



Key findings from the 2014 IDRS: a survey of people who inject drugs

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KEY FINDINGS

- Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice.
- Recent heroin use remained stable and frequency of use increased (however this was not significant). The availability of heroin was 'very easy' and purity 'low'.
- The recent use of any methamphetamine remained stable. However, the recent use of the form ice/crystal increased significantly. The frequency of ice/crystal use (days of use) also significantly increased. 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 in NSW was stable. Price remained stable. Availability was reported as 'easy' and purity as 'medium'.
- The recent use of cannabis remained stable, however the frequency of use significantly decreased from daily to every second day. 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. Nearly half of the participants re-used their own needles in the last month.
- Over one-third of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. Mainly depression, followed by anxiety.
- Over one-third of the national sample reported a 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, cannabis and other drugs. 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. Since 2000, all three components of the IDRS were conducted in every state and territory in Australia.

The key findings of the 2014 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 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.

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 (2013) compared with current year (2014)
- ↓Significant decrease ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2013) compared with current year (2014)

NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Demographics

In 2014, a total of 898 participants were interviewed for the IDRS survey. The mean age of the sample was 41 years, ranging from 18-67 years. Around two-thirds of the sample was male. The majority were unemployed, with a mean

income of \$416 per week. Nearly half of the sample reported being 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 5-60 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 2013 IDRS. Those reporting ic/crystal as the drug injected most often in the last month significantly increased between 2013 and 2014 (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the national sample, 2013-2014

	National	
	2013 (N=887)	2014 (N=898)
Mean age (years)	40	41
% Male	64	69
% Unemployed	84	83
Mean income/week (\$)	(N=871) \$392	(N=882) \$416
% Prison history	56	55
% Currently in drug treatment	47	47
Mean age first injected	20	20
% Drug of choice		
Heroin	53	50
Any methamphetamine#	23	24
Speed	10	8
Base	2	2
Ice/crystal	11	14
Morphine	8	10
Oxycodone	3	1
Methadone	1	4
Cocaine	2	1
Cannabis	5	5
% Drug injected most often in the last month		
Heroin	40	41
Any methamphetamine#	25	30
Speed	8	6
Base	2	1
Ice/crystal	15	22↑
Morphine	17	16
Oxycodone	5	2
Methadone	4	4
Cocaine	1	<1

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

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

Recent use

Heroin

In 2014, around two-thirds (60%) of the national sample reported use in the preceding six months on a median of 72 days (Figure 1 and Table 2). Daily use was reported by 25% of recent heroin users (15% of the national sample). While the recent use of heroin was stable the frequency of use increased between 2013 and 2014 (60 days versus 72 days), however this difference was not significant.

Methamphetamine

Nationally, the recent use of any methamphetamine (speed, base or ice/crystal) remained stable. However, the recent use of the form ice/crystal significantly increased between 2013 and 2014 ($p < 0.05$). The recent use of the forms speed and base remained stable (Figure 1 and Table 2). The 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey also found an increase in ice/crystal as the main form used among those who used any methamphetamine in the last 12 months (22% in 2010 to 50% in 2013; AIHW 2014). Data from the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service also reported an increase in the number of detections and weight for ice/crystal in 2012/13 (Australian Customs; Figure 2).

The recent use of each form varied among jurisdictions. Nationally, the frequency of use of any form of methamphetamine (by users) remained stable at 24 days; however the frequency of ice use significantly increased (12 days in 2013 to 20 days in 2014). The proportion of all participants who reported daily methamphetamine (among those recently used) use was relatively stable at 8% nationally (6% in 2013). Daily use of ice/crystal also remained stable.

Cocaine

The prevalence of cocaine use in the six months preceding interview was 15% or less in all jurisdictions except NSW where it was higher (32%). Nationally recent cocaine use was stable (12%, Figure 1 and Table 2). The frequency of cocaine use was also stable and remained low and sporadic in all other jurisdictions.

Cannabis

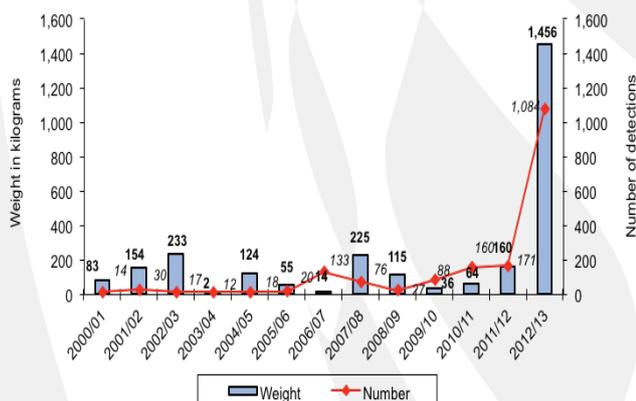
As in previous years of the IDRS, cannabis use among this group was common nationally (Figure 1 and Table 2). Frequency of cannabis use significantly decreased from 170 days in 2013 to 96 days in 2014. Cannabis remained readily available in all jurisdictions. Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market.

