

Impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions on people who inject drugs in Melbourne, Victoria: Preliminary findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System 2020

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Key findings from the Victoria sample:

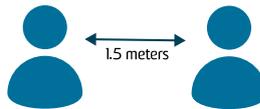
COVID-19 BEHAVIOURS



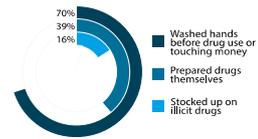
One fifth (20%) of the 2020 IDRS sample reported getting tested for COVID-19.



In the sample, 59% were worried about getting COVID-19.

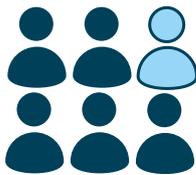


The majority (87%) reported that they had practiced social distancing since March.

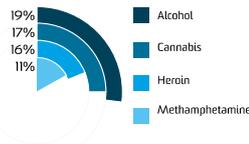


Harm reduction behaviours relating to COVID-19.

CHANGES IN DRUG USE DURING COVID-19



One-sixth (14%) 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).

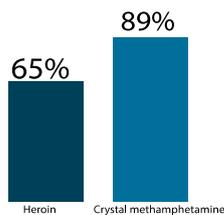


Heroin was the most frequently endorsed drug that decreased in use (i.e. used less or stopped using) since COVID-19 restrictions.

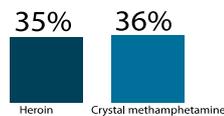


Non-prescribed benzodiazepines were the drug most frequently endorsed as no change in use since COVID-19 restrictions.

CHANGES IN DRUG MARKETS AND TREATMENT



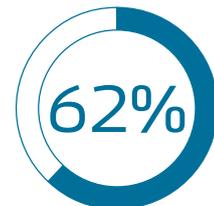
The majority of participants reported an increase in price for heroin and crystal methamphetamine.



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



Almost one-in-ten (8%) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since COVID-19.



Almost one third of those in treatment since March (62%) 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 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 represents preliminary findings from 179 participants recruited in Melbourne, Victoria, from 23 June to 6 August 2020 (37 participants in June, 138 in July, 4 in August).

Method

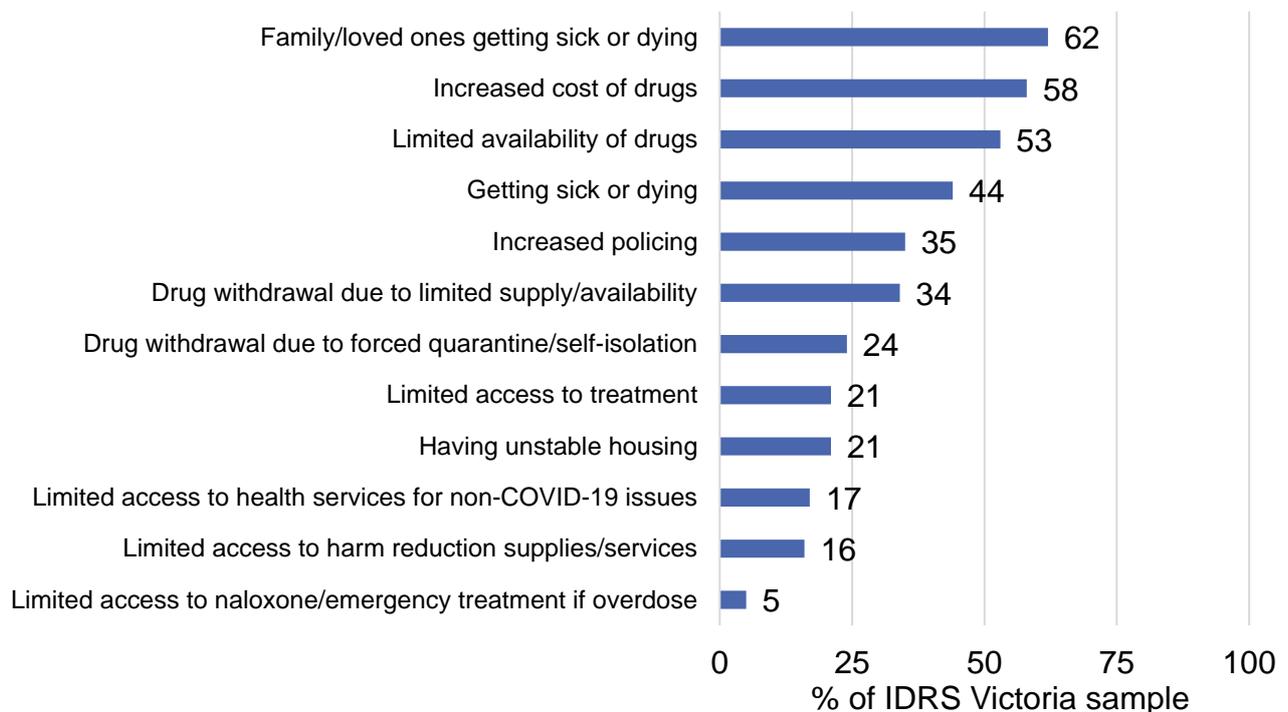
- IDRS interviews are conducted with a sentinel sample of people aged 18 or older who have injected drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Melbourne, Victoria for the last 12 months.
- Participants are recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm 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 (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 Victorian IDRS sample are demographically similar to those recruited in 2019 and in earlier years, being mostly male (59%) with a median age of 43 years (IQR 38-49) (40 years in 2019; IQR 34-46; $p=0.014$). Note that the sample for 2020 was slightly larger than the sample for 2019 (179 versus 149, respectively).

