

A summary of criminal activity and contact with the criminal justice system among a sample of people who inject drugs in Darwin, Northern Territory, 2015-2020

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Key Findings:

- The proportion of people with at least one illicit drug-related crime proceeded against by police in the NT is lower than is the case for the balance of Australia.
- Among a sample of people who inject drugs (PWID) in Darwin, men were more likely than women to report having ever being in prison, although were generally no more likely to report past month crime or past year arrest.
- In 2020, Aboriginal participants were more likely to report past year arrest and lifetime prison history than non-Aboriginal participants, but no more likely to report past month crime.
- Those who reported committing a crime or being arrested tended to be younger than those who did not.

Introduction

The [National Drug Strategy 2017-2026](#) recognises that alcohol, tobacco and other drugs have the potential to result in a number of social, health and economic harms. One social harm that has been identified is engagement with the criminal justice system, with people in contact with the criminal justice system identified as a priority population (i.e., at higher risk of experiencing disproportionate harms).

This bulletin presents a summary of selected aspects of crime, arrests and prison history reported by people who regularly inject drugs (PWID), interviewed as part of the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) in Darwin, Northern Territory (NT), from 2015-2020 and examines whether there are differences across gender, age and Aboriginality. Secondary offence-related data is also presented.

Method

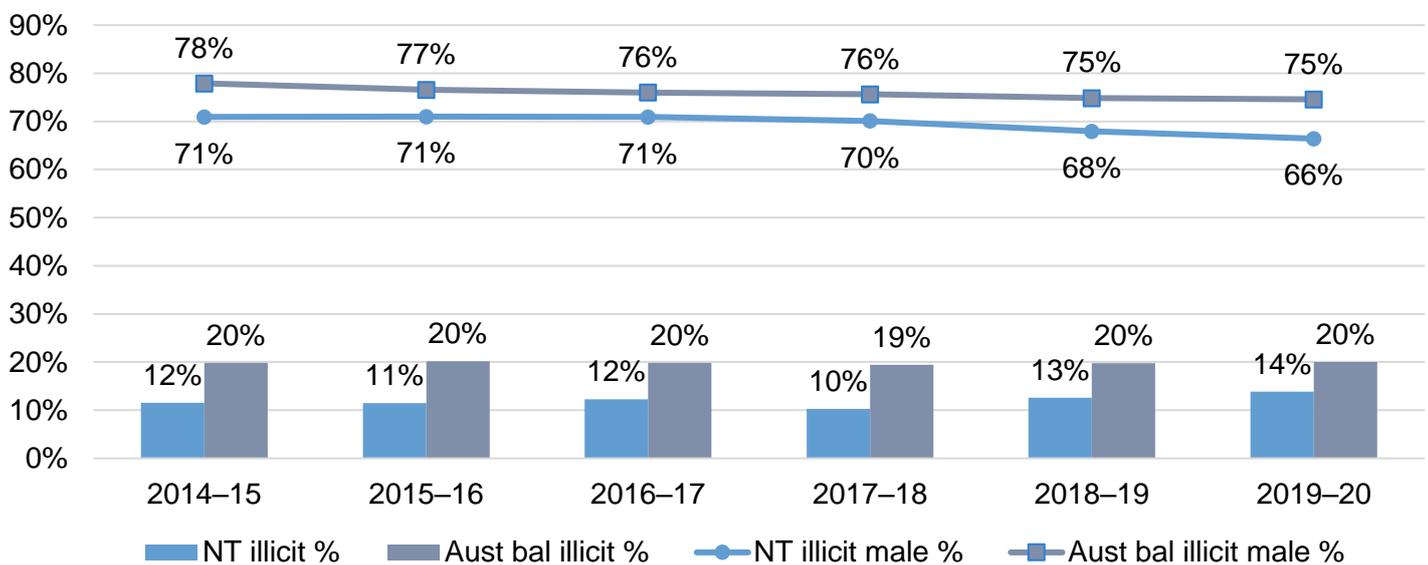
The IDRS comprises annual interviews with cross-sectional sentinel samples of approximately 100 people who regularly inject drugs recruited from Darwin, NT, using a structured questionnaire. Data for this bulletin were drawn from the IDRS surveys conducted from 2015 to 2020 and related secondary data. Full details of the [methods for the annual interviews](#) are available for download.

