

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 2022 from May-July. Interviews in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2022 samples relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample in 2022 (N=879) was relatively similar to the sample in 2021. The 2022 sample predominantly identified as male (66%) with a mean age of 46 years (SD:10), stable from 2021. In 2022, more participants reported having a post-school qualification compared to 2021 (63% versus 58% in 2021; $p=0.015$) and fewer participants reporting receiving a government pension, allowance or benefit in the past month (92% versus 95% in 2021; $p=0.012$). The drug of choice remained stable in 2022 with 46% nominating methamphetamine as their drug of choice (45% in 2021), followed by heroin (39%; 40% in 2021). Most participants nominated methamphetamine as the drug injected most often in the past month (54%; 53% in 2021). There was a significant increase in weekly or more frequent consumption of non-prescribed cannabis in 2022 compared to 2021 (60% versus 54%; $p=0.013$).

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of any heroin was reported by 53% of the 2022 sample, the second lowest percentage since monitoring began, although there was large variation across capital cities (e.g., $n \leq 5$ of participants in

the Darwin sample versus 78% in the Melbourne sample). Median frequency of use remained stable at 80 days in 2022 (72 days in 2021), although, among those who reported recent use, significantly more participants reported daily use (35% versus 28% in 2021; $p=0.046$). The reported median price for one gram of heroin significantly increased from \$300 in 2021 to \$400 in 2022 ($p=0.019$), although there were no statistically significant changes in the perceived purity and perceived availability of heroin.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has been gradually increasing since 2010. In 2022, 81% reported recent use, the second highest per cent since monitoring began, although stable from 2021 (80%). Crystal was the most common form of methamphetamine used by participants (80%), followed by powder (11%) and base (3%). Relative to 2021, frequency of any methamphetamine use was relatively stable at a median of 60 days (72 median days in 2021). There were significant changes in the perceived purity ($p=0.024$) and availability ($p=0.005$) of methamphetamine crystal in 2022 relative to 2021, although median price remained stable. Specifically, in 2022, more participants perceived purity to be 'low' and 'medium' (24% and 33%, respectively versus 21% and 30%, respectively in 2021) and availability as 'very easy' (53% versus 46% in 2021).

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine and frequency of use has generally decreased amongst the national sample since the beginning of monitoring (peak of 35% in 2001). In 2022, recent use of cocaine remained stable relative to 2021 (15%, respectively), as did median frequency of use (2 days vs 3 days in 2021). Market trends for cocaine remained stable between 2021 and 2022.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

Significantly more participants reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products in 2022 relative to 2021 (noting estimates for 2021 and prior refer to any cannabis use; 72% versus 67% in 2021; $p=0.030$). Frequency of use remained stable at a median of 180 days. Half (51%) of those who had recently used cannabis reported daily use (51% in 2021). There were no significant changes in relation to the price, perceived purity, or perceived availability of bush and hydroponic cannabis in 2022 relative to 2021.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Non-prescribed use of most forms of pharmaceutical opioids has mainly remained stable or significantly declined since monitoring of each opioid first began. In 2022, morphine was the most common pharmaceutical opioid used in a non-prescribed context (14%), followed by methadone and oxycodone (10%, respectively). Five per cent of the national sample reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use, the lowest per cent since monitoring began and stable from 6% in 2021.

Other Drugs

Use of NPS has gradually declined over the period of monitoring (12% in 2013). In 2022, 6% reported recent any NPS use, the lowest per cent since monitoring began. Use of 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis and amphetamine or cocaine were reported by 2%, respectively. Recent use of alcohol (58%) significantly increased compared to 2021 (52%; $p=0.013$), whilst recent use of GHB /GBL/1,4-BD significantly decreased (7% vs 10% in 2021; $p=0.015$). Use of all other monitored drugs remained stable.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

In 2022, 55% of the national IDRS sample reported using two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding

interview. Nearly one in five participants (17%) reported non-fatal overdose on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin (11%). Nearly two-fifths (38%) had ever been trained in naloxone administration. In 2022, 4% of participants reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe and 8% reported distributive sharing in the past month, the lowest percentages since monitoring began. One in four participants (26%) reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly infection/abscess (12%) and nerve damage (11%). Almost two-fifths of the sample were currently in any drug treatment (38%), stable relative to 2021 (37%). Two-fifths of participants in 2022 (43%) reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, 37% had received an RNA test and 7% reported having a current HCV infection. Self-reported mental health problems remained stable in 2022 (47% in 2022 and 2021, respectively). Seventy-six per cent of those who had driven recently reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months (70% in 2021; $p<0.001$) and 10% reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol (12% in 2021; $p<0.001$). Nineteen per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia, with 8% having done so in the past year. Self-reported past month criminal activity remained stable in 2022 (39%), although there was an increase in self-reported past month fraud (6% versus 3% in 2021; $p=0.008$).

In 2022, 83% of the national sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 by the time of interview and 27% had been diagnosed with the virus. The majority (65%) of participants were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and 45% of participants reported that they had quarantined for at least seven days due to a positive test or possible exposure in the past 12 months. The majority (84%) had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by the time of interview.