

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs ≥ 6 days in the preceding six months and resided in Canberra, ACT. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle and syringe programs (NSP) 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 2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission; all interviews in 2023 and prior to 2020 were conducted face-to-face. 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 Canberra, ACT in 2023 was relatively consistent in sociodemographic profile to samples recruited in previous years. The 2023 sample had a median age of 46 years, stable from 2022 (45 years) and predominantly identified as male (66%; 70% in 2022). The majority (85%) reported being unemployed at the time of interview and most (92%) had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview, similar to previous years. Drug of choice remained stable in 2023 compared to 2022, with 50% nominating heroin as their drug of choice (49% in 2022) and 40% nominating methamphetamine (42% in 2022). The drug injected most often in the last month also remained stable, with half (52%) of the Canberra sample nominating heroin as the drug injected most often in the past month

(44% in 2022). In 2023, weekly or more frequent use of heroin and cannabis remained stable relative to 2022, while powder methamphetamine significantly increased from no participants reporting weekly or more use in 2022 to 7% in 2023 ($p=0.014$).

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of any heroin was reported by 81% of the 2023 sample, a significant increase from 66% in 2022 ($p=0.022$), albeit within the range observed in prior years. Frequency of use was reported at a median of 101 days, stable relative to 2022 (90 days). Weekly or more frequent use among those who had recently used heroin also remained stable relative to 2022 (79% versus 80%). The median 'typical' amount of heroin used per day was 0.20 grams. In 2023, there was a significant change in the perceived availability of heroin relative to 2022 ($p=0.039$). Mainly, there was an increase in participants that perceived heroin to be 'very easy' to obtain (67% versus 51%, respectively).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has remained relatively common over time, with 75% of participants reporting recent use in 2023 (81% in 2022). This mostly comprised use of methamphetamine crystal (74%; 81% in 2022). In 2023, significantly more participants reported use of powder and base methamphetamine (10%, respectively), relative to 2022 ($n \leq 5$; $p=0.010$, respectively). Participants reported using any methamphetamine on a median of 49 days in 2023 (among those that reported recent use; 48 days in 2022). The median price for one point (0.10 grams) of crystal methamphetamine was reported at \$50 in both

2022 and 2023. There were no significant changes in the perceived purity or availability of crystal methamphetamine in 2023 relative to 2022.

Cocaine

Historically, recent use of cocaine has typically been reported by one in five or fewer participants in the Canberra sample. In 2023, 12% of the sample reported using cocaine (17% in 2022) on a median of three days in the past six months. Snorting was the most common route of administration, similar to previous years.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

At least three in four participants have reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products each year since monitoring commenced (75% in 2023; 77% in 2022). The median frequency of use was 180 days in both 2022 and 2023. Nearly three fifths (58%) of participants who had recently used non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products reported daily use (54% in 2022). The price for a gram of hydroponic or bush cannabis remained stable at \$20, respectively. The perceived potency of hydroponic cannabis significantly changed in 2023 relative to 2022 ($p=0.033$). Fewer participants perceived the potency to be 'high' (44% versus 65% in 2022) and was the lowest per cent since monitoring commenced. The perceived potency for bush cannabis remained stable, as did the perceived availability for both hydroponic and bush cannabis.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Non-prescribed use of pharmaceutical opioids has declined over the course of monitoring. In 2023, methadone and oxycodone were the most commonly used non-prescribed opioids

in 2023 among the IDRS sample (10%, respectively), followed by fentanyl (7%) and morphine (6%).

Other Drugs

Recent use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) was reported by one in ten participants (12%) in 2023, with most using 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of psychedelic drugs (7%; $n \leq 5$ in 2022). In 2023, recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical drugs (other than opioids) remained stable. In 2023, 11% reported past six month use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD (7% in 2022). Despite recent tobacco use being relatively common since monitoring began, it reached its lowest per cent since monitoring commenced in 2023 (84%; 88% in 2022). In contrast, the highest per cent reported recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes in 2023 (36%; 23% in 2022) with 17% reporting daily use (30% in 2022). Two thirds (64%) of those who had used e-cigarettes reported use as a smoking cessation tool (79% in 2022). Recent use of alcohol was reported by 57% of participants on a median of 24 days, stable relative to 2022 62% on a median of 24 days in 2022).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- In 2023, nearly two thirds (63%) of the sample reported using two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding interview.
- Almost one fifth (17%) of the sample reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year (18% in 2022), most commonly following heroin use (10%).
- In 2023, nearly all participants reported to be aware of naloxone (98%; 92% in 2022) and being aware of take-home naloxone (97%; 78% in 2022; $p < 0.001$), the highest percentages since monitoring commenced.

- In 2023, there was a significant increase in participants having accessed naloxone in their lifetime and also in the past year (82% and 68%, respectively) compared to 2022 (57%; $p<0.001$ and 52%; $p=0.034$, respectively). In addition, 76% of participants had participated in naloxone training programs in their lifetime, also a significant increase relative to 2022 (56%; $p=0.005$).
- Few ($n\leq 5$) participants reported distributive and receptive sharing of a needle or syringe in the past month.
- In 2023, 26% of the sample reported re-using their own needles in the past month, a significant decrease from 41% in 2022 ($p=0.039$), and the lowest per cent since monitoring commenced.
- Three in ten participants (28%) reported any past month injection-related health problems in 2023, stable from 2022 (30%).
- Half (51%) of the sample were currently in any drug treatment (57% in 2022), most commonly methadone (37%; 43% in 2022).
- Seventy-one per cent scored five or above on the opioid Severity of Dependence (SDS) scale (58% in 2022) and 48% scored four or above on the methamphetamine SDS scale (42% in 2022), both indicating possible dependence.
- In 2023, half (51%) of the sample received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test (41% in 2022) and three in ten (31%) received an RNA/ PCR test (27% in 2022) in the year preceding interview.
- There was a significant increase in participants who reported a past six month HIV test in 2023 (42%) relative to 2022 (21%; $p=0.001$).
- Almost two thirds (64%) of the sample reported experiencing a mental health condition in the past six months (68% in 2022), most commonly depression (63%) and anxiety (50%).
- In 2023, one in three (29%) participants obtained a score of 30 or more on the K10 scale, indicating high psychological distress (31% in 2022).
- The majority of participants (90%) had accessed a health service for alcohol and/or drug support in 2023 (90% in 2022).
- Significantly fewer participants reported experiencing stigma in specialist alcohol or drug services in 2023 relative to 2022 (17% versus 33%; $p=0.015$).
- The majority (88%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months (87% in 2022), with 18% of participants reporting a positive test for COVID-19 in the past 12 months.
- The large majority (91%) reported they had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose (85% in 2022).
- Seventy-three per cent of those who had driven recently reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months, stable relative to 2022 (87%).
- In 2023, one quarter (24%) of participants reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drug(s) in Australia in the past year (19% in 2022).
- One in three (29%) participants reported past month criminal activity (39% in 2022), with selling drugs for cash profit (18%) remaining as the most common crime. Property crime significantly decreased from 24% in 2022 to 9% in 2023 ($p=0.012$).
- In 2023, 59% of the sample reported a lifetime prison history (57% in 2022), and 21% reported being arrested in the past 12 months (15% in 2022).
- One in three (31%) participants reported a drug-related encounter in the last 12 months which did not result in charge or arrest (16% in 2022; $p=0.021$).
- Significantly fewer participants reported having been the victim of a crime involving violence in 2023 in the past month relative to 2022 (9% versus 21%; $p=0.045$).