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 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 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 Melbourne, Victoria (VIC) in 2024 (N=150) was mostly consistent with samples in previous years. Seventy-two per cent of participants were male (74% in 2023), but median age increased significantly to 48 years (45 years in 2023; $p=0.032$). Ninety-four per cent of the sample were unemployed at the time of interview, and most (95%) had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. The reported median weekly income increased significantly from $407 (IQR=346-500) in 2023, to $450 (IQR=369-550) in 2024 ($p=0.016$). Current accommodation status remained stable between 2023 and 2024 ($p=0.189$), with most participants reporting residing at a private house/flat (63%) or at no fixed address (25%). Participants typically nominated heroin as their drug of choice in 2024 (64%; 57% in 2023), followed by methamphetamine (23%; 30% in 2023). Heroin was also the drug injected most often in the past month (67%; 60% in 2023), followed by methamphetamine (31%; 39% in 2023). Weekly or more frequent use of non-prescribed cannabis significantly decreased in 2024 (53%), relative to 2023 (67%; $p=0.015$).

Heroin

Eighty-three per cent of the Melbourne sample reported recent use in 2024, stable relative to 87% in 2023 ($p=0.424$). Frequency of use increased from a median of 72 days in 2023 to a median of 150 days in 2024 ($p=0.003$). Forty-four per cent reported daily use in 2024, a significant increase from 30% in 2023 ($p=0.031$). The reported median typical amount used per day decreased significantly from 0.2 grams in 2023, to 0.1 grams in 2024 ($p=0.042$). The reported frequency of injection increased significantly in 2024 to a median of 150 days (72 days in 2023). Perceived purity and availability remained stable between 2023 and 2024, with 46% perceiving purity to be 'medium' (29% in 2023) and 98% perceiving that heroin was 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain (96% in 2023).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years. In 2024, 70% of the Melbourne sample reported recent use of any form of methamphetamine (77% in 2023). Three fifths (60%) reported weekly or more frequent use of any methamphetamine, stable relative to 2023 (61%). Few participants (n≤5) reported recent use of methamphetamine powder in 2024, a significant decrease from 2023 (7%; $p=0.02$). Crystal methamphetamine remained the most common form

reportedly used (70%; 77% in 2023). Injection remained the most commonly reported route of administration for crystal methamphetamine (90%; 95% in 2023), followed by smoking (48%; 50% in 2023). The median typical amount of methamphetamine crystal used per day changed significantly between 2024 and 2023 (0.1 grams; IQR=0-0.2; 0.1 grams; IQR=0.1=0.3 in 2023). The reported median maximum amount of methamphetamine crystal used per day decreased significantly, from 0.3 grams (IQR=0.1-0.6) in 2023 to 0.2 grams (IQR=0-0.5) in 2024. Findings about price, perceived purity, and availability reported in 2024 were all similar to those from 2023.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine remained stable at 14% (17% in 2023). Frequency of use remained low and stable at a median of two days (2 days in 2023), however, the frequency of injection increased significantly to a median of four days (n≤5 in 2023; p=0.025)

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

Recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products in 2024 remained stable at 69% (79% in 2023). Forty-nine per cent of participants who reported recent use reported daily use, similar to 2023 (53%). Reported use of hydroponic cannabis decreased significantly (75%; 88% in 2023; p=0.036), while there was a significant increase in bush cannabis use (50%; 30% in 2023; p=0.006). Reports of price, purity, and availability of non-prescribed cannabis in 2024 were comparable to 2023.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

In 2024, recent non-prescribed use of methadone (5%), buprenorphine tablets (n≤5), buprenorphine-naloxone (5%), morphine (n≤5), oxycodone (5%), and codeine (0%) remained low and stable relative to 2023. However, recent non-prescribed use of fentanyl decreased significantly in 2024 (n≤5; 5% in 2023; p=0.036). No participants reported any recent use of codeine in 2024, a significant decrease from 2023 (n≤5; p=0.03), Few participants (n≤5) reported any recent use of tramadol, and none reported prescribed recent use of tramadol, significant decreases from 2023 (6% and 5%; p=0.019 and p=0.015, respectively)

Other Drugs

Four per cent of participants reported recent use of new psychoactive substances in 2024 (5% in 2023), with all participants reporting them to be 'new drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis' (5% in 2023). Recent non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 27% of participants in 2024, a significant decrease from 39% in 2023 (p=0.027). Few participants (n≤5) reported recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants or antipsychotics, and none reported recent use of gabapentin. Sixteen per cent of participant reported recent use of non-prescribed Pregabalin in 2024, stable from 23% in 2023. Reported recent use of alcohol declined significantly in 2024 (52%; 65% in 2023; p=0.030), while reported use of tobacco (89%; 93% in 2023) remained stable. For the first time, participants were asked about their recent use of illicit smoked or non-smoked tobacco products, with 80% of participants reporting recent use. Reported recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes declined significantly, from 43% in 2023 to 29% in 2024 (p=0.017).

