

Executive Summary

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and via word-of-mouth in Canberra, ACT. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2021 from April-July. Interviews were delivered face-to-face (n=51) as well as via telephone (n=49), due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed throughout the data collection period. This methodological change, which also impacted interview modality in 2020, should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The ACT EDRS sample (N=100) recruited from Canberra, ACT, were predominantly a young, educated group, with more participants identifying as male (64%) than female (34%), consistent with the sample profile in 2020 and since monitoring commenced. There was a significant change in age in 2021 compared to 2020 ($p=0.001$) with the 2021 sample being older (median 23 years; 21 years in 2020). Cocaine and cannabis were the most common drugs of choice (23%, respectively), with the per cent of participants nominating cocaine as their drug of choice the highest since monitoring began. Similarly, in 2021, cannabis was reported as the substance most often used in the preceding month (36%), followed by cocaine (19%, the highest per cent since monitoring began).

COVID-19

In 2021, 56% of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, with no participants having been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the 12 months prior to interview. Two-thirds (68%) reported that they were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and one-tenth (13%) reported that they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, at the time of interview.

Ecstasy

The ecstasy market has diversified over the past few years. Recent (i.e., past six month) use of ecstasy pills has been declining since 2013, with 36% of the sample reporting use in 2021, the lowest percent since monitoring began and a significant decrease from 2020 (55%; $p=0.009$). The crystal form of ecstasy also decreased significantly from 71% in 2020 to 36% in 2021 ($p<0.001$), the lowest observed per cent since monitoring began in 2003. Despite capsules remaining the most commonly used form of ecstasy, recent use significantly decreased from a record high of 91% in 2020 to 76% in 2021 ($p=0.007$). Frequency of use of any form of ecstasy significantly declined from a median of 15 days in 2020 to six days in 2021 ($p<0.001$). This was mainly driven by a decrease in the frequency of use of the capsule form (5 days in 2021; 10 days in 2020; $p<0.001$). The median price of a pill and a capsule remained stable between 2020 and 2021, at \$25 and \$20 respectively, whereas the price of a gram of crystal increased to \$200 in 2021 from \$150 in 2020 ($p=0.047$). There was a significant change in the perceived purity of pills ($p=0.024$) and crystal ($p=0.025$), with fewer participants perceiving these forms to be of 'high' purity in 2021 compared to 2020 (23% versus 52%, and 34% versus 63%, respectively). In addition, there was a significant change in the perceived availability of pills ($p=0.015$) and capsules ($p=0.001$), with an increase in the proportion of participants perceiving these forms to be 'difficult' to obtain in 2021 compared to 2020 (21% versus 16%, and 29% versus 22%, respectively).

Methamphetamine

Use of methamphetamine had been declining amongst the ACT sample since the commencement of monitoring, with the lowest per cent (15%) reporting any recent use in 2020. However, recent use of 'any' methamphetamine increased in 2021 (29%), returning to similar levels of use observed in 2015-2019. This was largely driven by an increase in recent use of crystal methamphetamine (21%; $n\leq 5$ in 2020;

$p=0.001$). Frequency of 'any' methamphetamine use remained stable at a median of six days in the past six months.

Cocaine

The per cent reporting any recent use of cocaine has been increasing since 2017, and in 2021 the highest per cent reported recent use since monitoring began (91%; 89% in 2020; $p=0.832$). Recent use remained infrequent (5 median days), however, with 9% of participants who had recently used cocaine reporting weekly or more frequent use. The median price for a gram of cocaine has been \$300 since 2006 onwards.

Cannabis

At least three in four participants have reported any recent use of cannabis each year since monitoring began (86% in 2021). Over one-quarter (26%) of those who had recent used cannabis reported daily use, stable relative to 2020 (22%) and consistent with previous years. The median price for an ounce of bush cannabis decreased from \$275 in 2020 to \$220 in 2021 ($p=0.012$).

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine, LSD and DMT has fluctuated over the period of monitoring. In 2021, just over half (51%) of participants reported any recent ketamine use, the highest per cent since monitoring began, but stable from 2020 (47%). Recent use of LSD also remained stable in 2021 (45%; 41% in 2020). In 2021, nearly one-fifth (18%) of participants reported recent use of DMT, a significant increase from 2020 (7%; $p=0.030$). Frequency of use remained low for all three substances.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Eighteen per cent of the sample reported recent use of at least one form of NPS (including plant-based NPS). Any 2C-variant has consistently been the most commonly used NPS, ranging from 25% reporting recent use in 2012 and 2013 to 7% in 2021.

Other Drugs

Reported recent non-prescribed use of benzodiazepines significantly decreased from

38% in 2020 to 23% in 2021 ($p=0.031$). In contrast, there were significant increases in recent use of hallucinogenic mushrooms (47%; 29% in 2020; $p=0.013$), GHB/GBL/1,4-BD (17%; $n \leq 5$ in 2020; $p=0.005$) and e-cigarettes (67%; 51% in 2020; $p=0.036$). Frequency of e-cigarette use also increased, from a median of 9 days in 2020 to 30 days in 2021 ($p=0.002$). Recent alcohol and tobacco use were common in the sample (95% and 72%, respectively).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, 72% of participants in 2021 reported concurrent use of two or more drugs. Three-quarters (74%) obtained a score of eight or more on the AUDIT scale, indicative of hazardous alcohol use, a significant decrease from 2020 (91%; $p=0.003$). Fifteen per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose and one-fifth (21%) reported a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol) in the 12 months prior to interview, stable relative to 2020. The majority of the sample (84%) reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past four weeks, of which 27% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they did not know the HIV status of their partner. Mental health problems in the preceding six months were self-reported by 56% of the sample. One-quarter (27%) of the sample reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol, and 43% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, most commonly cannabis. Past month drug-dealing (22%) and property crime (18%) remained the two main forms of criminal activity in 2021, with 'any' past-month crime increasing from 24% in 2020 to 40% in 2021 ($p=0.020$). The most popular means of participants arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview was in person (63%), followed by social networking applications (56%). There was a significant decrease in participant reports of obtaining drugs via a collection point in 2021 relative to 2020 (9% versus 26% in 2020; $p=0.004$).