

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs ≥ 6 days in the preceding six months and resided in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW). 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 2022 from June-July. Interviews in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2022 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The Sydney IDRS sample (N=152) in 2022 comprised predominantly male participants (70%) with a mean age of 46 years. There was a significant increase in the per cent of participants who identified as being of Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander descent (42%; 25% in 2021; $p=0.002$). Sexual identity significantly changed in 2022 relative to 2021 ($p=0.015$), with more participants identifying as heterosexual (86%; 73% in 2021). Consistent with previous years, the majority of the sample were living in their own home (72%), unemployed at the time of interview (95%), and had received a government pension, allowance or benefit in the month preceding interview (93%). Notably, the median income of participants significantly decreased from \$348 in 2021 to \$325 in 2022 ($p=0.029$). Half (50%) of the sample nominated heroin as their drug of choice. However, methamphetamine was the drug injected most often in the past month (51%).

Heroin

In 2022, 72% of participants reported recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin, the lowest per cent since monitoring began, although stable relative to 2021 (75%). Among those who reported recent use ($n=109$), 86% reported using heroin weekly or more frequently and 54% reported daily use, a

significant increase from 35% in 2021 ($p=0.007$). The median price per cap of heroin was \$50, stable from 2021. Perceived purity significantly changed between 2021 and 2022 ($p<0.001$), with more participants reporting 'high' purity in 2022 (28%; 17% in 2021). Perceived availability of heroin remained stable between 2021 and 2022, with most participants reporting heroin to be 'easy' (44%) or 'very easy' (43%) to obtain in 2022 (41% and 38% in 2021, respectively).

Methamphetamine

The majority (87%) of the sample reported recent use of any methamphetamine in 2022, a significant increase from 74% in 2021 ($p=0.007$). All of these participants reported recent use of methamphetamine crystal. Among those who reported recent use of any methamphetamine, both weekly or more frequent use (80%, 68% in 2021; $p=0.043$) and daily use (27%, 15% in 2021; $p=0.021$) significantly increased. The price per point and gram of methamphetamine crystal remained stable at \$50 and \$375, respectively. The perceived purity of methamphetamine crystal remained stable between 2021 and 2022, with participants generally reporting 'low' purity (31%; 19% in 2021). Perceived availability also remained stable between 2021 and 2022. The largest per cent of participants reported methamphetamine crystal to be 'easy' to obtain in 2022 (45%; 33% in 2021).

Cocaine

Sixteen per cent of the sample reported recent use of cocaine, stable relative to 2021 (15% in 2021). Participants who had recently used cocaine did so infrequently, on a median of five days in the six months preceding interview.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

Almost three-quarters of the sample (72%) reported non-prescribed cannabis use in the six months preceding interview in 2022, of which 57% reported daily use. Most of the sample (95%) reported using hydroponic cannabis. In 2022, the median price per gram of non-prescribed hydroponic and bush

cannabis was \$20, respectively, stable from 2021. Both hydroponic and bush cannabis were largely perceived as being of 'high' purity (56% and 35%, respectively) and 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain (85% and 70%, respectively).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Consistent with previous years, the most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioid recently used by participants was methadone (18%), followed by morphine (11%) and oxycodone (11%). Four per cent of participants reported recent non-prescribed fentanyl use.

Other Drugs

Recent use of any new psychoactive substance was reported by 4% of participants. One-fifth (21%) of participants reported recent use of any non-prescribed benzodiazepines, a significant decrease from 34% in 2021 ($p=0.015$). This included a significant decrease in the recent use of non-prescribed alprazolam (11%, 21% in 2021; $p=0.013$). The majority (91%, 89% in 2021) of the sample reported recent tobacco use and almost half (45%, 47% in 2021) reported recent alcohol use, both stable from 2021. Recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes also remained stable at 30% (29% in 2021). Recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD significantly declined from 16% in 2021 to 5% in 2022 ($p=0.003$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

Three-fifths (61%) of the sample reported using two or more drugs on the day preceding interview (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes). One-fifth (20%) of the sample reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview, with opioids (14%) being the most common substance involved. Three-quarters (78%) of participants reported awareness of the naloxone take-home program, and 48% of participants

reported ever being trained in how to administer naloxone. Few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported receptive needle sharing in the past month, a significant decrease from 7% in 2021 ($p=0.019$), and 7% reported distributive needle sharing in 2022. Twenty-eight per cent of participants reported experiencing an injection-related health issue in the past month, most commonly infection/abscess (16%) and nerve damage (14%). Forty-three per cent of the sample reported currently being in some form of drug treatment at the time of the interview, most commonly methadone (30%). Thirty-four per cent of participants reported receiving an HCV antibody test in the last year and 34% reported receiving a HIV test in the past six months. Almost two-fifths (38%) self-reported experiencing a mental health problem in the six months preceding interview, most commonly depression and anxiety. Of those who had recently driven a vehicle ($n=29$), 83% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug, a significant increase from 66% in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Eleven per cent of the sample reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year. In 2022, almost two-fifths (38%) of the Sydney, NSW sample reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month, with 10% reporting being the victim of a crime involving violence in the past month. The majority (89%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the last 12 months, with 28% of participants having ever been diagnosed with the virus. In 2022, 88% of the Sydney, NSW sample reported having received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccination by the time of interview, with 84% having received two or more doses. Almost one-third (29%) of the sample reported some level of concern about contracting COVID-19, a significant decrease from 47% in 2021 ($p=0.013$), and 61% reported that they would be concerned about their health if they were to contract COVID-19.