Findings

Experience of COVID-19 testing, diagnosis and restrictions

- 20% said they had been tested for COVID-19. None had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- 59% said they were currently worried about getting COVID-19.
- At the time of the interview, 87% reported they had been social distancing, 68% 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 (62% of the sample) or they themselves becoming unwell (44%; **Figure 1**).
- Issues related to drug markets (e.g., increased cost, limited availability of illicit drugs), as well as increased policing, were also commonly cited.

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



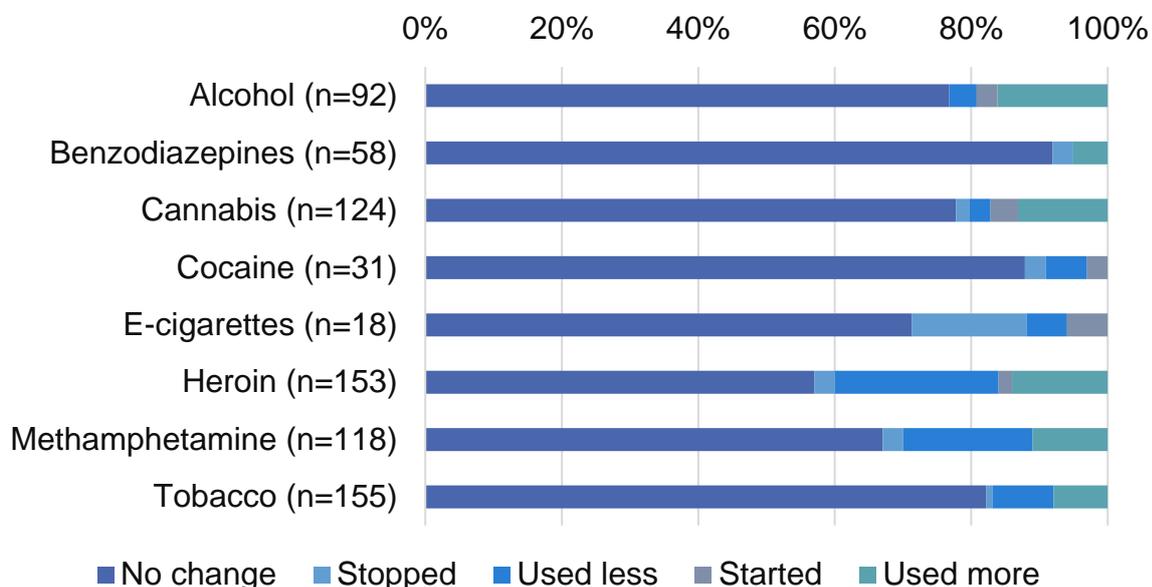
Social impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Nearly one-in-ten (9%) reported that they had been given new shelter/short term housing or put up in a hotel since March.
- Nearly two-in-five (37%) reported that the income they received in the month prior to interview was more than what they earned in February, 7% said less, and 56% said a similar amount.
- When asked about financial difficulties they had experienced in the four weeks prior to interview, 48% reported being unable to buy food or going without meals, while approximately one-third 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 (36%, 35% and 34%, respectively).

