

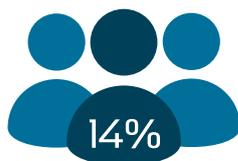
Impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions on people who inject drugs in the Northern Territory: Findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System 2020

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Key findings from the Northern Territory sample:

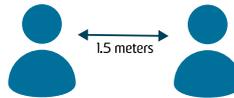
COVID-19 BEHAVIOURS



One-in-six (14%) of the 2020 IDRS sample reported getting tested for COVID-19.



In the sample, 58% were worried about getting COVID-19.



The majority (81%) reported that they had practiced social distancing since March.



Harm reduction behaviours relating to COVID-19.

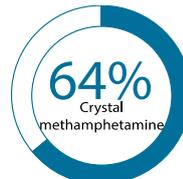
CHANGES IN DRUG USE DURING COVID-19



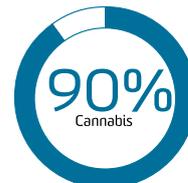
Over half (54%) reported a decrease in injecting frequency compared to before COVID-19 restrictions.



Alcohol was the drug most frequently endorsed as increased in use (i.e. used more or started using).



Crystal methamphetamine was the most frequently endorsed drug that decreased in use (i.e. used less or stopped using) since COVID-19 restrictions.



Cannabis was the drug most frequently endorsed as no change in use since COVID-19 restrictions.

Background

- The Northern Territory closed borders to the rest of Australia on 24 March 2020 and introduced a variety of restrictions on gatherings and business activities. Easing of restrictions commenced on 1 May and from 17 July only arrivals from declared virus hotspots needed to self-quarantine.
- The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on travel and gathering have likely had major impacts on drug supply, use and harms [1], and there have been significant challenges with delivery of drug treatment and harm reduction services [2].
- It is anticipated that impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and gatherings will be particularly felt by those reporting more problematic patterns of use, including those people who inject drugs (PWID).
- The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is an illicit drug monitoring system which has operated in Australia since 2000 and includes annual interviews with PWID recruited from capital cities [3].
- Recognising the critical need for information, the IDRS project has been adapted to collect important data on people's experiences during COVID-19.
- This output presents findings from 78 participants recruited in the Northern Territory, from 2 July to 4 September 2020 (17 in July, 48 in August and 13 in September).

