

Executive Summary

The Tasmanian (TAS) IDRS participant sample is 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 Hobart, Tasmania. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs 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. **Data were collected in 2021 from June-July. Interviews in 2020 and 2021 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed in various jurisdictions throughout the data collection period. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Hobart, Tasmania (TAS) was demographically consistent with the TAS profile in previous years, whereby the majority (71%) of the sample was male, with a mean age of 42 years. Almost nine out of ten (86%) participants were unemployed at the time of interview and most of the sample (96%) received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. Just over two-fifths (44%) of the sample reported that methamphetamine was their drug of choice, and almost two-thirds (64%) reported that methamphetamine was the drug they had injected most often in the past month, both stable from 2020.

COVID-19 Impact

In 2021, 34% of the TAS sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the 12 months prior to interview; zero participants had been diagnosed with the virus. The majority (75%) of participants were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and 18% of participants reported that they had quarantined for 14 or more days due to a possible exposure in the past 12 months.

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has fluctuated amongst the TAS sample since monitoring began, however, the percentage reporting recent use was relatively stable at 11% in 2021 (22% in 2020). Frequency of use increased (though not significantly) from a median of four days in 2020 to 12 days in 2021. Small numbers ($n \leq 5$) of participants reported weekly or daily use. Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported on the median price of heroin per point or gram, therefore, further details have been suppressed.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has trended upwards over the past few years, with almost nine in ten participants (89%) reporting recent use in 2021. This was mostly driven by a continued increase in use of crystal methamphetamine (85%), the most commonly used form since 2014. Despite the increase in recent use, the frequency of use of any methamphetamine significantly declined from 90 days in 2020 to 48 days in 2021. The price of crystal methamphetamine per point significantly declined from \$150 in 2020 to \$50 in 2021. The price of powder methamphetamine was \$58 per point. There was a significant change in the perceived availability and purity of crystal methamphetamine, with more participants reporting that it was 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain and of 'high' purity, compared to 2020.

Cocaine

Sixteen per cent of the TAS sample had recently consumed cocaine, stable from 16% in 2020, on a median of three days, similar to nine days in 2020.

Cannabis

The proportion of participants reporting recent cannabis use has been slowly declining since the early 2000s to 67% in 2020 (72% in 2020). Almost three-fifths (58%) of those who had recently used cannabis reported daily use, a significant decrease relative to 2020 (77%).

Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (87%), followed by bush cannabis (67%). There was a significant change in the perceived potency and availability of hydroponic cannabis, with more participants reporting that it was 'high' potency and 'very easy' to obtain in 2021 compared to 2020.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent non-prescribed use of pharmaceutical opioids such as morphine, oxycodone and methadone has declined over the past 10 years of monitoring, however remained stable in 2021 relative to 2020. In 2021, 40% of the sample reported recent use of non-prescribed morphine, although frequency of use declined to a median of 11 days in the previous six months (49 days in 2020; $p=0.033$). Seventeen per cent reported recent use of non-prescribed oxycodone, with a median frequency of five days. One-third (32%) reported using non-prescribed methadone on a median of 24 days in the past six months, stable from 2020. Recent use of non-prescribed buprenorphine, buprenorphine-naloxone, fentanyl, codeine, tramadol and tapentadol all remained stable in 2021.

Other Drugs

Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 41% of participants in 2021 (49% in 2020). Alcohol and tobacco use have remained consistently high over the period of monitoring, with 60% and 86% reporting recent use of alcohol and tobacco, respectively, in 2021. One quarter of participants that reported recent alcohol use and 88% of participants reporting recent tobacco use reported daily use.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

In 2021, the majority (97%) of the sample reported using one or more drugs (including alcohol, tobacco and prescription medications) on the day preceding interview, most commonly cannabis (45%), stimulants (42%), opioids (40%), tobacco (37%) and benzodiazepines (16%).

Fifteen per cent of participants reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug. Just over half (53%) of participants reported that they were aware of the take-home naloxone programs in 2021, with similar numbers (34%) reporting having ever accessed naloxone.

One-quarter (23%) of the sample reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly infection/abscess (8%), artery injection (8%) and nerve damage (7%). Almost two-fifths (38%) reported re-using their own needle in the past month, stable from 32% in 2020. Just over one-quarter (29%) of the sample reported being in drug treatment at the time of interview, stable from 30% reporting current treatment in 2020, with the most common being methadone treatment (12%) followed by counselling (11%).

Thirty per cent of the sample (73% 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.

Self-reported past six-month mental health problems remained stable (64%; 58% in 2021), as did past month criminal activity (38%; 34% in 2021).

The majority of participants in 2021 (55%) reported that they had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, 53% had received an RNA test and 7% reported having a current HCV infection.

Twenty-one per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia, with 12% undertaking this in the past year.