

Executive Summary

The New South Wales (NSW) 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 Sydney, New South Wales. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other health and 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. **Data were collected in 2021 from June-July. Interviews in 2020 and 2021 were delivered via phone and face-to-face, due to the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia during the data collection periods. This change in modality should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The NSW IDRS sample (N=150) in 2021 were predominantly male (70%) with a mean age of 47 years, significantly older than participants in 2020 (44 years; $p=0.011$). Consistent with previous years, the majority of the sample were living in their own home (82%), unemployed at the time of interview (89%), and had received a government pension, allowance or benefit in the month preceding interview (95%). Notably, the median income of participants significantly decreased from \$450 in 2020 to \$348 in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Three-fifths (61%) of the sample reported heroin to be their drug of choice, with 56% of participants reporting heroin to also be the drug they injected the most often in the past month.

COVID-19 Impact

Two-thirds (66%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the last 12 months, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. In 2021, 17% of the NSW sample reported having received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccination at the time of the interview. Almost half (46%) of the NSW sample reported some level of concern about contracting COVID-19 and almost three-

quarters (72%) reported that they would be concerned about their health if they were to contract COVID-19.

Heroin

Since monitoring began, the lowest per cent of participants reported recent use (past 6 months) of heroin in 2021 (75%). Among those who reported recent use ($n=113$), 35% reported using heroin daily and the majority (99%) reported injecting it. The median price per cap of heroin was \$50, stable from 2020, and the largest per cent (37%) reported the drug to be of 'medium' purity. A significant change was observed in the availability of heroin between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.007$), with more participants reporting heroin to be 'very easy' (38%) or 'easy' (41%) to obtain in 2021.

Methamphetamine

Almost three-quarters (74%) of the sample reported recent use of any methamphetamine, with all of these participants reporting that they had used methamphetamine crystal. Weekly or more frequent use was reported by 68% of participants who had recently used methamphetamine. The price per point of methamphetamine crystal significantly decreased from \$60 in 2020 to \$50 in 2021, returning to the same median price observed from 2001 to 2019. A significant change was observed in the perceived purity of methamphetamine crystal between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.004$), with more participants reporting 'high' purity in 2021 (26%; 14% in 2020), and less participants reporting 'low' purity (19%; 39% in 2020). A significant change was also observed in perceived availability between 2020 and 2021 ($p<0.001$), with more participants reporting methamphetamine crystal to be 'very easy' to obtain in 2021 (51%; 14% in 2020).

Cocaine

Fifteen per cent of the 2021 NSW sample reported recent use of cocaine, the lowest per cent observed since monitoring began. Participants who had recently used cocaine did so infrequently, on a median of three days in the six months preceding the interview.

Cannabis

Approximately two-in-three participants (65%) reported cannabis use in the six months preceding interview in 2021, of which 45% reported daily use. Most of the NSW sample (96%) reported using hydroponic cannabis. In 2021, the median price per ounce of hydroponic cannabis was \$300, stable from 2020. A significant change in the perceived potency of hydroponic cannabis was observed between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.025$), whereby more participants in 2021 perceived potency to be 'high' (61%; 42% in 2020). A significant change in the perceived availability of hydroponic cannabis was also observed between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.003$), whereby 49% of participants perceived it as being 'very easy' to obtain, an increase from 22% in 2020.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Consistent with previous years, the most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioid recently used by participants was methadone (19%), followed by morphine (9%) and oxycodone (9%). Less than one-in-ten participants (7%) reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use.

Other Drugs

Recent use of any new psychoactive substance was reported by 6% of NSW participants, with 4% reporting recent use of drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis. Thirty-four per cent of participants reported recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines, including alprazolam, and one-tenth (12%) reported recent non-prescribed pregabalin use. The majority (89%) of the 2021 NSW sample reported recent tobacco use and almost half (47%) reported recent alcohol use. Recent use of e-cigarettes significantly increased from 12% in 2020 to 29% in 2021 ($p<0.001$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

The majority (97%) of the sample reported using one or more drugs on the day preceding the interview. Almost one-quarter (24%) of the sample reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding the interview, with opioids (16%) being the most common substance involved. Almost three-quarters (74%) of NSW participants reported awareness of the naloxone take-home program, and 44% of participants reported being trained in how to administer naloxone. Less than one-tenth reported receptive (7%) or distributive (9%) needle sharing in the past month and almost one-third (32%) reported experiencing an injection-related health issue in the past month. Half (50%) of the sample reported currently being in some form of drug treatment at the time of the interview, most commonly methadone (37%). The per cent of participants who reported receiving an HCV antibody test in the last year significantly increased from 24% in 2020 to 41% in 2021 ($p=0.003$) and 40% reported receiving a HIV test in the past 6 months. Forty-seven per cent self-reported experiencing a mental health problem in the six months preceding interview, most commonly depression and anxiety. One-fifth (21%) of the whole sample reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, with methamphetamine crystal the most common drug used prior to driving. Thirteen per cent of the sample reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year. In 2021, just over two-fifths (42%) of the NSW sample reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month, and 19% reported being the victim of a crime involving violence in the past month.