Changes in drug use with COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- One-quarter (26%) reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. Of these, 54% reported a decrease in injecting frequency (14% of total sample).
- One in ten (10%) 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 methamphetamine to heroin.
- 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 heroin and methamphetamine (24% and 19% reported using less, respectively), with frequently cited reasons being that the drugs were more expensive or less available.

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 heroin and crystal methamphetamine as increased in price (65% and 89%, respectively) since the beginning of March compared to before (**Figure 3**). Price of cannabis was most commonly reported as stable.
- Two in five participants who commented said that the purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine had declined since the beginning of March compared to before (43% and 42%, respectively; **Figure 4**).
- Participants who commented most commonly reported availability of illicit drugs as stable, although 36% and 35% noted a decline in availability for crystal methamphetamine and heroin, respectively (**Figure 5**).

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

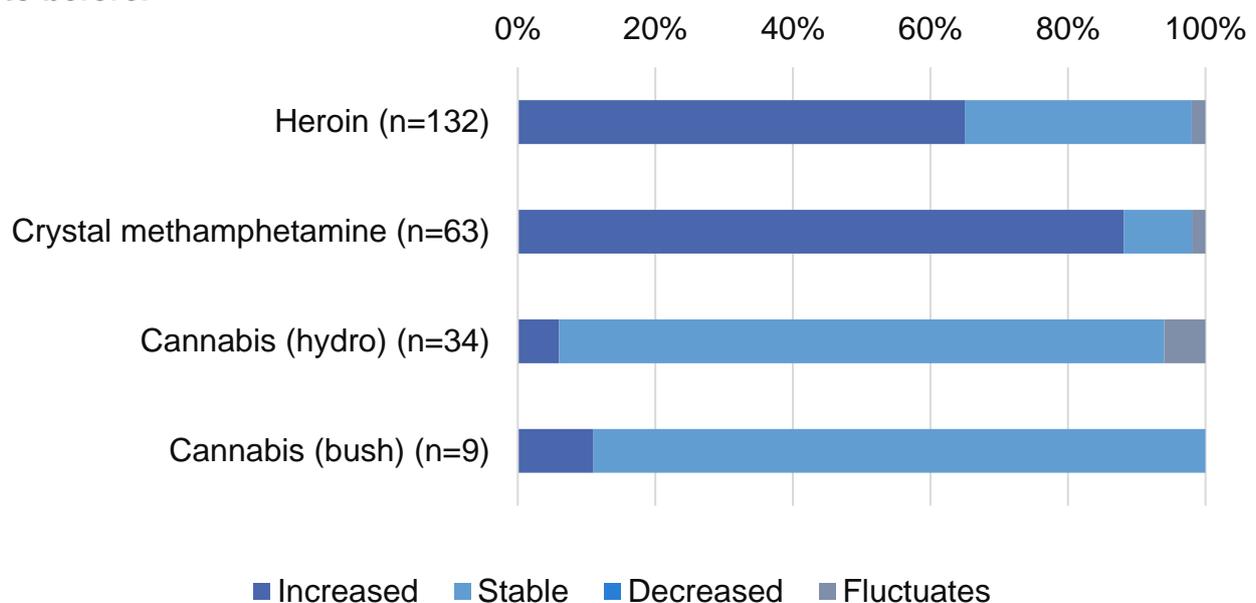
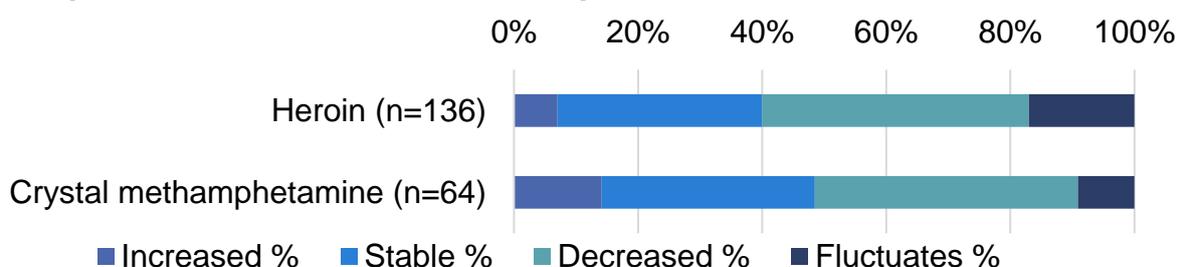
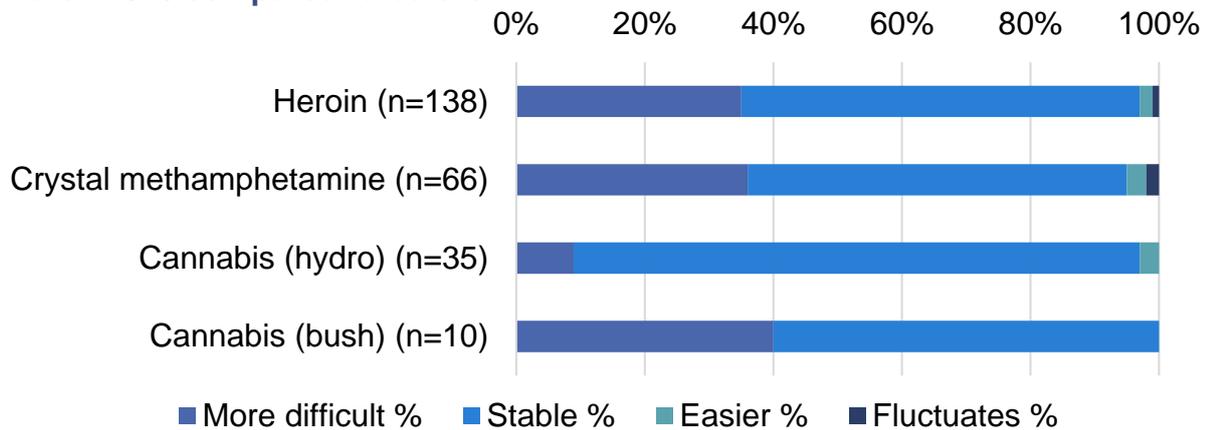


