Executive Summary

The Canberra, 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 2022 from April-July. Interviews in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce the 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 2020-2022 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The EDRS sample (N=100) recruited from Canberra, ACT, were predominantly a young (although older than seen in previous years), educated group, with slightly more participants identifying as male (53%) than female (42%). This is largely consistent with the sample profile in 2021, and in previous years, although median age has been increasing over time. Cannabis and ecstasy were the most common drugs of choice (21% and 20%, respectively). There was a significant change in the drug most often used in the past month between 2021 and 2022 (p=0.039). Specifically, there was an increase in participants reporting alcohol (25% versus 15% in 2021) as the drug used most often in the past month and fewer reporting ecstasy (n≤5 versus 13% in 2021).

Ecstasy

The ecstasy market has diversified over the past few years. Recent (i.e., past six month) use of ecstasy pills have declined since 2013, with 28% of the sample reporting use in 2022, the lowest per cent throughout monitoring. Despite capsules remaining the most commonly used form of ecstasy, recent use significantly decreased from 76% in 2021 to 52% in 2022 (p<0.001). Indeed, recent use of 'any' ecstasy declined significantly in 2022 (87% versus 98% in 2021; p=0.005) to the lowest per cent observed. However, frequency of use of any form of ecstasy remained stable in 2022 relative to 2021 (i.e., equivalent to monthly use), although lower compared to previous years. There was a significant change in the perceived availability of crystal (p=0.001) and capsules (p<0.001), with an increase in the per cent perceiving these forms to be 'difficult' to obtain in 2022 compared to 2021 (42% versus 29%, and 52% versus 24%, respectively). Although not significant, the highest per cent reported pills and powder to be 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to obtain.

Methamphetamine

Use of methamphetamine had been declining, with the lowest per cent (15%) reporting any recent use in 2020. However, recent use increased in 2022 (39%), returning to similar levels of use observed in 2014-2019. This was largely driven by an increase in recent crystal methamphetamine use (31%). Frequency of crystal methamphetamine use was reported at a median of 24 days (i.e., equivalent to weekly use), the highest median days recorded since monitoring began. There was a significant change in the perceived availability of powder and crystal methamphetamine (p=0.030 and p=0.038, respectively). More participants perceived both forms to be 'easy' and 'very easy' to obtain in 2022 relative to 2021.

Cocaine

In 2021, the highest per cent reported recent use over the course of monitoring (91%). In 2022, use declined, with three-quarters (76%; p=0.007) reporting recent use, similar to levels observed in 2018-2019. Recent use remained infrequent (6 median days), however, 17% of participants who had recently used cocaine reported weekly or more frequent use. The median price for a gram of cocaine has been $300 since 2006. The perceived purity and perceived availability of cocaine remained stable between 2021 and 2022.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

At least three in four participants have reported any recent use of non-prescribed

cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products each year (81% in 2022; noting some changes in question wording). The median price for an ounce of bush cannabis increased from $220 in 2021 to $250 in 2022 ($p$=0.027). The perceived purity and availability of non-prescribed cannabis remained stable between 2021 and 2022.

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine, LSD and DMT has fluctuated over the period of monitoring. In 2022, two-fifths (39%) of participants reported any recent ketamine use, stable from 2021 (51%). Recent use of LSD also remained stable in 2022 (31%; 45% in 2021), although there was a significant decrease in frequency of use, from three median days in 2021 to two median days in 2022 (p=0.023). There was a significant change in the perceived availability of LSD in 2022 relative to 2021 (p=0.004). More participants perceived LSD to be 'very difficult' to obtain compared to 2021 (22% versus n≤5 in 2021). In 2022, one in ten (9%) participants reported recent use of DMT, stable from 18% in 2021.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Nine per cent reported recent use of at least one form of NPS (including plant-based NPS) stable relative to 18% in 2021. Few participants (n≤5) reported any individual NPS use.

Other Drugs

Half (50%) of the sample reported recent non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulant use, the highest per cent observed, although stable from 41% in 2021. There was a significant decrease in GHB/GBL/1,4-BD use from 17% in 2021 to 6% in 2022 (p=0.027). In 2022, the lowest per cent reported recent use of alcohol (86%) and tobacco (68%). Although recent non-prescribed e-cigarette use remained stable between 2021 and 2022 (67% and 57%, respectively), frequency of use increased from a median of 30 days in 2021 to 120 median days in 2022 (p=0.001). Recent use of nitrous oxide also remained stable between 2021 and 2022, however, an increase in frequency of use was observed from 4 days in 2021 to 11 days in 2022 (p=0.013).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

On the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use, 79% of participants in 2022 reported concurrent use of two or more drugs. Twenty-nine per cent reported that they had tested the contents of their illicit drugs in the 12 months preceding interview. There was a significant decrease in the mean AUDIT score in 2022 relative to 2021 (11.6 versus 13.1 in 2021; p<0.001). Eleven per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose and one-fifth (17%) a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol) in the 12 months prior to interview, stable relative to 2021 (15% and 21%, respectively). Nine per cent of participants reported that they were currently in drug treatment. Seventy per cent reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past four weeks, of which 28% 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 67%, most commonly anxiety and depression. Among recent drivers, 21% reported recently driving while over the (perceived) legal limit of alcohol, whereas 58% reported recently driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drugs. Past month drug-dealing (20%) and property crime (13%) remained the two main forms of past month criminal activity in 2022. The most popular means of participants arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview was in person (68%) and via social networking applications (68%). Significantly more participants obtained their drugs face-to-face in 2022 than 2021 (97% versus 86% in 2021; p=0.009). In 2022, 95% of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, with 57% of participants having been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 12 months. Two-thirds (68%) reported that they were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and most (91%) had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.