

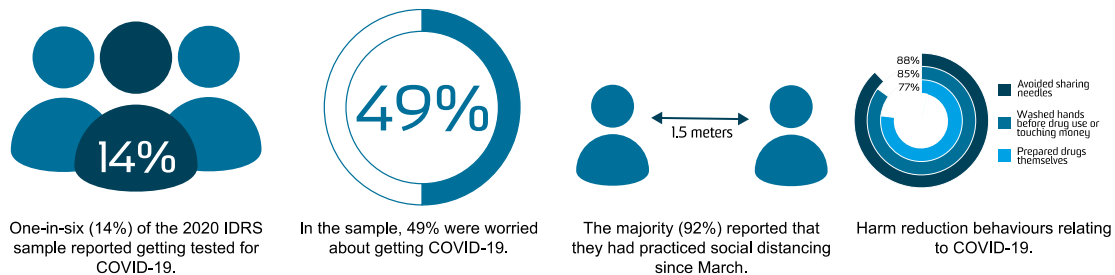
Impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions on people who inject drugs in Western Australia: Findings from the Illicit Drug Reporting System 2020

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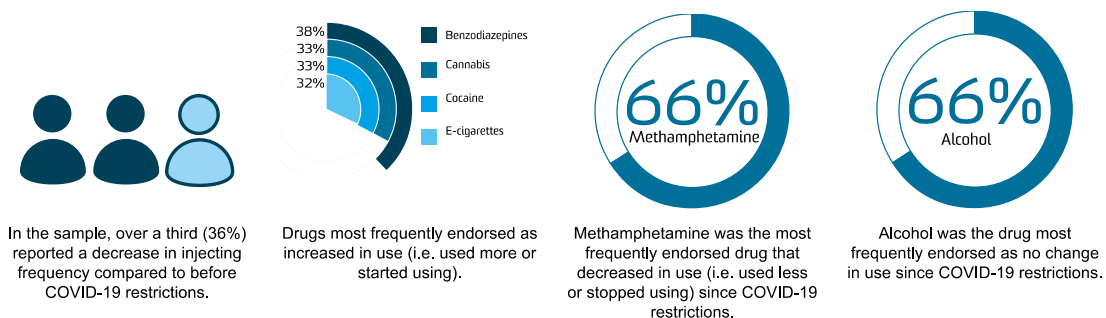
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Key findings from the Western Australia sample:

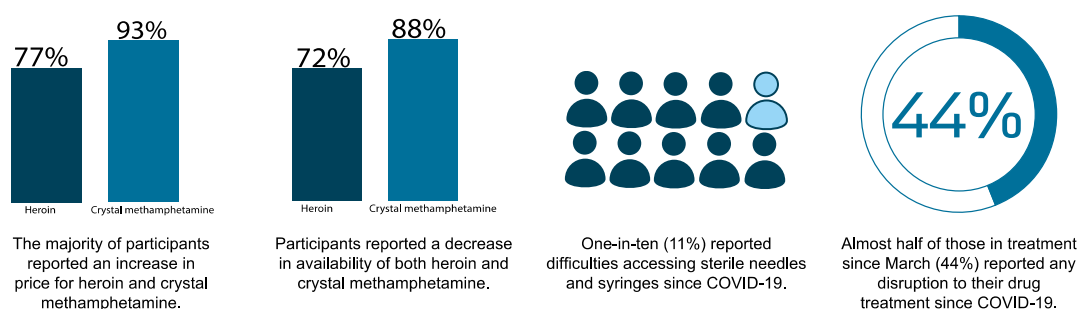
COVID-19 BEHAVIOURS



CHANGES IN DRUG USE DURING COVID-19



CHANGES IN DRUG MARKETS AND TREATMENT



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Background

- The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on travel and gathering have likely had major impacts on drug supply, use and harms [1], and there have been significant challenges with delivery of drug treatment and harm reduction services [2].
- It is anticipated that impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and gatherings will be particularly felt by those reporting more problematic patterns of use, including those people who inject drugs (PWID).
- The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is an illicit drug monitoring system which has operated in Australia since 2000, and includes annual interviews with PWID recruited from capital cities [3].
- Recognising the critical need for information, the IDRS project has been adapted to collect important data on people's experiences during COVID-19.
- This output presents findings from 100 participants recruited in Western Australia, from 30 June to 25 August 2020 (3 participants in June, 65 in July, 32 in August).

