

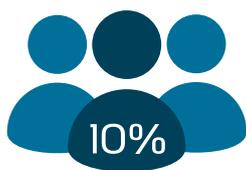
Impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions on people who inject drugs in Queensland: Findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System 2020

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Key findings from the QLD sample:

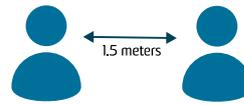
COVID-19 BEHAVIOURS



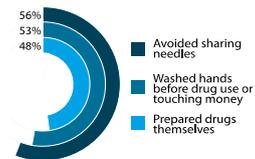
One tenth (10%) of the 2020 IDRS sample reported getting tested for COVID-19.



In the sample, 27% were worried about getting COVID-19.



The majority (87%) reported that they had practiced social distancing since March.

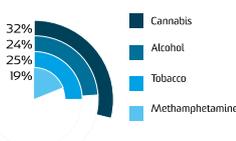


Harm reduction behaviours relating to COVID-19.

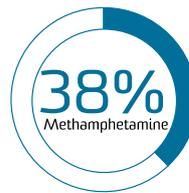
CHANGES IN DRUG USE DURING COVID-19



Of the entire sample, 48% reported a decrease in injecting frequency compared to before COVID-19 restrictions.



Drugs most frequently endorsed as increased in use (i.e. used more or started using).

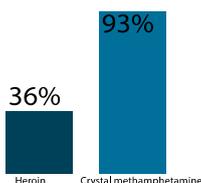


Methamphetamine was the most frequently endorsed drug that decreased in use (i.e. used less or stopped using) since COVID-19 restrictions.

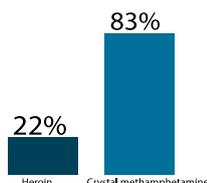


Alcohol was the drug most frequently endorsed as no change in use since COVID-19 restrictions.

CHANGES IN DRUG MARKETS AND TREATMENT



In 2020, participants reported an increase in price for heroin and crystal methamphetamine.



Participants reported a decrease in availability of both heroin and crystal methamphetamine.



One-tenth (10%) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since COVID-19.



One-in-three of those in treatment since March (35%) reported any disruption to their drug treatment since COVID-19.

Background

- 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 on 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 that 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 98 participants recruited in Queensland, from 25 June to 31 July 2020 (15 participants in June, 83 in July).

