

Executive Summary

The New South Wales (NSW) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and via word-of-mouth in Sydney, NSW. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2021 from April-July. Interviews were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed throughout the data collection period. This methodological change, which also impacted interview modality in 2020, should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The 2021 NSW EDRS sample (N=99) predominantly comprised of young (median age 23) males (67%). There were significant changes in current accommodation between 2021 and 2020 ($p<0.001$), with a greater per cent of participants reporting living in a private rental house or flat in 2021 (71%; 60% in 2020). Additionally, there were significant changes in employment status ($p=0.002$), with fewer participants reporting being currently unemployed in 2021 (15%; 22% in 2020) and more participants currently studying for either a university or trade qualification (63%; 45% in 2020). Cannabis remained the most popular drug of choice among the 2021 EDRS sample (28%), followed by ecstasy (27%) and alcohol (11%). Similarly, cannabis and alcohol were cited as the drugs used most often in the month preceding the interview in 2021 (39% and 35%, respectively).

COVID-19 Impact

Approximately two-thirds (68%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the last 12 months, and few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported ever being diagnosed with COVID-19. The largest per cent (62%) reported that they were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19. Almost one-tenth (8%) of the sample reported

that they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of the interview.

Ecstasy

Despite some fluctuation, weekly or more frequent use of any ecstasy has been gradually declining since 2004. In 2021, weekly or more frequent use of ecstasy significantly declined to 9% of the whole sample (21% in 2020; $p=0.039$). Consistent with previous years, capsules (82%) were the most common form of ecstasy consumed in the six months preceding interview. This was followed by crystal (62%) which significantly increased from 47% in 2020 ($p=0.046$), powder (25%; 33% in 2020; $p=0.290$) and pills (17%), which significantly decreased from 41% in 2020 ($p<0.001$). A significant decline was observed in the median days of 'any' ecstasy use, with participants reporting a median of six days of use in the six months preceding the interview (9 days in 2020; $p=0.016$). The median price per capsule increased to \$25 (\$20 in 2020; $p<0.001$), returning to the same median price observed from 2016 to 2019. The price per pill remained stable at \$28 in 2021. There was a significant change in the perceived purity of ecstasy crystal between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.040$), with fewer participants perceiving it to be of high purity in 2021 (31%; 48% in 2020). The largest per cent reported capsules to be of 'medium' (36%) purity and 'easy' (55%) to obtain in 2021.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has been declining amongst the NSW sample since the commencement of monitoring (15% in 2021). The median days of any methamphetamine use in the six months preceding interview remained low and stable (2 days in 2021).

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine has been increasing amongst the NSW sample, with 94% reporting recent use in 2021, the highest per cent since monitoring began and a significant increase from 2020 (84%; $p=0.034$). Participants reported using cocaine on a median of six days in the six months preceding the interview, with

one-in-ten reporting weekly or more frequent use. Consistent with previous years, the price per gram of cocaine remained stable at \$300.

Cannabis

Eighty-eight per cent of the NSW sample reported recent use of cannabis in 2021, with three-fifths (60%) reporting weekly or more frequent use. The price for hydroponic and bush cannabis remained stable in 2021. However, there was a significant change in the perceived potency of hydroponic cannabis between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.018$), with more participants reporting 'high' (73%) potency in 2021 (44% in 2020).

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine significantly increased from 53% in 2020 to 76% in 2021, the largest per cent observed since monitoring began. However, availability significantly changed between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.006$), with an increase in participants reporting ketamine to be 'difficult' to obtain in 2021 (44%; 38% in 2020). Recent use of LSD and DMT remained stable in 2021 (57% and 14%, respectively). Frequency of use for all three substances remained low in 2021, at a median of five days or less in the preceding six months.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

In 2021, 17% of the sample reported recent use of at least one form of NPS (including plant-based NPS), the lowest per cent since monitoring began. Any 2C substance was the most commonly used NPS (9%).

Other Drugs

Recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants significantly increased in 2021 (61%; 38% in 2020; $p=0.002$), as did recent use of hallucinogenic mushrooms (56%; 30% in 2020; $p<0.001$) and e-cigarettes (85%; 50% in 2020; $p<0.001$). While the median days of tobacco use significantly decreased from 95 days in 2020 to 24 days in 2021 ($p=0.045$), the median days of e-cigarette use significantly increased from 15 days in 2020 to 90 days in 2021 ($p<0.001$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, the majority (94%) of the sample reported concurrent use of two or more drugs, with stimulant and depressant use reported as the most common combination (26%). Almost four-fifths (79%) of the sample obtained a score of eight or more on the AUDIT, indicative of hazardous alcohol use. Nineteen per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose and non-fatal depressant overdose in the past year, respectively. The per cent reporting lifetime injecting drug use remained low ($n\leq 5$), as did the number currently in drug treatment ($n\leq 5$). Three-quarters (77%) of the sample reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past month, of which 23% reported penetrative sex without a condom, where they did not know the HIV status of their partner. Twenty-nine per cent reported receiving a STI test and 25% reported receiving a HIV test in the six months preceding the interview. Almost three-fifths of the sample (57%) self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the preceding six months, and 55% of these had seen a mental health professional in that period. Three-quarters (75%) of the sample reported driving a motor vehicle in the six months preceding the interview. Twenty-two per cent of the sample reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol and 34% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, most commonly cannabis. 'Any' criminal activity remained stable in 2021 (41%; 39% in 2020), with drug dealing (26%) and property crime (20%) remaining the two main forms of self-reported criminal activity. The majority of participants (80%) reported arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs via social networking applications in the preceding year, with a significant decrease in participants arranging the purchase of drugs via text messaging (34%) in 2021 (58% in 2020; $p=0.001$).