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Key findings

- Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice for participants.
- The recent use and frequency of heroin remained stable.
- Price remained stable. The availability of heroin was 'very easy' or 'easy' and purity 'low' or 'medium'.
- Nationally, the recent use and frequency of use among users of 'any form' of methamphetamine was lower in 2010.
- Methamphetamine price varied by jurisdiction. All forms were considered 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain. Ice/crystal was reported as 'high' in purity, while speed was 'low' and base 'medium'.
- Recent use of cocaine remained low. NSW remained the only jurisdiction where sizeable numbers of participants reported recent cocaine use.
- Cocaine price remained stable. Availability was reported as either 'easy' or 'difficult' and purity as 'medium' or 'high'.
- The use of cannabis by participants remained common and frequency of use among users remained high, usually daily.
- Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market. Price per gram varied by type. Hydroponic cannabis potency was 'high'.
- Extra-medical use and injection of pharmaceutical preparations continued to occur.
- Borrowing of needles was reported by one in ten participants in the month preceding interview. Sharing of injecting equipment was common. Over half of the participants re-used their own needles in the last month.
- Nearly half of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. The most common problem reported was depression.
- Over one-third of the national sample reported a criminal activity in the last month. Thirty-nine percent had been arrested in the last year.

An overview of the 2010 IDRS:

The injecting drug user survey key findings

Introduction

The key findings of the 2010 Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) injecting drug user (IDU) surveys are presented in this bulletin. The IDRS monitors emerging trends in the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. In addition to a survey of regular injecting drug users (IDU), the annual data collection also includes a survey of key experts (KE) who are professionals in the field of illicit drugs and the analysis of existing indicator data on drug-related issues. This is the tenth year that all three components of the IDRS were conducted in every state and territory in Australia.

Regular IDU were recruited as they are considered a sentinel group able to provide information on a range of illicit drug trends and related issues. The information from the IDU survey is therefore not representative of illicit drug use in the general population, and is not representative of other illicit drug users (e.g. in other geographical areas, occasional users, etc), but it is indicative of emerging trends that may warrant further monitoring and/or investigation.

National Overview

Demographics

In 2010, a total of 902 participants were interviewed for the IDRS survey. The mean age of the sample was 38 years, ranging from 18-64 years. Around two-thirds of the sample was male. The majority were unemployed, with a mean income of \$366 per week. Nearly half of the sample reported been in current treatment (mainly methadone maintenance). Around half of the participants reported a prison history (Table 1).

Drug use patterns

Among the national sample the mean age of first injecting was 20 years (range 10-48 years). The main drug of choice and drug injected most often in the last month was heroin

followed by methamphetamine and morphine. These results are similar to the 2009 IDRS (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the national sample, by jurisdiction, 2010

| | National | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| | 2009 (N=881) | 2010 (N=902) |
| Mean age (years) | 37 | 38 |
| Male (%) | 64 | 65 |
| Full-time students (%) | 1 | 1 |
| Mean income/ week (\$) | N=838 \$364 | N=804 \$366 |
| Prison history (%) | 52 | 52 |
| Currently in drug treatment (%) | 45 | 47 |
| Mean age first injected | 19 | 20 |
| Drug of choice (%) | | |
| Heroin | 52 | 54 |
| Methamphetamine* | 21 | 16 |
| Morphine | 8 | 10 |
| Methadone | 2 | 2 |
| Cocaine | 5 | 3 |
| Cannabis | 7 | 8 |
| Drug injected most often in the last month (%) | | |
| Heroin | 43 | 43 |
| Methamphetamine* | 24 | 19 |
| Morphine | 16 | 19 |
| Methadone | 6 | 7 |
| Cocaine | 2 | 2 |

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

* includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine

Recent use

Heroin

In 2010, over half (64%) of the national sample reported recent use in the preceding six months (Figure 1) on a median of 72 days (i.e. around three times a week). Daily use was reported among 17% of the national sample. No change in recent use and frequency of use was found between 2009 and 2010.

Methamphetamine

In 2010, 16% of participants nominated methamphetamine as their drug of choice, a figure which is less than previous years (22% in 2008 and 21% in 2009). Nationally, the recent use of any methamphetamine (60%) was lower than 2009 (67%, Figure 1). The recent use of speed powder (41%) and base (21%) was significantly lower ($P < 0.05$), while the recent use of ice (39%) remained relatively stable compared to 2009 (48%, 28% and 37% respectively). Nationally, the frequency of use of any form of methamphetamine (by users) was lower in 2010 (20 days in 2009, 14 days in 2010). Each form of methamphetamine was reported on a median of 10 days or less. The proportion of all

participants who reported daily methamphetamine (among those recently used) use was stable at 5% nationally (3% in 2009).