IDRS participants were asked several questions around crime and contact with the criminal justice system. The variables included in this report are from: questions around four types of crime (property, dealing, fraud and violent crime) which are collapsed to a single response representing 'have you committed any crime in the past month?'; 'have you been arrested in the past 12 months?'; and 'have you ever been in prison?'. Chi square analyses were used to determine if there were significant differences by gender, and Aboriginal status, while t-tests were used to determine significant differences by age.

Drug-related principal offence in the general population

In 2019-20, 14% (Figure 1) of all people proceeded against by police in the NT had at least one main illicit drug-related offence, compared with 20% for the balance (that is, all jurisdictions other than the NT) of Australia ($p < 0.010$). These proportions are comparable to those observed in 2014-15. Over the same period, the proportion of people who were proceeded against for an illicit drug-related offence that were male has varied between 66% and 71% in the NT and 75% to 78% for the rest of Australia, demonstrating small declines in both cases. In 2019-20, the proportion of people who were proceeded against for an illicit drug-related offence that were male in the NT (66%) was significantly ($p < 0.01$) lower than observed for the rest of Australia (75%).

Figure 1: illicit drug-related principal offence*, % male, NT and balance of Australia, 2014/15-2019/20.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics; Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2019–20; 2. Offenders, states and territories.xls; Table 13, downloaded 9/6/2021.

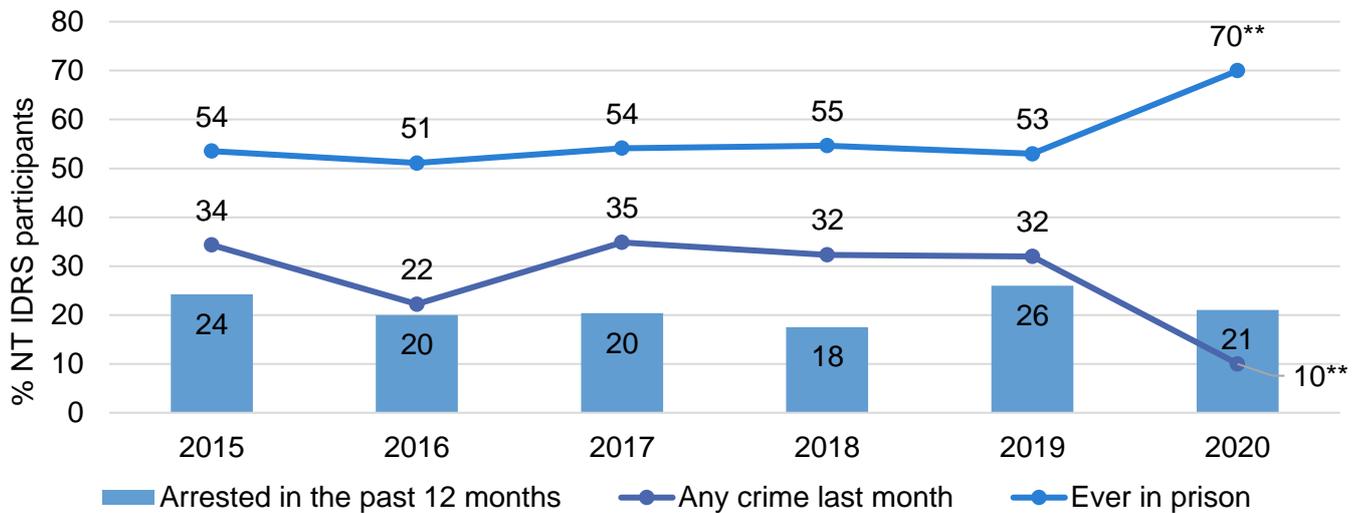
*Among all people proceeded against by police in the NT and the balance (bal) of Australia.

Illicit Drug Reporting System - People who inject drugs

In 2020, 10% of the NT IDRS sample reported having committed at least one crime in the month prior to interview, significantly lower ($p = 0.024$) than the 32% found in 2019 (Figure 2). All categories of self-reported crime (not shown) were lower than 2019, although dealing (6%; 19% in 2019, $p = 0.025$) and property crime ($n \leq 5$; 16% in 2019, $p = 0.024$) remained the most reported.

Twenty-one per cent (Figure 2) of the sample in 2020 had been arrested within 12 months of the interview (27% in 2019, $p = 0.480$), whilst 70% (53% in 2019, $p = 0.039$) reported having ever been in prison.

