

Impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions on people who inject drugs in the Australian Capital Territory: Findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System 2020

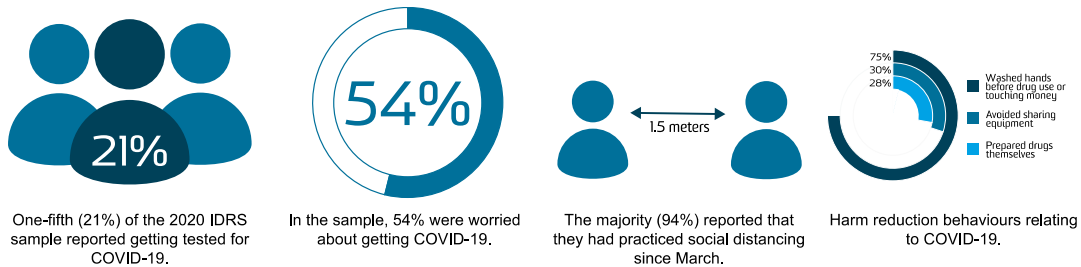
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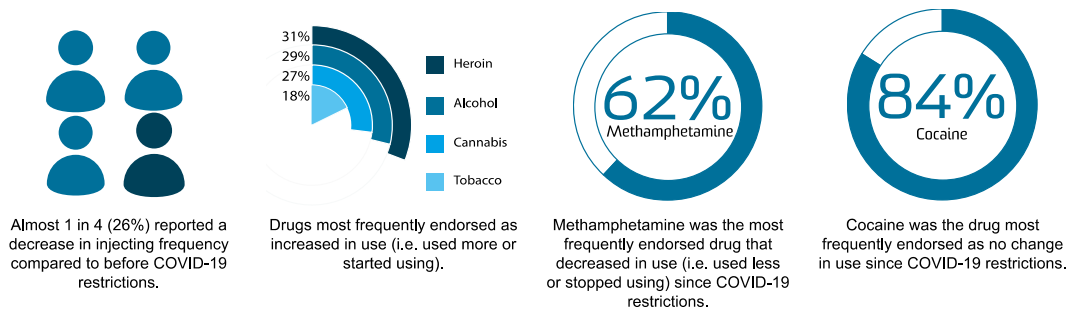
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Key findings from the ACT sample:

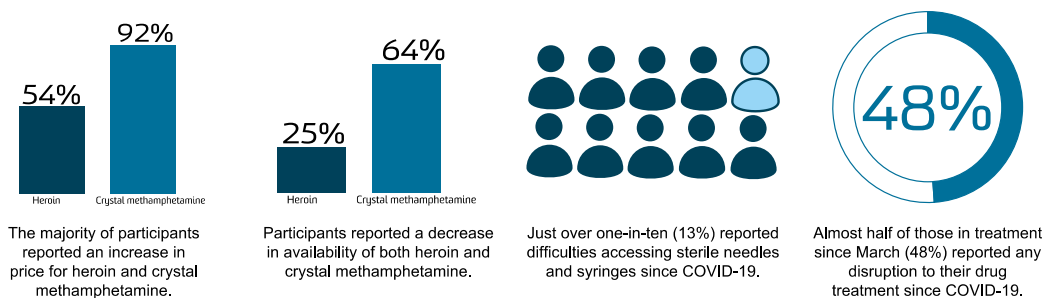
COVID-19 BEHAVIOURS



CHANGES IN DRUG USE DURING COVID-19



CHANGES IN DRUG MARKETS AND TREATMENT



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Background

- The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on travel and gathering have likely had major impacts on drug supply, use and harms [1], and there have been significant challenges with delivery of drug treatment and harm reduction services [2].
- It is anticipated that impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and gatherings will be particularly felt by those reporting more problematic patterns of use, including those people who inject drugs (PWID).
- The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is an illicit drug monitoring system which has operated in Australia since 2000, and includes annual interviews with PWID recruited from capital cities [3].
- Recognising the critical need for information, the IDRS project has been adapted to collect important data on people's experiences during COVID-19.
- This output presents findings from 100 participants recruited in Canberra, ACT from 24 June to 25 August 2020 (22 participants in June, 70 in July, 8 in August).

