

Executive Summary

The Hobart Tasmania (TAS) IDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly inject illicit drugs and reside in Hobart, TAS. 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 2023 from June-July. Interviews from 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

In 2023, the IDRS sample (N=66) recruited from Hobart, Tasmania, was similar to the sample in 2022 and in previous years. Gender remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with 70% identifying as male (69% in 2022), and participants had a median age of 45 years. Two thirds (67%) held post-school qualifications including trade/technical and university (65% in 2022). The majority (89%) of the sample were unemployed (85% in 2022), and 97% had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview (93% in 2022). The median income per week remained stable at \$420 in 2023 (\$418 in 2022). Accommodation remained stable relative to 2022, with 59% living in a rental house/flat (70% in 2022). Fifteen per cent of participants reported having no fixed address (12% in 2022) and 12% reported residing at a shelter/refuge (n≤5 in 2022).

The drug of choice remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with half (50%) of the participants nominating methamphetamine as their drug of choice in 2023 (53% in 2022),

followed by heroin (14%; 14% in 2022). Most participants nominated methamphetamine as the drug injected most often in the past month (77%; 73% in 2022). Weekly or more frequent use of any methamphetamine was reported by 71% of the sample (67% in 2022).

Heroin

The per cent reporting recent heroin use has remained relatively stable and low since the commencement of monitoring, with 11% of the Hobart sample reporting recent use in 2023, stable relative to 2022 (22%). Few participants (n≤5) who had recently used heroin reported using on a weekly or more frequent basis in 2023 (n≤5 in 2022). Price, perceived purity and perceived availability remained stable between 2022 and 2023.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has trended upwards over the past few years, with almost nine in ten participants reporting recent use since 2021. In 2023, 88% of participants reported recent use of any methamphetamine (84% in 2022). This mostly comprised of crystal methamphetamine use (85%; 84% in 2022) - the most commonly used form since 2014. Fourteen per cent of the sample reported recent use of powder (18% in 2022) and few participants (n≤5) reported recent use of base (n≤5 in 2022).

The frequency of use of any methamphetamine was trending to an increase from 2021 (median of 48 days) to a median of 72 days in 2022 and 2023. There was a significant decrease in the frequency of use of methamphetamine powder with participants reporting use on a median of 10 days in 2023 (24 days in 2022; $p=0.013$). In 2023, there were significant increases in the quantity of use for methamphetamine crystal and powder. Participants reported using a

median of 0.20 grams of crystal on a 'typical' day (0.10 grams in 2022; $p=0.006$) and the median maximum amount used per day was 0.40 grams (0.30 grams in 2022; $p=0.016$). Participants reported recently using a median of 0.40 grams of powder on a 'typical' day (0.10 grams in 2022; $p=0.018$) and the median maximum amount used per day was 0.50 grams (0.30 grams in 2022; $p=0.027$).

The median price of one point of crystal significantly decreased from \$100 in 2022 to \$50 in 2023 ($p<0.001$). There were significant increases in the perceived purity of crystal methamphetamine between 2022 and 2023 ($p=0.034$), with more participants perceiving crystal as 'high' in 2023 (36%; 23% in 2022) and fewer participants reporting 'low' purity (13%; 23% in 2022) and 'medium' purity (25%; 40% in 2022).

Cocaine

In 2023, recent use of cocaine remained stable relative to 2022 (15%; 14% in 2022). Frequency of use also remained stable at a median of three days in 2023 (6 days in 2022). There was a significant decrease in the quantity of cocaine used on a 'typical' day, with participants reporting using a median of 0.10 grams (0.50 grams in 2022; $p=0.017$).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

The per cent of participants reporting recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products, while overall slowly declining since the early 2000s, remained stable between 2022 and 2023 (73%; 70% in 2022). Three fifths (60%) of participants who had recently used non-prescribed cannabis reported daily use, stable relative to 2022 (51%; $p=0.349$). Hydroponic cannabis (88%) and bush cannabis (54%) remained stable as the most commonly used forms of

cannabis, relative to 2022 (84% and 56%, respectively). Few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported using hashish and/or hash oil and/or non-prescribed pharmaceutical CBD oil and/or THC extract in the six months preceding interview. In 2023, smoking (83%) remained the most common route of administration, however a significant decrease in per cent of participants reporting smoking was observed, relative to 2022 (97%; $p=0.014$). Both hydroponic and bush cannabis were reported as being 'very easy' to obtain in 2023 (74% and 55% of those who responded, respectively), stable relative to 2022.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent non-prescribed use of pharmaceutical opioids such as morphine, oxycodone and methadone has generally declined over the past 10 years of monitoring. In 2023, however, there was a significant increase in the use of non-prescribed buprenorphine tablets, with 20% of participants reporting recent use (7% in 2022; $p=0.018$). Recent use of non-prescribed methadone (11%), buprenorphine-naloxone (18%), morphine (20%), oxycodone (15%), fentanyl (11%), codeine (9%) and tramadol (12%) remained low and stable compared to reports in 2022.

