

Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats' (ADAPT) Study Wave 3

BACKGROUND

What are the aims of the ADAPT Study?

The Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT) Study is exploring the **short and long-term impacts** of the **COVID-19 pandemic** on the experiences of **Australians who use illicit drugs**. Findings will be used to ensure drug-related issues during COVID-19 are better understood and more accurately represented, so as to better inform **drug treatment and harm reduction in Australia**.

What does the ADAPT Study involve?

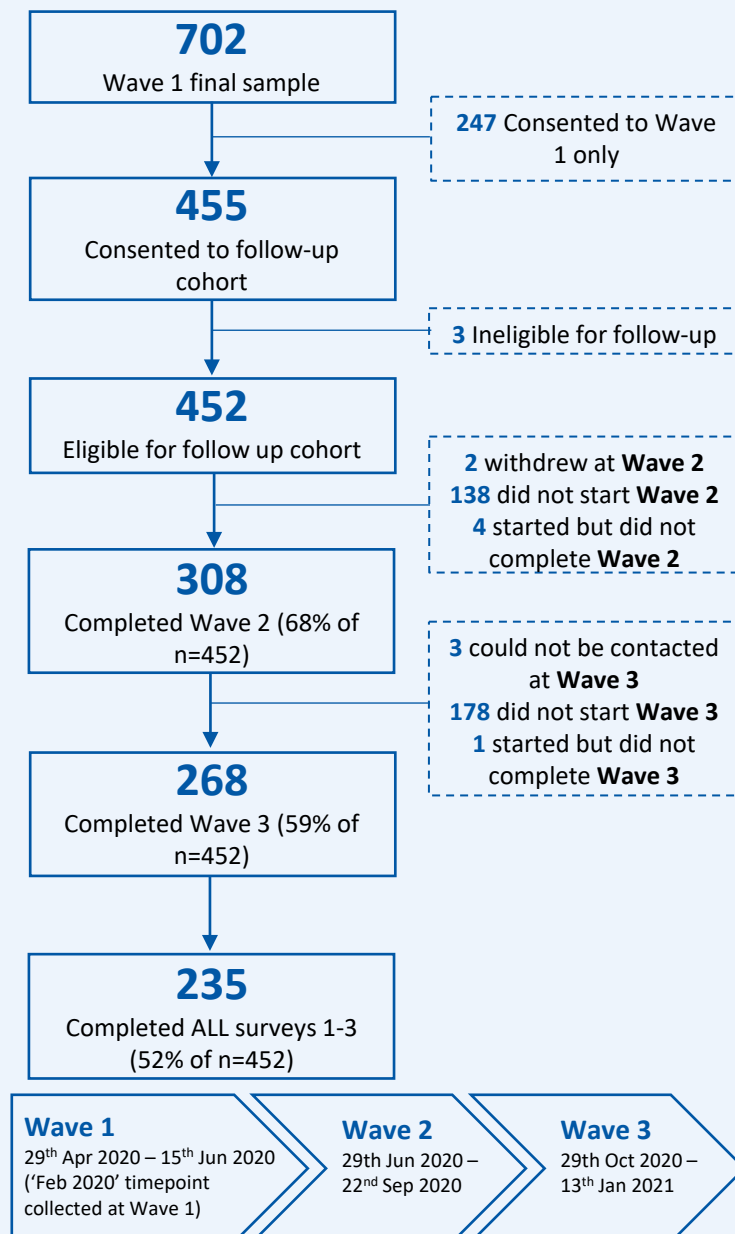
Australians who regularly (i.e. at least once a month) used illicit drugs in 2019 were invited to complete an **online survey** initially and follow-up surveys in **2-months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years** and **3 years**. Participants could opt to complete the **Wave 1** survey only.

At **Wave 3**, the ADAPT Study had a **59%** follow-up rate (**268** participants completed their **Wave 3 survey** from the **452** included in the cohort).

About this bulletin:

This bulletin outlines preliminary findings from the **235** participants who **completed ALL surveys** from **Waves 1-3**.

FLOW CHART



Citation: Sutherland, R., Baillie, G., Memedovic, S., Hammoud, M., Barratt, M., Bruno, R., Dietze, P., Ezard, N., Salom, C., Degenhardt, L., Hughes, C. & Peacock, A. (2021). Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT)' Study Wave 3. ADAPT Bulletin no. 3. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

WAVE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF COHORT PARTICIPANTS

The below table presents a comparison of those who completed **ALL surveys** (i.e. **Wave 1-3**) and those who did not among the cohort follow up sample. These two groups were mostly similar with the exception that the former group were significantly **older** and slightly **more likely to have completed tertiary/university qualification** compared to the latter; this should be considered in all interpretation of findings. (Note that apart from *p* values presented in the table below, no further statistical analyses have been undertaken and all further bulletin results are descriptive only.)