Method

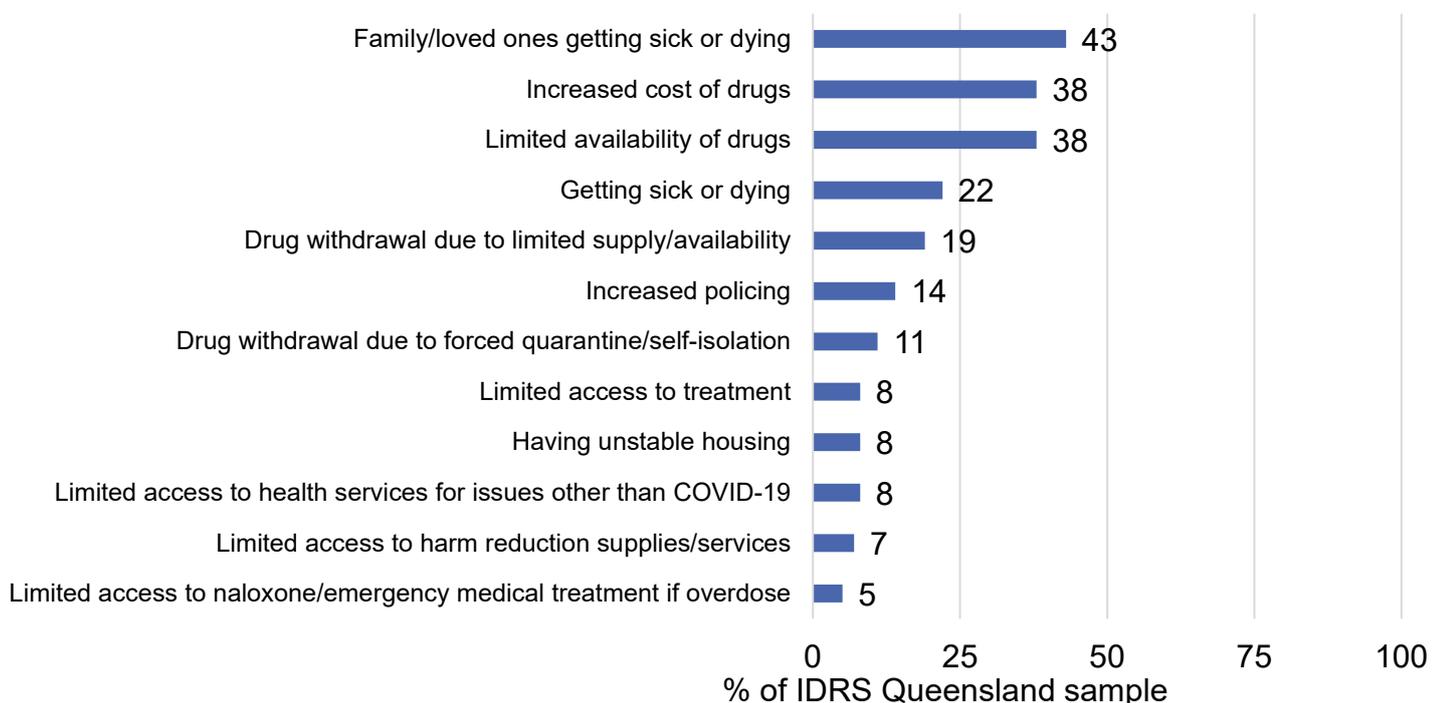
- IDRS interviews are conducted with a sentinel sample of people aged 18 or older who have injected drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Brisbane and the Gold Coast, Queensland, for the last 12 months.
- Participants are recruited via advertisements in needle and syringe 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 (instead of 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 age eligibility criterion was increased from 17 to 18 in 2020.
- The study protocol remained otherwise unchanged. Findings are suppressed where ≤ 5 participants report an outcome to protect confidentiality.
- The Queensland IDRS sample are demographically similar to those recruited in 2019 and in earlier years, with a median age of 44 years (IQR 38 - 50). Slightly more females participated in 2020 (41%, compared to 33% in 2019).

Findings

Experience of COVID-19 testing, diagnosis and restrictions

- 10% said they had been tested for COVID-19. None had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- 27% said they were currently worried about getting COVID-19.
- At the time of the interview, 87% reported they had been practising social distancing and 64% reported home isolation since March 2020.
- Participants reported a number of concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely around family or friends getting sick or dying (43% of the sample) or they themselves becoming unwell (22%; **Figure 1**).
- Issues related to drug markets showed concerns around increased cost (38%) and limited availability of illicit drugs (38%), as well as drug withdrawal due to limited supply or availability (19%).

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



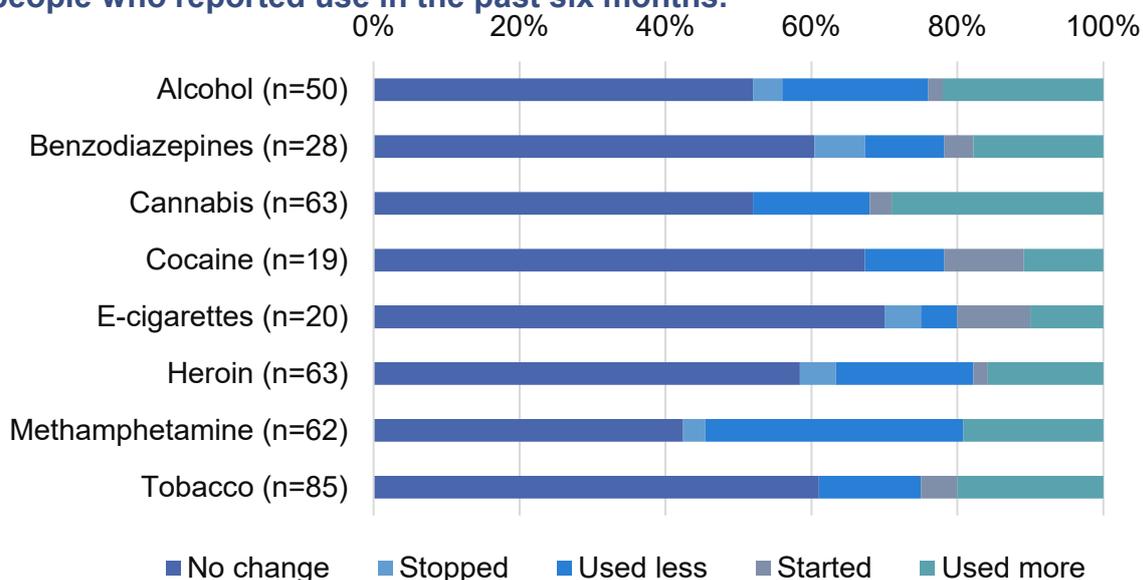
Social impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Fewer than one in ten (7%) reported that they had been given new shelter/short term housing or put up in a hotel since March.
- Nearly two-in-five (38%) reported that the income they received in the month prior to interview was more than what they earned in February, 13% said less, and 49% said a similar amount.
- When asked about financial difficulties they had experienced in the four weeks prior to interview, 26% reported being unable to buy food or going without meals, while approximately one-quarter reported asking for financial help from friends/family, being unable to pay household/phone bills on time and asking for help from welfare/community organisations (27%, 19% and 27%, respectively).

