



Key findings from the 2013 IDRS: a survey of people who inject drugs

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KEY FINDINGS

- Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice for participants who inject drugs.
- Recent heroin use remained stable while the frequency of use significantly decreased. The availability of heroin was 'very easy' and purity 'low'.
- Recent use of ice/crystal remained stable, while speed powder and base decreased significantly. All forms were considered 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain. Ice/crystal was reported as 'high' in purity, while speed powder and base were 'medium'.
- NSW remained the only jurisdiction where sizeable numbers of participants were able to comment on cocaine. Recent use and frequency of cocaine use remained stable. Price remained stable. Nationally, the availability of cocaine was reported as 'easy' and purity as 'medium'.
- The cannabis market remained stable. Recent use and frequency of use remained high, usually daily or near-daily. Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market.
- Extra-medical use and injection of pharmaceutical preparations continued to occur, with jurisdictional differences in patterns observed.
- Sharing of injecting equipment was common. Less than 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. Mainly depression, followed by anxiety.
- Nearly half of the national sample reported driving in the last six months. Over three-quarters drove after taking an illicit drug.
- Over one-third of the national sample reported some form of criminal activity in the last month, mainly drug dealing or property crime. Around one-third had been arrested in the last year.

INTRODUCTION

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) monitors emerging trends in the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. In addition to a survey of people who inject drugs (PWID), 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 thirteenth year that all three components of the IDRS were conducted in every state and territory in Australia.

The key findings of the 2013 IDRS participant (PWID) surveys are presented in this bulletin. Regular PWID 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 PWID survey is therefore not representative of illicit drug use in the general population, and is not representative of other PWID (e.g. in other geographical areas, occasional users, etc), but it is indicative of emerging trends that may warrant further monitoring and/or investigation.

Notes on interpretation:

- 'Recent' refers to the six months preceding interview
- 'Frequency' data refers to the number of days on which those participants had recently used the drug (maximum days = 180)
- ↑Significant increase ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2012) compared with current year (2013)
- ↓Significant decrease ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2012) compared with current year (2013)

NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Demographics

In 2013, a total of 887 participants were interviewed for the IDRS survey. The mean age of the sample was 40 years, ranging from 18-66 years. Around two-thirds of the sample were male. The majority were unemployed, with a mean

income of \$392 per week. Nearly half of the sample reported being in current treatment (mainly methadone maintenance). The majority were unemployed and 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 9-60 years). The main drug of choice and drug injected most often in the last month was heroin followed by methamphetamines and morphine. These results are similar to the 2012 IDRS (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics PWID, nationally, 2012-2013

	National	
	2012 N=924	2013 N=887
Mean age (years)	39	40
Male (%)	66	64
Unemployed (%)	84	84
Mean income/ week (\$)	N=904 \$386	N=871 \$392
Prison history (%)	54	56
Currently in drug treatment (%)	44	47
Mean age first injected (years)	20	20
Drug of choice (%)		
Heroin	54	54
Any methamphetamine#	21	23
Speed	13	10
Base	1	2
Ice/crystal	7	11
Morphine	11	8
Oxycodone	2	3
Methadone	2	1
Cocaine	3	2
Cannabis	5	5
Drug injected most often last month (%)		
Heroin	42	40
Any methamphetamine#	25	25
Speed	14	8
Base	1	2
Ice/crystal	10	15
Morphine	16	16
Oxycodone	4	4
Methadone	5	5
Cocaine	1	1

Source: IDRS participant interviews
includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine

Recent use

Heroin

In 2013, around two-thirds (60%) of the national sample reported use in the preceding six months on a median of 60 days (Figure 1 and Table 2). Daily use was reported by 22% of recent heroin users (28% in 2012). While the recent use of heroin was stable the

frequency of use significantly decreased between 2012 and 2013 (72 days versus 60 days; $p < 0.05$).

Methamphetamine

Nationally, the recent use of ice/crystal remained stable, while the recent use of speed powder and base significantly decreased between 2012 and 2013 ($p < 0.05$; Figure 1 and Table 2). The recent use of each form varied among jurisdictions. Nationally, the median days of use of any form of methamphetamine (by users) remained stable (22 days in 2012, 24 days in 2013). Each methamphetamine form was reported on a median of 12 days or less in the last six months. The proportion of all participants who reported daily methamphetamine (among those recently used) use was stable at 7% nationally (6% in 2012).

