

Executive Summary

The Tasmanian (TAS) IDRS sample comprises a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Hobart, Tasmania. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle 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 2020 from July-September: subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were delivered via phone and face-to-face. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample, relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Hobart, Tasmania (TAS), was made up of seventy-four participants, notably less than the IDRS samples ($n \approx 100$) of previous years due to recruitment difficulties related to COVID-19. The demographic profile of participants, however, was largely consistent with the TAS profile in previous years. Half (58%) the sample was male. The mean age of participants was 43 years, a significant increase from 2019 (40 years; $p=0.022$). The majority (89%) of the sample was unemployed at the time of interview, and most of the sample (95%) received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. Over one-third (39%) of the sample reported that methamphetamine was their drug of choice, and over half (53%) reported that methamphetamine was the drug they had injected most often in the past month.

COVID-19 Impact

This brief section was included to summarise data collected specifically related to COVID-19 and associated restrictions; subsequent sections reflect standard annual reporting. Seven per cent of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Since the beginning of March 2020, most participants

(86%) had practiced social distancing and 55% had undergone home isolation.

Over two-fifths (42%) of participants reported injecting drugs at a different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; of these participants, 81% reported reduced frequency of injection. Nevertheless, methamphetamine was reported by 55% of participants as the drug most injected in February 2020 (before COVID-19 restrictions), and by 53% in the month prior to interview.

Nearly half of participants reported a perceived decrease in the use of methamphetamine since March (58%), with 80% of these participants citing 'decreased availability' and 'drug is more expensive' (80%) as the primary reasons. Smaller numbers reported an increase in alcohol use (22%), mainly cited as due to 'difficulty accessing other drugs' and 'boredom/less things to occupy time'.

Most participants reported that crystal methamphetamine and heroin had increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 (93% and 60%, respectively). Furthermore, crystal methamphetamine was most commonly reported to have decreased in perceived purity (75%) and was also the drug most commonly cited as having decreased in availability (90%).

Over one-third (32%) of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, and 44% reported 'similar'.

Whilst the majority of participants reported 'no change' when commenting on changes related to their injecting practices since March 2020, 10% reported an increase in injecting alone. Almost one-quarter (23%) of participants reportedly sought information on how to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or avoiding impacts of restrictions on drug acquisition and use. The majority (76%) of participants reported engaging in various harm reduction behaviours to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or impacts of COVID-19 restrictions while using or obtaining drugs.

Heroin

Recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin has fluctuated amongst the TAS sample since monitoring began, however, the percentage reporting recent use was stable from 15% in 2019 to 24% in 2020 ($p=0.186$). Frequency of use was stable at a median of four days between 2019 and 2020 ($p=0.361$). The reported median price of heroin was \$60 per point, stable from 2019 (\$60; $p=0.924$).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of crystal methamphetamine has trended upwards over the past few years, with over three-quarters (77%) reporting recent use in 2020. The median price for one point of crystal significantly increased from \$50 in 2019 to \$150 in 2020 ($p<0.001$). Significantly more participants (62%) perceived purity of crystal methamphetamine to be 'low' in 2020, compared to a small minority (14%) reporting 'low' purity in 2019 ($p<0.001$). Almost half (46%) found crystal to be 'difficult' to obtain ($n\leq 5$ in 2019; $p<0.001$), and over one-third (37%) perceived crystal to be 'very difficult' to obtain in 2020 (zero in 2019; $p<0.001$).

Cocaine

Sixteen per cent of the TAS sample had recently consumed cocaine (6% in 2019; $p=0.058$) on a median of five days (nine days in 2019; $p=0.323$).

Cannabis

The proportion of participants reporting recent cannabis use has been slowly declining since the early 2000s to 72% in 2020 (76% in 2019; $p=0.661$). Over three-quarters of recent consumers (77%) reported daily use, a significant increase relative to 2019 (57%; $p=0.031$). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (90%), followed by bush cannabis (67%). Almost two-thirds (61%) of recent consumers perceived hydroponic cannabis to be 'easy' to obtain, significantly more so than rates in 2019 (31%, $p=0.005$).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent non-prescribed use of pharmaceutical opioids such as morphine and oxycodone has declined over the past 10 years of monitoring.

Recent use of any methadone has also been declining since 2003.

Other Drugs

Non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 49% of participants in 2020, stable from 43% in 2019 ($p=0.598$). Alcohol and tobacco use have remained consistently common over the period of monitoring, with 68% and 88% reporting recent use of alcohol and tobacco, respectively, in 2020. Sixteen per cent of recent alcohol consumers reported daily use and almost all recent tobacco consumers smoked daily (91%).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

Eleven per cent of participants reported having overdosed in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug. Almost half (45%) of participants reported that they were aware of the take-home naloxone programs in 2020, significantly more so than 22% in 2019 ($p=0.007$). Almost one-third (32%) reported re-using their own needle in the past month, stable from 35% in 2019 ($p=0.883$).

Almost one-third (30%) of the sample reported being in drug treatment at the time of interview, a significant decrease from 47% reporting current treatment in 2019 ($p=0.028$). Over half (58%) self-reported mental health problems in the past six months, stable from 2019 (57%). Self-reported past month criminal activity significantly declined from 54% in 2019 to 35% in 2020 ($p=0.014$).