ≥48 hours without sleep. 'Withdrawal' defined as experience of any of the following symptoms when stopped using drugs suddenly: difficulty sleeping, depression, anxiety, aches and pains, cravings, fatigue, hallucinations, nausea, being hot and cold, goosebumps, runny nose.

At **Wave 2**, **24%** or participants reported experiencing withdrawal symptoms in the past four weeks (vs **28%** at **Wave 1**). Of these, **cannabis** continued to be the main drug that participants reported withdrawing from (**33%** in **Wave 2** vs **36%** in **Wave 1**), with the majority of withdrawal episodes being voluntary (**67%** vs **71%** in **Wave 1**).



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TREATMENT ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IN THE PAST FOUR WEEKS

Drug Treatment (DT)

Treatment engagement remained low:

5%

Had accessed drug treatment (vs 4% in Wave 1)

2%

Tried but were unable to access drug treatment (stable from Wave 1)

Mental Health (MH) Treatment

Seeking help for mental health reasons remained relatively common:

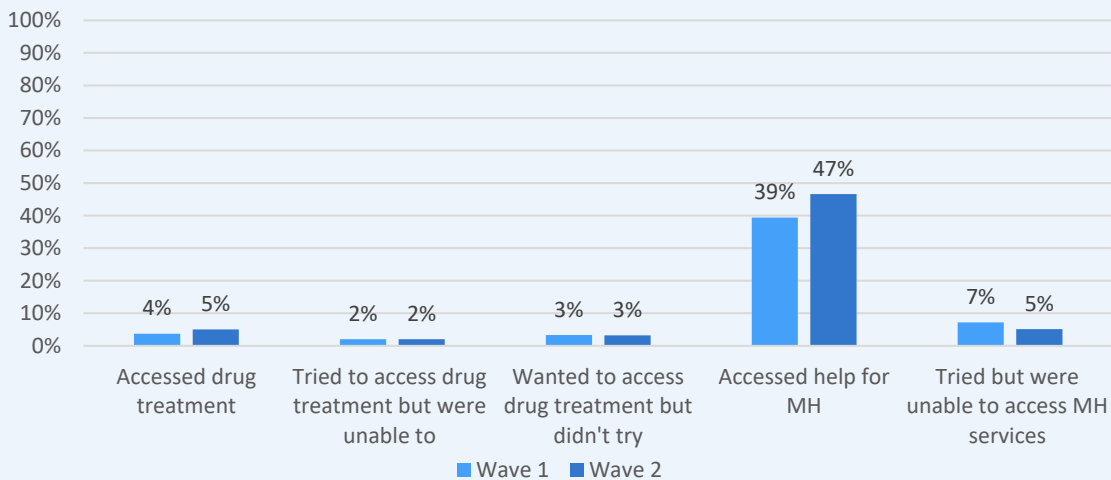
47%

Had accessed MH services (vs 39% in Wave 1)

5%

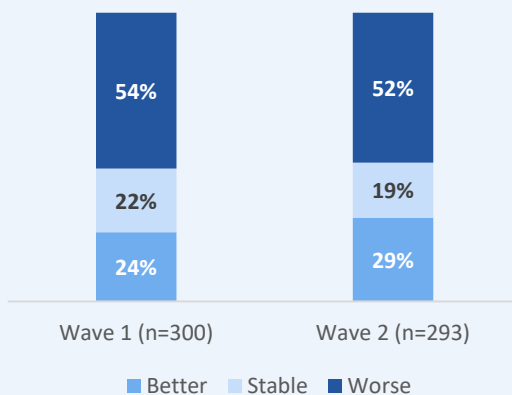
Tried but were unable to access MH services (vs 7% in Wave 1)

Drug & mental health treatment and access in past four weeks

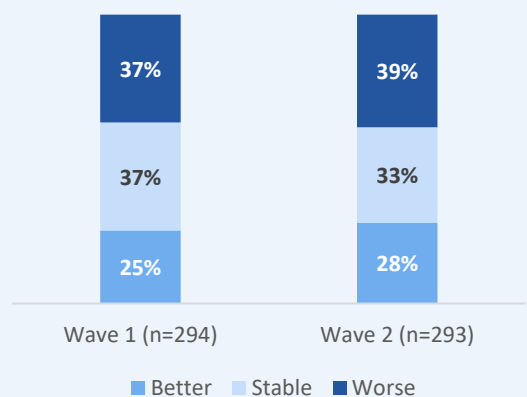


PERCEIVED CHANGES IN HEALTH RATINGS

Mental Health



Physical Health



Note: 'Perceived changes' are based on perceptions of current health as compared to before March 2020 (i.e. before COVID-19 restrictions)



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SUMMARY

- The ADAPT cohort who completed the Wave 2 survey 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 continued to be the substance with the greatest proportion reporting increased use relative to before COVID-19 restrictions, although the percentage declined relative to Wave 1 (56% reporting increased use at Wave 1 versus 44% at Wave 2).
- MDMA, cocaine and ketamine continued to be the substances with the greatest proportion reporting decreased use (47%, 42%, and 40%, respectively) relative to before COVID-19 restrictions, consistent with Wave 1 (49%, 39%, 32%, respectively).
- However, there was considerable diversity in changes in consumption across individuals and drug types, highlighting the heterogeneity of experiences among people who use drugs.
- Perceived availability was reported as easy/very easy for most drugs, however there was an increase in the perception of methamphetamine being 'very difficult' to obtain at Wave 2.
- The percentage of participants reporting that they had drugs delivered to them in the past month declined in Wave 2. There was a small increase in the percentage reporting not obtaining illicit drugs in the past month.
- Experience of drug-related harms remained relatively consistent between Waves 1 and 2.
- More than half of participants reported poorer mental health in the past four weeks relative to before March 2020, consistent with Wave 1. The percentage of the sample reporting accessing mental health treatment increased from 39% at Wave 1 to 47% at Wave 2.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The participants who contributed their valuable time to share their experiences.
- The Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) for their support and advice in developing the project.
- All those who gave advice and shared information about the project.
- The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and the Australian Government Department of Health for funding support.

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