Other Drugs

Few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported recent use of NPS in 2023 (7% in 2022). Twelve per cent of the sample reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD in 2023, a significant increase from 2022 ($n\leq 5$; $p=0.015$). Eighteen per cent reported recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants (16% in 2022), and 12% reported recent use of non-prescribed antipsychotics (6% in 2022). In 2023, recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines (36%; 35% in 2022) and pregabalin (17%; 14% in 2022) remained stable. Recent use of alcohol (61%; 64% in 2022), tobacco (91%; 93% in 2022) and

non-prescribed e-cigarettes (15%; 15% in 2022) also remained stable. Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported recent use of gabapentin and non-prescribed steroids in 2022 and 2023.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- In 2023, 55% of the Hobart sample reported using two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding interview.
- One quarter (27%) of participants reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose on any drug in the 12 months preceding interview, a significant increase from 13% in 2022 ($p=0.039$). Fourteen per cent reported a non-fatal opioid overdose (6% in 2022), followed by 11% reporting a non-fatal stimulant overdose ($n \leq 5$; in 2022).
- Four fifths (79%) of the sample reported an awareness of naloxone, a significant decrease from 91% in 2022 ($p=0.037$). Almost two fifths (38%) reported being trained in naloxone administration (22% in 2022), and one third (32%) had accessed naloxone in the past year (36% in 2022).
- In 2023, 9% of participants reported distributive sharing of a needle or syringe in the past month (6% in 2022), with few participants ($n \leq 5$) reporting receptive sharing ($n \leq 5$ in 2022). Thirty-six per cent of participants reported that they had re-used their own needle in the past month (34% in 2022), with one third (33%) reporting that they had injected someone else after injecting themselves (19% in 2022).
- One fifth (21%) of the sample reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month (22% in 2022).
- In 2023, 21% per cent of participants reported that they were in any drug treatment for their substance use (25% in 2022).
- One fifth (21%) of the sample obtained an SDS score of ≥ 5 , indicative of possible dependence relating to opioids, a significant decrease from 47% in 2022 ($p=0.033$). Three fifths (59%) obtained an SDS score of ≥ 4 , indicative of possible dependence relating to methamphetamine (59% in 2022).
- In 2023, half (50%) of the sample reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year (47% in 2022), and 28% reported receiving an RNA test in the past year (36% in 2022). Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported having a current HCV infection ($n \leq 5$ in 2022).
- Self-reported mental health problems remained stable in 2023 (66%; 51% in 2022), with anxiety being the most commonly reported problem (59%), followed by depression (51%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (28%).
- Almost three fifths (57%) of the sample reported 'high' or 'very high' psychological distress (58% in 2022). Half (49%) of those who self-reported a mental health disorder had seen a mental health professional during the past six months (57% in 2022).
- The majority (85%) of participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug (AOD) support in the six months preceding interview (84% in 2022).
- Half (50%) of the sample reported experiencing stigma because of their illicit drug use in any setting in the six months preceding interview.
- In 2023, 93% of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 by the time of interview and 16% had returned a positive COVID-19 test in the 12 months preceding interview. At the time of interview, 86% reported that they

had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose.

- Three quarters (74%) of those who had driven recently reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months (74% in 2022). Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol in both 2022 and 2023.
- 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 (13% in 2022), with few participants ($n \leq 5$) doing so in the past 12 months ($n \leq 5$ in 2022).
- Thirty-nine per cent of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2023 (38% in 2022), with 38% having been arrested in the past year (31% in 2022).
- One third (34%) of participants reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest, a significant increase relative to 2022 (18%; $p=0.047$). This predominantly comprised of being stopped for questioning (89%), a significant increase from 21% in 2022 ($p < 0.001$).