Method

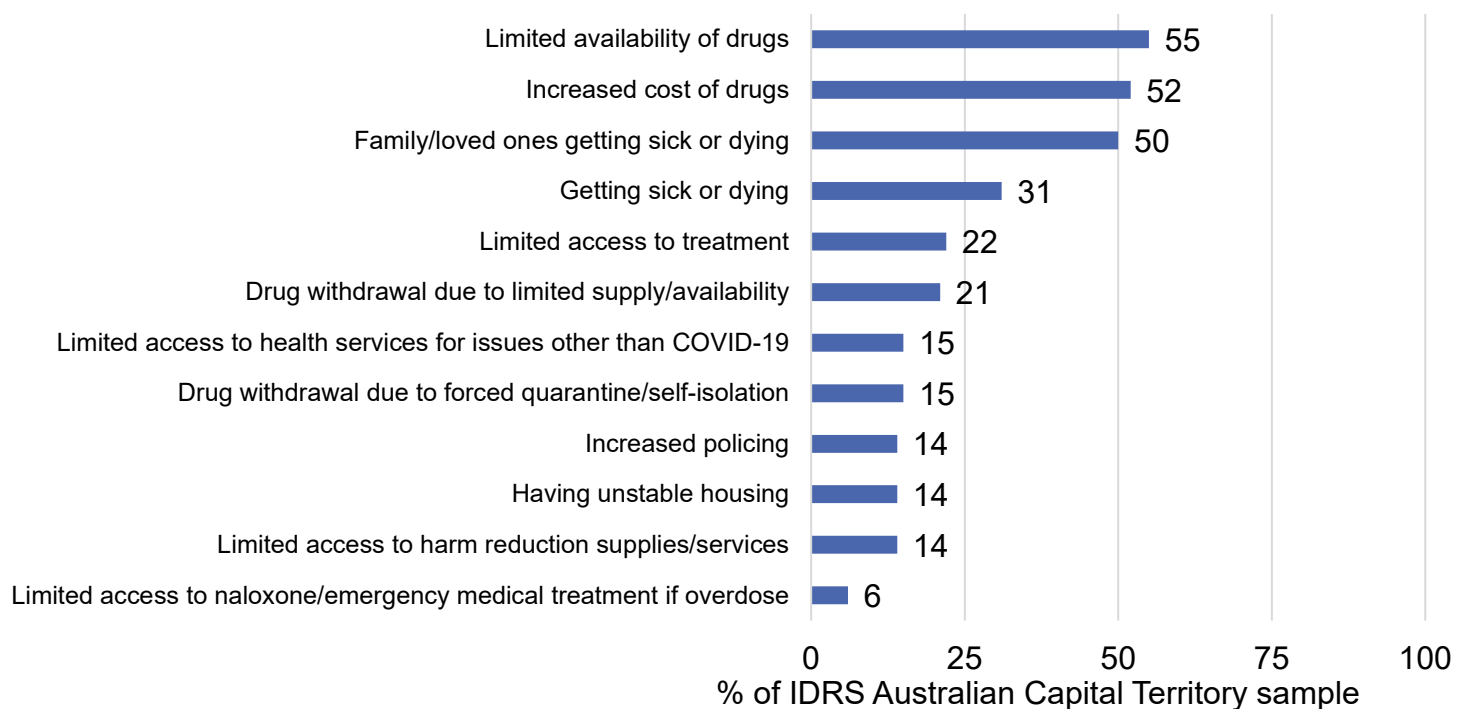
- IDRS interviews are conducted with a sentinel sample of people aged 18 or older who have injected drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Canberra, ACT for the last 12 months.
- Participants are recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm reduction services and via peer referral.
- In previous years, participants completed a one-hour face-to-face interview, and were reimbursed \$40 for time and expenses.
- In 2020, interviews were completed via phone (instead of face-to-face) and participants were reimbursed electronically to manage risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- The interview length was reduced and the content adapted to include COVID-19 specific items, anchored to implementation of restrictions in Australia at the beginning of March 2020.
- The age eligibility criterion was increased from 17 to 18 in 2020.
- The study protocol remained otherwise unchanged. Findings are suppressed where ≤ 5 participants report an outcome to protect confidentiality.
- The ACT IDRS sample were demographically similar to those recruited in 2019 and in earlier years, with 55% reporting being male and a median age of 44 years (IQR 39 - 50). However, there were significantly fewer males in the 2020 sample compared to the 2019 sample (74%).

