

Executive Summary

The 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 the capital cities of 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 2020 from June-September: subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were mostly delivered via phone rather than face-to-face though some participants were interviewed face-to-face in Tasmania and the Northern Territory. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample in 2020 (N=884) was predominantly identified as male (59%) with a mean age of 44, consistent with the national profile in previous years. This sample had more females participating in 2020 compared to 2019. Half of the participants (50%) reported that their drug of choice was heroin, an increase relative to 2019 (45%). Heroin and methamphetamine were the drugs injected most often in the past month (46% and 41%, respectively).

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. One-fifth (20%) of the national sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Since the beginning of March 2020, most participants (89%) had practiced social distancing and 70% had undergone home isolation. Over one-third (36%) of participants

reported injecting drugs at a different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; whereby 25% reported greater frequency of injection, with 11% reporting a reduced frequency. One-tenth (12%) reported a change in the main drug injected in February versus the past month (subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions). Nearly half (48%) the participants reported a perceived decrease in the use of methamphetamine since March, with 57% of these participants citing 'decreased availability' as the primary reason. Smaller numbers reported an increase in alcohol (27%) and cannabis (25%), mainly cited as due to 'boredom/less things to occupy time'. Most participants reported that crystal methamphetamine and heroin had increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 (91% and 62%, respectively). Furthermore, crystal methamphetamine and heroin were most commonly reported to have decreased in perceived purity (59% and 50%, respectively). Crystal methamphetamine and morphine were the drugs most commonly cited as having decreased in availability (71% and 57%, respectively). Almost one-third (32%) of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, and 50% reported 'similar'. Of those on opioid agonist treatment since March 2020 (n=373), 25% reported an increase in take-away doses. Whilst the majority of participants reported 'no change' when commenting on changes related to their injecting practices since March 2020, 9% reported an increase in re-using their own needles, and 13% reported injecting alone more. Over one-quarter (28%) of participants reportedly sought information on how to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or avoiding impacts of restrictions on drug acquisition and use. The majority (82%) of participants reported engaging in various harm reduction behaviours to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or impacts of COVID-19 restrictions while using or obtaining drugs.

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of any heroin increased from 55% in 2019 to 63% in 2020. There was large jurisdictional variation (e.g., n≤5 of participants in the NT sample versus 86% in the VIC sample). Median frequency of use in 2020 was 96 days in the past six months. Significantly more participants perceived heroin to be of 'low' purity and 'difficult' to obtain in 2020 compared to 2019.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years. In 2020, 72% reported recent use, significantly lower than 78% in 2019. The majority reported use of the crystal form of methamphetamine (71%) with smaller numbers reporting recent use of powder (20%) and base (8%). Frequency of use remained stable relative to 2019 (median of 48 days for 2019 and 2020). In 2020, there was a significant increase in the price of a point and gram of crystal methamphetamine, relative to 2019 (\$50 versus \$100 and \$250 versus \$500, respectively). One-third reported crystal methamphetamine was 'difficult' to obtain, the highest percentage since monitoring began.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine and frequency of use has generally decreased amongst the national sample since the beginning of monitoring (35% in 2001). In 2020, a significant increase was observed, relative to 2019 (17%; 13% in 2019).

Cannabis

Recent use of cannabis was reported by the lowest per cent since monitoring began (67%) and was also a significant decrease relative to 2019 (74%). Frequency of use, however, was similar to 2019 at a median of 160 days (130 days in 2019). Nearly half the consumers (48%) reported using cannabis daily (46% in 2019). The price of an ounce of hydroponic and bush cannabis had both significantly increased, relative to 2019.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Non-prescribed use of most forms of pharmaceutical opioids has either remained stable or significantly declined since monitoring of each opioid first began. In 2020, morphine was the most common pharmaceutical opioid used in a non-prescribed context (15%). Six per cent of the national sample reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use, stable from 9% in 2019. There was a significant decrease of those reporting recent use of non-prescribed codeine in 2020, relative to 2019 (4% versus 9% in 2019).

Other Drugs

Use of NPS has remained low and stable over the period of monitoring. In 2020, slightly less participants reported recent use (8% versus 11% in 2019). Use of 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis and opioids were reported by 5% and 1%, respectively. Recent use of e-cigarettes (13%), tobacco (89%), alcohol (54%), anti-psychotics (6%) and pregabalin (14%) had significantly declined compared to 2019 reports. One-in-ten reported recent use of GHB /GBL/1,4-BD.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

Nearly one in five participants (18%) reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin. One in three (34%) had been trained in naloxone administration and 5% of the sample had been resuscitated with naloxone by somebody trained through the take-home naloxone program. In 2020, 5% of participants reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe and 9% reported distributive sharing in the past month. Significantly fewer participants reported to have experienced injection-related problems in 2020. Nearly half of the sample were currently in any drug treatment (48%), an increase relative to 2019 (42%). Self-reported mental health problems in the past six months and any criminal activity in the past month remained stable from 2019 (47% and 40%, respectively).