Method

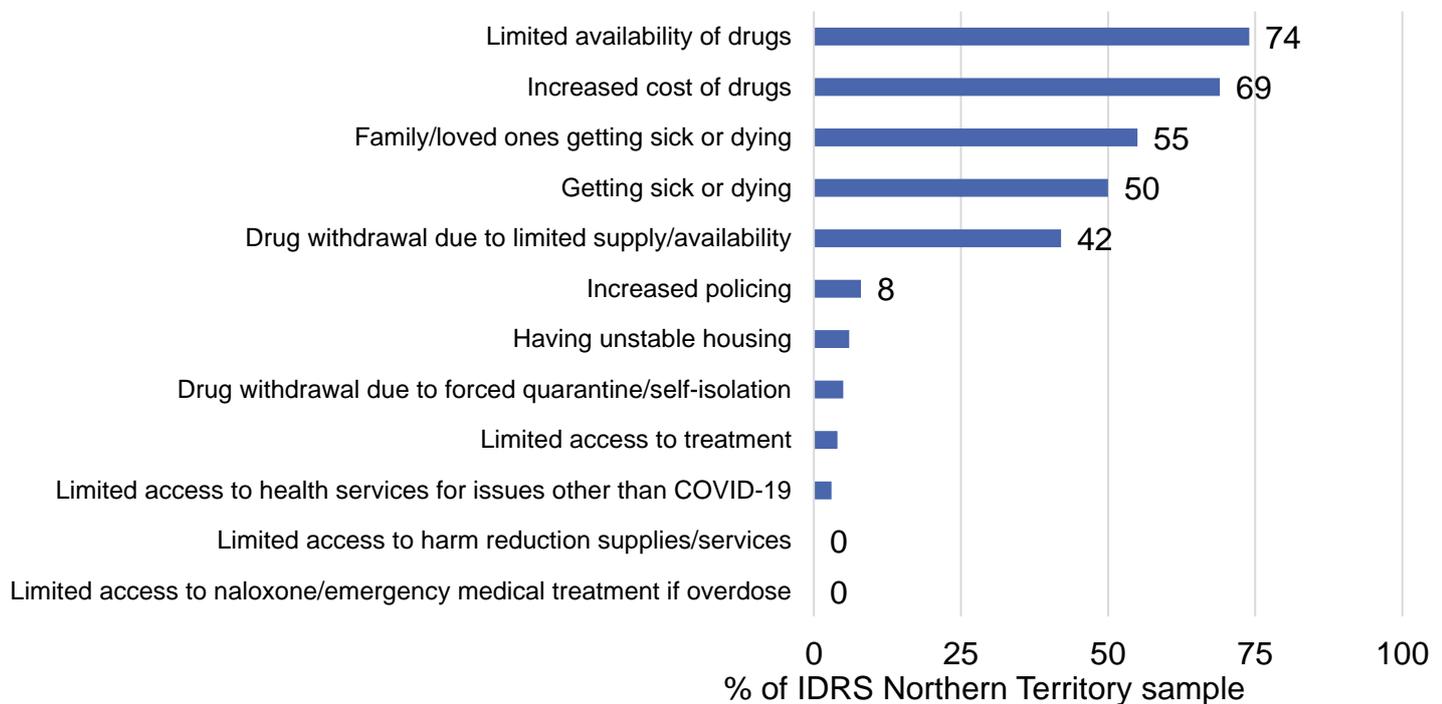
- IDRS interviews are conducted with a sentinel sample of people aged 18 or older who have injected drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Darwin for the last 12 months.
- Participants are recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm reduction services and via peer referral.
- In previous years, participants completed a one-hour face-to-face interview, and were reimbursed \$40 for time and expenses.
- In 2020, interviews were completed via phone and face-to-face and participants were reimbursed electronically to manage risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- The interview length was reduced and the content adapted to include COVID-19 specific items, anchored to implementation of restrictions in Australia at the beginning of March 2020.
- The study protocol remained otherwise unchanged. Findings are suppressed where ≤ 5 participants report an outcome to protect confidentiality.
- The NT IDRS sample are demographically similar to those recruited in 2019 and in earlier years, being mostly male (63%) with a median age of 44 years (IQR 34 - 52). The sample in 2020 was smaller relative to 2019 (78 versus 99 people, respectively).

Findings

Experience of COVID-19 testing, diagnosis and restrictions

- 14% said they had been tested for COVID-19. None had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- 58% said they were currently worried about getting COVID-19.
- At the time of the interview, 81% reported they had been social distancing, 36% reported home isolation, and less than 5 participants reported quarantine since March 2020.
- Participants reported a number of concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely around family or friends getting sick or dying (55% of the sample) or they themselves becoming unwell (50%; **Figure 1**).
- Issues related to drug markets were also cited, such as: limited availability of illicit drugs (74%), increased cost of drugs (69%) and withdrawal due to limited availability (42%).

Figure 1. The percentage of the IDRS NT sample endorsing potential concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Note: Data labels suppressed due to small cell size (n≤5 but not 0).

