

Executive Summary

The EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants, recruited via social media and word-of-mouth across each capital city of Australia. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2023 from April-July. Interviews from 2020 onwards were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone and videoconference, 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 2020-2023 samples relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

In 2023, the national EDRS sample ($n=708$) differed in some ways to the sample in 2022. Whilst median age (25 years) and gender identity (58% male) remained stable, a significant change was observed in sexual identity ($p=0.032$), with more participants identifying as homosexual in 2023 (8%; 5% in 2022). Employment status also significantly changed ($p=0.007$), with an increase in participants reporting full-time work (38%; 32% in 2022), as did current median weekly income (\$808; \$700 in 2022; $p=0.014$). Three fifths of the sample held tertiary qualifications (62%).

Drug of choice significantly changed ($p=0.032$), with fewer participants nominating cannabis and alcohol as their drugs of choice in 2023. The drugs used most often in the month preceding interview also significantly changed ($p=0.001$), with an increase in participants reporting ecstasy as the drug used most often in 2023 (8% to 16%). Weekly or more frequent use of cannabis significantly decreased from 51% in 2022 to 43% in 2023 ($p=0.008$).

Ecstasy

Recent use of any ecstasy significantly increased in 2023 (95%; 88% in 2022; $p<0.001$), although frequency of use remained stable at a median of 7 days in the past six months. Capsules remained the most commonly used form of ecstasy, although significant increases were observed in the recent use of ecstasy pills (43%; 37% in 2022; $p=0.030$) and ecstasy crystal (50%; 43% in 2022; $p=0.028$). The median price for one capsule significantly increased, from \$25 in 2022 to \$30 in 2023 ($p<0.001$). Significant changes were observed in the perceived purity and availability of ecstasy pills, capsules and crystal. Specifically, more participants nominated purity as 'high' and availability as 'easy' or 'very easy' in 2023, with estimates similar to those observed previously in 2020 and earlier.

Methamphetamine

Recent methamphetamine use among this sample has been declining over time, though remained stable in 2023 (30%), relative to 2022 (31%; $p=0.562$). Crystal remained the most commonly used form of methamphetamine, with a significant decrease observed in those reporting recent use of powder (11%; 16% in 2022; $p=0.010$).

The price (\$50 per point) and perceived purity of powder methamphetamine remained stable in 2023, however, a significant change was observed in the perceived availability ($p=0.012$), with more participants reporting that it was 'very easy' to obtain in 2023 (45%; 21% in 2022).

Whilst the perceived availability of crystal methamphetamine remained stable, a significant change was observed in the perceived purity ($p=0.004$), with more participants reporting 'medium' purity in 2023 (32%; 17% in 2022), and a significant decrease was observed in the median price for one gram

(\$300; \$475 in 2022; $p=0.002$) and one point of crystal (\$50; \$70 in 2022; $p<0.001$), respectively.

Non-Prescribed Pharmaceutical Stimulants

The per cent of participants reporting any recent non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulant (e.g., dexamphetamine, methylphenidate, modafinil) use steadily increased between 2007 (17%) and 2022 (52%), before declining in 2023 (47%; $p=0.045$). The perceived availability of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants significantly changed in 2023, relative to 2022 ($p=0.008$), with an increase in participants reporting it to be 'very easy' (52%; 37% in 2022) to obtain.

Cocaine

Whilst past six month use remained stable in 2023 (81%) relative to 2022 (79%; $p=0.457$), this represented the highest percentage of recent use observed since the commencement of monitoring. The vast majority of participants who had recently consumed cocaine reported using powder cocaine (94%). Perceived purity significantly changed between 2022 and 2023 ($p=0.008$), with more participants reporting cocaine to be of 'low' purity (36%; 30% in 2022), although availability remained stable.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

Approximately four in five participants have reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis each year since monitoring began. There was, however, a significant decline in 2023 (74%) relative to 2022 (79%; $p=0.046$), with decreases observed in the recent use of both hydroponic and outdoor grown 'bush' cannabis. Frequency of use also declined, from a median of 48 days in 2022 to 30 days in 2023 ($p=0.037$). The perceived purity and perceived availability of hydroponic cannabis remained mostly stable in 2023, though there were

significant changes in the perceived availability ($p=0.001$) of 'bush' cannabis. Specifically, in 2023, more participants perceived non-prescribed bush cannabis as being 'very easy' to obtain (70%; 53% in 2022).