Method

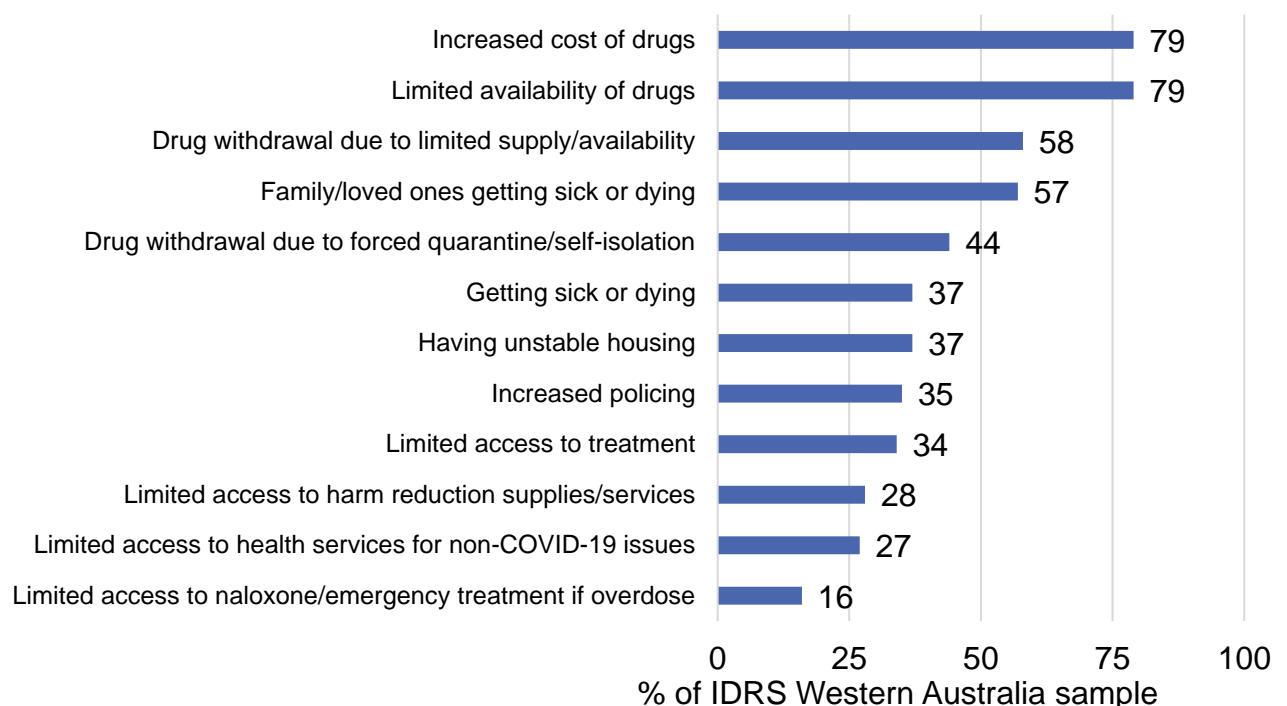
- IDRS interviews are conducted with a sentinel sample of people aged 18 or older who have injected drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in Perth, Western Australia for the last 12 months.
- Participants are recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs and other harm reduction services and via peer referral.
- In previous years, participants completed a one-hour face-to-face interview, and were reimbursed \$40 for time and expenses.
- In 2020, interviews were completed via phone (instead of face-to-face) and participants were reimbursed electronically to manage risk of COVID-19 transmission.
- The interview length was reduced and the content adapted to include COVID-19 specific items, anchored to implementation of restrictions in Australia at the beginning of March 2020.
- The study protocol remained otherwise unchanged. Findings are suppressed where ≤ 5 participants report an outcome to protect confidentiality.
- The Western Australia IDRS sample are demographically similar to those recruited in 2019 and in earlier years, being mostly male (67%) with a median age of 42 years (IQR 36 - 49).