Changes in drug use with COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- One-third (32%) reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. Of these, 48% reported decreased frequency (16% of total sample).
- One in eight (13%) reported that the drug they injected most during the last month was different to the drug most injected in February. The most common change was from heroin to methamphetamine (23% of this subsample).
- Participants who reported past six month use of each drug were asked about changes in their use since the beginning of March 2020 compared to before. Participants mostly reported no change in use of each drug (**Figure 2**). The drugs most commonly reported as decreased in use were methamphetamine, alcohol, and heroin (35%, 20% and 19% reported using less, respectively), with frequently cited reasons being that methamphetamine was more expensive (62%) or less available (62%), whilst 42% reported that they did not feel like using alcohol and 33% reported that heroin was less available.

Figure 2. Change in drug use since March 2020 compared to before amongst people who reported 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 (93%); (**Figure 3**). The 2020 median price was \$75 per point compared to \$50 per point from 2016 – 2019. Prices of cannabis and heroin were mostly reported as stable.
- Two in five participants who commented said that the purity of heroin had declined since the beginning of March compared to before (39%; **Figure 4**). Over half (55%) reported this for crystal methamphetamine.
- Participants noted a decline in availability for crystal methamphetamine (83%) (**Figure 5**), but participants who commented mostly reported availability of heroin and cannabis as stable (74%, and 57% and 59% for hydroponic and bush forms of cannabis, respectively).

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

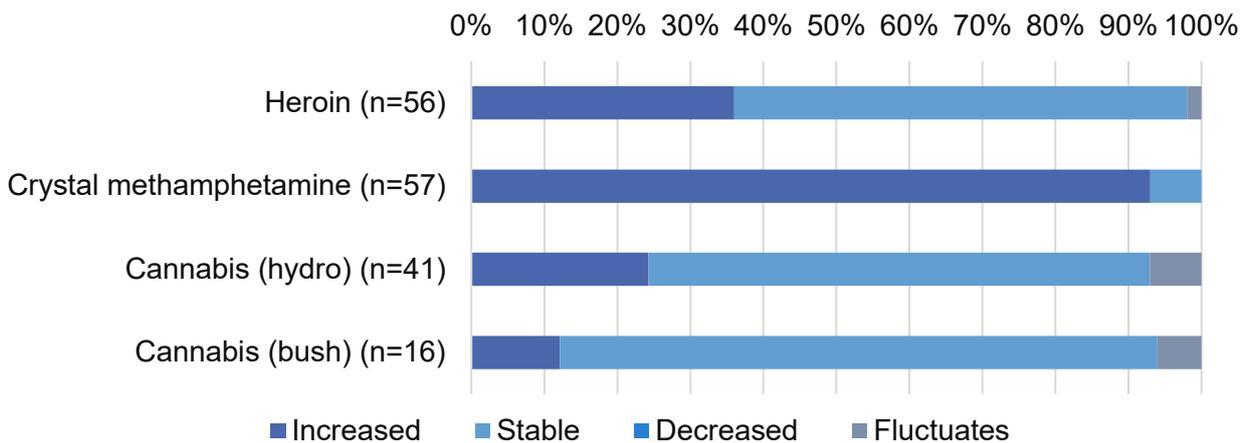
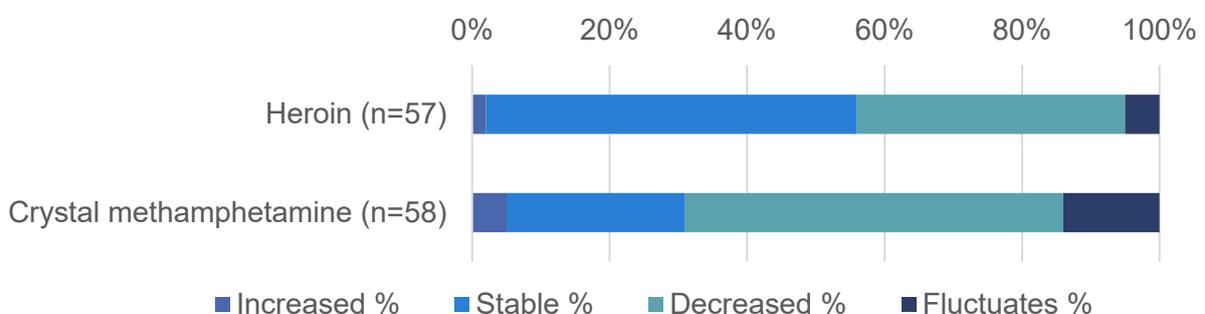
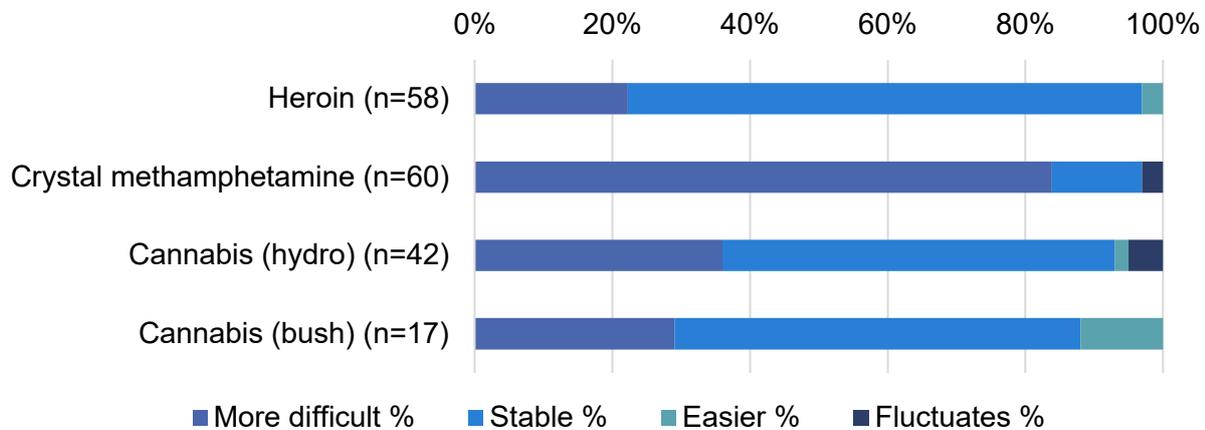


Figure 4. Change in perceived purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine since March 2020 compared to before.



Note. Data were only collected for heroin and crystal methamphetamine.

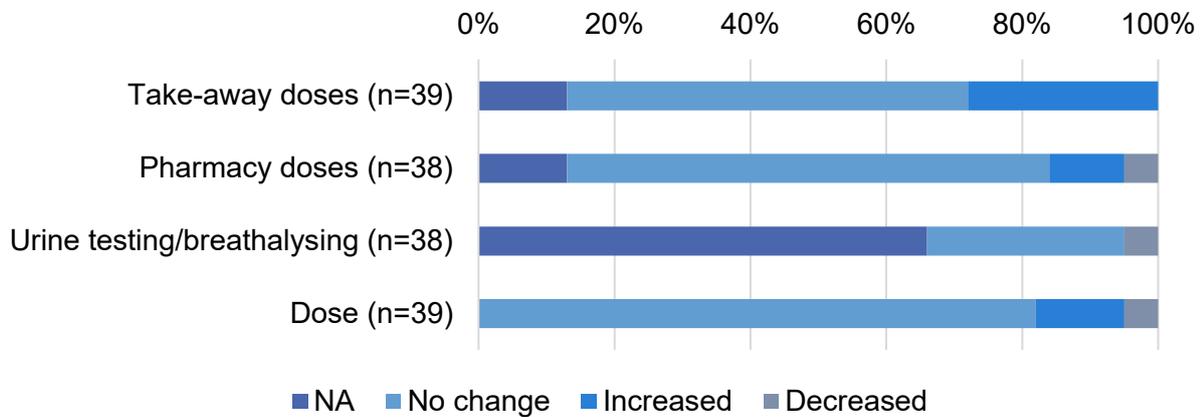
Figure 5. Change in perceived availability of select illicit drugs since March 2020 compared to before.



