

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs ≥ 6 days in the preceding six months and resided in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW). Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle and 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 June, 2023. Interviews from 2020-2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission; all interviews in 2023 and 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 Sydney IDRS sample (N=153) in 2023 comprised predominantly male participants (70%), with a mean age of 47 years (48 years in 2022). Consistent with previous years, the majority of the sample were living in their own home (78%), unemployed at the time of interview (90%) and had received a government pension, allowance or benefit in the month preceding interview (97%). There was, however, a significant change to the median weekly income reported by Sydney participants, with a significant increase from \$325 in 2022 to \$400 in 2023 ($p < 0.001$). Forty-six per cent of the sample nominated heroin as their drug of choice (50% in 2022) while the largest per cent nominated methamphetamine as the drug injected most often in the past month (53%), stable relative to 2022.

Heroin

In 2023, two thirds (67%) of the Sydney sample reported recent (i.e., past six month) use of

heroin, the lowest per cent since monitoring commenced, although stable relative to 2022 (71%). Among those who reported recent use, almost half (47%) reported using heroin daily, also stable relative to 2022 (54%). The median price per cap and gram of heroin was \$50 and \$330, respectively (\$50 and \$370, respectively, in 2022). Perceived purity of heroin remained stable in 2023, with the largest per cent reporting it to be of 'medium' purity (39%; 35% in 2022), followed by 'low' (22%; 34% in 2022). Similarly, the perceived availability remained stable in 2023, with the largest per cent reporting it to be 'very easy' to obtain (51%; 43% in 2022).

Methamphetamine

The majority (86%) of the sample reported recent use of any methamphetamine in 2023, stable from 87% in 2022. Seven per cent of participants reported recent use of methamphetamine powder, stable relative to 2022 (11% in 2022). Consistent with previous years, the majority (86%) of the Sydney sample reported using methamphetamine crystal in the six months preceding interview (87% in 2022). Among those who reported recently using methamphetamine crystal, the median days of use was 72 days (i.e. three days a week) in both 2022 and 2023, representing the highest median days of use recorded throughout monitoring. Participants reported a median price of \$50 per point of methamphetamine (\$50 in 2022). The perceived purity and availability of methamphetamine crystal remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with the largest percentage of participants reporting it to be of 'medium' (39%; 29% in 2022) purity and 'very easy' (55%; 43% in 2022) to obtain.

Cocaine

Almost one quarter (23%) of the sample reported recent use of cocaine, stable relative to 2022 (16%). Participants who had recently used cocaine did so infrequently, on a median of four days in the six months preceding interview (5 days in 2022).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

Two thirds (65%) of the Sydney sample reported non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related product use in the six months preceding interview in 2023 (72% in 2022), of which 56% reported daily use (57% in 2022). Most of the sample (90%) reported using hydroponic cannabis (95% in 2022). In 2023, the median price per gram of non-prescribed hydroponic and bush cannabis was \$20, respectively, stable from 2022. While there were no significant changes to the perceived potency of hydroponic cannabis, the perceived availability of hydroponic cannabis significantly changed in 2023 relative to 2022 ($p=0.031$). The largest per cent reported hydroponic cannabis to be 'very easy' (61%) to obtain, an increase from 42% in 2022. There were no significant changes to the perceived potency or availability of bush cannabis in 2023.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

The most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioids recently used by participants was methadone (12%; 18% in 2022) and oxycodone (12%; 11% in 2022). There was a significant decrease in any recent injection of oxycodone, from 65% in 2022 to 33% in 2023 ($p=0.044$). Seven per cent of participants reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use (4% in 2022).

Other Drugs

Recent use of any new psychoactive substance was reported by 6% of participants, stable relative to 2022 (4% in 2022). One third (33%)

of the Sydney sample reported recent use of any non-prescribed benzodiazepines, a significant increase from 21% in 2022 ($p=0.022$). Two fifths (42%) of the sample reported recent use of alcohol and, although not statistically significant, this represented the second lowest percentage observed since monitoring commenced (45% in 2022). While non-prescribed e-cigarette use remained stable in 2023 with one third (33%) reporting recent use (30% in 2022), frequency of use significantly increased from a median of 20 days in 2022 to daily (180 days) use in 2023 ($p=0.002$). Similarly, the per cent reporting daily non-prescribed e-cigarette use significantly increased from one quarter (25%) of those reporting recent use in 2022 to half (52%) in 2023 ($p=0.015$). Recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD also significantly increased from 5% in 2022 to 24% in 2023 ($p<0.001$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- Almost two thirds (63%) of the sample reported using two or more drugs on the day preceding interview (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes).
- Almost one fifth (17%) of the sample reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview (20% in 2022), with 'any opioids' (12%) being the most common substance involved (14% in 2022).
- A significant decrease was observed in participants indicating awareness of naloxone in 2023 (81%; 95% in 2022; $p<0.001$). Fifty-three per cent of the sample reported ever accessing naloxone in their lifetime (56% in 2022). One in three (33%) reported resuscitating someone using naloxone at least once in their lifetime (25% in 2022).
- Five per cent of participants reported receptive needle sharing in the past month, stable relative to 2022 ($n\leq 5$).

- One quarter (24%) of the sample reported having an injection-related health issue in the month preceding interview (28% in 2022), with significantly fewer participants reporting experiencing an artery injection in 2023 ($n \leq 5$; 8% in 2022; $p=0.031$).
- Thirty-nine per cent of the sample reported currently being in some form of drug treatment at the time of the interview (43% in 2022), most commonly methadone treatment (22%; 30% in 2022).
- Among those who had recently used opioids and commented, 61% scored five or above on the Severity of Dependence (SDS) scale, indicating possible dependence. Of those who had recently used methamphetamine and commented, 48% scored four or above on the SDS scale, indicating possible dependence.
- The percentage of participants who reported having had a hepatitis C (HCV) antibody test in the last year significantly increased from 34% in 2022 to 58% in 2023 ($p < 0.001$). Similarly, significantly more participants reported receiving a PCR or RNA test in 2023 compared to 2022 (54%; 40% in 2022; $p=0.025$). There was also a significant increase in participants reporting a current HCV infection in 2023 (11%; 5% in 2023; $p=0.018$).
- Half (52%) of the Sydney sample self-reported that they had recently experienced a mental health problem, a significant increase relative to 2022 (38% in 2022; $p=0.015$), with the most common reported problem being depression (65%).
- Almost one third (32%) of the Sydney sample scored 30 or more on the K10 scale (33% in 2022), indicating high psychological distress.
- The majority (95%) of participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in 2023, a significant increase from 80% in 2022 ($p < 0.001$), with significantly more participants accessing NSPs (86%; 66% in 2022; $p < 0.001$), followed by a GP (31%; 25% in 2022).
- In 2023, three quarters (76%) of the sample reported experiencing stigma related to their illicit drug use in any setting in the six months preceding interview. These experiences of stigma most commonly occurred when visiting a non-health setting (66%).
- The vast majority (87%) reported that they had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose (88% in 2022) at the time of interview, with participants receiving a median of 3 doses.
- Among those who had driven in the last six months, almost two third (63%) of participants reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug (83% in 2022).
- Seven per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the last year (11% in 2022).
- In 2023, almost half (47%) of the Sydney sample reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month (38% in 2022; $p=0.152$). Selling drugs for cash profit remained the most common self-reported crime in the month preceding interview and significantly increased from 23% in 2022 to 36% in 2023 ($p=0.030$). Two in three (63%) participants reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest in the past 12 months, a significant increase from 39% in 2022 ($p < 0.001$).