Findings

Experience of COVID-19 testing, diagnosis and restrictions

- 14% said they had been tested for COVID-19. None had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- 49% said they were currently worried about getting COVID-19.
- At the time of the interview, 92% reported they had been social distancing, and 70% reported home isolation since March 2020.
- Participants reported a number of concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including around family or friends getting sick or dying (57% of the sample), drug withdrawal due to forced quarantine/self-isolation (44%) or themselves becoming unwell (37%; **Figure 1**).
- Issues related to drug markets (e.g., limited availability, increased cost of drugs) were also commonly cited.

Figure 1. The percentage of the IDRS Western Australia sample endorsing potential concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic.



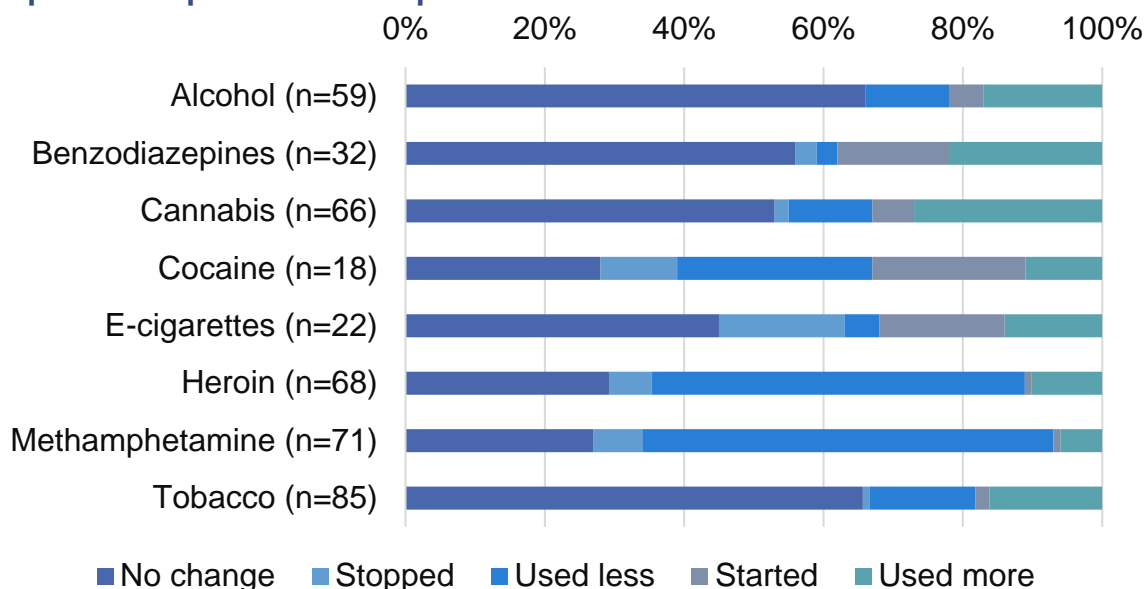
Social impacts of COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Nearly six-in-ten (56%) reported that the income they received in the month prior to interview was more than what they earned in February, 8% said less, and 36% said a similar amount.
- When asked about financial difficulties they had experienced in the four weeks prior to interview, 41% reported being unable to buy food or going without meals, while approximately half of the sample reported asking for financial help from friends/family, being unable to pay household/phone bills on time and asking for help from welfare/community organisations (49%, 46% and 33%, respectively).

Changes in drug use with COVID-19 and associated restrictions

- Four-in-ten (43%) reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. Of these, 84% reported a decrease in injecting frequency (36% of total sample).
- One in ten (13%) reported that the drug they injected most during the last month was different to the drug most injected in February.
- Participants who reported past six month use of each drug were asked about changes in their use since the beginning of March 2020 compared to before. Participants mostly reported no change in use of alcohol, non-prescribed benzodiazepines, cannabis and tobacco (**Figure 2**). The drugs most commonly reported as decreased in use were methamphetamine and heroin (59% and 53% reported using less, respectively), with frequently cited reasons being that the drugs were less available or more expensive.