Findings

Experience of COVID-19 testing, diagnosis and restrictions

- 21% said they had been tested for COVID-19. None had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- 54% said they were currently worried about getting COVID-19.
- At the time of the interview, 94% reported they had been social distancing, 84% reported home isolation, and none reported quarantine since March 2020.
- Participants reported a number of concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely around family or friends getting sick or dying (50% of the sample) or they themselves becoming unwell (31%; **Figure 1**).
- Issues related to drug markets (e.g., increased cost, limited availability of illicit drugs) were of primary concern.

Figure 1. The percentage of the IDRS ACT sample endorsing potential concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic.



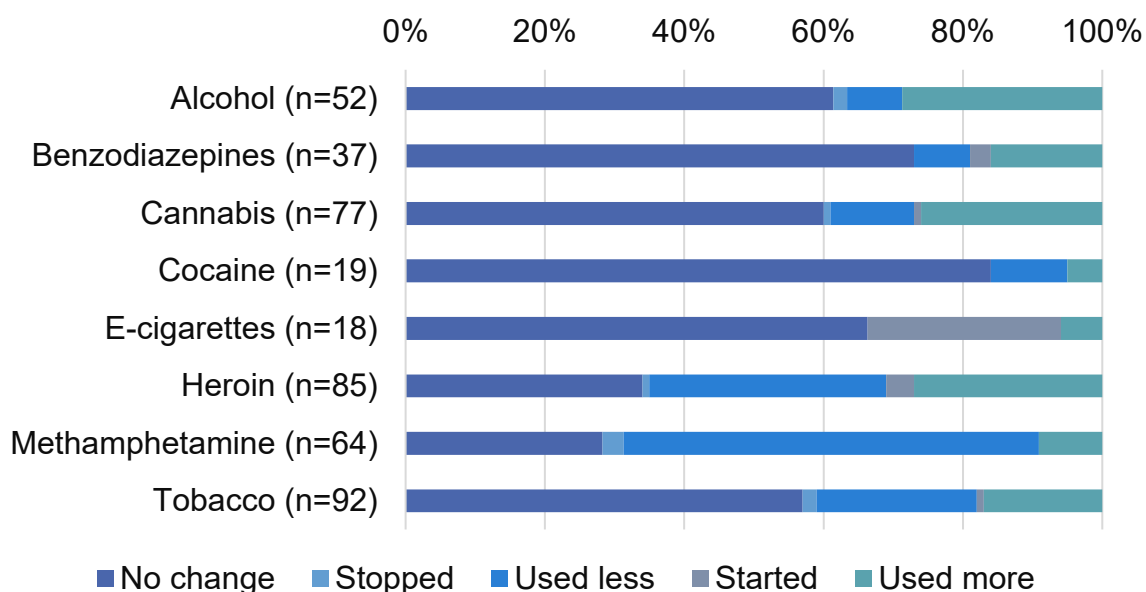
Social impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Seven per cent reported that they had a rent increase since March 2020.
- Nearly half (47%) reported that the income they received in the month prior to interview was more than what they earned in February 2020, 9% said less, and 44% said a similar amount.
- When asked about financial difficulties they had experienced in the four weeks prior to interview, 36% reported being unable to buy food or going without meals, one-third (33%) reported asking for financial help from friends/family, followed by not being able to pay household or phone bills on time (28%) and asking for help from welfare/community organisations (19%).

Changes in drug use with COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Nearly two-fifths (37%) reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. Of these, 70% reported a decrease in injecting frequency (26% of total sample).
- More than one in ten (13%) reported that the drug they injected most during the last month was different to the drug most injected in February.
- Participants who reported past six month use of each drug were asked about changes in their use since the beginning of March 2020 compared to before. Participants mostly reported no change in use of most drugs, except for methamphetamine (62% used less or stopped) and heroin (34% used less, 27% used more) (**Figure 2**). The drugs most commonly reported as decreased in use was methamphetamine, followed by heroin, with frequently cited reasons being that these drugs were more expensive or less available.