Figure 4. Change in perceived purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine since March 2020 compared to before.



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

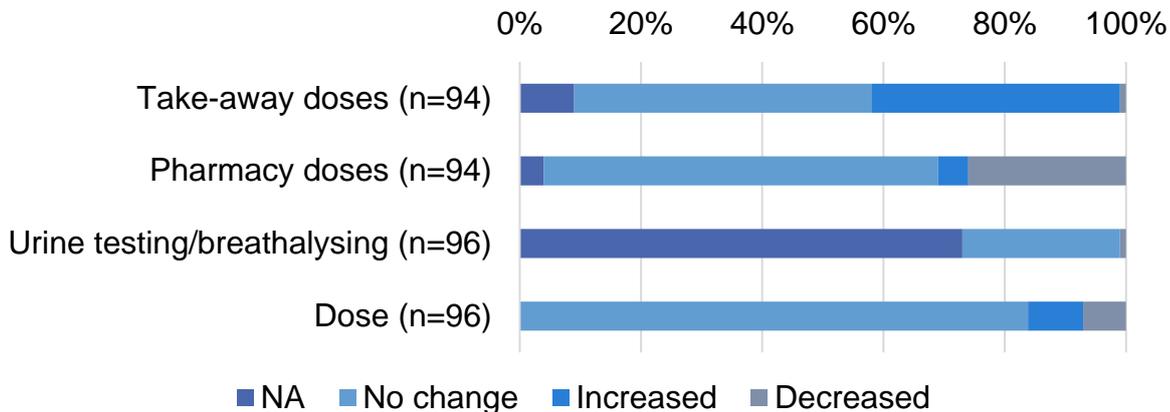
Figure 5. Change in perceived availability of select illicit drugs since the March 2020 compared to before.