Figure 2. Change in drug use since March 2020 compared to before amongst people who report use in the past six months.



Note. Estimates reflect reports on non-prescribed use for pharmaceutical medicines .

Changes in drug markets with COVID-19 restrictions

- Participants who commented most commonly reported crystal methamphetamine and heroin as increased in price since the beginning of March compared to before (93% and 77%, respectively; **Figure 3**). Price of cannabis was most commonly reported as stable.
- Over half of participants who commented said that the purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine had declined since the beginning of March compared to before (62% and 52%, respectively; **Figure 4**).
- Participants who commented mostly commonly reported availability of illicit drugs as more difficult, although 53% noted a stable availability of both hydroponic and bush cannabis (**Figure 5**).

Figure 3. Change in price of select illicit drugs since March 2020 compared to before.

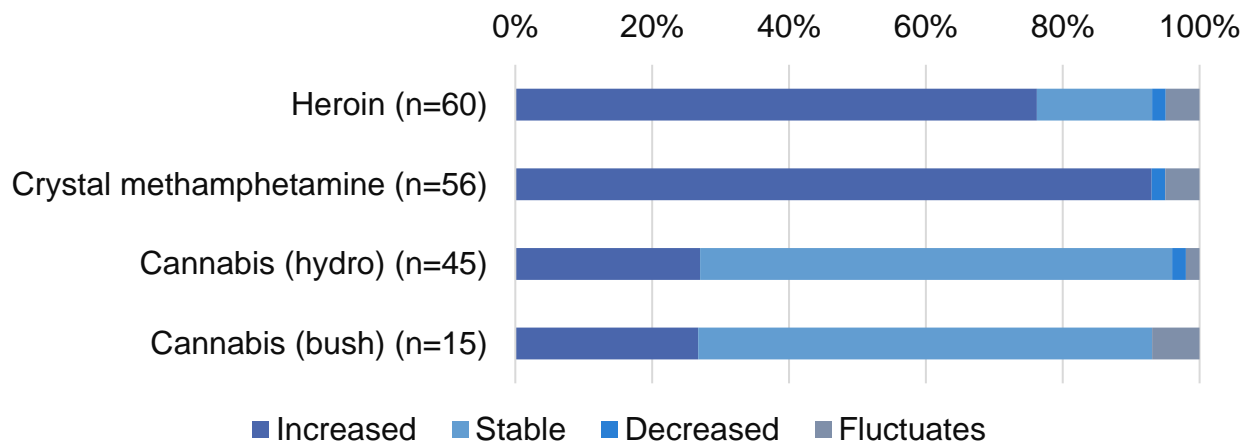
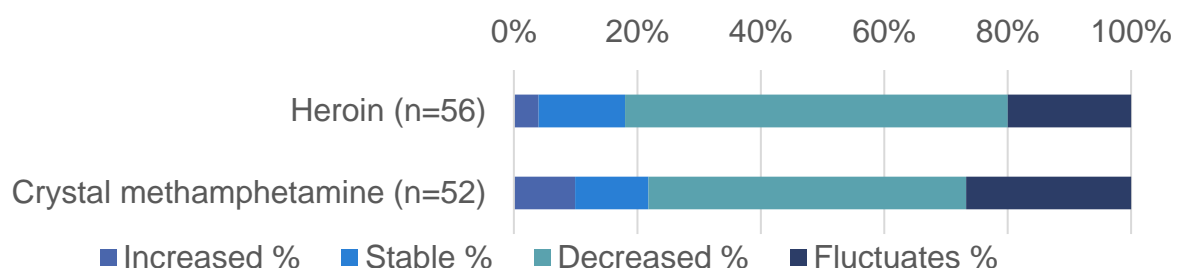
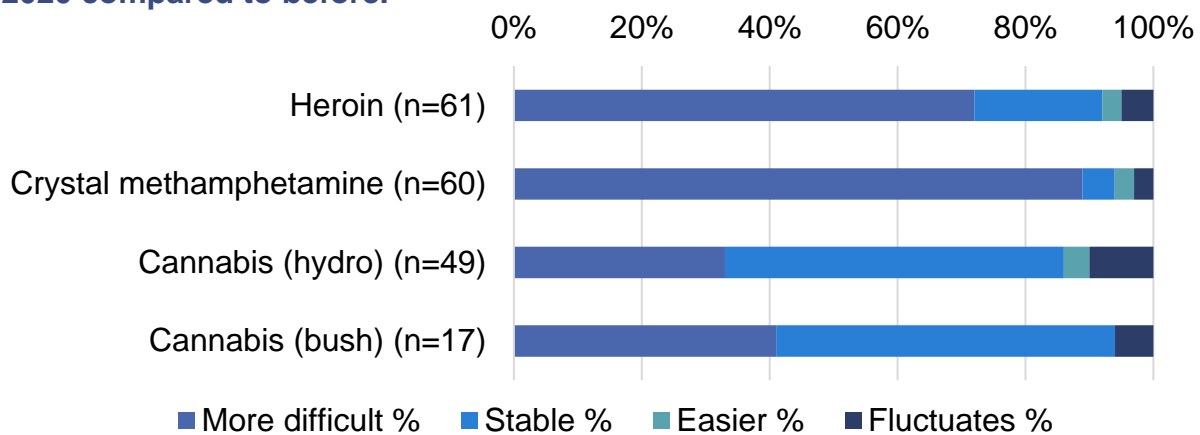


