Executive Summary

The IDRS comprises a sentinel sample 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 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 2024. Interviews from 2020 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission; all interviews prior to 2020 were conducted face-to-face. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2024 samples relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Canberra, ACT in 2024 was relatively consistent in sociodemographic profile to samples recruited in previous years. The 2024 sample had a median age of 48 years, stable from 2023 (46 years) and predominantly identified as male (70%; 66% in 2023). The majority (91%) reported being unemployed at the time of interview and most (94%) had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview, similar to previous years. Drug of choice remained stable in 2024 compared to 2023, with 51% nominating heroin as their drug of choice (50% in 2023) and 32% nominating methamphetamine (40% in 2023). The drug injected most often in the last month also remained stable, with half (49%) of the sample nominating heroin as the drug injected most often in the past month (52% in 2023) and half (48%) nominating methamphetamine (46% in 2023). In 2024, weekly or more frequent use of heroin and cannabis remained stable relative to 2023, while weekly or more frequent use of methamphetamine crystal significantly increased (66%; 51% 2023; p=0.049).

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of any heroin was reported by 74% of the 2024 sample, stable relative to 2023 (81%). Participants reported use on a median of 90 days, also stable relative to 2023 (101 days). Weekly or more frequent use among those who had recently used heroin also remained stable in 2024 relative to 2023 (78% versus 79%). The median 'typical' amount of heroin used per day was 0.20 grams. In 2024, the price of heroin, perceived purity and perceived availability remained stable relative to 2023.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has remained relatively common over time. In 2024, 85% of participants reported recent methamphetamine use (75% in 2023) on a median of 60 days (49 days in 2023). This mostly comprised use of methamphetamine crystal (83%; 74% in 2023). Participants reported using any methamphetamine. In 2024, the median price for one point (0.10 grams) of methamphetamine crystal was $50, stable from 2023. The perceived purity and availability of methamphetamine crystal remained stable in 2024 relative to 2023.

Cocaine

Historically, recent use of cocaine has typically been reported by one in five or fewer participants in the sample. In 2024, 18% of the sample reported using cocaine (12% in 2023) on a median of three days in the past six

months. Snorting was the most common route of administration, similar to previous years. The median 'typical' amount of cocaine used per day was 0.30 grams.

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 in most years since monitoring commenced (74% in 2024; 75% in 2023). The median frequency of use was 180 days in both 2023 and 2024. Fifty-six per cent of participants who had recently used non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products reported daily use (58% in 2023). In 2024, there was a significant decrease of those reported using bush cannabis relative to 2023 (48% versus 70%; p=0.013). The perceived potency of hydroponic cannabis significantly changed in 2024 relative to 2023 (p=0.003), with more participants perceiving potency to be 'high' in 2024. 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 2024, there was a significant decrease in recent use of any methadone relative to 2023 (28% versus 48%; p=0.007). Approximately one in ten participants reported recent use of non-prescribed morphine (8%) and oxycodone (9%), stable from 2023. Another 14% reported recent use of non-prescribed fentanyl, the highest percentage since monitoring began although stable from 2023.

Other Drugs

Recent use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) was reported by 14% of participants in 2024, with most using 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of opioids (9%), a significant increase relative to 2023 (n≤5; p=0.032). In 2024, recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical drugs (other than opioids) remained stable. In 2024, 14% reported past six month use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD (11% in 2023). Despite recent tobacco use being relatively common since monitoring began, it reached its lowest per cent since monitoring commenced in 2024 (75%; 84% in 2023). Recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes remained stable in 2024 (28%; 36% in 2023). Recent use of alcohol also remained stable, with 54% of participants reporting recent on a median of 30 days (57% on a median of 24 days in 2023).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

Polysubstance use and bingeing

In 2024, 70% of the sample reported using two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding interview.

Three fifths (60%) of the sample had binged on one or more drugs for 48 hours or more in the six months preceding interview (53% in 2023).

Overdose, naloxone and drug checking

In 2024, nearly one third (30%) of the sample reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year (17% in 2023), most commonly following heroin use (16%). One in ten participants (11%) reported overdosing on a stimulant drug in the past year, a significant increase relative to 2023 (n≤5; p=0.029)

Awareness of naloxone remained high and stable in 2024 (96%; 98% in 2023), as did awareness of take-home naloxone (92%; 97% in 2023). In 2024, two fifths (44%) of the sample reported past year participation in naloxone training programs (52% in 2023), and two-

thirds (63%) reported obtaining naloxone in the past year (68% in 2023).

Twenty-nine per cent reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year (24% in 2023).

Injecting behaviours and equipment access

Few participants reported distributive and receptive sharing of a needle or syringe in the past month (n≤5, respectively, in 2024 and 2023). There was, however, a significant increase in those reporting re-use of their own needles in the past month (44%; 26% in 2023; p=0.013).

In 2024, nearly one third (31%) reported any injection-related problems in the past month (28% in 2023), mostly commonly nerve damage and any infection/abscess (14%, respectively).

Dependence, drug treatment and HCV

In 2024, 40% of male participants obtained an AUDIT-C score of ≥4, and 37% of female participants obtained a score of ≥3, indicative of hazardous alcohol use.

Nearly three fifths (57%) of participants who reported recent opioid use scored five or above on the Severity of Dependence Scale (SDS), and 62% of participants reporting recent methamphetamine use scored four or above, indicating possible dependence on these substances.

Forty-five per cent of the sample were currently in any drug treatment (51% in 2023), most commonly methadone (23%).

In 2024, half (53%) of the sample reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test (51% in 2023) and three in ten participants (29%) reported receiving an RNA/ PCR test (31% in 2023) in the year preceding interview. Seven per cent reported having a current HCV infection (n≤5 in 2023).

Sexual activity, mental health and health service access

One third (33%) of the sample reported engaging in sexual activity in the past four weeks (26% in 2023) and nearly one third (30%) reported recently having a sexual health check-up (27% in 2023).

Nearly three fifths (58%) of the sample reported experiencing a mental health condition in the past six months (64% in 2023), most commonly depression (67%) and anxiety (43%).

In 2024, one in three participants (32%) obtained a score of 30 or more on the K10 scale, indicating very high psychological distress (29% in 2023).

The majority of participants (94%) had accessed a health service for alcohol and/or drug support in 2024 (90% in 2023).

Driving, contact with police and modes of purchasing drugs

Sixty-seven 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 2023 (73%).

Nearly half (48%) of participants reported past month criminal activity (29% in 2023; p=0.007). Approximately one-quarter (23%, respectively), reported past year arrest or a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest (21% and 35% in 2023; respectively).

In 2024, the most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview was face-to-face (94%, 86% in 2024).