

Executive Summary

The IDRS sample is a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs ≥ 6 days in the preceding six months and resided in Perth, Western Australia (WA). Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle and syringe programs, pharmacies providing Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT), 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 June 2023. In Perth, WA, interviews in 2020 and 2021 were delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone, while in 2022, they were only conducted via telephone to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. In 2023, they were again delivered face-to-face as well as via telephone. This methodological change should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020-2023 samples relative to previous years.**

Sample Characteristics

The IDRS sample recruited from Perth, WA in 2023 (N=99) was fairly consistent with the Perth profile in previous years, whereby two thirds (65%) were male, with a median age of 46 years. The majority (89%) of the sample were unemployed at the time of interview, and most (94%) had received a government pension/allowance or benefit in the month prior to interview. The median income per week remained stable, from \$370 in 2022 to \$395 in 2023. However, there were some differences in terms of sexual identities reported in 2022 and 2023 ($p=0.009$) with an increase in the number of participants who reported being heterosexual (90%; 78% in 2022), and a decrease in the number of participants who reported being bisexual ($n \leq 5$; 17% in 2022). Participants typically nominated heroin as their drug of choice in 2023 (55%), followed by methamphetamine (38%). Methamphetamine was the drug injected most

often in the past month (51%), followed by heroin (46%).

Heroin

After a steady resurgence in recent (i.e., past six month) heroin use up until 2016, a downward trend has been observed since 2017. However, the percentage of respondents who reported recent use of heroin has remained stable between 2022 (59%) and 2023 (64%). Perceived purity and availability of heroin remained stable between 2022 and 2023, while there was an increase in the median price of one point of heroin from \$100 in 2022 to \$150 in 2023 ($p=0.022$).

Methamphetamine

Recent use of any methamphetamine has fluctuated over the years, showing a general downward trend since monitoring began until 2009, which was followed by an upward trend since 2012, with four fifths (79%) reporting recent use in 2023. The use of base and powder methamphetamine has decreased throughout the years which was driven by an increase in the use of crystal methamphetamine (79% in 2023), the most commonly used form since 2011 in Perth. Two thirds (65%) among participants that reported recent use reported weekly or more frequent use of any methamphetamine in 2023. The perceived purity and availability of crystal and powder methamphetamine remained stable between 2022 and 2023. However, the reported median price of crystal methamphetamine decreased from \$100 for one point in 2022 to \$80 in 2023 ($p<0.001$).

Cocaine

Similar to previous years, in 2023, cocaine use amongst people who inject drugs in Perth was infrequent and sporadic. Recent use of cocaine remained stable at 21% (12% in 2022), on a median of two days (2 days in 2022).

Cannabis and/or Cannabinoid-Related Products

Recent use of non-prescribed cannabis and/or cannabinoid-related products remained stable, with two third (66%) of participants reporting recent use in 2023 (60% in 2022). Hydroponic cannabis remained the form most commonly used (98%), followed by bush cannabis (36%). Smoking remained the most common route of administration in 2023 (100%), while there was a significant decrease in the number of participants who reported inhaling/vaporising ($n \leq 5$) as their route of administration in 2023 (25% in 2022; $p=0.013$). Perceived purity, availability, and price of hydroponic/bush cannabis remained stable between 2022 and 2023.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Recent use of all forms of pharmaceutical opioids remained stable in 2023, though an overall downward trend was observed since monitoring of each opioid first began. No significant differences in terms of non-prescribed recent use, nor frequency of use, were observed for methadone, buprenorphine tablet, buprenorphine-naloxone, morphine, oxycodone, codeine, tapentadol or tramadol between 2022 and 2023. However, there was a significant increase in the frequency of recent use of any (prescribed or non-prescribed) fentanyl between 2022 ($n \leq 5$) and 2023 (13%; $p=0.040$).

