Executive Summary

The NT EDRS sample is a sentinel group of people who regularly use ecstasy and other stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and via word-of-mouth in Darwin, NT. 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-August. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via telephone, due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed during the data collection period. This change in modality, which also occurred in 2020, should be considered when comparing data from 2020 and 2021 samples to samples from previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

In 2021, the NT EDRS sample (N=100) were predominantly young and educated, although one-fifth (21%) reported being unemployed at the time of interview. One-tenth (10%) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Ecstasy and cannabis were the most common drugs of choice among the sample, while cannabis and alcohol were the drugs used most often in the past month.

COVID-19 impact

Just over half (56%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the past 12 months, with very few participants (n≤5) diagnosed with COVID-19. The majority (78%) reported that they were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19. Almost one-third (29%) reported they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of interview.

Ecstasy

Recent use of any ecstasy remained stable among the NT sample. Capsules remained the main form used (82%), followed by pills (56%). Frequency of use of any ecstasy significantly decreased from a median of 14 days in the past 6 months in 2020 to 9 days in 2021. Both pills and crystal were significantly more expensive in 2021 compared to 2020. However, perceived availability and purity of all forms of ecstasy remained stable between 2021 and 2020.

Methamphetamine

The per cent reporting recent use of methamphetamine in 2021 was the lowest since monitoring began (14%; peak 82% in 2003). Use of the crystal form remained stable relative to 2020 (12% both years) but use of powder significantly decreased (n≤5 participants, 14% in 2020).

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine has generally increased over the monitoring period, albeit with some fluctuation. In 2021, almost three-quarters (71%) of the NT sample reported recent use. Frequency of use remained stable at less than monthly. Reported price, purity and availability of cocaine was similar in 2021 relative to 2020.

Cannabis

In almost every year of monitoring, at least three quarters of the NT sample has reported recent use of cannabis. In 2021, 83% of the sample reported recent use, stable relative to 2020. There was a non-significant increase in frequency of use, from a median of 48 days (i.e., twice weekly) in 2020 to 90 days (i.e., every second day) in 2021. The price for hydroponic and bush cannabis remained stable in 2021, as did perceived potency.

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Half (55%) of the NT sample reported recent ketamine use, a significant increase compared to 2020 (24%). Recent LSD use also significantly increased from 42% in 2020 to 59% in 2021. A similar per cent reported recent use of DMT in 2020 (7%) and 2021 (13%). Frequency of use for all three substances remained low and stable (i.e., less than monthly).

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Recent use of any NPS among the NT sample has mostly decreased since 2015. In 2021, one-fifth (20%) of the sample reported recent use of NPS (including plant-based NPS). In 2021, the most commonly used NPS was mescaline (6% of the total sample).

Other Drugs

Recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical benzodiazepines, stimulants and opioids all remained stable in 2021 relative to 2020. Use of hallucinogenic mushrooms has largely increased since 2016; in 2021, 26% of the NT sample reported use in the past six months, the highest per cent since reporting began. Use of e-cigarettes significantly increased to almost half of the NT sample (46%; 27% in 2020). The per cent reporting recent use of amyl nitrite and nitrous oxide remained stable in 2021, at 22% and 43% respectively. Alcohol and tobacco use remained common among the sample, and frequency of use was stable at a median of 48 (i.e., twice per week) and 177 days (i.e., almost daily), respectively.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

When asked about the last time they used ecstasy or related drugs, the majority of participants (94%) reported concurrent use of two or more drugs. The most commonly used combination of drugs was stimulants and depressants (27%). Three-quarters of participants (77%) obtained a score of eight or more on the AUDIT scale, indicative of hazardous alcohol use, similar to 2020 (88%). Thirteen per cent of the sample reported a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol), while 11% reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose in the 12 months prior to interview. Small numbers reported being in current drug treatment (n≤5) and no one reported past month drug injection. The majority of the sample (90%) reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the four weeks prior to interview. Of these participants, 89% reported that they had used alcohol and/or drugs prior to or while engaging in sexual activity. Almost half (45%) the sample reported a sexual health check up in the six months prior to interview. Two-fifths (37%) of the sample self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the preceding six months, and three-fifths (62%) of this group had seen a mental health professional in the same period. Approximately one-third of the NT sample reported driving while over the perceived legal limit for alcohol (31%) or within three hours of using illicit or non-prescribed drugs (36%; mostly cannabis). Past month drug-dealing (22%) and property crime (10%) remained the two main forms of criminal activity in 2021. Face-to-face was the most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview (86%), followed by social networking applications (66%). Significantly fewer participants obtained their drugs via a collection point in the past 12 months in 2021 relative to 2020.