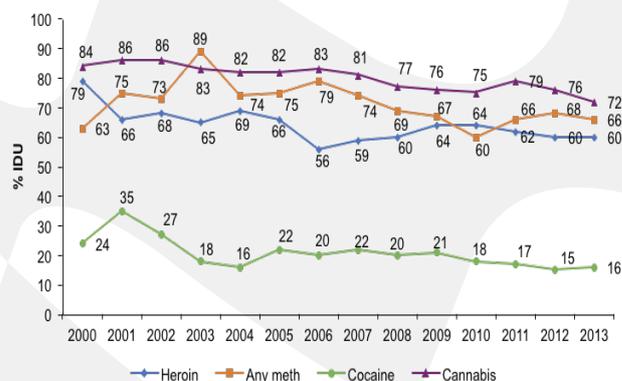
Cocaine

The prevalence of cocaine use in the six months preceding interview was 16% or less in all jurisdictions except NSW where it was higher (41%). Nationally recent cocaine use was stable (16%, Figure 1 and Table 2). The median days of cocaine use remained low and stable.

Cannabis

As in previous years of the IDRS, cannabis use among this group was common nationally (Figure 1 and Table 2). Frequency of cannabis use tended to be daily or near-daily. Cannabis remained readily available in all jurisdictions.

Figure 1: Recent use of heroin, any methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis, nationally, 2000-2013



Source: IDRS participant interviews

Table 2: Recent use and median days of use for heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis, nationally, 2012-2013

	National	
	2012 N=924	2013 N=887
Recent use (%)		
Heroin	60	60
Any Methamphetamine [#]	68	66
<i>Speed</i>	40	34↓
<i>Base</i>	18	13↓
<i>Ice</i>	54	55
Cocaine	15	15
Cannabis	76	76
Median days of use[^]		
Heroin	72	60↓
Any Methamphetamine [#]	22	24
<i>Speed</i>	10	10
<i>Base</i>	6	6
<i>Ice</i>	12	12
Cocaine	3	3
Cannabis	160	170

Source: IDRS participant interviews

[#]includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine

[^] among those who had used; maximum number of days, i.e. daily use = 180

Pharmaceuticals

In 2013, the recent use of oxycodone remained stable at 36%. While the recent use of morphine decreased significantly from 43% in 2012 to 38% in 2013 ($p < 0.05$).

Morphine and oxycodone injection remained stable over the last two years (morphine: 40% in 2012 and 35% in 2013, oxycodone: 33% in 2012 and 31% in 2013). 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 64% (result includes benzodiazepines used as prescribed). By contrast, benzodiazepine injection was relatively uncommon, a behaviour reported by 6% of the national sample (7% in 2012). Benzodiazepine injection was most often reported in TAS (23% in 2013, 26% in 2012).

Price, purity and availability

Heroin

The price of heroin varied among the jurisdictions ranging from \$250 to \$600 for a gram and \$50 to \$100 for a cap. The availability of heroin was reported as either 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain in the last six months. Purity varied with the majority of jurisdictions reporting purity as 'low' (Table 3).

Methamphetamine

Prices for speed powder, base and ice/crystal varied across jurisdictions. Overall, the three main forms of methamphetamine were generally considered 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain, with percentages between 12-15% nationally also reporting all forms as 'difficult' to obtain. Of the three forms, ice/crystal was reported to be of 'high' purity, while speed powder and base were commonly reported to be 'medium' (Table 3).

Cocaine

The price per 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. Nationally, the availability of cocaine was reported as 'easy' to obtain and the purity as 'medium' (Table 3).

Table 3: Recent use and perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2013

%	Heroin	Methamphetamine			Cocaine	Cannabis	
		Speed powder	Base	Ice/crystal		Hydro	Bush
Availability	N=487	N=238	N=88	N=379	N=64	N=464	N=204
Very easy	47	39	39	42	28	53	27
Easy	38	45	41	46	42	40	47
Difficult	13	15	15	12	27	7	25
Very difficult	5	2	6	0	3	1	3
Purity	N=475	N=239	N=92	N=375	N=64	N=461	N=207
High	7	23	27	44	28	58	27
Medium	32	37	40	30	36	30	54
Low	50	26	15	13	27	4	9
Fluctuates	11	14	17	13	9	9	10

Source: IDRS participant interviews

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 availability of hydroponic cannabis was reported as 'very easy' to obtain while bush cannabis was reported as 'easy'. The potency of hydroponic cannabis continued to be rated as 'high' and bush cannabis as 'medium' (Table 3).