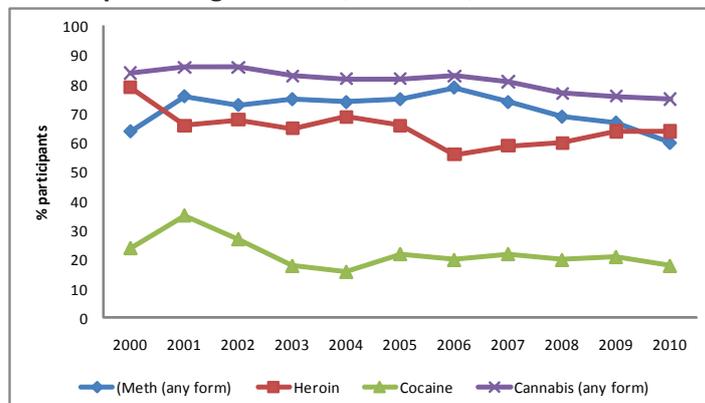
Cocaine

Similar to previous years (2003-2009), the prevalence of cocaine use nationally in the six months preceding interview was 18% (Figure 1). The frequency of cocaine use among those who had recently used was 5 days. NSW reported the highest level of recent use (57%) and median frequency of days (12 days), while the other jurisdictions remained low and sporadic.

Cannabis

As in previous years of the IDRS, cannabis use among this group was common nationally (Figure 1). Frequency of cannabis use tended to be daily or near-daily.

Figure 1: Prevalence of use of heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and cannabis by participants in the six months preceding interview, Australia, 2003-2010



Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

Pharmaceuticals

Morphine remained the most commonly injected pharmaceutical opioid among the national sample. Reports of this behaviour remained highest in the NT and TAS, the jurisdictions where heroin has traditionally been the least available. Morphine and oxycodone injection remained stable over the last two years, from 42% in 2009 to 43% in 2010 (morphine) and 29% in 2009 to 28% in 2010 (oxycodone). Frequency of use, as with all extra-medical use of opioid medication, remained sporadic.

Use of benzodiazepines (typically by swallowing) remained common among this sample at 65% (result includes benzodiazepines used as prescribed). By contrast, benzodiazepine injection was relatively uncommon, a

behaviour reported by 8% of the national sample (8% in 2009). This was most often reported in TAS (16% in 2010, 25% in 2009) and the NT (23% in 2010, 22% in 2009). Frequency of benzodiazepine injection among those who had injected was slightly higher nationally from 5 days in 2009 to 7.5 days in 2010.

Price, purity and availability

Heroin

The price of a gram (range \$100 to \$400) or cap (\$50) of heroin remained relatively stable across jurisdictions where numbers were high enough to estimate. The availability of heroin was reported as either 'very easy' or 'very' to obtain in the last six months. Purity varied with the majority of jurisdictions reporting purity as either 'low' or 'medium' (Table 2).

Methamphetamine

Prices for speed powder, base and ice/crystal varied across jurisdictions. Overall, the three main forms of methamphetamine were generally considered 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain, with around one-fifth also reporting all forms as 'difficult' to obtain. Of the three forms, ice/crystal was reported to be of 'high' purity, base was 'medium' and speed powder was 'low' (Table 2).

Cocaine

The price of a cap of cocaine remained stable at \$50 in NSW, which remained the only jurisdiction where sufficient numbers (i.e. >10 people) were able to comment. The availability of cocaine was reported as either 'easy' or 'difficult' to obtain and the purity as 'medium' or 'high' (Table 2).

Cannabis

The price per gram varied by type (hydroponic or bush cannabis) and by jurisdiction. Hydroponically grown cannabis continued to dominate the market. The use of bush (outdoor grown) cannabis was also noted in all jurisdictions. The potency of hydroponic cannabis continued to be rated as 'high' and bush cannabis as 'medium' (Table 2).

