

Executive Summary

The Brisbane/Gold Coast, Queensland (QLD) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and word-of-mouth in Brisbane/Gold Coast, QLD. The results are not representative of all people who use illicit drugs, nor of use in the general population. **Data were collected in 2023 from April-May. Interviews between 2020 and 2023 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 2020-2023 samples, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The EDRS sample (N=102) recruited from Brisbane/Gold Coast was mostly similar to the sample in 2022 and in previous years. Gender remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with over half (59%) identifying as male (53% in 2022), and participants had a median age of 26 years (23 years in 2022; $p=0.001$). Most participants held tertiary qualifications (67%), with one third (35%) reporting full-time employment and 35% reporting part time/casual employment. Accommodation remained stable relative to 2022, with over half the sample (59%; 65% in 2022) living in a rental house/flat or residing with their parents/at their family home (25%; 23% in 2022) at the time of interview. In 2023, cocaine was reported as the drug of choice (27%; 21% in 2022) followed by cannabis and ecstasy at 21% and 20% respectively. The drug used most often remained stable between 2022 and 2023, with almost one third (31%) nominating cannabis (34% in 2022), and 18% reporting

alcohol as the drug used most often in the month preceding interview (16% in 2022).

Ecstasy

In 2023, there were no significant changes to overall reported use of ecstasy compared to 2022 (95%; 93% in 2022). Use of ecstasy capsules significantly decreased in 2023 compared to 2022 (55% in 2023, 74% in 2022; $p=0.010$). Recent use of other forms of ecstasy remained stable. The perceived availability of crystal was significantly different in 2023 compared to 2022 ($p=0.002$) with 47% of participants reporting crystal as 'easy to access' in 2023 compared to 22% in 2022. No other significant market changes were reported.

Methamphetamine

Since monitoring commenced, recent use of any methamphetamine declined until 2022. However, in 2023, there was a significant increase in the per cent reporting recent use (27%; 15% in 2022; $p=0.043$). Forty-six per cent of those who had recently used methamphetamine reported weekly or more frequent use, (27% in 2022). Of participants who had used methamphetamine in the six months preceding interview in 2023, most had used crystal methamphetamine (82%), a significant change from 2022 (40%; $p=0.008$). Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported use of powder or base.

Non-Prescribed Pharmaceutical Stimulants

The per cent of participants reporting any recent non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulant (e.g., dexamphetamine, methylphenidate, modafinil) use has steadily increased since the commencement of monitoring, from 12% in 2007 to 41% in 2023 (53% in 2022).

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine increased significantly in 2023, at 95% (80% in 2022; $p=0.002$). Six percent of those who had recently used cocaine reported weekly or more frequent use. Of those who reported recent use of cocaine ($n=97$), all (100%) reported snorting as their chosen route of administration, remaining stable from 2022. The price of cocaine per gram remained stable in 2023, at \$350 (\$350 in 2022). Perceived purity of cocaine significantly changed in 2023 in comparison to 2022 ($p=0.002$), with 47% of participants reporting it was 'low' in purity (25% in 2022), and 27% reporting it was 'medium' in purity (21% in 2022).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

Three-in-four participants (75%) reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products compared to 76% in 2022. Twenty-three percent reported daily use, a significant increase from 2022 (6%; $p=0.003$). Forty-three percent reported use of bush cannabis, a significant decrease from 2022 (63%; $p=0.033$). Smoking remained the most common route of administration (95%; 94% in 2022), followed by swallowing (35%; 32% in 2022).

Non-prescribed Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of non-prescribed ketamine decreased significantly in 2023 (35%; 51% in 2022; $p=0.037$). Frequency of use significantly increased in the median number of days from two days in 2022 to three days in 2023 ($p=0.043$). Recent use of LSD (42%; 53% in 2022) and DMT (16%; 12% in 2022) remained stable in 2023, relative to 2022, as did frequency of use. Prices for ketamine and LSD remained stable between 2022 and 2023, however there was a significant increase in

participants reporting that LSD was 'difficult' to obtain (49%; 20% in 2022; $p=0.033$).

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Any NPS use, including plant based NPS, has fluctuated over time, with 12% reporting recent use in 2023, stable from 2022 (13%). A similar percentage was observed for any NPS use, excluding plant-based NPS (9%; 8% in 2022). Recent use of any phenethylamines also remained low in 2023, at 6% ($n\leq 5$ in 2022).

Other Drugs

Participants who had recently used non-prescribed codeine (13%) reported use on a median of four days in the preceding six months, remaining stable with three days in 2022. One quarter of participants (25%) reported recent use of any benzodiazepines (37% in 2022; $p=0.073$), and 45% reported recent use of hallucinogenic mushrooms (53% in 2022). Recent use of alcohol remained stable at 95% (98% in 2022), as did recent use of tobacco (62%; 68% in 2022). Seventy-one per cent reported recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes, the highest percentage of recent use over the course of monitoring (66% in 2022), half of the sample reporting daily use (50%), a significant increase compared to 23% in 2022 ($p<0.001$). Fifteen per cent reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD (5% in 2022; $p=0.032$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

The majority of the sample (92%; $n=94$) of the Brisbane/Gold Coast sample reported concurrent use of two or more drugs on the last occasion of ecstasy or related drug use (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes). Almost one quarter (24%) of participants reported that they or someone else had tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia in the past year. Seventy-four per cent of

participants obtained a score of eight or more on the AUDIT, indicative of hazardous use, stable from 2022.

Past year non-fatal stimulant overdose (17%; 19% in 2022) and non-fatal depressant overdose (31%; 36% in 2022) remained stable in 2023, relative to 2022. In 2023, 58% of the sample reported that they had ever heard of naloxone, a significant increase from 2022 (41%; $p=0.020$), of which 84% were able to correctly identify the purpose of naloxone (83% in 2022).

Reported past month injecting drug use remained low ($n \leq 5$), as did drug treatment engagement ($n \leq 5$). The median ecstasy SDS score was zero (range: 0–11), indicating that the majority of respondents reported no or few symptoms of dependence in relation to ecstasy use. The median methamphetamine SDS score was four (range: 0–14).

Eighty-seven per cent of the sample 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. Almost one quarter (23%) of the sample reported having a HIV test in the six months preceding interview, and 26% reported having a sexual health check-up in the six months prior to interview.

Mental health remained stable relative to 2022, with 68% (75% in 2022) reporting experiencing a mental health problem in the six months preceding interview, with depression (60%) and anxiety (59%) most commonly reported. Fifty-six per cent reported high/very high psychological distress. Almost one third of participants (29%) reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug support in the six months preceding interview, and 27% of the sample reported experiencing stigma in

any setting in the six months preceding interview.

In 2023, the vast majority of the sample (95%) had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, with almost half (47%) of participants testing positive to COVID-19 in the 12 months preceding interview.

Amongst those who had recently driven, 38% reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol and 53% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the prior six months. Forty-one per cent of the sample reported 'any' crime in the past month, with drug dealing (30%) and property crime (19%) remaining the two main forms of criminal activity in 2023, although there was a significant reduction in participants reporting property crime compared to 2022 (34% in 2022; $p=0.017$). Face-to-face and social networking applications were the most popular means of participants arranging the purchase of illicit or non-prescribed drugs in the 12 months preceding interview (68% and 72%, respectively).