Figure 2. Change in drug use since March 2020 compared to before amongst people who report use in the past six months.



Note. Estimates reflect reports on non-prescribed use for pharmaceutical medicines .

Changes in drug markets with COVID-19 restrictions

- Participants who commented most commonly reported crystal methamphetamine, followed by heroin, as increased in price (92% and 54%, respectively) since the beginning of March 2020 as compared to before (**Figure 3**). Price of cannabis was mostly reported as stable.
- Over half of participants who commented said that the purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine had declined since the beginning of March as compared to before (57% and 51%, respectively; **Figure 4**).
- Participants who commented most commonly reported availability of illicit drugs as stable, apart from crystal methamphetamine which was predominantly perceived to have declined in availability (64%; **Figure 5**).

Figure 3. Change in price of select illicit drugs since March 2020 compared to before.

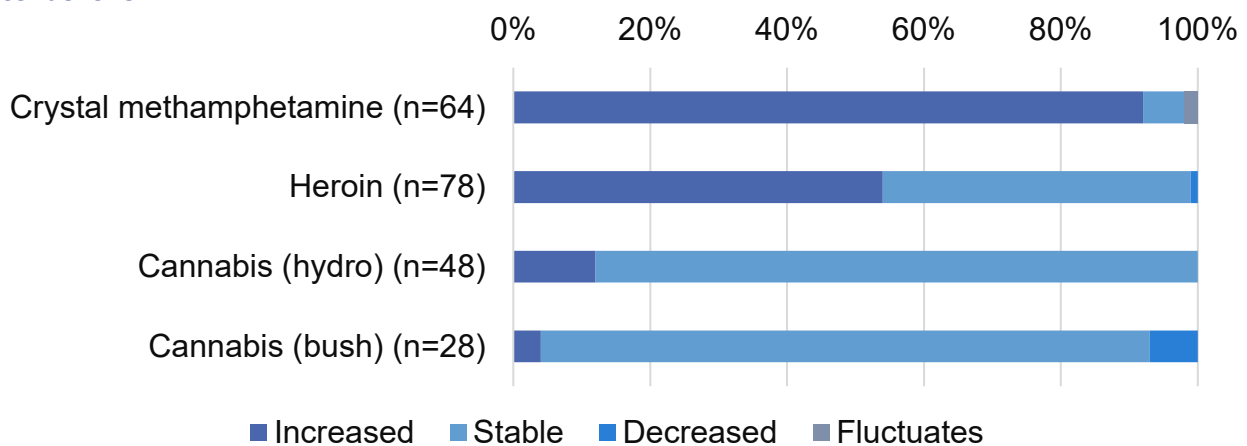
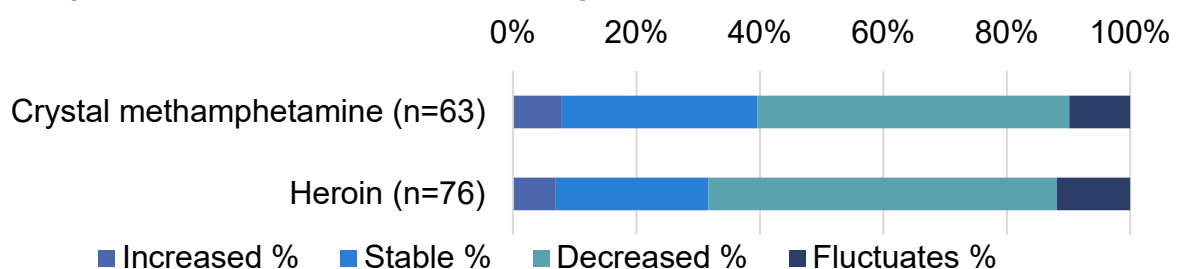
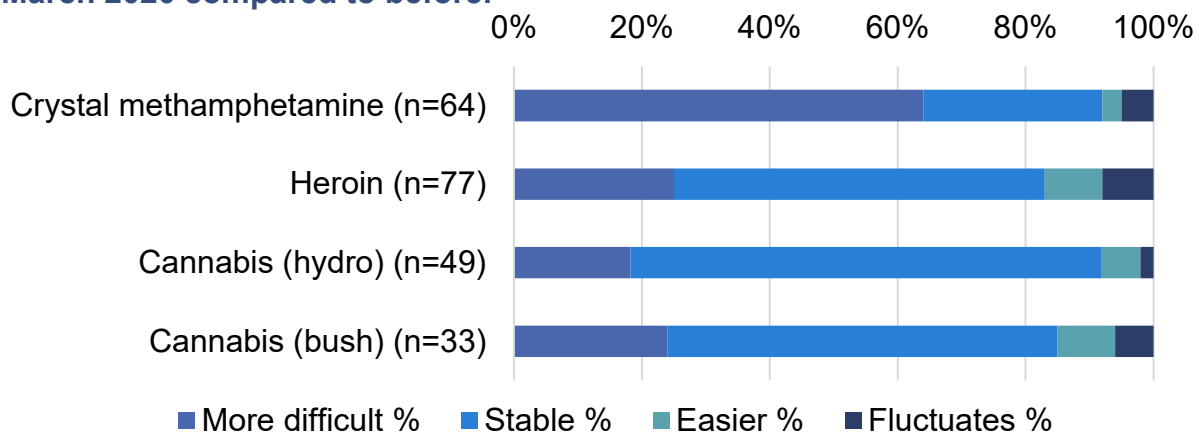


