

## Executive Summary

The IDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly inject illicit drugs, recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm reduction services, as well as via peer referral, across each capital city of Australia. The results are not representative of all people who inject drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2023 from June-July. Since 2020, interviews were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce 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 IDRS sample in 2023 (N=820) was relatively similar to the sample in 2022, however, there was some notable differences. The 2023 sample predominantly identified as male (68%) with a median age of 46 years, stable from 2022. In 2023, most participants reported being unemployed at the time of the interview (86%; 87% in 2022). The median weekly income significantly increased from \$385 in 2022 to \$400 in 2023 ( $p<0.001$ ). Additionally, there was a significant change to the current accommodation reported by participants ( $p=0.006$ ), with more participants reporting 'no fixed address' (19%; 16% in 2022) and fewer participants reporting living in their own house/flat (65%; 68% in 2022) and boarding house/hostel (5%; 8% in 2022). The drug of choice remained stable in 2023, with 45% nominating methamphetamine as their drug of choice (46% in 2022), followed by heroin (41%; 39% in 2022). Most participants nominated

methamphetamine as the drug injected most often in the past month (56%; 54% in 2022).

### Heroin

In 2023, the per cent reporting recent heroin use remained stable relative to 2022, with 56% reporting recent use (53% in 2022). Median frequency of use remained stable at every second day in the past six months (80 days in 2022). The reported median price for one gram of heroin remained stable at \$350 (\$400 in 2022), although there was a significant change in perceived availability of heroin in 2023 ( $p=0.001$ ), with more participants perceiving it to be 'very easy' (56%; 43% in 2022) to obtain.

### Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has been gradually increasing since 2010. In 2023, 81% reported recent use, stable from 2022 (81%). Similar to previous years, crystal was the most common form of methamphetamine used by participants (80%; 80% in 2022), followed by powder (10%; 11% in 2022) and base (5%; 3% in 2022). Among those who reported recent use, participants reported using methamphetamine crystal on average three times per week in the six months preceding the interview (72 median days; 60 days in 2022). There was a significant change to the perceived availability ( $p<0.001$ ) of methamphetamine crystal in the 2023 sample. Notably, more participants reported crystal methamphetamine to be 'very easy' (64% versus 53%) to obtain, the highest per cent reported since monitoring began. The median price of crystal methamphetamine was \$50 per point and \$380 for one gram. The perceived purity of crystal methamphetamine remained stable in 2023.

## 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 2023, recent use of cocaine remained stable relative to 2022 (16%; 15% in 2022), as did median frequency of use (2 days). The median price for one gram of cocaine was reported to be \$350 in 2023 (\$300 in 2022), almost equal percentages reported purity to be 'high' or 'medium' (36% and 35%, respectively) and 68% perceived it as being 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain.

## Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

At least two thirds of the IDRS national sample have reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products since monitoring began. In 2023, 69% reported recent non-prescribed use (72% in 2022). Three per cent reported recent use of prescribed cannabis in 2023, a significant increase relative to 2022 (1% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ). Frequency of non-prescribed cannabis use remained stable at a median of 180 days. Half (51%) of those who had recently used cannabis reported daily use (51% in 2022). There were no significant changes in relation to the price, perceived purity, or perceived availability of bush and hydroponic cannabis in 2023 relative to 2022.

## 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 2023, the per cent reporting recent use of non-prescribed morphine significantly decreased from 14% in 2022 to 10% in 2023 ( $p = 0.015$ ), the lowest per cent reported since monitoring

began. Nevertheless, morphine and oxycodone remained the most common pharmaceutical opioids used in a non-prescribed context (10%, respectively), followed by methadone (9%) and buprenorphine-naloxone (9%).

## Other Drugs

Use of any NPS has fluctuated between 6% and 12% since monitoring began in 2013, with 7% reporting recent use in 2023 (6% in 2022). Consistent with previous years, the use of 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis remained the most common NPS reported by the 2023 sample (3%; 2% in 2022). Benzodiazepines remained the most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical drug reported by participants in 2023 (28%; 25% in 2022), followed by pregabalin (16%; 13% in 2022). One third (34%) of the sample reported recent non-prescribed e-cigarette use in 2023, the highest per cent reported since monitoring began in 2014 and a significant increase from 22% in 2022 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Frequency of use similarly increased from a median of 20 days (IQR=4-132) in 2022 to 90 days (IQR=12-180) in 2023 ( $p < 0.001$ ). A significant increase in the per cent reporting GHB /GBL/1,4-BD was also observed (17%; 7% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ). Use of all other monitored drugs remained stable.

## Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- In 2023, 60% 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 (18%; 17% in 2022) reported a non-fatal overdose on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin (9%).
- There was a significant increase in participants reporting awareness of take

- home naloxone in 2023 (73%; 65% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ), and naloxone training (52%; 38% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ), although this could be due to a change in question wording in 2023. More participants also reported having accessed naloxone in the past year (44%; 34% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ).
- In 2023, 5% of participants reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe (4% in 2022) and 7% reported distributive sharing in the past month (8% in 2022), the lowest percentages since monitoring commenced.
  - One in four participants (26%) reported injection-related problems in the past month (26% in 2022), most commonly any infection/abscess (10%; 12% in 2022) and nerve damage (10%; 11% in 2022).
  - Almost two fifths (39%) of the sample reported that they were in any drug treatment for their substance use (38% in 2022). There was a significant increase in participants reporting buprenorphine depot injection treatment in 2023 (7%; 4% in 2022;  $p = 0.001$ ).
  - Almost three fifths (57%) scored five or above on the Severity of Dependence Scale, indicating possible dependence relating to opioids, and 47% scoring four or above, indicating possible dependence relating to methamphetamine.
  - In 2023, a significant increase was observed in participants who reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year (52% vs 43% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ). Two fifths (43%) had received an PCR or RNA test in 2023 (37% in 2022;  $p = 0.015$ ), and 7% reported having a current HCV infection (7% in 2022). The per cent who reported they had been tested for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the past six months significantly increased from 23% in 2022 to 33% in 2023 ( $p < 0.001$ ).
  - Self-reported mental health problems significantly increased from 47% in 2022 to 53% in 2023 ( $p = 0.034$ ), the highest since monitoring began. Twenty-nine per cent reported high/very high psychological distress (30% in 2022).
  - Most participants (89%) reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug (AOD) support in the six months preceding interview in 2023 (82% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ). Nearly all had accessed a health service for any reason in the past six months (96%; 91% in 2022;  $p < 0.001$ ).
  - Fifty-five per cent of the sample reported experiencing stigma because of their illicit drug use in any setting in the six months preceding interview.
  - In 2023, 92% of the national sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 by the time of interview and 22% had returned a positive result for COVID-19 in the 12 months preceding interview. Four in five participants (83%) reported that they had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose (84% in 2022).
  - Seventy 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 (76% in 2022) and 8% reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol (10% in 2022).
  - In 2023, 8% of participants reported that they or someone else had tested the contents and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year (8% in 2022).
  - One third (33%) of participants reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest, a significant increase relative to 2022 (22%;  $p < 0.001$ ).