Injecting risk behaviours

Among the national sample, similar proportions to the 2012 IDRS reported borrowing a needle. However, lending a needle in the last month significantly decreased between 2012 and 2013 (14% versus 11%; $p < 0.05$). Twenty-four percent of participants reported sharing injecting equipment (excluding needles). The main equipment shared were spoons and tourniquets (75% and 31% respectively among those who reported sharing other equipment). Forty percent of the national sample reported re-using their own needle in the last month, a significant decrease from 47% in 2012 ($p < 0.05$). The proportion of participants re-using their own injecting equipment significantly decreased (62% in 2012 and 56% in 2013; $p < 0.05$). Among those who re-used their own injecting equipment the majority reported re-using spoons (81%), followed by tourniquets (40%). The arm was reported as the last site of injection (74%; Table 4).

Table 4: Injecting risk behaviour among PWID in the last month, nationally, 2012-2013

	National	
	2012 N=924	2013 N=887
Borrowed a needle	7	7
Lent a needle	14	11↓
Shared other injecting equipment**	25	24
Re-used own needle	47	40↓
Re-used own injecting equipment	62	56↓
Spoons	88	81
Filters	11	11
Tourniquets	43	40
Water	13	15
Swabs	4	2
Wheel Filter	6	1
Other	<1	1
Last site of injection	78	74
Arm	78	74
Leg	3	6
Hand	11	13
Foot	2	2
Groin	2	2
Neck	3	3
Other	1	1

Source: IDRS participant interviews

* includes spoons, water, tourniquets and filters

Self-reported mental health

Nearly half of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. The most common self-reported mental health problem was depression, followed by anxiety. Of those with a self-reported mental health problem, 74% reported attending a health professional for their mental health problem, a significant increase from 2012 ($p < 0.05$; Table 5).

Table 5: Self-reported mental health problems experienced among PWID in the last six months, nationally, 2012-2013

	National	
	2012 N=924	2013 N=887
Self-reported mental health problem (%)	43	44
Self-reported problem# (%)	N=393	N=388
Depression	70	66
Anxiety	52	46
Manic-depression/Bipolar	12	10
Schizophrenia	11	15
Panic	12	8
Paranoia	9	4
Drug induced psychosis	7	4
Attended health professional for mental health problem#	58	74↑

Source: IDRS participant interviews

among those who reported a mental health issue

Driving risk behaviours

Nearly half of the national sample reported driving a vehicle in the last six months. Of those who reported recently driving, around one-fifth drove while under the influence of alcohol and over three-quarters reported driving while under the influence of an illicit drug. The main drugs reported were cannabis and heroin. No significant differences were found between 2012 and 2013 (Table 6).

Criminal activity

Thirty-six percent of the national sample reported a criminal activity in the last month. The most common criminal activity reported was drug dealing and property crime. Over one-third of the sample had been arrested in the last 12 months. No significant differences were found between 2012 and 2013 (Table 7).

Table 6: Driving risk behaviours among PWID in the last six months, nationally, 2012-2013

	National	
	2012 N=924	2013 N=887
Driven in the last six months (%)	44 (N=409)	42 (N=370)
Driven under the influence of alcohol last six months* (%)	20	18
Driven after taking an illicit drug in the last six months* (%)	77	77
Drugs used last time in the last six months^	N=313	N=282
Heroin	39	32
Methadone	11	9
Morphine	17	17
Oxycodone	5	3
Speed	10	9
Base	3	2
Ice	10	14
Benzodiazepines	5	7
Cannabis	28	26

Source: IDRS participant interviews

* Of those who had driven a vehicle in the last six months

^ Of those that had driven after taking an illicit drug

Table 7: Proportion of PWID that reported criminal activity, nationally, 2012-2013

	National	
	2012 N=924	2013 N=887
Crime in the last month (%)		
Drug dealing	24	23
Property	18	18
Fraud	3	2
Violence	3	3
Any crime	37	36
Arrested last 12 months (%)	33	32

Source: IDRS participant interviews

More information

For more detailed 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 2014. Previous years' reports are available on the NDARC website, www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au (click on 'Drug Trends').

Participating researchers and research centres

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