Changes in drug treatment and harm reduction service access

- When asked about drug treatment in the past six months, 5% reported being in drug treatment before March, 4% since March, and 45% both before and since March.
- Of those in treatment since March (n=48), 35% reported some disruption to their drug treatment in that same period. Most commonly reported disruptions for those in treatment were appointments moving to phone/video rather than face-to-face (25%) and changed hours of service (9%).
- Of those who reported being on opioid agonist therapy (OAT) since March (n=38), few (n≤5) reported that they were put on a new treatment.
- In regard to changes in aspects of OAT since March, 28% reported an increase in take-away doses; few (n≤5) reported a decrease in pharmacy doses. Most participants reported that dosage of medications remained stable (**Figure 6**).
- Most reported that their satisfaction with their drug treatment was the same compared to before March (77%), while 12% said better and 12% said worse.
- Of those who did not report recent treatment (n=51), 20% reported experiencing difficulties accessing treatment in the past six months (16% since March 2020).
- One-in-ten (10%) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since March. Of this small group, 20% reported re-using their own needles more than normal as a result.
- 8% reported difficulties in safely disposing of used needles and syringes in a disposal unit since March.

Figure 6. Change in aspects of drug treatment since March 2020 as compared to before among those reporting recent OAT.



Physical and mental health

- Nearly one-in-five participants (18%) reported experiencing a non-fatal opioid overdose in the past 12 months (compared to 24% in the 2019 QLD sample).
- In 2020, 9% experienced an opioid overdose before March, 3% since March, and 5% both before and since March.
- One-in-five participants (20%) reported accessing take-home naloxone during the past year (16% before March and 7% since March).
- Very few (6%) reported difficulties accessing naloxone during the past year (n≤5 before March and n≤5 since March).
- 15% reported resuscitating someone with naloxone during the past year (7% before March and 7% since March).
- 11% reported an increase in reusing their own needles since March, while n≤5 of participants reported an increase in any needle sharing (either receptive or distributive), as compared to the month of February.
- 9% reported that they injected alone more often since March, compared to before.
- 60% reported experiencing withdrawal from a drug during the past year (8% before March, 10% since March and 42% both before and since March).
- When asked about their current physical health as compared to before March, 21% said it was better, 57% said similar, and 23% said worse.
- When asked about their current mental health as compared to before March, 18% said it was better, 49% said similar, and 33% said worse.

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 (56%), washing hands with soap/sanitiser before handling drugs/money (53%), preparing drugs themselves (48%), stocking up on sterile needles/syringes (40%) and avoiding sharing other drug use equipment with others (34%).
- One quarter of participants (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 (10% from a harm reduction service, 5% from a GP, online or social media respectively).



Conclusions

- Participants reported a significant increase in the price of crystal methamphetamine from 2019; 93% of participants who commented said the price increased over the COVID period.
- Crystal methamphetamine was perceived as more difficult to obtain and lower in purity.
- The majority of participants reported that heroin price, purity and availability remained stable.
- Whilst the majority of participants reported no change in their use, the drugs most commonly reported as increased in use were the same as for the 2020 EDRS sample (cannabis, tobacco and alcohol) [1].
- This sample cannot be considered representative of all people who inject drugs, but provides important and timely information from an informed sentinel group, particularly regarding the effects of COVID-19. It is thus important to consider this information in light of other samples, and to continue monitoring to evaluate longer term impacts of the pandemic.
- Future Drug Trends outputs will explore these and related issues.

References

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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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