

Executive Summary

The Western Australia (WA) 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 Perth, Western Australia. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle 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-June. In WA, interviews in 2020 and 2021 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, while in 2022, they were only conducted via telephone to reduce the 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 WA IDRS sample in 2022 were predominantly males (55%) with a mean age of 44 years, consistent with the WA profile in previous years. The majority (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 in 2022 (\$370) compared to 2021 (\$363). Drug of choice remained stable in 2022 compared to 2021, with the largest percentage of the sample reporting that heroin was their drug of choice (47%; 52% in 2021). Similarly, there were no significant changes in the drug injected the most often in the last month, with heroin being the drug injected most often (45%; 43% in 2021), followed by methamphetamine (44%; 52% in 2021).

Heroin

After a steady resurgence in recent (i.e., past six month) heroin use up until 2016, a downward trend has been observed since 2017. However, the percentage of respondents who reported recent use of heroin has

remained stable between 2021 (61%) and 2022 (60%). Eighty-one per cent of those who had recently used heroin reported weekly or more frequent use in 2022. A significant change was reported for perceived purity between 2021 and 2022 ($p=0.042$). Specifically, an increase was observed in the percentage of participants who reported perceived purity to be 'high' (46%; 31% in 2021), or 'medium' (38%; 31% in 2021). However, perceived availability remained stable between 2021 and 2022, with nearly half of participants (47%) perceiving that heroin was 'easy' to obtain (38% in 2021).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has trended upwards over the past few years, with almost eight in ten participants (78%) reporting recent use in 2022. This was mostly driven by a continued increased trend in crystal methamphetamine use (77% in 2022) – the most commonly used form since 2011 in Perth. However, recent use of powder and crystal methamphetamine remained stable between 2021 and 2022, with 13% (9% in 2021) and 77% (80% in 2021) reporting recent use, respectively. Similarly, the perceived purity and availability of any form of methamphetamine remained stable between 2021 and 2022. The median price for one point of crystal significantly increased, however, from \$95 in 2021 to \$100 in 2022 ($p=0.006$), while the price for one point of powder methamphetamine remained stable between 2021 and 2022. Seventy per cent of those who had recently used any methamphetamine reported weekly or more frequent use in 2022.

Cocaine

Cocaine use amongst people who inject drugs in Perth remains infrequent and sporadic. Twelve per cent of the Perth sample had recently consumed cocaine on a median of two days.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

Recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products remained stable between 2021 (69%) and 2022 (60%). Forty-five per cent of those who had recently used non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products reported daily use, stable from 2021 (46%). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (97%), with a significant increase in recent use of bush (43%; 15% in 2021; $p=0.001$). There was also a significant increase in the percentage of participants reporting inhaling/vaporising cannabis between 2021 (9%) and 2022 (25%) ($p=0.017$).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent use of all forms of pharmaceutical opioids remained stable in 2022, though an overall downward trend was observed since monitoring of each opioid first began. No significant differences in terms of non-prescribed recent use nor frequency of use were observed for buprenorphine tablet, buprenorphine-naloxone, morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, codeine, tapentadol and tramadol between 2021 and 2022. However, there was a significant increase in the frequency of non-prescribed use of methadone (syrup) between 2021 (2 days) and 2022 (48 days; $p=0.047$).

Other Drugs

A small percentage of participants (7%) reported recent use of any NPS in 2022. Recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines (including alprazolam) (28%; 32% in 2021), non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants (10%; 10% in 2021), antipsychotics ($n\leq 5$; $n\leq 5$ in 2021); and pregabalin (16%; 19% in 2021) remained stable between 2021 and 2022. Tobacco use has remained consistently high but stable over the period of monitoring, with 89% reporting recent use in 2022, while alcohol use has been trending downward over the course of monitoring. Furthermore, recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes (24%; 20% in 2021), as well as GHB/GBL/1,4-BD (9%; 12% in 2021) also remained stable between 2021 and 2022.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

In 2022, the majority of the sample (95%) reported using one or more drugs on the day preceding interview. Eighteen per cent of participants reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug, with 15% reporting a past year non-fatal opioid overdose. Heroin was the most common opioid cited in a past year overdose, being identified by 14% of the sample. The majority of the sample (83%) had heard of naloxone, while 54% had ever been trained in using it. Almost half the sample (47%) reported re-using their own needle in the past month, stable from 51% in 2021. There was a statistically significant change in the location of last injection ($p=0.023$), with an increase in the number of participants who reported they had injected at home (80%; 70% in 2021) or in a street/park or bench (9%; $n\leq 5$ in 2021). One-third (31%) of the sample reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month, most commonly any nerve damage (17%). Forty per cent of participants reported being in drug treatment at the time of interview, stable from 46% in 2021. Two-fifths of participants in 2022 (43%) reported that they had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year, while 39% had received an RNA test. Self-reported mental health problems in the past six months remained stable in 2022 (46%; 47% in 2021). Thirteen per cent of recent drivers reported driving over the perceived legal limit of alcohol, while 81% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months. One-fifth (21%) of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia. In 2022, 85% of the Perth sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, while 35% of participants had been diagnosed with the virus. At the time of interview, 91% of the sample reported they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.