Figure 2: Self-reported crime, arrests and prison history, NT IDRS sample, 2015-2020



Note. 'Any crime' comprises the percentage who report any property crime, drug dealing, fraud and/or violent crime in the past month. Y axes reduced to 80% to improve visibility of trends. * $p < 0.050$; ** $p < 0.010$; *** $p < 0.001$ for 2019 versus 2020.

In 2015, men were significantly more likely than women to report committing a crime in the past month ($p = 0.048$); in all other NT IDRS samples between 2015 and 2020, similar proportions of men and women have been likely to report a recent crime or have been arrested within 12 months (Table 1), with no significant differences. Over the same period, men were significantly more likely than women to have ever been in prison (Table 1) in each year.

In all years, similar proportions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants reported committing a crime, while higher proportions of PWID who identified as Aboriginal reported being arrested in the previous 12 months, with this difference being significant in 2015 ($p = 0.005$) and 2020 ($p = 0.001$). In the 2020 sample, Aboriginal participants were significantly ($p = 0.002$) more likely to have ever been in prison than non-Aboriginal participants.

The relationship between age and recent crime or arrest is inconsistent across years, although where the relationship is significant, those who report recent crime or arrest within 12 months are consistently younger than those who do not. The likelihood of having ever been in prison shows no relationship to age in any year (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of NT IDRS sample who self-reported crime, arrests and prison history, 2015-2020

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Any crime in the past month %						
Gender						
Male	43*	22	36	29	33	10
Female	22	23	33	34	33	11
Aboriginal status						
Aboriginal	38	17	33	30	34	7
Not Aboriginal	34	25	35	31	32	13
Mean age (SD)	41 (8.4)	41* (8.1)	44 (10.8)	42**(8.8)	42**(9.1)	37 (8.7)
Arrested in the last 12 months %						
Gender						
Male	24	15	18	19	29	22
Female	25	30	25	14	21	18
Aboriginal status						
Aboriginal	42*	27	32	26	31	40**
Not Aboriginal	15	17	16	15	24	9
Mean age (SD)	38* (7.3)	40* (7.4)	40 (8.0)	43 (9.5)	42* (9.2)	41 (7.9)
Ever been in prison %						
Gender						
Male	65**	63**	72***	63*	62*	82**
Female	33	27	24	40	38	50
Aboriginal status						
Aboriginal	55	50	54	56	57	90**
Not Aboriginal	53	52	54	54	52	57
Mean age (SD)	43 (9.7)	46 (9.0)	46 (9.9)	47 (9.7)	47 (9.5)	45 (11.1)

Source: IDRS participants. Note: * $p < 0.050$; ** $p < 0.010$; *** $p < 0.001$

Conclusion

- Between 2015 and 2019, approximately 30% of PWID reported committing one or more crimes in the previous month, with a sharp decrease noted in 2020 (10%).
- Across all years approximately 20% had been arrested in the 12 months prior to interview.
- Between 2015 and 2019, approximately half of the NT IDRS sample reported having ever been in prison, with an increase noted in 2020 (70%).
- Men were generally no more likely than women to report past month crime or past year arrest, however they were significantly more likely to report having ever been in prison in every year from 2015-2020.
- Similarly, participants who were Aboriginal were no more likely to report past month crime than those who were not Aboriginal, however in 2020 they were significantly more likely to report having been arrested in the past year and to have ever been in prison.
- Younger participants were generally more likely to report past month crime and past year arrest, although this was inconsistent across years. There was no relationship between age and lifetime prison history.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (February 2021) [Recorded crime - offenders](#), ABS Website, accessed June 2021.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (February 2021) 'Table 13 Offenders, Principal offence by sex, Northern Territory, 2008–09 to 2019–20' [time series spreadsheet], [Recorded crime - offenders](#), accessed June 2021.

Department of Health. National Drug Strategy 2017-2026. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Health; 2017.

Participating Researchers and Research Centres

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), UNSW Australia, coordinated the IDRS. The following researchers and research institutions contributed to IDRS 2020:

- Antonia Karlsson, Julia Uporova, Daisy Gibbs, Rosie Swanton, Olivia Price, Roanna Chan, Professor Louisa Degenhardt, Professor Michael Farrell and Dr Amy Peacock, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, New South Wales;
- Cristal Hall, Sophie Cameron Krepp, Sarah Eddy, Dr Campbell Aitken and Professor Paul Dietze, Burnet Institute, Victoria;
- Tanya Wilson and Associate Professor Raimondo Bruno, School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, Tasmania;
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