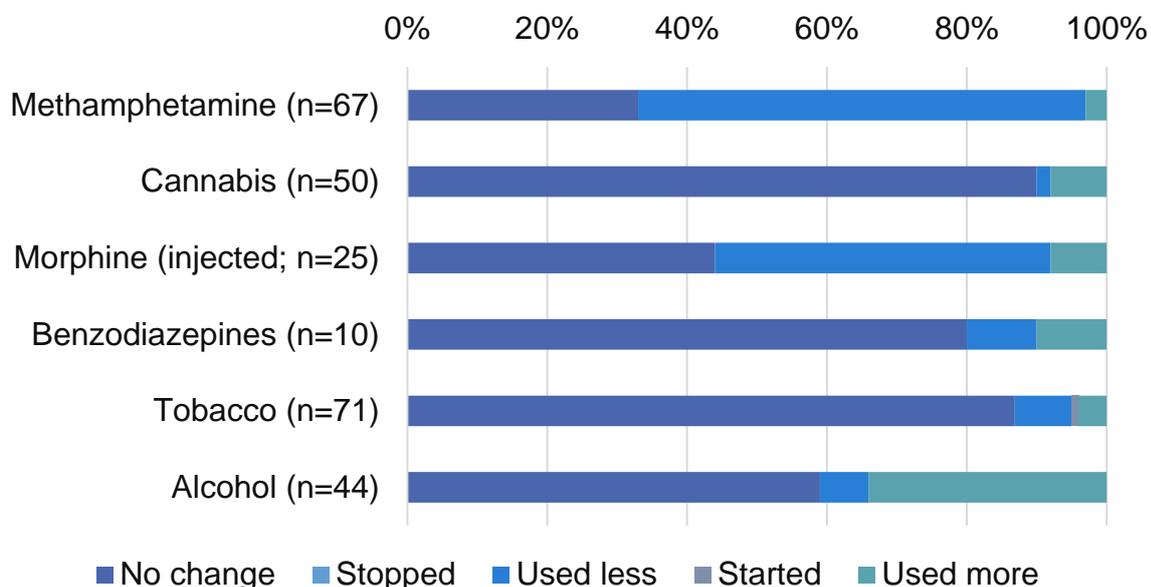
Social impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Eleven percent reported that the rent on their accommodation had increased since March.
- Over half (53%) reported that the income they received in the month prior to interview was more than what they earned in February, small numbers reported less (n ≤5), and 44% said it was a similar amount.
- When asked about financial difficulties they had experienced in the four weeks prior to interview, 34% had asked for help from welfare/community organisations, 18% reported being unable to buy food or going without meals and 12% could not pay household/phone bills on time.

Changes in drug use with COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Almost two-thirds (63%) reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. Of these, 86% reported a decrease in injecting frequency (54% of total sample).
- Twelve percent reported that the drug they injected most during the last month was different to the drug most injected in February.
- Almost two-thirds (64%, Figure 2) of those who reported recent use of methamphetamine reported decreased use since March, with decreased availability and higher cost being the main reasons cited. Increased use of alcohol was reported by 34% of those reporting recent use, with the main reason being difficulty accessing other drugs. Of those who had injected non-prescribed morphine in the last six months, 48% had decreased their use since March. Use of cannabis, non-prescribed benzodiazepines and tobacco was mostly stable.

Figure 2. Change in drug use since March 2020 compared to before amongst people who report use in the past six months.



Note. Estimates reflect reports on non-prescribed use for pharmaceutical medicines .

Changes in drug markets with COVID-19 restrictions

- Participants who commented most commonly reported crystal methamphetamine as increased in price since the beginning of March compared to before (94%, **Figure 3**). Similar was observed for morphine, with 96% of those commenting reporting that price had increased. The price of hydroponic and bush cannabis was reported as stable by most of those commenting (79% and 77%, respectively).
- Four out of five (80%) participants who commented said that the purity of crystal methamphetamine had declined since the beginning of March compared to before (**Figure 4**).
- Participants who commented mostly reported that the availability of cannabis had been stable – hydroponic 67%, bush 75% - while crystal methamphetamine (97%) and morphine (96%) had been more difficult to obtain (**Figure 5**).

Figure 3. Change in price of select illicit drugs since the March 2020 compared to before.

