

Executive Summary

The Victoria (VIC) EDRS comprises a sentinel sample of people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants recruited via social media, advertisements on websites and via word-of mouth in Melbourne, VIC. 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 to June. Interviews were conducted face-to-face as well as via telephone, due to COVID-19 restrictions being imposed in various jurisdictions throughout the data collection period. This methodological change, which also impacted interview modality in 2020, should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 and 2021 sample relative to previous years.**

Additional data from third-party sources have been included for available drugs. These data cover a range of information regarding the state of illicit drugs in VIC, including seizure purity, ambulance attendances and more.

Sample Characteristics

The VIC EDRS sample (N=100) recruited from Melbourne were predominantly young, educated males, residing in a rental house/flat; consistent with the sample collected in 2020 and in previous years. Ecstasy and cocaine were the main drugs of choice (22% and 17%, respectively), while alcohol and cannabis were the drugs used most often in the preceding month (45% and 36%, respectively).

COVID-19

Three-quarters (76%) of the VIC sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the previous 12 months, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Only 6% of the sample had received at least one-dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the time of interview, and the majority (78%) reported that they were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19.

Ecstasy

The ecstasy market has diversified over the past few years, with the number reporting any recent (i.e., past six month) use of ecstasy pills

declining and most other forms fluctuating over time. In 2021, there was a significant decrease in the use of pills (47%; 69% in 2020; $p=0.003$) and powder (21%, 44% in 2020; $p=0.001$), while the use of capsules and crystal remained stable (70% and 47%, respectively). Median days of use of any ecstasy decreased significantly from 15 days in 2020 to 7 days in 2021 ($p<0.001$). A significant increase in the price of ecstasy pills (\$35; \$25 in 2020; $p=0.004$) and crystal (\$200/gram; \$150/gram in 2020; $p=0.005$) was observed, while capsules (\$20) and powder (\$200/gram) remained stable. There was a significant difference in the reported perceived availability of capsules ($p=0.001$) and crystal ($p=0.017$) relative to 2020, with a greater number perceiving these drugs as 'difficult' to obtain in 2021.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of methamphetamine has been declining amongst the VIC sample since 2012, (44% in 2021), with frequency of use remaining stable since 2018. Powder continued to be the main form used in 2021, although crystal was reported with more median days of use (7 in 2021 versus 2 median days for powder). The price of a gram of powder methamphetamine remained stable in 2021 (\$200), alongside reports of stable purity and perceived availability.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine has increased over the years of monitoring, with the largest percentage reporting any recent use recorded in 2021 (90%; 76% in 2020; $p=0.014$). Frequency of use remained stable compared to 2020 (5 days in 2021 and 2020), with 7% of participants that reported recent use reporting weekly or more frequent use. The median price of a gram of cocaine was reported as \$300 in 2021, similar to previous years.

Cannabis

At least four in five participants have reported any recent use of cannabis each year since monitoring commenced. Eighty-four per cent of participants reported recent use in 2021, stable from 2020. Among those who had recently used cannabis, almost three-fifths (57%)

reported weekly use, while 13% reported daily use. The price, purity, and availability of both hydro and bush cannabis was stable relative to 2020.

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Recent use of ketamine, LSD, and DMT remained stable in 2021, relative to 2020. Most of the sample (81%) reported recent use of ketamine, with 53% and 16% reporting recent use of LSD and DMT, respectively. A significant increase in the price of a gram of ketamine was observed in 2021 (\$200; \$180 in 2020; $p=0.001$). The median frequency of use of both LSD and DMT remained low (2 days in 2021), while the median frequency of use of ketamine was reported at 6 days.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Almost one-quarter (23%) reported recent use of any NPS (including plant-based NPS) in 2021. Any substance of the 2C class was the most common recently used NPS in 2021 (16%).

Other Drugs

Two-thirds (66%) of the sample reported recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants, and half (54%) reported recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines; stable compared with 2020. There was a significant increase in the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms in 2021 (54%; 37% in 2020; $p=0.023$), while the median frequency of use of nitrous oxide decreased (3 days in 2021; 5 days in 2020; $p=0.020$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

Almost all participants (98%) reported concurrent use of two or more drugs on the last occasion of ecstasy or other drug use, most

commonly stimulants and depressants. Hazardous alcohol use remained high, with 73% of the sample scoring above the hazardous range in the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). Fifteen per cent reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose, and 17% a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol), in the past year. Few participants reported lifetime injection drug use in 2021, and small numbers reported receiving drug treatment. The majority (78%) reported engaging in sexual activity in the past four weeks, of whom 14% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they did not know the HIV/STI status of their partner. Just over two-thirds (68%) of the sample self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the preceding six months. Of those participants, the most common problems were anxiety (68%) and depression (55%). Of the total sample, 18% reported having driven over the perceived legal alcohol limit in the previous six months, while 36% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed substance (most commonly cannabis). Property crime was the main form of self-reported criminal activity in 2021 (32%), followed by drug dealing (18%). The most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit drugs remained social media applications (88%), while reports of face-to-face (52%; 68% in 2020; $p=0.026$), text messaging (20%; 48% in 2020; $p<0.001$) and phone call (19%; 36% in 2020; $p=0.013$) all declined substantially from 2020. Significantly fewer participants reported obtaining illicit drugs from an unknown dealer in 2021 (33%; 49% in 2020; $p=0.036$). Almost all participants reported obtaining illicit drugs face-to-face (99%).