Figure 1: Recent use of heroin, any methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis, nationally, 2000-2014



Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

Figure 2: Weight and number of detections of crystalline methamphetamine (ice) made at the border by the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, 2000/01-2012/13



Source: Australia Custom and Border Protection Service

Pharmaceuticals

Morphine remained the most commonly injected pharmaceutical opioid among the national sample. Reports of this behaviour remained highest in the NT (84%) and TAS (71%), the jurisdictions where heroin has traditionally been the least available. Morphine and oxycodone injection remained stable over the last two years, from 35% in 2013 and 2014 (morphine) and 31% in 2013 to 28% in 2014 (oxycodone). Frequency of illicit use, as with all extra-medical use of opioid medication, remained sporadic.

Table 2: Recent use of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2013-2014

	National	
	2013 (N=887)	2014 (N=898)
% Recent use		
Heroin	60	60
Any Methamphetamine#	66	70
<i>Speed</i>	34	30
<i>Base</i>	13	12
<i>Ice/crystal</i>	55	61↑
Cocaine	16	12
Cannabis	72	73
Median days of use^		
Heroin	60	72
Any Methamphetamine#	24	24
<i>Speed</i>	10	6
<i>Base</i>	6	6
<i>Ice/crystal</i>	12	20↑
Cocaine	3	2
Cannabis	170	96↓

Source: IDRS IDU 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

Table 3: Recent use and perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2014

	Heroin (N=515)	Methamphetamine			Cocaine (N=53)	Cannabis	
		Speed powder (N=192)	Base (N=79)	Ice/crystal (N=451)		Hydro (N=485)	Bush (N=211)
% Availability (n)	(N=515)	(N=192)	(N=79)	(N=451)	(N=53)	(N=485)	(N=211)
Very easy	50	34	34	49	34	51	29
Easy	39	51	49	42	38	40	43
Difficult	10	14	11	9	25	9	26
Very difficult	2	2	5	0	4	0	2
% Purity/potency (n)	(N=499)	(N=192)	(N=76)	(N=441)	(N=51)	(N=479)	(N=205)
High	10	29	31	40	29	55	22
Medium	30	37	32	31	33	32	54
Low	46	20	20	12	26	3	11
Fluctuates	13	15	17	17	12	10	14

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Use of benzodiazepines (typically by swallowing) remained common among this sample at 63% (result includes benzodiazepines used as prescribed). By contrast, benzodiazepine injection was relatively uncommon, a behaviour reported by 4% of the national sample (6% in 2013).

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' to obtain in the last six months. Purity varied with the majority of jurisdictions reporting purity as either '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 9-14% 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 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 'easy' to obtain and the purity as 'medium' (Table 3).

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 2013 IDRS reported either borrowing a needle or lending a needle in the last month. Twenty-five percent of participants reported sharing injecting equipment (excluding needles). The main equipment shared among those who reported sharing other injecting equipment were spoons and tourniquets (76% and 23% respectively). Nearly half of the national sample reported re-using their own needle in the last month.

The proportion of participants re-using their own injecting equipment remained fairly stable (52% in 2013 and 56% in 2014). 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 (76%; Table 4).

Self-reported mental health

Over one-third 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, 72% reported attending a health professional for their mental health problem (Table 5). No significant differences were found between years.

Table 4: Injecting risk behaviour in last month, 2013-2014

	National	
	2013 (N=887)	2014 (N=898)
% Borrowed a needle	7	6
% Lent a needle	11	12
% Shared other injecting equipment**	24	25
% Re-used own needle	40	41
% Re-used own injecting equipment	52	56
% Injecting equipment reused# (n)	(N=465)	(N=507)
Spoons	81	81
Filters	11	9
Tourniquets	40	40
Water	15	15
Swabs	2	3
Wheel filters	1	4
Other	1	2
% Last site of injection (n)	(N=859)	(N=868)
Arm	74	76
Leg	6	4
Hand	13	13
Foot	2	2
Groin	2	2
Neck	3	3
Other	1	1

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

includes spoons, water, tourniquets and filters

Criminal activity

Thirty-eight 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 (Table 6). No significant differences were found between years for crime in the last month and arrested in the last 12 months.

Table 5: Self-reported mental health problems experienced in the preceding six months, 2013-2014

	National	
	2013 (N=887)	2014 (N=898)
% Self-reported mental health problem	44	39
% Problem# (n)	(N=388)	(N=346)
Depression	66	68
Anxiety	46	48
Manic-depression/Bipolar	10	13
Schizophrenia	15	15
Panic	8	11
Paranoia	4	7
Drug induced psychosis	4	7
% Attended health professional for mental health problem#	74	72

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews
 # among those who reported a mental health issue

Table 6: Proportion of IDU that reported criminal activity, 2013-2014

	National	
	2013 (N=887)	2014 (N=898)
% Crime in the last month		
Drug dealing	23	25
Property	18	18
Fraud	2	4
Violence	3	5
Any crime	36	38
% Arrested last 12 months	32	33

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user 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 2015. 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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