

Executive Summary

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) IDRS sample comprises a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Canberra, ACT. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs (NSP) and other harm reduction services, as well as via peer referral. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **In 2021, data were collected in June: there were no COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Canberra thus all interviews were delivered face-to-face. In contrast, all interviews in 2020 were conducted via telephone, and this change in modality should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample relative to other years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Canberra, ACT in 2021 was relatively consistent with samples recruited in previous years. There was a significant change in gender identity ($p=0.041$), with more male participants in 2021 (70%) than 2020 (55%), however age remained stable at a mean of 44 years) The majority (88%) reported being unemployed at the time of interview and most (98%) received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview, similar to previous years. There was a significant difference in participants' drug of choice in 2021 compared to 2020 ($p=0.007$), with fewer participants nominating heroin as their drug of choice in 2021 (46% versus 69% in 2020) and more participants nominating methamphetamine as their drug of choice (40% versus 20% in 2020). Similarly, there was a significant change in the substance injected most often in the past month, with fewer participants nominating heroin as the substance injected most often in the past month (49%; 66% in 2020), and more participants nominating methamphetamine (47%; 31% in 2021).

COVID-19 Impact

In 2021, 35% of the ACT sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the 12 months prior to interview, although no one had been diagnosed with the virus. The majority (72%) of participants were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19. Six per cent had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of interview.

Heroin

At least seven in ten participants have reported any recent use of heroin each year since monitoring began, with 78% reporting recent use in 2021 (85% in 2020). Frequency of use significantly decreased, from a record high of a median of 165 days in 2020 to 72 days in 2021, returning to levels similar to 2019. The median price for one gram of heroin was stable at \$320. There was a significant change in the perceived purity of heroin ($p=0.004$), with more participants perceiving heroin to be of 'medium' purity in 2021 (32% versus 12% in 2020) and fewer participants perceiving it to be of 'low' purity (38% versus 61% in 2020). Availability of heroin remained stable compared to 2020.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has remained relatively common over time, with 75% of participants reporting recent use in 2021 (65% in 2020). This mostly comprised use of methamphetamine crystal (74%), with just over one-in-ten reporting use of powder methamphetamine (13%). In 2021, participants reported using methamphetamine on a median of 72 days, a non-significant increase from 47 days in 2020. The median price for one point (0.10 grams) of crystal methamphetamine decreased significantly from \$100 in 2020 to \$50 in 2021, similar to the price reported in 2017-2019. There were significant changes in the perceived purity ($p=0.005$) and availability ($p<0.001$) of crystal methamphetamine between 2020 and 2021, with more participants perceiving purity as 'high' in 2021 (35%; 11% in 2020) and more people

perceiving it to be 'very easy' to obtain (48%; 16% in 2020).

Cocaine

Historically, recent use of cocaine has typically been reported by one-in-five or fewer participants in the ACT sample. In 2021, 16% of the sample reporting using cocaine on a median of two days in the past six months. Injecting and snorting were reported as the most common routes of administration, similar to previous years.

Cannabis

At least three-in-four participants have reported recent use of cannabis each year since monitoring began (75% in 2021). Three-fifths (63%) of participants who had recently used cannabis reported daily use. The price for a gram of bush and hydroponic remained stable at \$20. Hydroponic cannabis was mostly perceived to be of 'high' potency in 2021 (52%), whereas cannabis was perceived to be of 'medium' potency (50%), both stable from 2020. The perceived availability of bush and hydroponic cannabis also remained stable in 2021, and were largely perceived as being 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Methadone was the most commonly used non-prescribed opioid in 2021 (14%), followed by fentanyl (10%), morphine (9%) and buprenorphine-naloxone (9%). There were no significant changes between 2020 and 2021.

Other Drugs

New psychoactive substance (NPS) use was reported by one-in-ten participants (12%). The most commonly used NPS were 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis (12%). In 2021, recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines decreased relative to 2020 (24% versus 38% in 2020; $p=0.047$), largely driven by a decrease in the recent use of alprazolam (9% versus 20% in 2020; $p=0.045$). In 2021, 11% reported past six month use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD. The per cent reporting tobacco use remained high and stable (93%) and recent use of alcohol was reported by 57% of participants. Almost one-quarter (23%) of

participants reported recent use of e-cigarettes, mostly containing nicotine (86%).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

Nearly all participants reported using one or more drugs on the day preceding interview (99%). Just over one-in-ten participants (13%) reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin (6%) and stimulants (6%). Ninety-six per cent of participants had heard of naloxone, 88% had heard of the take-home naloxone programs and nearly three-fifths (58%) had been trained in naloxone administration. Eleven per cent reported distributive sharing and small numbers ($n\leq 5$) reported receptive sharing of needles/syringes in the past month. One-fifth (18%) of the sample reported any past month injection-related health problems in 2021, stable from 2020 (24%). There was a significant decrease ($p=0.009$) in the per cent of participants who reported current drug treatment (52%; 71% in 2020), mostly driven by a decline in methadone treatment (36%; 52% in 2020). Nearly two-thirds (64%) of participants reported receiving a hepatitis C antibody test in the past year, and just over half (52%) had received a PCR or RNA test. One-in-ten participants reported having a current HCV infection (10%). The majority (87%) reported having an HIV test in their lifetime (44% within the past six months). Two-fifths (42%) of the sample reported experiencing a mental health condition in the past six months, most commonly depression and anxiety. One-fifth of the sample (19%; 86% those who had recently driven a vehicle) reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the last six months. In 2021, one-in-six participants (14%) reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drug(s) in Australia in the past year. One-quarter (26%) reported past month criminal activity, with selling drugs for cash profit (18%) and property crime (13%) remaining the most common crimes. In 2021, 61% of the sample reported a lifetime prison history, and just over one-quarter (28%) reported being arrested in the past 12 months.