

## Executive Summary

The Western Australia (WA) IDRS sample comprises a sentinel group of people (n=100) aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Perth, Western Australia. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm reduction services, pharmacies, 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 2020 from June-August: subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were delivered via phone rather than face-to-face. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample, relative to previous years.**

### Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Perth, Western Australia (WA) was overall consistent with the WA profile in previous years, whereby close to seven out of ten participants (67%) were male, with a mean age of 43 years (SD=10). Approximately nine out of ten participants were heterosexual (87%), a significant increase from 2019 (73%;  $p=0.028$ ), while nearly six out of ten respondents (59%) held post-school qualifications (74% in 2019;  $p=0.034$ ). Over half of the participants (53%) reported that heroin was their drug of choice and 50% said that it was also the drug they injected most often in the past month.

### COVID-19 Impact

*This brief section was included to summarise data collected specifically related to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and associated restrictions; subsequent sections reflect standard annual reporting.* Fourteen per cent of the sample had been tested for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Since the beginning of March 2020, most participants (92%) had practiced social distancing and 70% had undergone home isolation. Slightly less than half (43%) of participants reported

injecting drugs at a different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; of these participants, 16% reported greater frequency of injection, and 84% reported reduced frequency. Nevertheless, more than one-tenth (13%) of participants reported that the drug injected most often in the past month was not the same as the drug injected most often in February 2020. Most commonly, participants reported a decrease in use of methamphetamine (66%), followed by a decrease in use of heroin (59%). An increase in use was most frequently reported for cannabis (33%) and benzodiazepines (38%), and 'no change' was most commonly reported for alcohol (66%) and tobacco (65%). Crystal methamphetamine and heroin were the most commonly reported illicit drugs to have increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 as compared to before (identified by 93% and 77% of respondents, respectively). Furthermore, the majority of participants perceived the purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine to have decreased since the beginning of March 2020, as compared to before (63% and 52%, respectively). Crystal methamphetamine and heroin were also most commonly cited as illicit drugs which had decreased in availability (identified by 88% and 72% of respondents, respectively). Slightly less than one-third (30%) of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, and 49% reported 'similar'. For those on opioid agonist treatment (OAT) since March (n=40), 88% of participants reported that the frequency of pharmacy doses had remained mostly stable, as had their dose (88%), and take-away doses (70%). Slightly less than one-fifth (16%; n=7) of those in OAT in the last six months reported having missed a dose of medication due to service disruptions. Approximately one-in-ten participants (11%) reported having experienced trouble in obtaining new sterile needles and syringes since the beginning of March (since COVID-19 restrictions). Of those who had trouble obtaining new sterile needles and syringes and commented (n=11), 64% of participants reported having re-used their own

needles more than they normally would. Over one-third (39%) of participants reportedly sought information on how to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or avoiding impacts of restrictions on drug acquisition and use. Almost all participants (99%) reported engaging in various harm reduction behaviours to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or impacts of COVID-19 restrictions while using or obtaining drugs.

## Heroin

After a steady resurgence in recent (i.e., past six month) heroin use up until 2016, there has been a downward trend that has been observed since 2017. However, the proportion of respondents who have reported recent use of heroin has remained constant between 2019 (62%) and 2020 (69%). Thirty-five per cent of recent consumers reported daily use of heroin in 2020. The median amount of heroin used in a 'typical' day was 0.20 grams, stable from 2019. However, the reported median price of heroin was \$100 for one point, a significant increase from \$60 in 2019 ( $p<0.001$ ). Furthermore, significantly less participants (14%) perceived heroin purity as 'high' in 2020 (33% in 2019;  $p=0.032$ ), while significantly more participants (44%) perceived it as 'low' as compared to 2019 (14%;  $p=0.001$ ). Significantly less respondents (17%) perceived heroin as being 'very easy' to obtain in 2020 (64% in 2019;  $p=0.001$ ).

## Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years, showing a general downward trend since monitoring began until 2009, which was followed by a slight upward trend until 2012. The use of base and powder methamphetamine significantly decreased throughout the years which was driven by a significant increase in the use of crystal methamphetamine. Sixty-seven per cent of recent consumers reported weekly or more frequent use of any methamphetamine in 2020. The reported median price of crystal methamphetamine was \$150 for one point, a significant increase from \$50 in 2019 ( $p<0.001$ ). Furthermore, significantly less participants (20%) perceived crystal methamphetamine purity as 'high' in 2020 (57% in 2019;  $p<0.001$ ), while significantly more participants (29%) perceived that it fluctuated in comparison to 2019 (9%;

$p=0.010$ ). Significantly less respondents (10%) perceived crystal methamphetamine as being 'very easy' to obtain in 2020 (85% in 2019;  $p<0.001$ ).

## Cocaine

Eighteen per cent of the WA sample had recently consumed cocaine, stable from 11% in 2019 ( $p=0.277$ ), on a median of three days (IQR=1-5) (2 days in 2019; IQR=1-5);  $p=0.800$ ).

## Cannabis

The per cent reporting recent cannabis use has ranged from a peak of 98% in the early 2000s to a low of 60% in the late 2000s, with the per cent reporting use increasing again subsequently. Nevertheless, a decrease (though not significant) was observed in 2020, with 66% reporting recent use (72% in 2019;  $p=0.463$ ). The median amount of cannabis used in a 'typical' day was 1.10 grams (IQR=1.00-2.50), a slight increase from 2019 (1.00 gram; IQR=0.50-1.00;  $p=0.013$ ). The reported median price of hydroponic cannabis was \$350 per ounce, a significant increase from \$300 in 2019 ( $p=0.026$ ). Furthermore, significantly less respondents (20%) perceived bush cannabis as being 'very easy' to obtain in 2020 (51% in 2019;  $p=0.045$ ).

## Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent use of all forms of pharmaceutical opioids has generally remained stable or showed a downward trend since monitoring of each opioid first began. There were no differences in terms of recent use of buprenorphine, buprenorphine-naloxone, morphine, fentanyl, and tapentadol between 2019 and 2020. However, there was a significant increase in the number of participants who reported recent use of methadone, while there was a significant decrease in the number of participants who reported recent use of oxycodone, codeine, and tramadol. However, approximately half of the WA sample (48%) was currently in treatment, a significant increase from 2019 (28%,  $p=0.007$ ) which may account for the increase in methadone. Furthermore, in 2020 it has to be noted that some participants were recruited from a dosing pharmacy, due to COVID-19 restrictions, which might have affected these results.

## Other Drugs

NPS use was uncommon amongst the WA sample. Recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines, pharmaceutical stimulants, alprazolam, antipsychotics and pregabalin remained stable between 2019 and 2020. Alcohol and tobacco use have remained consistently high but stable over the period of monitoring, with 59% (69% in 2019;  $p=0.204$ ) and 85% (86% in 2019;  $p=0.93$ ) reporting recent use in 2020, respectively. Of recent tobacco consumers, 94% reported daily use, a significant increase from 2019 (83%;  $p=0.042$ ).

## Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

In 2020, over one-tenth (16%) of the WA sample reported overdosing on any drug in the

last 12 months, most commonly heroin (12%). In 2020, of those who reported having heard of naloxone and responded ( $n=85$ ), 32% reported that they had resuscitated someone using naloxone at least once in their lifetime. Of those who reported a past year opioid overdose and commented ( $n=12$ ), almost six out of ten (58%;  $n=7$ ) reported that they had been resuscitated by a peer using naloxone. Of those who reported ever accessing naloxone, almost half (46%) reported that they 'always' had naloxone on hand when using opioids. In 2020, fewer participants reported having an injection-related health issue in the month preceding interview, relative to 2019 (33% in 2020; 51% in 2019;  $p=0.022$ ). Significantly fewer participants reported to have experienced any thrombosis in 2020 (6%) compared to 2019 (19%;  $p<0.011$ ).