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 2023 from April-June. Interviews from 2020 onwards 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 2020-2023 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The 2023 Sydney EDRS sample (N=100) predominantly comprised of young (median age 26 years) males (59%), with a significant decrease in age observed compared to 2022 (median age 29 years; p=0.021). Employment and accommodation status remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with the majority (84%) of the 2023 Sydney sample living in a rental house/flat (54%) or in their parents/family home (30%). Additionally, the majority (85%) of the sample reported being employed on a full time (49%) or part-time/casual basis (36%). Cocaine was the most popular drug of choice among the 2023 EDRS sample (29%), followed by ecstasy and cannabis (22% and 16%, respectively). The drug used most often in the past month significantly changed between 2022 and 2023 (p=0.021), with fewer participants reporting alcohol as the drug used most often in the last month in 2023 (18%; 36% in 2022) and more participants endorsing cocaine as the drug used most often (20%; 10% in 2022).

Ecstasy

There was a significant increase in recent use of any form of ecstasy between 2022 (83%) and 2023 (99%; p<0.001). While median frequency of use of any ecstasy remained stable at 8 days, weekly use (among those who had recently used ecstasy) significantly decreased to 7% in 2023 (19% in 2022; p=0.015). Capsules remained the most common form of ecstasy consumed in the six months preceding interview, with a significant increase observed in 2023 (69%; 52% in 2022; p=0.021). This was followed by pills (49%), which also increased in 2023 (33% in 2022; p=0.034), and crystal (47%). There was a significant change in the perceived availability of ecstasy capsules between 2022 and 2023 (p=0.030), with more participants reporting capsules to be 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain in 2023 (41%; 25% in 2022 and 42%; 34% in 2022, respectively). There was also a significant change in the perceived availability of ecstasy powder between 2022 and 2023 (p=0.021), with more participants perceiving powder to be 'very easy' (25%; 0% in 2022) to obtain and fewer participants perceiving it to be difficult (n≤5; 53% in 2022) to obtain.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has been declining since monitoring commenced. In 2023, one fifth (21%) of the sample reported recent use, stable relative to 2022 (29%). The largest percentage of participants reported using crystal methamphetamine (14%), followed by powder (8%). Frequency of crystal and powder use (≤monthly), as well as their perceived purity and availability, remained stable between 2022 and 2023.

Non-Prescribed Pharmaceutical Stimulants

The per cent of participants reporting any recent non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulant (e.g., dexamphetamine,

methylphenidate, modafinil) use has fluctuated considerably since monitoring commenced in 2007, ranging between 45% and few participants (n≤5) reporting recent use. In 2023, two fifths (41%) of the Sydney sample reported recent use (39% in 2022). The price per 5mg tablet significantly increased from $5 in 2022 to $10 in 2023 ($p$=0.020). There was also a significant change to the perceived availability of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants in 2023 (p=0.002), with more participants perceiving non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants to be 'very easy' (62%; 23% in 2022) to obtain.

Cocaine

A gradual increase in recent cocaine use has been observed since 2013. In 2023, the majority (86%) of the sample reported recent cocaine use (86% in 2022). Participants reported using cocaine on a median of six days in the six months preceding interview. Consistent with previous years, the price per gram of cocaine remained stable at $300. The perceived purity and availability of cocaine remained stable in 2023 with the largest per cent perceiving cocaine to be of 'low' purity (40%; 43% in 2022) and 'very easy' to obtain (51%; 51% in 2022).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

Two thirds (66%) of the sample reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products in 2023 (71% in 2022). The median frequency of use significantly decreased from 28 days in 2022 to 12 days in 2023 (p=0.018), the lowest median frequency of use observed since monitoring commenced. The majority (92%) of participants who had recently used non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products in 2023 reported smoking as a route of administration (87% in 2022), with significantly fewer participants reporting

inhaling/vaporising (18%; 41% in 2022; p=0.006). The per cent reporting recent hydroponic cannabis use significantly decreased in 2023 (51%; 77% in 2022; p=0.005), while recent use of bush cannabis remained stable (53%; 44% in 2022). The price, perceived availability and perceived purity of hydroponic and bush cannabis remained stable in 2023 relative to 2022.