Figure 4. Change in perceived purity of heroin and crystal methamphetamine since March 2020 compared to before.



Note. Data were only collected for heroin and crystal methamphetamine.

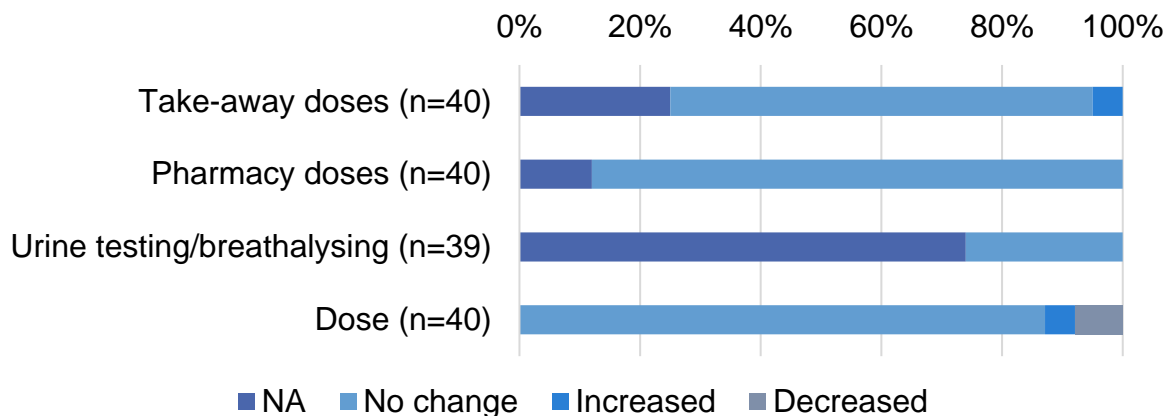
Figure 5. Change in perceived availability of select illicit drugs since March 2020 compared to before.