Fourteen per cent of participants reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD in 2024, stable from 20% in 2023. Recent use of Unisom was reported by 12% of participants in 2024 (13% in 2023).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

Polysubstance use and bingeing

In 2024, 61% of the sample reported using two or more drugs on the day preceding interview (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes). Reported binge drug use in the 6-months preceding interviewing remained stable in 2024 at 48% (58% in 2023).

Injecting behaviours and equipment access

The median number of needles/syringes given out to others decreased significantly from a median of 10 (IQR=0-30) in 2023, to 5 (IQR=0-20) in 2024. In 2024, fewer participants reported obtaining needles or syringes from a partner or friend (5%; 17% in 2023; p=0.003), or a dealer (n≤5; 5% in 2023; p=0.067). There was a significant decrease in the number of participants reporting use of spoons/mixing containers (83%; 91% in 2023; p=0.045) and water (76%; 96% in 2023; p<0.001) in 2024.

In 2024, 4% reported receptive sharing and 7% reported distributive sharing of a needle or syringe in the past month (n≤5 and 4% in 2023, respectively). Two fifths (38%) of the sample reported that they had re-used their own needles in the past month (34% in 2023). Participants reporting injecting a partner/friend after injecting themselves decreased significantly from 43% in 2023, to 28% in 2024 (p=0.013).

Twenty per cent reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month (17% in 2023), most commonly any nerve damage (8%).

Overdose, alcohol use, naloxone and drug checking

Twenty-two per cent reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, stable from 23% in 2023. Non-fatal overdose of any opioid was reported by 19% of participants (17% in 2023), with heroin being the most common opioid reported (19%; 15% in 2023). Few (n≤5) participants reported a stimulant overdose.

In 2024, almost all (94%) of the Melbourne sample reported awareness of naloxone, stable from 97% in 2023. Eighty-eight per cent of the sample reported awareness of naloxone take-home programs (90% in 2023), with 66% having been trained in naloxone administration in their lifetime (68% in 2023). Seventy-three per cent of the Melbourne sample reported having ever accessed naloxone, stable from 71% in 2023.

Seven per cent of participants (n≤5) reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year (11% in 2023).

Dependence, treatment and hepatitis C

Sixty-nine per cent scored five or above on the opioid Severity of Dependence Scale (SDS) and 31% scored four or above on the methamphetamine SDS, both indicating possible dependence in relation to opioid and methamphetamine use. Seven per cent of participants score a zero on the opioid SDS, a significant decrease from 16% in 2023 (p=0.037).

Over half (53%) of participants reported receiving any drug treatment in 2024, stable relative to 2023 (53%). Six per cent of the Melbourne sample reported being unable to access treatment in 2024, a significant decrease from 14% in 2023 (p=0.036).

The mean AUDIT-C score decreased significantly from 4.3 in 2023, to 3.3 in 2024 (p=0.001), as did the per cent of participants scoring four or above on the AUDIT-C (35%; 51% in 2023; p=0.021).

Seven tenths (69%) of the sample reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test (64% in 2023) and 69% reported receiving an RNA test (64% in 2023) in the past year. Ten per cent reported having a current HCV infection.

Sexual activity, mental health and health service access

Self-reported mental health problems remained stable in 2024 (56%; 55% in 2023), with depression being the most commonly reported problem (65%), followed by anxiety (57%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (30%).

The K10 score remained stable between 2023 and 2024 (p=0.550), with 23% of participants scoring 'high' psychological distress and 39%scoring 'very high' (28% and 31% in 2023, respectively).

Over four fifths (85%) of participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview (89% in 2023). Seventy-five per cent of participants reported using an NSP for 'any reason', a significant decrease from 85% in 2023 (p=0.047).

Driving, contact with policy and modes of purchasing drugs

Of those who had driven recently (n=39), few participants (n≤5) reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol, and 80% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, both stable relative to 2023 (n≤5 and 63%, respectively).

Forty-four per cent of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2024 (47% in 2023), with 22% having been arrested in the past year (26% in 2023), and 66% reporting a lifetime prison history (74% in 2023).

One fifth (22%) of participants reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest, stable relative to 2023 (28%). There was a significant decrease in participants reporting being stopped and questioned by police (45%; 76% in 2023; p=0.012).

In 2024, face-to-face contact was the most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview (83%). In 2024, 40% of participants reported purchasing illicit drugs via text message, a significant increase from 23% in 2023 (p=0.002).