Figure 4. Change in perceived purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine since March 2020 compared to before.



Note. Data were only collected for heroin and crystal methamphetamine.

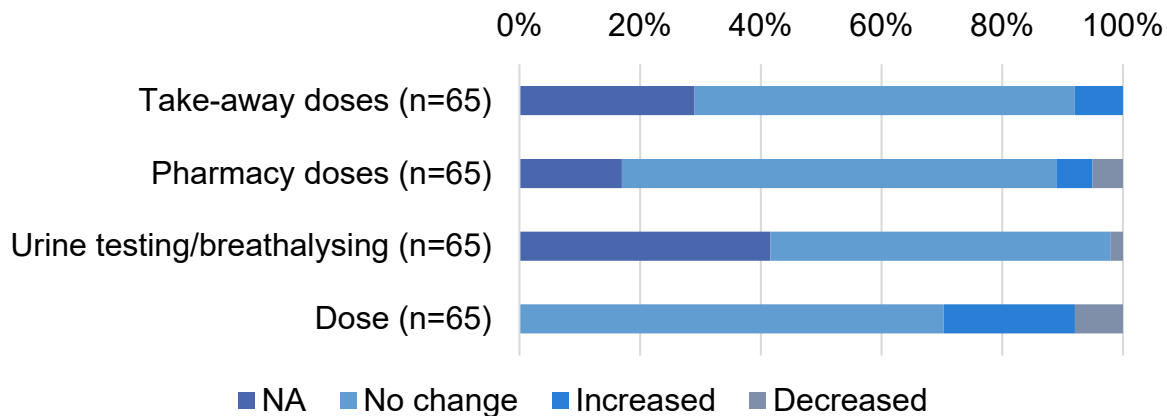
Figure 5. Change in perceived availability of select illicit drugs since the March 2020 compared to before.



Changes in drug treatment and harm reduction service access

- When asked about drug treatment in the past six months, small numbers ($n \leq 5$) reported being in drug treatment before March, 12% since March, and 60% both before and since March.
- Of those in treatment since March ($n=72$), nearly half (48%) reported any disruption to their drug treatment in that same period. Of those who reported past six-month treatment, most commonly reported disruptions were appointments moving to phone/video rather than face-to-face (29%) and changed hours of service (19%).
- Of those who reported being on opioid agonist therapy (OAT) since March ($n=65$), small numbers ($n \leq 5$) reported that they were put on a new treatment.
- In regard to changes in aspects of treatment since March, most reported that number of take-away doses, pharmacy doses and urine testing/breathalysing remained mostly stable. One-fifth (22%) reported an increase in their dose (**Figure 6**).
- Most reported that their satisfaction with their drug treatment was the same compared to before March (86%), while 11% said worse and small numbers ($n \leq 5$) said better. Of those who did not report recent treatment ($n=29$), 14% reported difficulties accessing treatment in the past six months (with small numbers ($n \leq 5$) reported having difficulties since March 2020).
- Just over one-in-ten (13%) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since March. Of this small group, 62% reported re-using their own needles more than normal as a result.
- 6% reported difficulties in safely disposing of used needles and syringes in a disposal unit since March.

