



# Drug-related police encounters among a sample of people who regularly inject drugs in Australia, 2022

Natalie Thomas<sup>1</sup>, Jennifer Juckel<sup>1</sup>, Catherine Daly<sup>1</sup>, Caroline Salom<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, <sup>2</sup>National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney

For further information: [natalie.thomas@uq.edu.au](mailto:natalie.thomas@uq.edu.au)

## Key Findings

National 2022 IDRS



Nationally,

**33%**

of participants reported that they had a drug-related encounter with police that did not result in arrest and/or charge.

Amongst participants who reported a drug-related police encounter in the previous 12 months:



## Introduction



There is disproportionate representation of people who inject drugs (PWID) in the criminal justice system in Australia (1, 2, 3, 4). Given that police are the first point of contact for entry into the criminal justice system, understanding the frequency of encounters with police for PWID is important.

In Australia, there are a range of potential outcomes of a drug-related police encounter, and not all encounters result in an arrest or charge. Police officers have the discretion to stop people for a drug-related matter that does not result in arrest and charge, with outcomes including: searching belongings, referral to diversion, and/or a warning, caution or a fine.

The aim of this bulletin is to describe the frequency of drug-related police encounters among a sample of people who regularly inject drugs recruited from all Australian capital cities in 2022.

## Methods

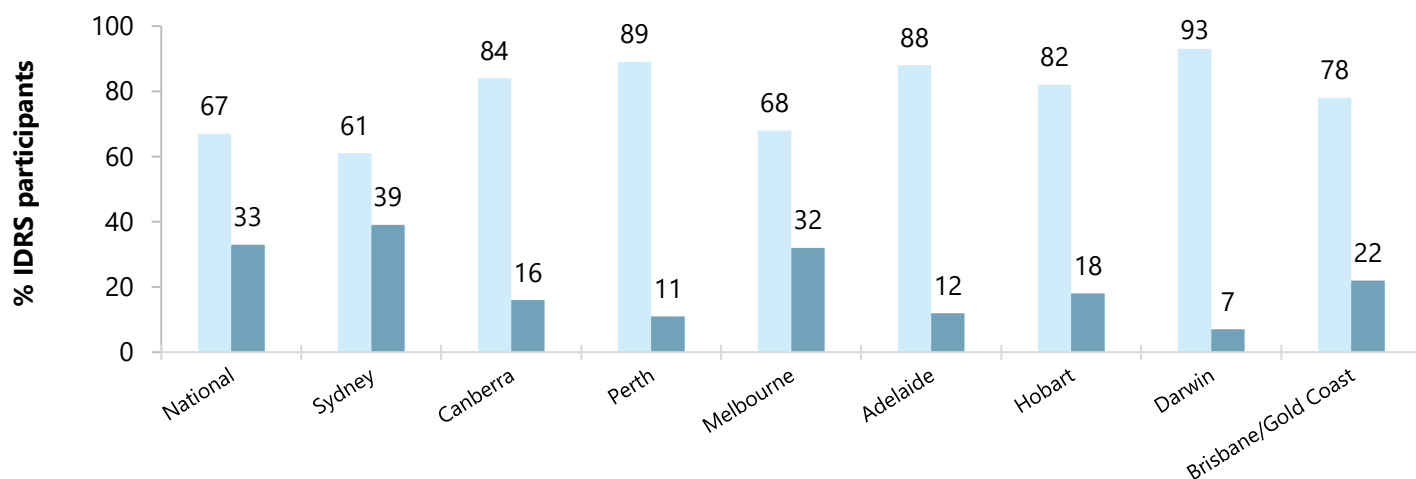


Data were collected as part of the national Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) in 2022 (N=879). The IDRS is a sentinel sample of people aged 18 or older who inject illicit drugs on a monthly or more frequent basis in the past six months and reside in a capital city in Australia. Interviews were conducted predominately via face-to-face surveys as well as telephone surveys where COVID-19 restrictions applied. Please refer to the [IDRS Backgrounds and Methods](#) for further details.

In 2022, participants of the Illicit Drug Reporting System were asked 'In the last 12 months, have you had a drug-related encounter with police, which has not resulted in charge or arrest?'. Descriptive statistics and multi-response analysis were used to analyse the data. Data were analysed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). For information regarding the characteristics of the National IDRS sample, please refer to the [National Illicit Drug Reporting System Report 2022](#).

## Results

**Figure 1. Self-reported drug-related encounters with police not resulting in charge/arrest in the previous 12 months, by state/territory and nationally**



■ No, I was not stopped by police in the previous 12 months ■ Yes, I was stopped by police in the previous 12 months

