

Executive Summary

The Northern Territory (NT) 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 greater Darwin, Northern Territory. 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 2021 between 7 June and 23 June, and interviews were delivered face-to-face. During this time, interstate travel was restricted due to COVID-19, while movement within Darwin was unrestricted.

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample from the NT in 2021 (N=94) was consistent with the NT profile in previous years, whereby 65% identified as male (63% in 2020) with a mean age of 45 years (44 years in 2020; $p=0.691$). Sexual identity significantly changed between 2020 and 2021 ($p=0.023$), with more participants identifying as heterosexual (77%; 93% in 2020) and bisexual (19%; 7% in 2020). The majority (91%) of participants reported having received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview (96% in 2020), and the current median income per week significantly decreased, from \$500 in 2020 to \$384 in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Drug of choice remained stable from 2020 ($p=0.142$) with 57% nominating methamphetamine as their drug of choice (67% in 2020). The drug injected most often also remained stable ($p=0.227$), with 63% reporting methamphetamine as the drug injected most often (72% in 2020).

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. In 2021, 28% of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the 12 months prior to interview, while no participants had been

diagnosed with the virus. Most of the sample, (77%) were 'not at all' concerned about contracting COVID-19. Nine per cent had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine by the time of interview.

Heroin

As in 2020, few participants ($n\leq 5$) reported recent use of heroin, therefore, these data are suppressed.

Methamphetamine

Almost eight-in-ten participants reported recent methamphetamine use (76%), stable relative to 2020 (83%). As in 2020, few ($n\leq 5$) participants reported recent use of methamphetamine powder or base. Crystal continued to be the most commonly used form of methamphetamine (74%), stable relative to 2020 (83%), though a significant increase was observed in daily use (26%; 11% in 2020; $p=0.044$). The price of a point of methamphetamine crystal significantly decreased, from \$200 in 2020 to \$100 in 2021 ($p<0.001$). Perceived purity and perceived availability significantly changed between 2020 and 2021 ($p<0.001$, respectively), with more participants perceiving purity to be 'high' (29%; 7% in 2020) and 85% perceiving availability to be 'easy' or 'very easy' ($n\leq 5$ in 2020).

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine remained low and stable among the NT sample ($n\leq 5$; 6% in 2020), therefore, these data are suppressed.

Cannabis

Fifty-nine per cent of the sample reported recent cannabis use (60% in 2020), with hydroponic being the most common form in 2021 (98%; 94% in 2020). No participants reported using bush cannabis in the six months prior to interview, a significant decrease from 15% reporting recent use in 2020 ($p=0.011$). No market changes were observed for hydroponic cannabis between 2020 and 2021. The price of a gram of hydroponic cannabis remained stable at \$30, with the majority of those commenting reporting 'high' purity (62%;

55% in 2020), as well as being 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain by the majority (94%) of the sample (74% in 2020).

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Morphine remained the most commonly used pharmaceutical opioid in the NT sample, with 36% reporting non-prescribed use in the six months prior to interview (32% in 2020). Median days of use remained stable at 72 days (75 days in 2020) in the past six months. The median price for 100mg of morphine significantly decreased, from \$150 in 2020 to \$120 in 2021 ($p < 0.001$). Perceived availability of non-prescribed morphine significantly changed between 2020 and 2021 ($p < 0.001$), with far fewer participants perceiving it as 'easy' to obtain in 2021 (47%; $n \leq 5$ in 2020) and in contrast, 10% reporting it 'very difficult' to obtain in 2021 (46% in 2020). A smaller percentage reported recent use of non-prescribed methadone (10%; $n \leq 5$ in 2020), whilst few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported recent non-prescribed use of other pharmaceutical opioids, including oxycodone, buprenorphine, buprenorphine-naloxone, fentanyl, tapentadol and tramadol.

Other Drugs

No participants reported recent use of NPS, and few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported recent use of GHB/GBL/1,4-BD and e-cigarettes. Recent non-prescribed benzodiazepine use was reported by 9% of participants in 2021 (12% in 2020). Pharmaceutical stimulants and pregabalin use remained low and stable at 6%, respectively (10% in 2020; 8% in 2020; respectively). Recent use of tobacco (91%; 91% in 2020) remained stable in 2021, as did recent use of alcohol (50%; 56% in 2020), though the frequency of use of alcohol significantly decreased from a median of 180 days in 2020 to 48 days in 2021 ($p = 0.038$). Daily use of alcohol, among those who reported recent use, also significantly decreased, from 55% in 2020 to 32% in 2021 ($p = 0.049$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

In 2021, 100% of the NT sample reported using one or more drugs on the day preceding interview. Consistent with previous years, few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the previous 12 months. In 2021, 45% of the sample had heard of naloxone (49% in 2020) and one-third (34%) had heard of naloxone take-home programs (45% in 2020). Thirteen per cent had ever been trained in naloxone administration, stable from 13% in 2020. Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe (9% in 2020) and few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported distributive sharing in the past month (12% in 2020). A significant decrease was observed, however, in the percentage of participants sharing other equipment, from 27% in 2020 to $n \leq 5$ in 2021 ($p < 0.001$). Fourteen per cent of the sample reported that they had re-used their own needles in the past month, stable from 22% in 2020. Few participants ($n \leq 5$) reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month. One-tenth (11%) were currently in any drug treatment, stable relative to 2020 (8%). Twenty-seven per cent reported that they had received a hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year (36% in 2020) and almost one-quarter (23%) of the sample had received an RNA test in the past year (31% in 2020). Seven per cent reported having a current HCV infection. Self-reported mental health problems remained stable in 2021 (21%; 32% in 2020), with depression (70%) and anxiety (45%) remaining the most common problems. Almost one-quarter (24%) of the sample reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit drug in the last six months. No participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the content and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia. Eighteen per cent of participants reported engaging in 'any' crime in the past month in 2021, stable from 10% in 2020, with property crime (13%) and drug dealing (10%) being the most common crimes reported.