Figure 6. Change in aspects of drug treatment since March 2020 as compared to before among those reporting recent OAT.

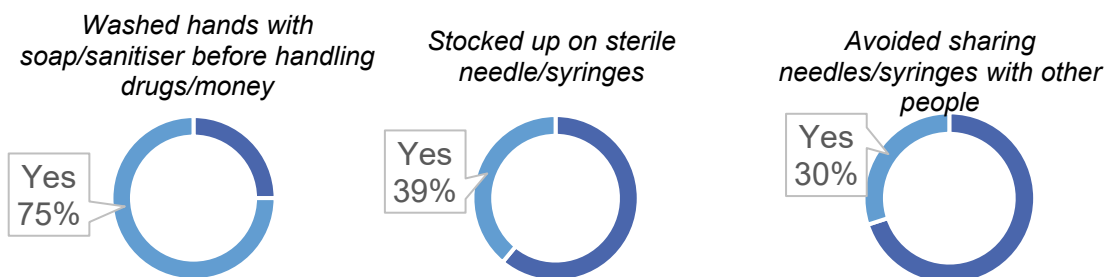


Physical and mental health

- One-in-ten participants (11%) reported experiencing an accidental opioid overdose in the past 12 months (14% in the 2019 ACT sample for comparison).
- In 2020, 7% experienced an opioid overdose before March, small numbers reported overdosing since March, and both before and since March (n≤5 and n≤5, respectively).
- Nearly two-in-five participants (38%) reported accessing take-home naloxone during the past year (23% before March and 19% since March).
- Small numbers (n≤5) reported difficulties accessing naloxone during the past year.
- 20% reported resuscitating someone with naloxone during the past year (13% before March and 7% since March).
- 18% reported an increase in reusing their own needles since March 2020, while less than five participants reported an increase in any needle sharing (either receptive or distributive), as compared to the month of February.
- 21% reported that they injected alone more since March as compared to before.
- 56% reported experiencing withdrawal from any drug during the past year (9% before March, 13% since March and 34% both before and since March).
- When asked about their current physical health as compared to before March, 16% said it was better, 60% said similar, and 23% said worse.
- When asked about their current mental health as compared to before March, 15% said it was better, 53% said similar, and 32% said worse.

Precautions to reduce risk of COVID-19 and impacts of restrictions

- The most commonly reported behaviours to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 or impacts of restrictions while obtaining or using drugs were washing hands with soap/sanitiser before handling drugs/money (75%), stocking up on sterile needles/syringes (39%), avoiding sharing needles/syringes with others (30%) and avoiding sharing other drug use equipment with others (29%).
- 23% reported seeking information on how to reduce risks of getting COVID-19 while obtaining or using drugs, or how to avoid impacts of restrictions on drug use (8% from a harm reduction service, 7% from online fact sheets/websites).



Conclusions

- Almost two-fifths reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. Of those, the majority reported a decrease in injecting frequency.
- The ACT IDRS participants mostly reported no change in use of a range of drugs since March 2020. Exceptions comprised methamphetamine (62% used less or stopped) and heroin (34% used less, 27% used more).
- Of those commenting, the majority reported crystal methamphetamine to have increased in price, with over half reporting that the purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine had declined since the beginning of March compared to before. Perceived availability of methamphetamine was also commonly that it was more difficult to obtain.
- Of those in treatment, nearly half reported disruption to their drug treatment since the beginning of March, but mostly in the mode of delivery (e.g., phone/video instead of face-to-face).
- Most participants engaged in some form of harm reduction behaviour to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission or impacts of restrictions while obtaining or using drugs.
- It is important to note that the IDRS is a sentinel sample and does not represent everyone that uses drugs.
- It is critical to continue to monitor impacts, particularly amongst those populations who report more regular or dependent use of drugs.
- More extensive findings on impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions among this sample will be reported in future outputs from the project.

References

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Participating researchers and research centres

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