## DRUG-RELATED POLICE ENCOUNTERS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

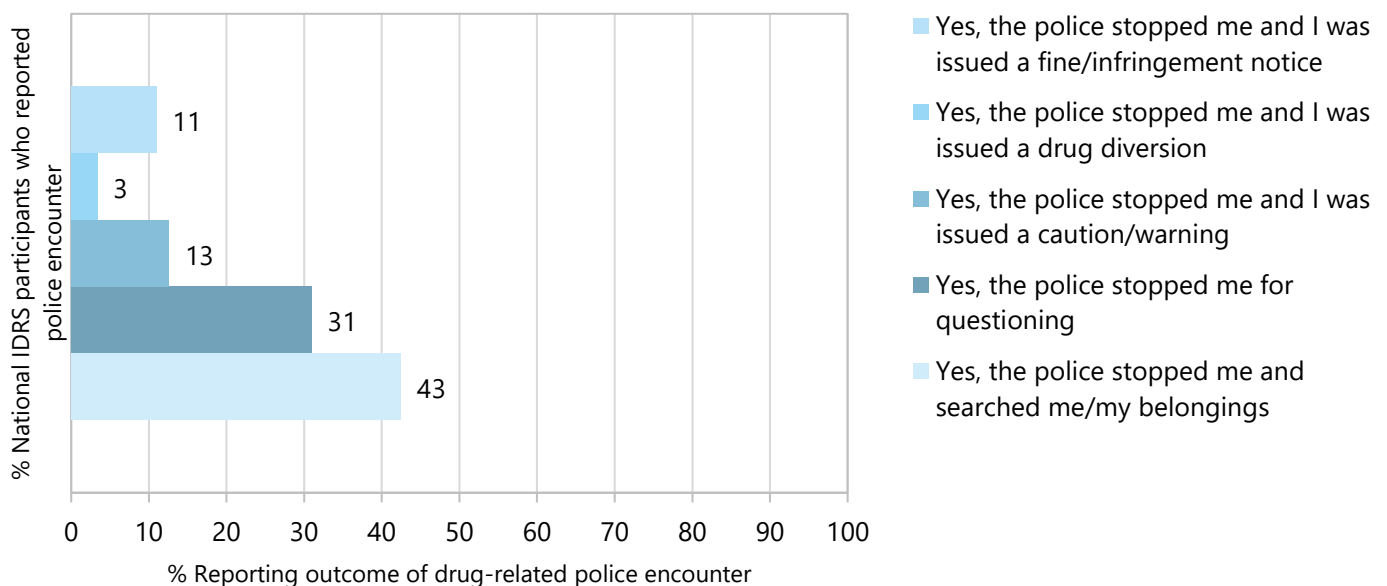


One third of participants nationally reported that they had a drug-related encounter in the previous twelve months that did not result in charge and/or arrest. The majority of participants reported that they had not had a drug-related encounter with police that did not result in charge and/or arrest in the previous 12 months (67% of the national sample) (Figure 1).

## OUTCOMES OF DRUG-RELATED POLICE ENCOUNTERS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

Amongst participants who reported a drug-related police encounter in the previous 12 months, 43% reported that police stopped them and searched their belongings; 31% reported that police stopped them for questioning; 13% reported that they were issued with a caution/warning, 11% reported they were issued with a fine/infringement notice; and 3% reported they were issued with a drug diversion (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Self-reported outcomes of drug-related police encounters not resulting in charge/arrest**



Note. Amongst people who reported that they had a drug-related police encounter in the previous 12 months. Participants could select more than one response option. No data labels provided with small cell size (i.e., n≤5 but not 0).

## Discussion

One third of the national 2022 IDRS sample reported that they had a drug-related police encounter that did not result in arrest or charge in the previous 12 months. Understanding the frequency of drug-related encounters with police and their outcomes will help to inform further evaluation of the impact of impending drug policy changes for people who inject drugs. Furthermore, ongoing monitoring of these trends is important to track the impact of policy changes over time.

## References

1. Beletsky L, Heller D, Jenness SM, Neaigus A, Gelpi-Acosta C, Hagan H. Syringe access, syringe sharing, and police encounters among people who inject drugs in New York City: a community-level perspective. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2014 Jan 1;25(1):105-11.
2. Greer A, Sorge J, Sharpe K, Bear D, Macdonald S. Police encounters and experiences among youths and adults who use drugs: Qualitative and quantitative findings of a cross-sectional study in Victoria, British Columbia. *Canadian journal of criminology and criminal justice*. 2018 Oct;60(4):478-504.
3. Greer A, Sorge J, Selfridge M, Benoit C, Jansson M, Macdonald S. Police discretion to charge young people who use drugs prior to cannabis legalization in British Columbia, Canada: A brief report of quantitative findings. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*. 2020 27;6:488-493.
4. Hughes CE, Barratt MJ, Ferris JA, Maier LJ, Winstock AR. Drug-related police encounters across the globe: How do they compare?. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2018 Jun 1;56:197-207.

## Funding and Copyright

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care under the Drug and Alcohol Program ©NDARC, UNSW SYDNEY 2023. This work is copyright. You may download, display, print and reproduce this material in unaltered form only (retaining this notice) for your personal, non-commercial use or use within your organisation. All other rights are reserved. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the information manager, NDARC, UNSW Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia via [drugtrends@unsw.edu.au](mailto:drugtrends@unsw.edu.au).

## Recommended Citation

Thomas N, Juckel J, Daly C, Salom, C. Drug-related police encounters among a sample of people who regularly inject drugs in Australia, 2022. *Drug Trends Bulletin Series*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2023. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.26190/8rdk-xc47>

## Acknowledgements

- The participants who were interviewed for the IDRS in the present and in previous years.
- The agencies that assisted with recruitment and interviewing.
- The IDRS is funded by the Australian Government of Health and Aged Care under the Drug and Alcohol Program.
- Associate Professor Caitlin Hughes for her contribution to the questionnaire items used in this bulletin.

## Participating Researchers and Research Centres



- Dr Rachel Sutherland, Fiona Jones, Antonia Karlsson, Julia Uporova, Daisy Gibbs, Olivia Price, Cate King, Professor Louisa Degenhardt, Professor Michael Farrell and Associate Professor Amy Peacock, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, New South Wales;
- Joanna Wilson, Dr Campbell Aiken and Professor Paul Dietze, Burnet, Victoria;
- Yalei Wilson and Associate Professor Raimondo Bruno, School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, Tasmania;
- Dr Seraina Agramunt and Professor Simon Lenton, National Drug Research Institute and enAble Institute, Curtin University, Western Australia; and
- Catherine Daly, Dr Jennifer Juckel, Dr Natalie Thomas and Associate Professor Caroline Salom, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Queensland.