

Executive Summary

The Western Australia (WA) IDRS 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 Perth, Western Australia. 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 throughout the data collection period. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The WA IDRS sample in 2021 were predominantly males (58%) with a mean age of 45 years (SD=10), consistent with the WA profile in previous years. Drug of choice remained stable in 2021 compared to 2020, with participants typically reporting that heroin was their drug of choice (52%). In contrast, in 2021 there was a significant change in the drug injected most often in the past month ($p=0.034$). Specifically, there was an increase in methamphetamine being the drug injected most often in the month preceding interview (52%; 39% in 2020), with an inverse decrease in heroin being the drug injected most often (43%; 50% in 2020). In addition, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of participants reporting powder methamphetamine consumption on a weekly or more frequent basis (6%; 20% in 2020).

COVID-19 Impact

This brief section was included to summarise data collected specifically related to COVID-19 and associated restrictions; subsequent sections reflect standard annual reporting. In 2021, 35% of the WA sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, while no participants had been diagnosed with the virus. Some 9% had received at least one dose

of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of interview. The majority of participants (74%) reported that they would be concerned about their health if they were to contract COVID-19, although a smaller per cent (18%) were concerned about actually contracting COVID-19.

Heroin

After a steady resurgence in recent (i.e., past six month) heroin use up until 2016, a downward trend has been observed since 2017. However, the percentage of respondents who reported recent use of heroin has remained stable between 2020 (69%) and 2021 (61%). Eighty-two per cent of those who had recently used heroin reported weekly or more frequent use in 2021. A significant change was reported for perceived purity between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.001$), as well as perceived availability ($p<0.001$). Specifically, an increase was observed in the percentage of participants who reported perceived purity to be 'high' (31%; 14% in 2020), or 'medium' (31%; 19% in 2020) and an increase was observed in the percentage of participants who perceived current availability as 'very easy' (57%; 17% in 2020).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of methamphetamine base (0%; 8% in 2020; $p=0.012$) and powder (9%; 36% in 2020; $p<0.001$) significantly decreased in 2021, though recent use of crystal remained stable (80%; 69% in 2020). One-quarter (73%) of those who had recently used methamphetamine reported weekly or more frequent use in 2021. The reported median price of crystal methamphetamine was \$95 for one point, a significant decrease from \$150 in 2020 ($p<0.001$). Perceived availability of methamphetamine crystal significantly changed between 2020 and 2021 ($p<0.001$), with nearly half of the sample (46%) reporting that methamphetamine crystal was 'very easy' to obtain (10% in 2020), and 13% reporting that it was 'difficult' to obtain (37% in 2020).

Cocaine

Cocaine use amongst people who inject drugs in WA remains infrequent and sporadic. Seventeen per cent of the WA sample had recently consumed cocaine, stable from 18% in 2020, on a median of two days (3 days in 2020). No participants reported using cocaine on a weekly or more frequent basis in the six months prior to interview.

Cannabis

Recent use of cannabis remained stable between 2020 (66%) and 2021 (69%). Nearly half of those who had recently used cannabis (46%) reported daily use, stable from 2020 (45%). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (99%), with a significant decline in recent use of bush (15%; 33% in 2020; $p=0.020$). There was also a reduction in the percentage of participants reporting inhaling/vaporising cannabis between 2020 (32%) and 2021 (9%) ($p=0.002$).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent use of all forms of pharmaceutical opioids remained stable in 2021, though an overall downward trend was observed since monitoring of each opioid first began. No significant differences in terms of non-prescribed recent use was observed for methadone, buprenorphine, buprenorphine-naloxone, morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, codeine, tapentadol and tramadol between 2020 and 2021. However, there was a significant decrease in the frequency of non-prescribed use of oxycodone between 2020 (21 days) and 2021 (4 days).

Other Drugs

Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported recent NPS use in 2021. Recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines (including alprazolam), pharmaceutical stimulants, antipsychotics and pregabalin remained stable between 2020 and 2021. However, there was a significant decline in the frequency of use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants, from a median of 13 days in 2020 to 3 days in 2021 ($p=0.042$). Tobacco use has remained consistently high but stable over the period of monitoring, with 89% (85% in 2020) reporting recent use in 2021, while alcohol use has been trending

downward over the course of monitoring (53% in 2021; 80% in 2000).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

In 2021, the majority (96%) of the sample reported using one or more drugs (including alcohol, tobacco and prescription medications) on the day preceding interview. Twenty per cent of participants reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug, with 10% reporting a past year non-fatal opioid overdose. Over half the sample (56%) had ever been trained in using naloxone, a significant increase from 2020 (34%; $p=0.003$). Similarly, 80% had heard of take-home programs, a significant increase from 66% in 2020 ($p=0.037$). Half the sample (51%) reported re-using their own needle in the past month, stable from 42% in 2020. One-third (33%) of the sample reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly infection/abscess (14%) and nerve damage (13%). Nearly half the sample (46%) reported being in drug treatment at the time of interview, stable from 48% in 2020. Two-fifths of participants in 2021 (38%) reported that they had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, while 36% had received an RNA test, stable from 2020. However, there was a significant increase in the number of participants who reported a current HCV infection (7% in 2021; 0% in 2020; $p=0.033$). A significant increase was observed in the number of participants reporting that they had experienced a mental health problem in the six months prior to interview (47% in 2021; 33% in 2020; $p=0.048$). Thirty-five per cent of the sample reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug. Fifteen per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia. Past month criminal activity remained stable (48%; 39% in 2020).