

Executive Summary

The Melbourne 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 Melbourne, Victoria. 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 2022 from May to 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 recruited from Melbourne, Victoria (VIC) in 2022 (N=151) was consistent with previous years; two thirds (66%) were male, and the mean age was 46 years. The majority of the sample were unemployed at the time of interview (90%) and had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview (91%). The median income per week remained stable in 2022, at \$400 (IQR=308–500). Significantly more participants held a post-school qualification in 2022 (56%) compared to 2021 (42%; $p=0.015$). Nominated drug of choice and drug injected most often in the past month were similar for 2021 and 2022. In 2022, 55% reported that heroin was their drug of choice (54% in 2021), and three fifths (62%) reported that heroin was the drug they had injected most often in the past month (56% in 2021). Weekly or more frequent use of heroin in 2022 (61%) was similar to 2021 (60%).

Heroin

The prevalence of recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has remained stable in recent years, with 78% reporting recent use in 2022 (76% in 2021). Most of those reporting recent use reported using heroin weekly or more frequently in 2022 (79%; 79% in 2021). The median price of a point of heroin was reportedly \$50 in 2022, a significant decrease from \$100

in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Perceived purity and availability remained stable between 2021 and 2022, with 30% of respondents perceiving purity to be 'low' in 2022 (29% in 2021), and 50% perceiving that heroin was 'very easy' to obtain (42% in 2021).

Methamphetamine

The prevalence of recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years. In 2022, 75% of participants reported recent use of any methamphetamine, similar to 2021 (79%). Three fifths (60%) of those reporting recent use reported using methamphetamine weekly or more frequently in 2022 (70% in 2021; $p=0.136$). Crystal methamphetamine remained the most common form reportedly used (75%; 78% in 2021). Injection was the most commonly reported route of administration of crystal methamphetamine in 2022 (96%; 91% in 2021), yet there was a significant decrease in the per cent reporting smoking the substance (39%; 57% in 2021; $p=0.012$). Price, perceived purity, and availability reported in 2022 were all similar to findings from 2021.

Cocaine

Nineteen per cent of the Melbourne sample reported recent use of cocaine in 2022, consistent with 2021 (18%) and previous years. There was a significant increase in those reporting snorting as their route of administration in 2022 (69%), relative to 2021 (37%; $p=0.033$).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

There was a significant increase in recent non-prescribed cannabis and/or related cannabinoid product consumption in 2022, reported by 82% of the sample (66% in 2021; $p=0.002$). Nearly half (47%) of participants who reported recent use reported daily use, stable from 2021 (53%). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most reportedly used (94%), followed by bush cannabis (35%). Reports of price, purity, and availability of non-prescribed cannabis in 2022 were comparable to 2021, although there was a change in the perceived availability of bush cannabis ($p=0.012$), with a greater number of participants perceiving that

bush was 'very easy' to obtain (64%), relative to 2021 (17%).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Reported recent use of any methadone and buprenorphine-naloxone remained stable in 2022, reported by 40% (32% in 2021) and 14% (8% in 2021) of participants, respectively. The most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioids reportedly used in 2022 were oxycodone (10%), morphine (7%), and tramadol (5%; $n \leq 5$ in 2021; $p=0.036$).

Other Drugs

Six per cent of participants reported recent use of new psychoactive substances (predominantly 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis; 6% in 2021). Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 36% of participants in 2022 (37% in 2021). Reported non-prescribed use of pregabalin in 2022 (18%) was comparable to 2021 (20%), although there was a decrease in frequency of reported use from a median of 8 days in the past six months in 2021 to 5 days in 2022 ($p=0.009$). Sixty-three per cent reported recent use of alcohol, a significant increase from 2021 (49%; $p=0.022$). Reported recent use of tobacco and e-cigarettes in 2022 were comparable to 2021. In 2022, there was a significant decrease in those reporting using e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool (31%; 59% in 2021; $p=0.031$). One sixth (16%) of the sample reported recent use of GHB (16% in 2021).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

In 2022, the majority (97%) of the Melbourne sample reported using one or more drugs (excluding alcohol, prescription medications, tobacco, and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding interview, with the most frequently reported being opioids (60%) and cannabis (52%). Approximately one fifth (21%) of participants reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year (24% in 2021), mostly following opioid use. Approximately four fifths (79%) reported awareness of the availability of take-home naloxone in 2022 (77% in 2021), and 70% reported having ever accessed naloxone (67% in 2021). Almost two fifths (38%) reported that they had re-used their own

needles in the past month (35% in 2021). Thirty-seven per cent of the sample reported sharing other injection equipment in 2022, a significant increase from 2021 (24%; $p=0.026$). The per cent reporting experiencing injection-related problems in the past month (19%) was not significantly different to 2021 (24%), with the most common being any infection/abscess (8%). Two fifths (43%) of the sample were currently in any drug treatment, a figure comparable to 2021 (34%). Half (50%) reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, while 46% reported receiving a HCV RNA test in the past year, and 9% reported having a current HCV infection. Most participants (83%) reported ever being tested for HIV, and 21% reported being tested in the past six months, while 6% reported ever receiving a HIV positive diagnosis. In 2022, self-reported mental health problems (54%) were reported at a comparable frequency to 2021 (48%), with the most cited problems being depression (67%) and anxiety (64%). Of those who reported experiencing a mental health problem in the past six months, almost half (49%) reported treatment seeking. One third (32%) of participants reported driving a motor vehicle in the past six months, of whom 77% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit drug, and 16% reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol. Seventeen per cent of the 2022 sample reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their drugs. Almost half (48%) of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2022, similar to 2021 (57%). In 2022, the majority (85%) of the Melbourne sample reported having been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, and 22% had received a positive diagnosis. Eighty-three per cent reported receiving at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose at the time of interview. Two thirds (66%) of participants were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19.