Other Drugs

Recent use of use of any NPS remained stable between 2022 (7%) and 2023 (12%). No significant differences in terms of non-prescribed recent use nor frequency of use were observed for benzodiazepines (including alprazolam), pharmaceutical stimulants, antipsychotics, pregabalin, Unisom, or gabapentin between 2022 and 2023. Alcohol use has been trending downward over the course of monitoring (64% in 2023; 80% in

2000), while tobacco use has remained consistently high but stable over the period of monitoring, with 87% reporting recent use in 2023 (89% in 2022). Furthermore, there was an increase in the recent use of non-prescribed e-cigarettes (54%; 24% in 2022; $p<0.001$). There was also an increase in the frequency of non-prescribed use of e-cigarettes in 2023 (150 days, 30 days in 2022; $p=0.046$).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Behaviours

- In 2023, 65% of the national IDRS sample reported using two or more drugs (excluding tobacco and e-cigarettes) on the day preceding interview.
- Seventeen per cent of participants reported experiencing a non-fatal overdose in the 12 months preceding interview on any drug (18% in 2022), with 14% reporting a past year non-fatal opioid overdose (15% in 2022).
- There was an increase in the number of respondents who reported having accessed naloxone in the last year, from 45% in 2022 to 63% in 2023 ($p=0.015$), and having been trained in naloxone administration in the last year from 29% in 2022 to 44% in 2023 ($p=0.042$). There was also an increase in the number of participants who reported that they had ever resuscitated someone using naloxone, from 29% in 2022 to 44% in 2023 ($p=0.043$).
- In 2023, 11% of participants reported receptive sharing of a needle or syringe (14% in 2022) and 13% reported distributive sharing in the past month (17% in 2022).
- Two fifths (41%) of the sample reported experiencing injection-related problems in the past month (31% in 2022), with an increase in the number of participants who reported having

- experienced a blood clot near the surface of the skin from 6% in 2022 to 16% in 2023 ($p=0.024$).
- Almost half (48%) of the sample reported being in any drug treatment for their substance use (40% in 2022), with methadone continuing to be the most common treatment received in 2023 (31%; 24% in 2022).
 - Fifty-six percent of participants scored five or above on the Severity of Dependence Scale (60% in 2022), indicating possible dependence relating to opioids, and 42% scored four or above (52% in 2022), indicating possible dependence relating to methamphetamine.
 - Half of participants in 2023 (51%) reported that they had received a Hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test in the past year (43% in 2022), while 48% had received a PCR or RNA test (39% in 2022). Almost two fifths (38%) of the sample reported they had been tested for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in the past six months (25% in 2022).
 - Self-reported mental health problems in the past six months remained stable in 2023 (52%; 46% in 2022). The two most commonly reported problems were depression (73%; 66% in 2022) and anxiety (43%; 64% in 2022).
 - Most participants (89%) reported accessing any health service for alcohol and/or drug (AOD) support in the six months preceding interview in 2023 (92% in 2022). Primary services reported by participants for AOD support in 2023 were peer based harm reduction services (57%; 53% in 2022), followed by GPs (45%; 37% in 2022), NSPs (42%; 68% in 2022; $p<0.001$), and drug and alcohol counsellors (17%; 24% in 2022).
 - Fifty-four per cent of the sample reported experiencing stigma in any setting in the six months preceding interview. These experiences of stigma most commonly occurred when visiting a general health care service (36%; 23% in 2022).
 - Sixty-nine per cent of those who had driven recently reported driving within three hours of consuming an illicit or non-prescribed drug in the past six months (81% in 2022) and 12% reported driving while over the perceived legal limit of alcohol (13% in 2022).
 - In 2023, 15% of participants reported that they or someone else had ever tested the contents and/or purity of their illicit drugs in Australia (21% in 2022), with 9% reporting doing so in the past year (9% in 2022).
 - Fifteen per cent of participants reported being the victim of a crime involving violence (13% in 2022).
 - In 2023, 96% of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 in the last 12 months (87% in 2022) and 94% reported that they had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose by the time of interview (91% in 2022).