Changes in drug treatment and harm reduction service access

- When asked about drug treatment in the past six months, 10% reported being in drug treatment before March only, 7% since March only, and 42% both before and since March.
- Of those in treatment since March (n=49), 44% reported any disruption to their drug treatment in that same period. Most commonly reported disruptions were appointments moving to phone/video rather than face-to-face (27%) and changed hours of service (25%).
- Of those who reported being on opioid agonist therapy (OAT) since March (n=40), 12% reported that they were put on a new treatment (split between starting methadone/biodone syrup, buprenorphine-naloxone and buprenorphine depot injection).
- In regard to changes in aspects of treatment since March, most participants reported that dosage of medications, pharmacy doses and take-away doses, and urine testing/breathalysing remained mostly stable (Figure 6).
- Most reported that their satisfaction with their drug treatment was the same compared to before March (77%), while 18% said worse.
- Of those who did not report recent treatment (n=52), 10% reported difficulties accessing treatment in the past six months (8% since March 2020).
- One in ten (11%) reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since March. Of this small group, 64% reported re-using their own needles more than normal as a result.

Figure 6. Change in aspects of drug treatment since March 2020 as compared to before among those reporting recent OAT.



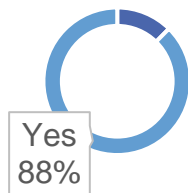
Physical and mental health

- One in ten participants (12%) reported experiencing a non-fatal opioid overdose in the past 12 months (12% in the 2019 WA sample for comparison).
- Two-in-five participants (41%) reported accessing take-home naloxone during the past year (30% before March and 23% since March).
- 17% reported resuscitating someone with naloxone during the past year (9% before March and 8% since March).
- 6% reported an increase in reusing their own needles since March.
- 14% reported that they injected alone more since March as compared to before.
- 58% reported experiencing withdrawal from any drug during the past year (10% before March, 15% since March and 32% both before and since March).
- When asked about their current physical health as compared to before March, 12% said it was better, 80% said similar, and 8% said worse.
- When asked about their current mental health as compared to before March, 21% said it was better, 49% said similar, and 30% said worse.

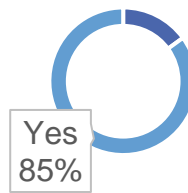
Precautions to reduce risk of COVID-19 and impacts of restrictions

- The most commonly reported behaviours to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 or impacts of restrictions while obtaining or using drugs were avoiding sharing needles/syringes with others (88%), washing hands with soap/sanitiser before handling drugs/money (85%), preparing drugs themselves (77%), avoiding sharing other drug use equipment with others (75%), stocking up on sterile needles/syringes (46%), and obtaining take-home naloxone/narcan (46%).
- 39% reported seeking information on how to reduce risks of getting COVID-19 while obtaining or using drugs, or how to avoid impacts of restrictions on drug use (22% from a harm reduction service, 13% from a GP).

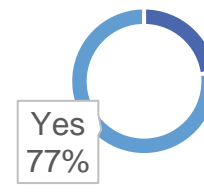
*Avoiding sharing
needles/syringes with
others*



*Washing hands with
soap/sanitiser before
handling drugs/money*



*Preparing drugs
themselves*



Conclusions

- Four-in-ten participants in WA reported injecting at a different frequency during the last month compared to the month of February. The majority of them reported a decrease in injecting drugs, and most particularly of methamphetamine and heroin which was mainly due to the fact that these drugs were considered less available or more expensive.
- Reported impacts on drug treatment and harm reduction services remained mixed with nearly four-in-ten participants reporting any disruptions to their drug treatment since March 2020. One in ten participants reported difficulties accessing sterile needles and syringes since COVID-19 restrictions.
- Reported impacts on physical health remained stable with the majority of participants reporting that their current physical health was similar than before COVID-19 restrictions. However, reported impacts on mental health were mixed. Nearly half of participants reported that their current mental health was similar than before March, while nearly a third said that it was worse.
- Our findings suggest that it is important to continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 and most particularly on drug treatment and harm reduction services, as well as mental health and risky behaviours.
- However, these results are not representative of all people who consume illicit drugs, nor of illicit drug use in the general population, but rather intend to provide an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 among a sentinel group of people who inject drugs in WA.
- More extensive findings of COVID-19 impacts will be reported in future IDRS outputs.

References

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2. Dunlop, A., et al. (2020). [Challenges in maintaining treatment services for people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Harm Reduction Journal, 17, 1-7.
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Participating researchers and research centres

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