

Executive Summary

The Sydney New South Wales (NSW) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and via word-of mouth in Sydney, NSW. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2022 from May-July. Interviews in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission; all interviews prior to 2020 were conducted face-to-face. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2022 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The 2022 Sydney EDRS sample (N=100) predominantly comprised of young (median age 29) males (64%), a significant increase in age from 23 years in 2021 ($p<0.001$). There were significant changes in current accommodation between 2022 and 2021 ($p=0.005$), with a greater per cent of participants reporting living in an owned house or flat in 2022 (14%; $n\leq 5$ in 2021). Additionally, there were significant changes in employment status ($p=0.001$), with a greater per cent being currently employed full time in 2022 (49%; 28% in 2021) and fewer participants currently studying for a university or trade qualification (31%; 63% in 2021; $p<0.001$). Ecstasy was most popular drug of choice among the 2022 EDRS sample (28%), followed by alcohol and cannabis (16%, respectively). Similarly, alcohol and cannabis were cited as the drugs used most often in the month preceding the interview in 2022 (36% and 21%, respectively).

Ecstasy

There was a significant decrease in recent use of any form of ecstasy between 2021 and 2022 (96%; 83% respectively; $p=0.005$). Consistent with previous years, capsules (52%) were the most common form of ecstasy consumed in the six months preceding interview, albeit decreasing relative to 2021 (82%; $p<0.001$).

This was followed by crystal (37%; 62% in 2021; $p<0.001$). On the contrary, one-third (33%) reported recent use of pills in 2022, a significant increase from 17% in 2021 ($p=0.015$). There was a significant change in the perceived purity of ecstasy crystal between 2021 and 2022 ($p=0.028$). The largest per cent reported crystal to be of 'high' (46%) purity in 2022 (31% in 2021). There was also a significant change in the perceived availability of ecstasy capsules between 2021 and 2022 ($p=0.007$), with more participants perceiving capsules to be 'difficult' to obtain in 2022 (32%; 15% in 2021).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has been declining since monitoring began. However, a significant increase was observed in 2022 amongst the Sydney sample (29%, 15% in 2021; $p=0.029$), driven predominantly by use of the crystal form (16%; $n\leq 5$ in 2021; $p=0.019$). The median days of any methamphetamine use in the six months preceding interview remained stable (5 days; 2 days in 2021; $p=0.220$). The perceived availability of crystal changed significantly with 63% participants reporting crystal was 'very easy' to obtain (0% in 2021; $p=0.006$).

Cocaine

A gradual increase in recent cocaine use has been observed since 2013 reaching 94% in 2021, with recent use remaining stable in 2022 at 86%. Participants reported using cocaine on a median of six days in the six months preceding the interview, with one-in-ten reporting weekly or more frequent use. Consistent with previous years, the price per gram of cocaine remained stable at \$300. The perceived purity and availability of cocaine remained stable in 2022 with the largest per cent perceiving cocaine to be of 'low' purity (43%; 35% in 2021) and 'very easy' to obtain (51%; 44% in 2021).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

Seventy-one per cent of the Sydney sample reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis in 2022, a significant decrease from

88% in 2021 ($p=0.006$). Fifty-eight per cent reported weekly use and 23% reported daily use. The price for non-prescribed hydroponic and bush cannabis remained stable in 2022. However, there was a significant change in the perceived availability of non-prescribed bush cannabis between 2021 and 2022 ($p=0.023$), with fewer participants reporting it was 'very easy' (24%) to obtain (54% in 2021).

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine significantly decreased from 76% in 2021 to 53% in 2022 ($p=0.005$). Recent use of LSD also significantly decreased between 2021 and 2022 (57% and 41%, respectively; $p=0.037$). Recent use of DMT remained stable in 2022 at 15% (14% in 2021). Frequency of use for all three substances remained low in 2022, at a median of six days or less in the preceding six months. Market changes remained stable for ketamine and LSD.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

In 2022, 12% of the sample reported recent use of at least one form of NPS (including plant-based NPS), the lowest per cent observed. Any 2C substance was the most commonly used NPS (9%).

Other Drugs

Recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants significantly decreased in 2022 (39%; 61% in 2021; $p=0.003$), returning to similar levels reported in 2020. Thirty-five per cent of participants reported recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines. Recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes significantly decreased from 85% in 2021 to 61% in 2022 ($p<0.001$), with few participants ($n\leq 5$) reporting prescribed e-cigarette use in the past six months. Recent use of nitrous oxide significantly decreased from 69% in 2021 to 41% in 2022 ($p<0.001$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, the majority (78%) of the sample reported concurrent use of two or more drugs; stimulant

and depressant use reported was the most common combination (31%). Almost one-third (32%) reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year. The mean AUDIT total score decreased significantly from 13.4 in 2021 to 12.0 in 2022 ($p<0.001$). Nine per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose and thirteen per cent reported a non-fatal depressant overdose in the past year. The per cent reporting lifetime injecting significantly increased from $n\leq 5$ participants in 2021 to 17% in 2022 ($p=0.005$). The majority (86%) of the sample reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past month, of which 19% reported penetrative sex without a condom, where they did not know the HIV status of their partner. Over half of the sample (51%) self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the past six months, and 63% of these had seen a mental health professional during that period. Four-fifths (81%) of the sample reported driving a motor vehicle in the six months preceding interview. Twenty-six per cent of those who had recently driven reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol and 51% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug. 'Any' past month criminal activity significantly decreased in 2022 (26%; 41% in 2021; $p=0.028$). There were significant differences in modes of purchasing illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the past 12 months in 2022. Purchasing via social networking applications significantly decreased between 2021 and 2022 (80% and 61%, respectively; $p=0.016$). Conversely, purchasing via text messaging significantly increased from 34% in 2021 to 60% in 2022 ($p<0.001$). Obtaining illicit or non-prescribed drugs via a collection point significantly increased from 11% in 2021 to 38% in 2022 ($p<0.001$). Nearly all (98%) had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the last 12 months, and three-quarters (75%) reported ever being diagnosed with COVID-19. Most (92%) had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose.