

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least six days in the preceding six months and resided in Brisbane/Gold Coast, Queensland. 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 between 2020 and 2023 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 2020-2023 samples relative to previous years.

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Brisbane/Gold Coast, Queensland (QLD) in 2023 (N=103) was consistent with the Brisbane/Gold Coast profile in previous years, whereby almost two thirds (66%) were male, with a median age of 45 years. Almost four fifths (78%) of the sample were unemployed at the time of interview, and most (86%) had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. The median income per week remained stable, from \$450 in 2022 to \$429 in 2023. Participants typically nominated methamphetamine as their drug of choice in 2023 (51%), followed by heroin (34%). Methamphetamine was also the drug injected most often in the past month (56%), followed by heroin (29%). Weekly or more frequent use of heroin remained stable in 2023 (30%), relative to 2022 (34%; $p=0.654$).

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has fluctuated since the commencement of monitoring, with 46% of the Brisbane/Gold

Coast sample reporting recent use in 2023, stable from 51% in 2022 ($p=0.478$). Two thirds (66%) of participants who had recently used heroin reported using on a weekly or more frequent basis in 2023, remaining stable relative to 2022 (67%). Perceived purity and availability also remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with 43% perceiving purity as 'medium' and 25% as 'high'. Forty-eight per cent perceived heroin was 'easy' to obtain and 45% 'very easy' to obtain (58% and 27% in 2022).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has trended upwards over the past few years, with 73% of participants reporting recent use in 2023. This was mostly driven by continuing crystal methamphetamine use (96% in 2023), the most commonly used form since 2010. The median price for one point of crystal remained unchanged at \$50. Perceived purity of crystal methamphetamine remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with 28% of participants perceiving crystal methamphetamine as being 'low' in purity in 2023 (19% in 2022, $p=0.565$). Availability of crystal methamphetamine also remained stable in 2023, with two thirds (66%) perceiving it as 'very easy' to obtain (54% in 2022; $p=0.356$).

Cocaine

Thirteen per cent of the Brisbane/Gold Coast sample had recently consumed cocaine, stable from 17% in 2022 ($p=0.431$). Frequency of use also remained stable in 2023, at a median of one day (1 day in 2022; $p=0.105$). Small numbers ($n\leq 5$) of participants reported using cocaine weekly or more frequently in 2023.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-related Products

Recent use of non-prescribed cannabis has remained fairly stable since 2014, with 59%

reporting recent use in 2023. Thirty per cent of participants who had recently used cannabis reported daily use (41% in 2022; $p=0.263$). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (90%), followed by bush cannabis (22%). Few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported using hashish, hash oil and/or non-prescribed pharmaceutical CBD oil in the six months preceding interview. Hydroponic cannabis was reported as being 'very easy' to obtain in 2023 (66% of those who commented) and was perceived to be of 'high' purity (72%).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent non-prescribed use of most pharmaceutical opioids remained stable in 2023 relative to 2022. These included methadone (7%; 10% in 2022), buprenorphine tablet (11%; 15% in 2022), buprenorphine-naloxone (15%; 10% in 2022), oxycodone (11%; 11% in 2022) and fentanyl ($n\leq 5$ in 2023 and 2022). There was a significant decrease in the use of morphine (8%; 19% in 2022; $p=0.025$). There was also a significant decrease in any recent use of codeine ($n\leq 5$; 17% in 2022, $p=0.006$), as well as a significant decrease in recent non-prescribed use of codeine ($n\leq 5$; 10% in 2022; $p=0.005$).

Other Drugs

Recent use of any NPS remained low and stable in 2023, at seven per cent (8% in 2022). Recent non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was also stable, reported by 21% of participants in 2023 (21% in 2022). Pregabalin use remained stable at 13% (19% in 2022). Recent use of tobacco (83%; 86% in 2022) and e-cigarettes (34%; 27% in 2022) remained stable in 2023, while significantly fewer participants reported daily use of alcohol ($n\leq 5$; 15% in 2022; $p=0.006$). Significantly more participants reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD, compared to 2022 (17%; 7% in 2022; $p=0.036$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- In 2023, 48% of the sample reported using two or more drugs on the day preceding interview (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes).
- Almost one quarter (23%) reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, with the majority of those participants reporting a non-fatal opioid overdose (15%) or stimulant (7%) overdose.
- Three-quarters (72%) of the Brisbane/Gold Coast sample reported awareness of naloxone take-home programs, with 51% having been trained in naloxone administration in their lifetime, a significant increase from 2022 (33%; $p=0.012$). Forty-three per cent of the sample had accessed naloxone in the past year.
- In 2023, few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported receptive or distributive sharing of a needle or syringe in the past month, respectively.
- Almost one third (32%) reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly any nerve damage (18%), followed by any infection/abscess (11%).
- Two fifths (40%) of participants reported receiving any drug treatment in 2023, stable relative to 2022 (48%).
- The median opioid SDS score was six (IQR=0–14), indicating many participants reported symptoms of dependence in relation to their opioid use, while the median SDS score for methamphetamine use was three (IQR=0–15), indicating that the majority of respondents reported no or few symptoms of dependence in relation to methamphetamine use.

- Almost two fifths (38%) of the sample reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year and 32% reported receiving an RNA test in the past year. Six per cent reported having a current HCV infection.
- Self-reported mental health problems remained stable in 2023 (56%; 56% in 2022), with depression and anxiety being the most commonly reported problems (50% respectively), followed by post-traumatic stress disorder (34%).
- Fifty-nine per cent reported high/very high psychological distress.
- The majority (94%) of participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview, and 10% of the sample reported experiencing stigma in specialist AOD service setting in the six months preceding interview, a significant decrease from 2022 (20%; $p=0.050$).
- In 2023, 85% of the Brisbane/Gold Coast sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months. At the time of interview, 76% reported that they had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose, with 31% having received two or more doses.
- Of those who had driven recently ($n=49$), few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol, and 73% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, both stable relative to 2022 ($n\leq 5$ and 79%, respectively).
- Seventeen per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia, 10% in the past year.
- Thirty-three per cent of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2023, stable from 41% in 2022, with 26% having been arrested in the past year, stable from 2022 (24%, $p=0.868$).