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 only, 9% since March only, and 50% both before and since March.
- Of those in treatment since March (n=107), 62% reported any disruption to their drug treatment in that same period. Most common disruptions were appointments moving to phone/video rather than face-to-face (48%) and changed hours in service (16%).
- Of those who reported being on opioid agonist therapy (OAT) since March (n=95), small numbers (n ≤5) reported that they were put on a new treatment.
- In regard to changes in aspects of treatment since March, 43% reported an increase in take-away doses, while 26% reported a decrease in pharmacy doses. Most participants reported that urine testing/breathalysing and dosage of medications remained mostly stable (**Figure 6**).
- Most reported that their satisfaction with their drug treatment was the same compared to before March (85%), while 9% said better and 6% said worse. Of those who did not report recent treatment (n=76), 9% reported difficulties accessing treatment in the past six months (8% since March 2020).
- Less than one-in-ten (8%) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since March. Of this small group, 60% reported re-using their own needles more than normal as a result.
- 6% reported difficulties in safely disposing of used needles and syringes in a sharps bin since March.

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



Physical and mental health

- One-in-five participants (19%) reported experiencing an accidental opioid overdose in the past 12 months (25% in the 2019 VIC sample for comparison).
- In 2020, 10% experienced an opioid overdose before March, 4% since March, and 5% both before and since March.
- Two-in-five participants (39%) reported accessing take-home naloxone during the past year (28% before March and 11% since March).
- Small numbers (≤ 5) reported difficulties accessing naloxone during the past year.
- 16% reported resuscitating someone with naloxone during the past year (10% before March and 6% since March).
- 5% reported an increase in reusing their own needles since March, while less than five participants reported an increase in any needle sharing (either receptive or distributive), as compared to the month of February.
- 12% reported that they injected alone more since March as compared to before.
- 58% reported experiencing withdrawal from any drug during the past year (8% before March, 7% since March and 43% both before and since March).
- When asked about their current physical health as compared to before March, 18% said it was better, 56% said similar, and 26% said worse.
- When asked about their current mental health as compared to before March, 17% said it was better, 51% said similar, and 33% said worse.

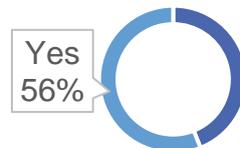
Precautions to reduce risk of COVID-19 and impacts of restrictions

- The most commonly reported behaviours to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 or impacts of restrictions while obtaining or using drugs were washing hands with soap/sanitiser before handling drugs/money (70%), avoiding sharing needles/syringes with others (56%), avoiding sharing other drug use equipment with others (43%) and stocking up on sterile needles/syringes (39%).
- 19% 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, 6% from a GP).

Washed hands with soap/sanitizer before handling drugs/money



Avoiding sharing needles/syringes with others



Avoided sharing other drug use equipment with others



Conclusions

- Most participants in Victoria reported no change in their illicit drug use since COVID-19 restrictions, although changes in use varied by drug. Perceptions of illicit drug availability were mostly that it remained stable or became harder to access.
- Most participants rated their mental and physical health as similar compared to before March, and most had engaged in precautions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission while using drugs or to avoid the impacts of restrictions on drug use.
- Of those in drug treatment, a majority of participants reported disruptions to their drug treatment since march, and most participants reported that their satisfaction with their drug treatment was the same compared to before march.
- The IDRS interviews are conducted with a sentinel sample of people and results are not representative of injecting drug use in the general population.
- It is critical to continue to monitor impacts, particularly amongst those populations who report more regular or dependent use of drugs.
- More extensive findings on impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions among this sample will be reported in future outputs from the project.

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*.
2. Dunlop, A., et al. (2020). Challenges in maintaining treatment services for people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 17, 1-7.
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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