Non-Prescribed Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Fifty-four per cent of the Sydney sample reported using non-prescribed ketamine in 2023, stable relative to 2022 (56%). Recent use of LSD and DMT also remained stable between 2022 and 2023 (37%; 41% in 2022 and 8%; 15% in 2022, respectively). Frequency of use for all three substances remained low in 2023, at a median of five days or less in the preceding six months. The price, perceived availability and perceived purity of ketamine and LSD remained stable in 2023 relative to 2022.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

In 2023, 13% of the sample reported recent use of any NPS (including plant-based NPS) (12% in 2022) and 11% reported recent use of any NPS (excluding plant-based NPS) (9% in 2022) in 2023. Any 2C substance was the most commonly used NPS (6%).

Other Drugs

Recent use of non-prescribed codeine (9%), other pharmaceutical opioids (9%), antipsychotics (n≤5), and any benzodiazepines (31%) remained stable in 2023. However, there was a change in the main brand of other non-prescribed benzodiazepines reported in 2023 (p=0.023), with fewer participants reporting using Valium (diazepam) (n≤5; 72% in 2022). Recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes significantly increased from 61% in 2022 to 76% in 2023 (p=0.035), with more participants reporting daily use in 2023 (49%; 27% in 2022; p=0.003).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

o On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, the majority (86%) of the sample reported concurrent use of two or more drugs; stimulants and depressants were the most common combination (39%).

o One third (34%) reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year.

o The mean AUDIT total score increased significantly from 12.0 in 2022 to 13.5 in 2023 ($p<0.001$).

o Seventeen per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose (9% in 2022) and 21% reported a non-fatal depressant overdose in the past year (13% in 2022).

o In 2023, half (51%) of the sample reported that they had ever heard of naloxone (59% in 2022), of which 89% were able to correctly identify the purpose of naloxone (93% in 2022).

o Reported past month injecting drug use remained low (n≤5), as did current drug treatment engagement (n≤5).

o Thirteen per cent of those who reported recent ecstasy use obtained an SDS score of 3 or more, whilst 33% of participants reporting recent methamphetamine use obtained a score of 4 or more, indicating possible dependence on these substances.

o Four fifths (81%) of the sample reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past month (86% in 2022), of which 26% reported penetrative sex without a condom, where they did not know the HIV status of their partner (19% in 2022).

o Almost three fifths (58%) of the sample self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the past six months (51% in 2022), and 62% of these had seen a mental health professional during that period (63% in 2022).

o Thirteen per cent reported high/very high psychological distress (17% in 2022).

o Twenty-eight per cent of the sample reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview (19% in 2022), and almost one quarter (24%) of the sample reported experiencing stigma in any health/non-health care setting in the six months preceding interview.

o In 2023, the vast majority of the sample (99%) had ever been tested for SARS-CoV-2, with almost half (48%) of participants testing positive to COVID-19 in the 12 months preceding interview.

o Thirty-two per cent of those who had recently driven reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol in the six months preceding interview. In 2023, significantly fewer participants reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug (32%; 51% in 2022; $p=0.026$).

o Forty-six per cent of the sample reported 'any' past month criminal activity, a significant increase from 26% in 2023 ($p=0.006$). This was driven by more participants reporting property crime in 2023 (26%; 13% in 2022; $p=0.035$). One in ten (10%) participants reported having been arrested in the 12 months preceding interview, while 25% reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest.

o There were significant differences in modes of purchasing illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the past 12 months in 2023. Arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs via text messaging decreased significantly in 2023 (45%; 60% in 2022; $p=0.049$). There was also a significant decrease in participants reporting that they had received illicit drugs via a collection point (defined as a predetermined location where a drug will be left for later collection) (23%; 38% in 2023; $p=0.033$).