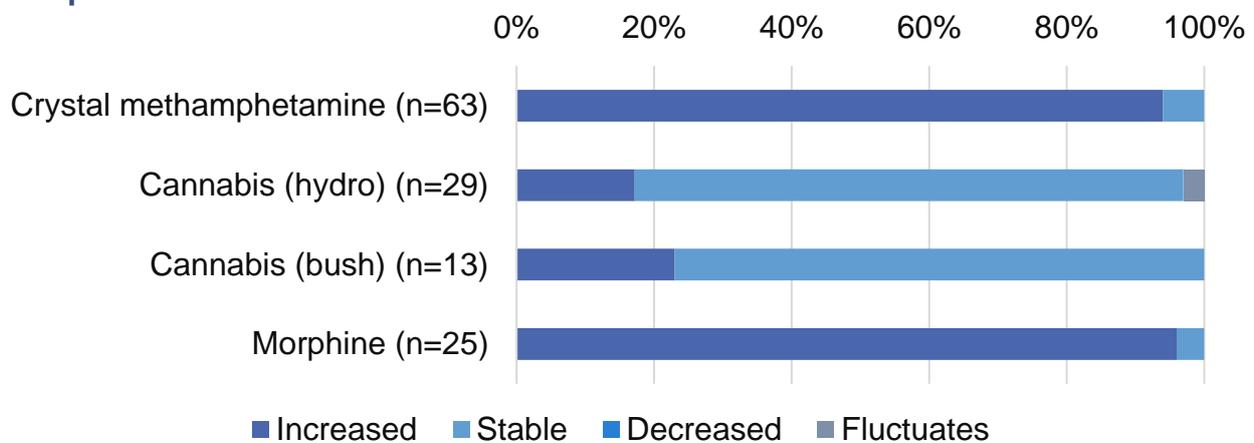
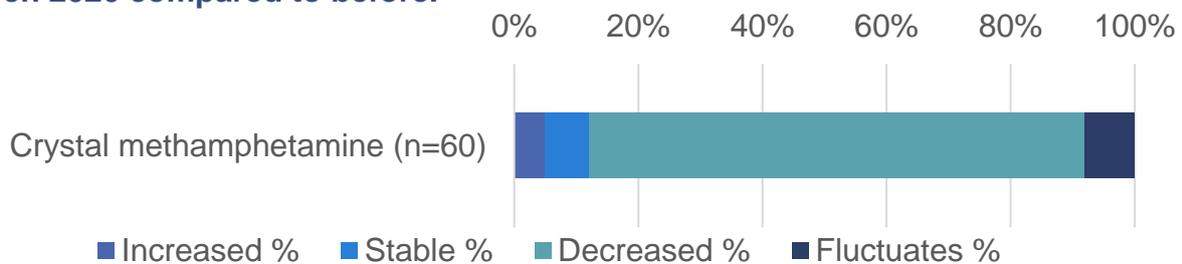
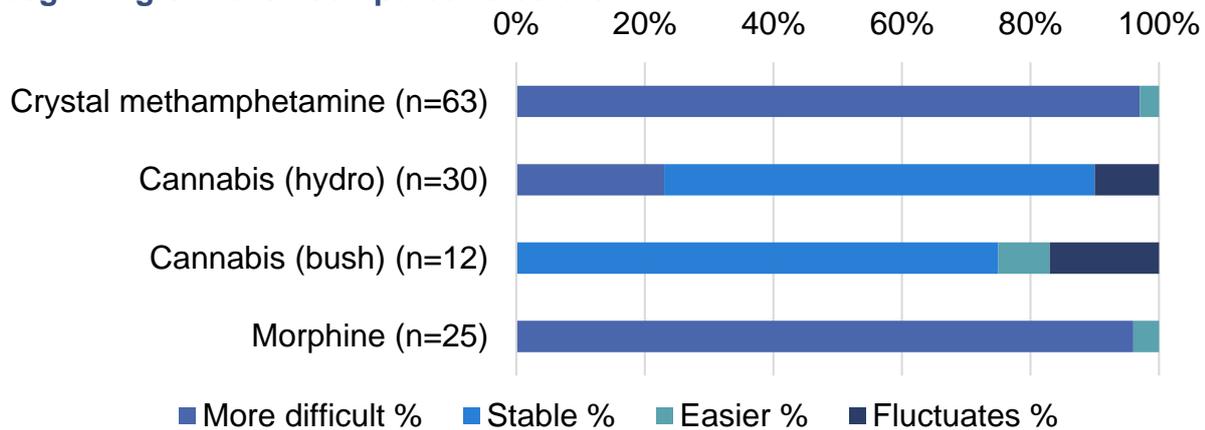


Figure 4. Change in perceived purity of crystal methamphetamine since the March 2020 compared to before.



Note. Data were collected for heroin and crystal methamphetamine, with no responses for heroin.

Figure 5. Change in perceived availability of select illicit drugs since the beginning of March compared to before.



Note. Estimates for heroin, non-prescribed oxycodone and methadone syrup were collected but are not reported here as less than five participants reported on these substances.

Changes in drug treatment and harm reduction service access

- Thirteen percent of participants has been in drug treatment in the past six months, with most of this group (60%) being in drug treatment both before and since March, with a small number (less than 5) being in treatment only since March.
- Of those in treatment since March (n=7), none reported any change to the treatment type or interruptions in their treatment.
- Regarding changes in aspects of treatment since March, a small number of participants (less than five) reported an increase in take-away doses, an increase in urine testing/breathalysing or a decrease in dose.
- Of those in treatment both before and after March, most (83%) reported that their satisfaction with their drug treatment was unchanged after March compared to before March.
- A small number of participants (less than five) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since March.

Physical and mental health

- When asked about their current physical health as compared to before March, 10% said it was better, 68% said similar, and 22% said worse.
- When asked about their current mental health as compared to before March, 21% said it was better, 71% said similar, and small numbers (n≤5) reported worse.
- 47% reported experiencing withdrawal from any drug during the past year (small numbers reported before March (n ≤5)), 14% since March and 31% both before and since March).
- No participants reported experiencing an accidental opioid overdose in the past 12 months (4% in the 2019 sample for comparison).
- Small numbers of participants, less than five in each case, reported an increase in the following since March:
 - Reusing their own needles,
 - Needle sharing, or
 - Injecting alone.

Precautions to reduce risk of COVID-19 and impacts of restrictions

- The most commonly reported behaviours to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 or impacts of restrictions while obtaining or using drugs were avoiding sharing needles/syringes with others (27%), washing hands with soap/sanitiser before handling drugs/money (26%), preparing drugs yourself (23%) and avoiding sharing other drug use equipment with others (19%).
- 27% reported seeking information on how to reduce risks of getting COVID-19 while obtaining or using drugs, or how to avoid impacts of restrictions on drug use (8% from a harm reduction service, 14% from social media).



Conclusions

The measures taken to address the pandemic appear to have had direct impacts on the drug market in the NT and on the sentinel sample of people who regularly inject drugs recruited by the IDRS.

Most participants reported that crystal methamphetamine and morphine, the most used and injected drugs in the NT, had increased in price and had become more difficult to obtain, since March. Most reporting recent use of methamphetamine were now consuming less, accounted for by the reduced availability and increased price. Half of those who had recently injected morphine had also reduced their use since March. Most participants reported injecting less when interviewed as compared to February.

The proportion of participants reporting withdrawal from any drug was higher after March than before. Approximately one-fifth reported that their physical health was worse since March. One-third of participants had increased their alcohol use since March, mainly due to difficulty accessing other drugs.

Participant concerns relating to COVID-19 and the associated restrictions focused on market impacts, such as limited availability and increased prices of drugs, and on risks to the health of themselves and family. Participants reported utilising recommended hygiene strategies to reduce the risk of COVID-19.

References

1. Dietze, P. & Peacock, A. (2020). [Illicit drug use and harms in Australia in the context of COVID-19 and associated restrictions: anticipated consequences and initial responses](#). Drug and Alcohol Review.
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3. Peacock, A., Uporova, J., Karlsson, A., Gibbs, D., Swanton, R., Kelly, G., Price, O. Bruno, R., Dietze, P., Lenton, S., Salom, C., Degenhardt, L., & Farrell, M. (2019). [Illicit Drug Reporting System \(IDRS\) Interviews: Background and Methods](#). Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

Participating researchers and research centres

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