Non-Prescribed Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of non-prescribed ketamine (49%), LSD (41%) and DMT (13%) remained stable in 2023, as did frequency of use for all three substances (i.e., less than monthly). The median price for an LSD tab remained stable at \$25, while the median price for a gram of ketamine significantly increased from \$200 in 2022 to \$250 in 2023 ($p=0.031$). Perceived purity remained stable for both ketamine and LSD in 2023, though there was a significant change in the perceived availability for both ketamine ($p=0.002$), and LSD ($p<0.001$), with more participants reporting ketamine to be 'very easy' to obtain in 2023 relative to 2022 (27% versus 14%), and more participants reporting LSD to be 'difficult' to obtain in 2023, compared to 2022 (34% versus 22%).

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Any NPS use, including (11%) and excluding (9%) plant-based NPS, remained stable in 2023, relative to 2022. Phenethylamines remained the most commonly used NPS class in 2023 (6%); this mostly comprised use of any 2C substance (5%).

Other Drugs

Recent use of any non-prescribed benzodiazepines significantly decreased, from 36% in 2022 to 29% in 2023 ($p=0.010$). Recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4 BD significantly increased (12%; 6% in 2022; $p<0.001$). Whilst recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes remained stable in 2023 (68%), frequency of use significantly increased, from a median of 72 days in 2022 to 120 days in 2023 ($p<0.001$). On the other hand, recent use of tobacco decreased, from 72% in

2022 to 64% in 2023 ($p<0.001$), as did median frequency of use (50 days; 90 days in 2022; $p=0.022$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, 83% of participants reported concurrent use of two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes).
- Almost two fifths (38%) of participants reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year, a significant increase from 32% in 2022 ($p=0.028$).
- Almost three quarters (72%) of participants obtained an AUDIT score of eight or more, indicative of hazardous alcohol use.
- Reported past year non-fatal stimulant overdose remained stable in 2023 (15%), as did past year non-fatal depressant overdose (mostly comprising alcohol) (22%).
- In 2023, almost three fifths (57%) of the sample reported that they had ever heard of naloxone, a significant increase from 46% in 2022 ($p<0.001$).
- Reported past month injecting drug use remained low (2%), as did current drug treatment engagement (6%).
- In 2023, 14% of those who reported recent ecstasy use obtained an SDS score of ≥ 3 , while 40% of participants reporting recent methamphetamine use obtained a score of ≥ 4 , indicating possible dependence on these substances.
- Almost four fifths (79%) of the sample reported engaging in sexual activity in the past four weeks, of which 26% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they did not know the HIV status of their partner.
- Almost three fifths (58%) of the sample self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the preceding six months. Eighteen per cent reported a score of 30 or more on the K10, indicating very high psychological distress.
- One quarter (26%) of participants reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview.
- One quarter (25%) of the sample reported experiencing stigma because of their illicit drug use in any health/non-health care setting in the six months preceding interview.
- In 2023, 46% of the sample reported a positive COVID-19 test in the 12 months preceding interview. The majority (93%) had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose.
- Among recent drivers, one third (33%) reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol (27% in 2022; $p=0.047$), and 44% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug (51% in 2022; $p=0.036$) in the past six months.
- Any crime in the past month was reported by 35% of the sample, with drug dealing the main form of criminal activity in 2023 (24%). Seven per cent of participants reported past year arrest, while 16% reported a drug-related encounter with police which did not result in charge or arrest (e.g., stopped and searched/questioned).
- In 2023, the most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview was face-to-face (72%). Most participants continued to report obtaining illicit drugs from a friend/relative/partner/colleague (79%), with significantly fewer participants reporting obtaining illicit drugs from an unknown dealer/vendor in 2023 (30%; 37% in 2022; $p=0.004$).