

Executive Summary

The Melbourne IDRS involves an annual survey of a sentinel group of people who inject drugs and have substantial knowledge of Melbourne's drug markets. The sample comprises people aged 18 years or older who report injecting illicit drugs on ≥ 6 days in the preceding six months and reside in Melbourne, Victoria. Participants are typically 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, or of drug use in the general population. **In the 2023 IDRS, data were collected in June. Some interviews between 2020 and 2023 were delivered 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 characteristics of the IDRS sample recruited from Melbourne, Victoria (VIC) in 2023 (N=150) were consistent with previous years: almost three-quarters (74%) were male, and their mean age was 45 years. Most were unemployed at the time of interview (92%) and had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview (94%), whilst 53% held a post-school qualification. At \$407 (IQR=346–500), the median income per week in 2023 was comparable to that in 2022. Nominated drugs of choice and the drugs injected most often in the past month were similar for 2022 and 2023. In 2023, 57% reported that heroin was their drug of choice (55% in 2022), and three fifths (60%) reported that heroin was the drug they had injected most often in the past month (62% in 2022). Reports of weekly or more

frequent use of heroin in 2023 (67%) were similar to 2022 (61%).

Heroin

The prevalence of recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has remained stable in recent years, with 87% reporting recent use in 2023 (78% in 2022). Most of those reporting recent use reported using heroin weekly or more frequently in 2023 (78%; 79% in 2022). There was a significant decrease in the median typical amount of heroin used per day, from 0.30 grams (IQR=0.10–0.50) in 2022 to 0.20 grams (IQR=0.10–0.30) in 2023 ($p=0.003$), and the median maximum amount used per day (0.40 grams; IQR=0.20–1.00; 0.70 grams in 2022, IQR=0.30–1.70; $p=0.008$). Perceived purity and availability in 2023 were comparable to 2022, with 30% of respondents perceiving purity to be 'high' in 2023 (26% in 2022), and 62% perceiving that heroin was 'very easy' to obtain (50% in 2022).

Methamphetamine

The prevalence of recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years. In 2023, 77% of participants reported recent use of any methamphetamine, similar to 2022 (75%). Three fifths (61%) of those reporting recent use reported using methamphetamine weekly or more frequently in 2023 (60% in 2022). Crystal methamphetamine remained the most common form reportedly used (77%; 75% in 2022). Injection was the most commonly reported route of administration of crystal methamphetamine in 2023 (95%; 96% in 2022). Findings about price, perceived purity, and availability reported in 2023 were all similar to those from 2022.

Cocaine

Seventeen per cent of the sample reported recent use of cocaine in 2023, consistent with 2022 (19%) and previous years. Findings about price, perceived purity, and availability reported in 2023 were all similar to those from 2022.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-related Products

Recent non-prescribed cannabis and/or related-cannabinoid product consumption in 2023 remained stable at 79% (82% in 2022). Fifty-three per cent of participants who reported recent use reported daily use, similar to 2022 (46%). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most reportedly used (88%), followed by bush cannabis (30%). Reports of price, purity, and availability of non-prescribed cannabis in 2023 were comparable to 2022.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

In 2023, recent non-prescribed use of methadone (12%), buprenorphine tablets ($n \leq 5$), buprenorphine-naloxone (6%), morphine (5%), oxycodone (7%), fentanyl (5%) and codeine ($n \leq 5$) remained low and stable.

Other Drugs

Five per cent of participants reported recent use of new psychoactive substances (predominantly 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis; 6% in 2022). Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 39% of participants in 2023 (36% in 2022). Reported non-prescribed use of antipsychotics (4%), pregabalin (23%), and Unisom (diphenhydramine) capsules (13%) remained similar to 2022. Sixty-five per cent reported recent use of alcohol, similar to 2022 (63%), and 93% reported recent tobacco use (91% in 2022). In 2023, there was a significant increase in non-prescribed e-cigarette use to 43% (25% in 2022; $p=0.002$), along with a significant increase in the frequency of use, from a median

of 11 days in 2022 to 60 days in 2023 ($p=0.005$). One fifth (20%) of the sample reported recent use of GHB (16% in 2022).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- In 2023, 69% of the sample reported using two or more drugs on the day preceding interview (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes).
- Twenty-three per cent reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, with most reporting a non-fatal opioid overdose (17%).
- Most (90%) participants reported awareness of naloxone take-home programs, with 68% having been trained in naloxone administration in their lifetime. Seventy-one per cent of the sample who had heard about naloxone training programs reported having ever accessed naloxone, with 53% having done so in the past year. Thirty-five per cent of the sample reported that they had resuscitated someone using naloxone at least once in their lifetime (33% in 2022).
- In 2023, few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe, while 4% reported distributive sharing of a needle or syringe in the past month. Thirty-four per cent of the sample reported that they had re-used their own needles in the past month.
- Seventeen per cent reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly any thrombosis (6%), followed by an infection/abscess (5%).
- Fifty-three per cent of participants reported receiving any drug treatment in 2023, similar to 2022 (43%), with significantly more participants reporting current buprenorphine depot

- injection treatment in 2023 (15%; 4% in 2022; $p < 0.001$).
- The median opioid Severity of Dependence (SDS) scale score was five (range: 0–15), with 56% scoring five or above, indicating possible dependence. The median methamphetamine SDS score was three (range: 0–15), with 43% scoring four or above, indicating possible dependence.
 - Sixty-four per cent of the sample reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year and 64% reported receiving an RNA test in the past year. Fourteen per cent of the sample reported that they had received HCV treatment in the past year, while 7% reported a current HCV infection.
 - Self-reported mental health problems remained stable in 2022 (55%; 54% in 2022), with anxiety being the most commonly reported problem (60%), followed by depression (49%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (20%). Three-fifths (59%) reported high/very high psychological distress.
 - Most (89%) participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview, and 73% of the sample reported experiencing stigma in any setting in the six months preceding interview.
 - In 2023, 91% of the Melbourne sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, with around one-quarter (23%) of participants having been diagnosed with the virus. At the time of interview, 84% reported that they had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose, with 81% having received two or more doses.
 - Of those who had driven a motor vehicle recently ($n=52$), few ($n \leq 5$) reported driving while over the perceived legal blood alcohol concentration, and 63% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, both similar to 2022 (16% and 77%, respectively).
 - Eleven per cent of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year.
 - Approximately half (47%) of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2023, similar to 48% in 2022, with 26% having been arrested in the past year (33% in 2023).