Injecting risk behaviours

Among the national sample, similar proportions to the 2009 IDRS reported either borrowing a needle or lending a needle in the last month. Over one-third of participants (39%) reported sharing injecting equipment (excluding needles), mainly spoons (37% in 2009). Just over half of the national sample reported re-using their own needle in the last month, a significant decrease from 58% in 2009 ($p < 0.05$). Among those who re-used their own injecting equipment the majority reported re-using spoons (80%), followed by tourniquets (52%). The arm was reported as

the main last site of injection (76%; Table 3).

Table 2: Perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis

| | Heroin (%) | Methamphetamine (%) | | | Cocaine (%) | Cannabis (%) | |
|-----------------------|------------|---------------------|-------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| | | Speed powder | Base | Ice/crystal | | Hydro | Bush |
| Availability | n=532 | n=296 | n=145 | n=247 | n=108 | n=484 | n=288 |
| Very easy | 53 | 41 | 32 | 34 | 28 | 54 | 41 |
| Easy | 34 | 38 | 49 | 41 | 35 | 38 | 38 |
| Difficult | 11 | 18 | 17 | 19 | 30 | 8 | 19 |
| Very difficult | 3 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 1 | 2 |
| Purity/potency | n=520 | n=291 | n=145 | n=244 | n=104 | n=485 | n=279 |
| High | 12 | 14 | 28 | 46 | 32 | 57 | 25 |
| Medium | 31 | 33 | 43 | 28 | 32 | 32 | 52 |
| Low | 44 | 40 | 19 | 16 | 24 | 4 | 16 |
| Fluctuates | 13 | 13 | 10 | 12 | 13 | 7 | 7 |

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

Table 3: Injecting risk behaviour in last month, 2010

| | National | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| | 2009 (N=881) | 2010 (N=902) |
| Borrowed a needle | 9 | 10 |
| Lent a needle | 18 | 16 |
| Shared other injecting equipment* | 37 | 39 |
| Re-used own needle** | 59 | 52 |
| Re-used own injecting equipment# | n.a. | N=613 |
| Spoons | | 80 |
| Filters | | 22 |
| Tourniquets | | 52 |
| Water | | 18 |
| Swabs | | 6 |
| Other | | 3 |
| Last site of injection | | |
| Arm | 79 | 76 |
| Leg | 4 | 4 |
| Hand | 9 | 13 |
| Foot | 2 | 2 |
| Groin | 2 | 2 |
| Neck | 3 | 3 |
| Other | 2 | 1 |

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

* includes spoons, water, tourniquets and filters

among those who re-used own injecting equipment

** significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

n.a. information not available for 2009

Self-reported mental health

Nearly half of the national sample self reported a mental health problem in the last six months, a significant increase from 44% in 2009 ($p < 0.05$). The most common self reported mental health problem in 2010 was depression, followed by anxiety. Of those with a self reported mental health problem, around three-quarters reported attending a professional for their mental health problem (Table 4).

Table 4: Self reported mental health problems experienced in the preceding six months, 2010

| | National | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| | 2009 (N=881) | 2010 (N=902) |
| Self reported mental health problem (%)** | 44 | 49 |
| Problem* (%) | N=386 | N=439 |
| Depression | 71 | 65 |
| Anxiety | 39 | 40 |
| Manic-depression/Bipolar | 13 | 13 |
| Schizophrenia | 14 | 14 |
| Panic | 8 | 11 |
| Paranoia | 7 | 7 |
| Drug induced psychosis | 5 | 3 |
| Attended health professional for mental health problem[#] | 77 | 77 |

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

[#] among those who reported a mental health issue

** significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

Criminal activity

Thirty-nine percent of the national sample reported a criminal activity in the last month, a significant decrease compared to 2009 (45%; $p < 0.05$). The most common criminal activity reported was drug dealing and property crime. Over one-third of the sample has been arrested in the last 12 months (Table 5).

Table 5: Proportion of IDU that reported criminal activity, 2010

| | National | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | 2009 (N=881) | 2010 (N=902) |
| Crime in the last month (%)** | | |
| Drug dealing | 29 | 25 |
| Property | 24 | 21 |
| Fraud | 4 | 4 |
| Violence | 6 | 6 |
| Any crime | 45 | 39 |
| Arrested last 12 months (%) | 36 | 39 |

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

** Significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

More information

For more details information on the prevalence of use, price, purity/potency and availability by this group, including key expert and indicator data in each jurisdiction please refer to the national and jurisdictional IDRS *Drug Trends* annual reports, which will be available through NDARC in early 2011. Previous years' reports are available in full on the NDARC website, www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au (click on 'Drug Trends').

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