

Executive Summary

The Melbourne, 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 from April to July in 2022. Interviews in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission; all interviews prior to 2020 were conducted face-to-face. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2022 samples and those from previous samples.**

Sample Characteristics

The EDRS sample (N=100) recruited from Melbourne, VIC, was similar to the sample in 2021 and in previous years. The sample continued to predominantly comprise young men (52%) with a median age of 25 (IQR=22–28), most of whom held tertiary qualifications (62%) and were living in a rental house/flat (69%) or residing with their parents/at their family home (26%) at the time of interview. Drug of choice remained stable in 2022, with cannabis and cocaine nominated as the main drugs of choice (20% and 19%, respectively). There was a significant difference in the drug used most often in the past month in 2022 compared to 2021 ($p<0.001$). Specifically, there were fewer participants who nominated alcohol and cannabis as the substances used most often (26%; 45% in 2021; 22%; 36% in 2021, respectively). Weekly or more frequent use of ecstasy, cannabis, methamphetamine and cocaine remained stable between 2021 and 2022.

Ecstasy

In 2022, 90% of the sample reported use of 'any' ecstasy in the six months prior to interview, a percentage comparable to recent years (95% in 2021). Frequency of use also remained stable, with median days of 'any' ecstasy use at seven days in 2022. Four-fifths (82%) reported that

their last ecstasy capsule contained the crystalline form ('crystal'), whilst 19% reported that it contained the powder form. The price of capsules increased significantly from \$20 in 2021 to \$25 in 2022 ($p<0.001$). The perceived availability of pills and capsules declined significantly between 2021 and 2022 ($p=0.031$ and $p=0.010$, respectively): more participants perceived availability to be 'difficult' in 2022 (49%; 24% in 2021, 48%; 23% in 2021, respectively). The perceived purity of crystal also changed significantly between 2021 and 2022 ($p=0.031$), with more participants perceiving purity as 'low' (26%; n≤5 in 2021).

Methamphetamine

Almost half (49%) of the sample reported any past six month use of methamphetamine in 2022, stable from 2021, with the majority (45% of the total sample) having used methamphetamine powder in the past six months (36% in 2021). Sixteen per cent of those who reported recent use reported weekly or more frequent use, stable from 2021. Frequency of use of crystal methamphetamine also remained stable at a median of 3 days. The vast majority of participants (90%) who reported crystal methamphetamine use reported smoking this form.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine has increased over the years of monitoring, with 91% of the sample reporting recent use – the highest recorded percentage over the years of the EDRS. Frequency of reported use remained stable compared to previous years, at six days, with 9% of participants who reported recent use reporting weekly or more frequent use. The median price of a gram of cocaine was reported as \$350 in 2022, stable compared to previous years.

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid Related Products

At least 80% of participants have reported recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid related products each year since monitoring commenced. Eighty-two per cent of participants reported recent use in 2022, stable from 2021. Weekly or more frequent use amongst those who reported recent non-

prescribed cannabis use remained stable at 60%, as did daily use (15%). Significantly fewer participants in 2022 reported use of non-prescribed bush cannabis (37%; 63% in 2021; $p=0.003$).

Ketamine, LSD and DMT

Relative to 2021, the percentages of the sample reporting recent use of ketamine, LSD, and DMT remained stable in 2022. Most of the sample (88%) reported recent use of ketamine, with 57% and 18% reporting recent use of LSD and DMT, respectively. Frequency of use of ketamine increased significantly to a median of 10 days in 2022 (6 days in 2021; $p=0.020$). There was a significant difference in the perceived availability of ketamine from 2021 to 2022 ($p<0.001$), with fewer participants reporting it to be 'very easy' to obtain in 2022 (15%; 52% in 2021). The median frequency of use of both LSD and DMT remained low in 2022 (3 days and 2 days, respectively).

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)

Sixteen per cent reported recent use of any NPS (including plant-based NPS) in 2022. Any substance of the 2C class was the most frequently reported NPS used in 2022 (9%).

Other Drugs

Reports of recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes significantly increased from 54% in 2021 to 71% in 2022 ($p=0.020$). Two-thirds (64%) of the sample reported recent use of non-prescribed pharmaceutical stimulants and hallucinogenic mushrooms, respectively, and 47% reported recent use of non-prescribed benzodiazepines, stable relative to 2021.

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

Most participants (87%) reported concurrent use of two or more drugs on the last occasion of ecstasy or other drug use, most commonly stimulants and depressants. Three-fifths (58%) of participants reported ever having tested the contents of their illicit drugs in Australia, with 40% doing so in the past year, most commonly using colorimetric or reagent test kits (91%). Hazardous alcohol use remained common, with 76% of the sample scoring above the hazardous range in the Alcohol Use Disorders

Identification Test (AUDIT). Twelve per cent reported a non-fatal stimulant overdose, and 22% a non-fatal depressant overdose (including alcohol), in the past year. Few participants reported past month injecting drug use in 2022, and small numbers ($n\leq 5$) reported receiving drug treatment. Three-quarters (76%) reported engaging in some form of sexual activity in the past four weeks, of whom 21% reported penetrative sex without a condom where they did not know the HIV status of their partner. Significantly fewer participants reported that they had used alcohol and/or other drugs before or during sexual activity in the previous month in 2022 (84%; 95% in 2021; $p=0.036$). Two-thirds (64%) 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 identified were anxiety (71%), depression (67%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Of those who had driven in the past six months and commented ($n=70$), 26% reported having driven a motor vehicle while over (what they perceived to be) the legal blood-alcohol limit, while 45% reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed substance (most commonly cannabis). Thirty-eight per cent of participants reported 'any' crime in the past month in 2022, with property crime reported as the main form of self-reported criminal activity in 2022 (28%), followed by drug dealing (23%). The most popular means of arranging the purchase of illicit drugs remained social networking applications (84%), followed by face-to-face (56%). Almost all (96%) participants reported obtaining illicit drugs face-to-face. Almost all (97%) of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the 12 months preceding interview in 2022, with 79% reporting having been diagnosed with COVID-19. Most (72%) reported that they were 'not at all' worried about contracting COVID-19, and almost all (98%) reported that they had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine (median of three doses).