

Executive Summary

The Victorian (VIC) IDRS survey 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 Melbourne, Victoria. 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. Eighty-two per cent of the interviews were delivered face-to-face and 18% were via telephone, due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed in Victoria for much of the data collection period. This change, which also impacted interview modality in 2020, should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

There was a significant change in gender identity between 2021 and 2020 ($p=0.019$), with more participants identifying as male in 2021 (72%) compared to 2020 (59%), however age remained stable at a mean of 44 years. The majority (96%) of the sample was unemployed at the time of interview and received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. Median weekly income decreased from \$533 in 2020 to \$378 in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Fewer participants (42%) reported holding a post-school qualification relative to 2020 (58%; $p=0.007$). In 2021, there was a significant change in drug of choice ($p=0.003$), with fewer participants nominating heroin (54%; 71% in 2020) as their drug of choice, and a greater number nominating methamphetamine (36%; 17% in 2020). Similarly, there was a difference in the drug injected most in the past month ($p=0.015$), marked by a decrease in heroin (56%; 70% in 2020), and an increase in methamphetamine (40%; 25% in 2020).

COVID-19 Impact

In 2021, 64% of the VIC sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the 12 months prior

to interview and none had been diagnosed with the virus. The majority (71%) of participants were not worried about contracting COVID-19, and 22% of participants reported that they had quarantined for 14 or more days due to a possible exposure in the past 12 months. Sixteen per cent had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by the time of interview.

Heroin

Recent use (i.e., past six months) of heroin has remained fairly stable in recent years, although decreased from 85% in 2020 to 76% in 2021 ($p=0.049$). Most of those reporting recent use reported using heroin weekly or more frequently in 2021 (79%). The reported median price of heroin was \$100 for one point, a significant increase from \$50 in 2020 ($p<0.001$). Perceived availability remained stable in 2021, with 45% of participants perceiving heroin as being 'very easy' to obtain.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years. In 2021, 79% of the sample reported recent use, a significant increase compared to 66% in 2020 ($p=0.012$). Seventy per cent of those reporting recent use reported using methamphetamine weekly or more frequently (44% in 2020; $p<0.001$). Crystal methamphetamine remains the most common form used (78%; 64% in 2020; $p=0.008$), with frequency of use also increasing from a median of 12 days in 2020 to 55 days in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Price, perceived purity, and availability remained stable in 2021.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine remained similar to previous years, with 18% of the sample reporting recent use (17% in 2020). Injecting remained the most common route of administration (70%), followed by snorting (37%).

Cannabis

Recent use of cannabis has remained stable in 2021, with 66% of the sample reporting recent use (69% in 2020). Over half (53%) of participants who had recently used cannabis reported daily use, similar to 2020 (47%). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (97%), followed by bush cannabis (28%).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent use of any methadone significantly decreased from 52% in 2020 to 32% in 2021 ($p < 0.001$), however non-prescribed use remained low and stable (5%; 10% in 2020). The most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioids used in 2021 were oxycodone (7%) and morphine (6%). Low numbers ($n \leq 5$) reported using fentanyl in the six months prior to interview.

Other Drugs

Low numbers (6%) reported recent use of new psychoactive substances (predominantly 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis). Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 37% of participants in 2021 (33% in 2020; $p = 0.455$). Alcohol and tobacco use have remained stable in 2021 relative to 2020, with 49% and 93% reporting recent use, respectively. Twenty-nine per cent of those reporting recent use of alcohol and 94% of those reporting recent use of tobacco reported daily use. Recent use of e-cigarettes increased to 20% in 2021 from 10% in 2020 ($p = 0.022$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

In 2021, the majority (98%) of the sample reported using one or more drugs on the day preceding interview, with the most used being tobacco (81%), opioids (61%), cannabis (43%), and stimulants (33%). The most common combination of drugs used on the day preceding interview were opioids (26%), and concurrent use of cannabis and opioids (13%). Twenty-four per cent of participants reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug (20% in 2020; $p = 0.501$), with 18% reporting a past year non-fatal heroin overdose (19% in 2020).

Seventy-seven per cent of participants reported that they were aware of the take-home naloxone programs in 2021, and 51% reported having ever accessed naloxone. There was a significant decrease in the number of participants reporting re-using their own needle in the past month, from 53% in 2020 to 35% in 2021 ($p = 0.002$). Four per cent of participants reported receptive sharing, and 8% reported distributive sharing of needles in the past month. One-quarter (24%) of the sample reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month (a significant decrease from 36% in 2020; $p = 0.032$), most commonly thrombosis (9%), infection/abscess (7%) and nerve damage (7%). Just over a third (34%) of the sample reported being in drug treatment at the time of interview, a significant decrease from 58% in 2020 ($p < 0.001$), with 26% of the sample receiving methadone (40% in 2020; $p = 0.008$). Almost three-fifths of participants (57%) reported that they had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, 50% had received an RNA test and 14% reported having a current HCV infection. The majority (93%) of the sample reported ever being tested for HIV, while 41% had been tested in the past month. Five per cent reported ever receiving a HIV positive diagnosis. Self-reported past six-month mental health problems remained relatively stable (48%; 57% in 2020; $p = 0.157$), with the most common problems reported being depression (56%), anxiety (41%), PTSD (23%), and schizophrenia (20%). Twenty-nine per cent of participants reporting driving in the 6 months prior to interview, with 5% reporting driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol and 18% reporting driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug. Seven per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their drugs. Fifty-seven per cent of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2021, stable from 51% in 2020. Property crime and drug dealing were the most common self-reported crimes in the month preceding interview (41% and 31% respectively). Thirty-nine per cent of the sample had been arrested in the year prior to interview, a significant increase from 25% in 2020 ($p = 0.010$), and 71% reported ever being in prison, another significant increase from 2020 (59%; $p = 0.035$).