

Executive Summary

The Queensland (QLD) IDRS sample is 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 Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle and 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 June-July: subsequent to COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were delivered via phone, rather than face-to-face. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The QLD IDRS sample in 2020 was predominantly male with a mean age of 45 years, consistent with the QLD profile in previous years. Close to half the participants (47%) reported that heroin was their drug of choice, and heroin was the drug injected most in the last month (42%).

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. Ten 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 (87%) had practiced social distancing and 64% had undergone home isolation. Almost one-third (32%) of participants reported injecting drugs at a different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; of these participants, 52% reported increased frequency of injection. Heroin was reported by 43% of participants as the drug most injected in February 2020 (before COVID-19 restrictions), and by 42% in the month prior to interview. Two-fifths of participants reported a

perceived decrease in the use of methamphetamine since March (40%), with 63% of these participants citing 'drug is more expensive', and 'decreased availability' as the primary reasons. Smaller numbers reported an increase in cannabis (32%), mainly cited as due to 'boredom/less things to occupy time'. Most participants reported that crystal methamphetamine had increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 (93%); the majority of participants reported that the price of other drugs remained stable. Furthermore, crystal methamphetamine was most commonly reported to have decreased in perceived purity (55%), and was also the drug most commonly cited as having decreased in availability (83%). Of those on opioid agonist treatment since March 2020 (n=38), 28% reported an increase in take-away doses, whilst 13% reported an increase in their dose of medication. Whilst the majority of participants reported 'no change' when commenting on changes related to their injecting practices since March 2020, 11% reported an increase in re-using their own needles, and 9% reported an increase in injecting alone. Approximately one-third (33%) of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, and 49% reported 'similar'. Over one-quarter (27%) 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 (81%) 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

In 2020, recent (i.e., past six month) use of heroin remained stable amongst the QLD sample at 64%, compared to 63% in 2019. Of recent consumers, 79% reported weekly or more frequent use of heroin, compared to 62% in 2019 ($p=0.051$), and 24% reported daily use, compared to 29% in 2019 ($p=0.634$). The median price for one gram of heroin was \$400,

compared \$350 in 2019 ($p=0.656$) where it was one of the lowest price points observed over the course of monitoring.

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years, with 63% of participants reporting recent use in 2020 (68% in 2019, $p=0.580$). The most common form of methamphetamine used was crystal (used by 63% in 2020) and has remained the most common form of methamphetamine used in QLD since 2011. The median price per point reported for crystal increased significantly to \$75 (\$50 in 2019, $p<0.001$), after remaining stable for the previous five years. Likewise, the median price per gram of crystal was reported to be \$500, a significant increase from \$300 in 2019 ($p<0.001$), after remaining stable for the previous four years.

Cocaine

Nineteen per cent of the QLD sample had recently consumed cocaine, compared to 10% in 2019 ($p=0.089$), on a median of three days (IQR=1-6), remaining stable compared to three days (IQR=2-5) in 2019 ($p=0.647$). Among participants who had recently used cocaine, the most frequent routes of administration in 2020 were snorting (95%) and injecting (21%), compared to 73% ($p=0.249$) and 64% ($p=0.047$) in 2019, respectively.

Cannabis

Recent use of cannabis has remained relatively stable over recent years, with 64% of QLD participants reporting recent use in 2020, compared to 65% in 2019. Around one-third of recent consumers reported using cannabis daily (30%) and 98% of participants who had recently used cannabis reported smoking it. Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (94%), followed by bush cannabis (44%). Almost half (44%) of recent

consumers perceived hydroponic cannabis to be 'easy' to obtain, compared to 35% in 2019 ($p=0.474$).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Use of all forms of pharmaceutical opioids has remained stable or significantly declined in Queensland since monitoring of each opioid began. In 2020, the most common non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioid used was morphine (21%), followed by buprenorphine-naloxone (15%) and oxycodone (15%).

Other Drugs

NPS use was uncommon; low numbers ($n\leq 5$) reported recent use in 2020 (8% in 2019; $p=0.534$). Non-prescribed benzodiazepines were used by 30% of the QLD sample. Alcohol and tobacco use has remained consistently high over the period of monitoring in 2020, with 51% and 87% reporting recent use of alcohol and tobacco, respectively. Of recent tobacco consumers, 89% reported daily use.

Drug-Related Harms and Associated Behaviours

Almost one-quarter (24%) of the QLD sample in 2020 reported overdosing on any drug in the preceding year, most commonly heroin. Over two-fifths (43%) of participants reported reusing their own needles. Furthermore, 8% of participants engaged in receptive sharing and 7% engaged in distributive sharing. Almost half (47%) of QLD participants reported that they were currently in some form of drug treatment. Over half (56%) the sample self-reported that they had experienced a mental health problem in the preceding six months, similar to 2019 (49%, $p=0.348$). Rates of self-reported criminal activity remained stable, with the most common crimes engaged in including drug dealing (30%) and property crime (26%).