	Invited and completed ALL surveys 1-3 (n=235)	Invited but did not complete ALL surveys 1-3 (n=217)	<i>p</i> value for differences between groups*
Median age (IQR)	27 (IQR=22-38)	24 (IQR=21-28)	.003
Gender % (n)			
Women	48.7% (113)	45.1% (97)	.898
Men	47.4% (110)	49.8% (107)	
Non-binary	3.9% (9)	5.1% (11)	
Sexual orientation % (n)			
Heterosexual	57.8% (130)	57.5% (122)	.961
LGBQ+	42.2% (95)	42.5% (90)	
Completed tertiary/university qualification % (n)	66.1% (154)	60.4% (131)	.208
Area % (n)			
Capital city	77.8% (182)	75.0% (162)	.488
Regional/rural/remote	22.2% (52)	25.0% (54)	
Jurisdiction % (n)			
NSW	30.2% (71)	32.3% (70)	.740
VIC	30.2% (71)	24.9% (54)	
QLD	17.0% (40)	21.7% (47)	
WA	7.7% (18)	7.8% (17)	
SA	7.7% (18)	5.1% (11)	
ACT	3.0% (7)	3.2% (7)	
TAS	3.0% (7)	4.1% (9)	
NT	1.3% (3)	0.9% (2)	
Frequency of illicit drug use in 2019 % (n)			
Daily	29.8% (70)	28.1% (60)	.659
≥ weekly < daily	43.8% (103)	41.5% (90)	
> Monthly < weekly	14.5% (34)	18.9% (41)	
Monthly	11.9% (28)	11.5% (25)	
W1 Drug of choice % (n)			
Cannabis	40.6% (95)	38.9% (84)	.320
MDMA	12.0% (28)	14.4% (31)	
Methamphetamine	7.7% (18)	8.8% (19)	
Alcohol	7.3% (17)	9.7% (21)	
Cocaine	6.8% (16)	9.3% (20)	

IQR: Interquartile range. **p* value of <0.05 indicates that there is a significant difference between the two groups.



ADAPT STUDY

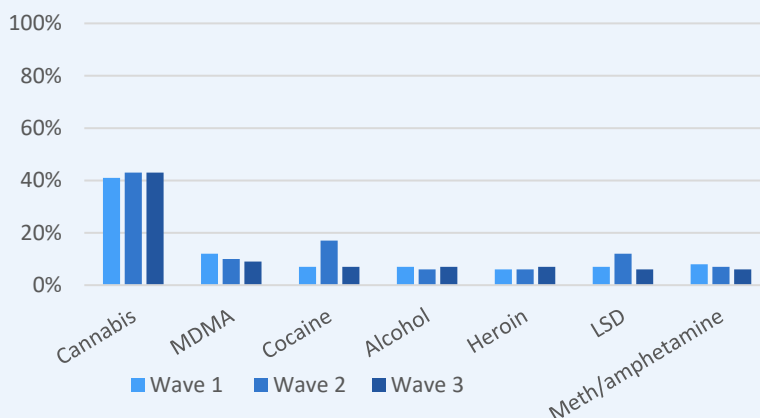
Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

DRUG USE

Cannabis remained the most common drug of choice at **Wave 3** (43% - stable from **Wave 2**, vs 41% at **Wave 1**), followed by **MDMA** (12%, vs 10% at **Wave 2** and 9% at **Wave 1**).

At **Wave 3**, 15% of participants reported that their **drug of choice** had changed from **Wave 1** (vs 12% at **Wave 2**).

Drug of choice



Most commonly used drugs in the past four weeks

Alcohol (89%, 86%, 84%, 85%), cannabis (74%, 75%, 73%, 68%) and tobacco (45%, 52%, 56%, 55%) were the main substances used in the past four weeks at each time point (percentages refer to Feb 2020 and Waves 1, 2, 3 respectively). At **Wave 3**, **e-cigarettes** (26%) were the fourth most commonly used substance, overtaking **MDMA** (24%) for the first time.

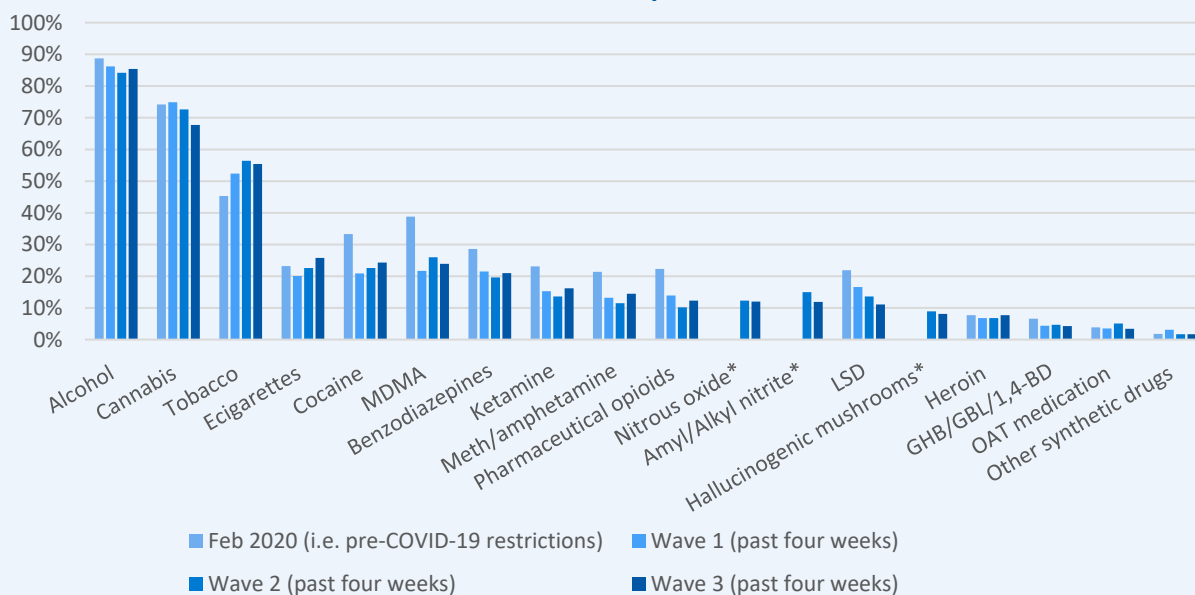
COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

Almost

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of participants have been tested for COVID-19 (48%), with <1% testing positive

Substance use in the past four weeks



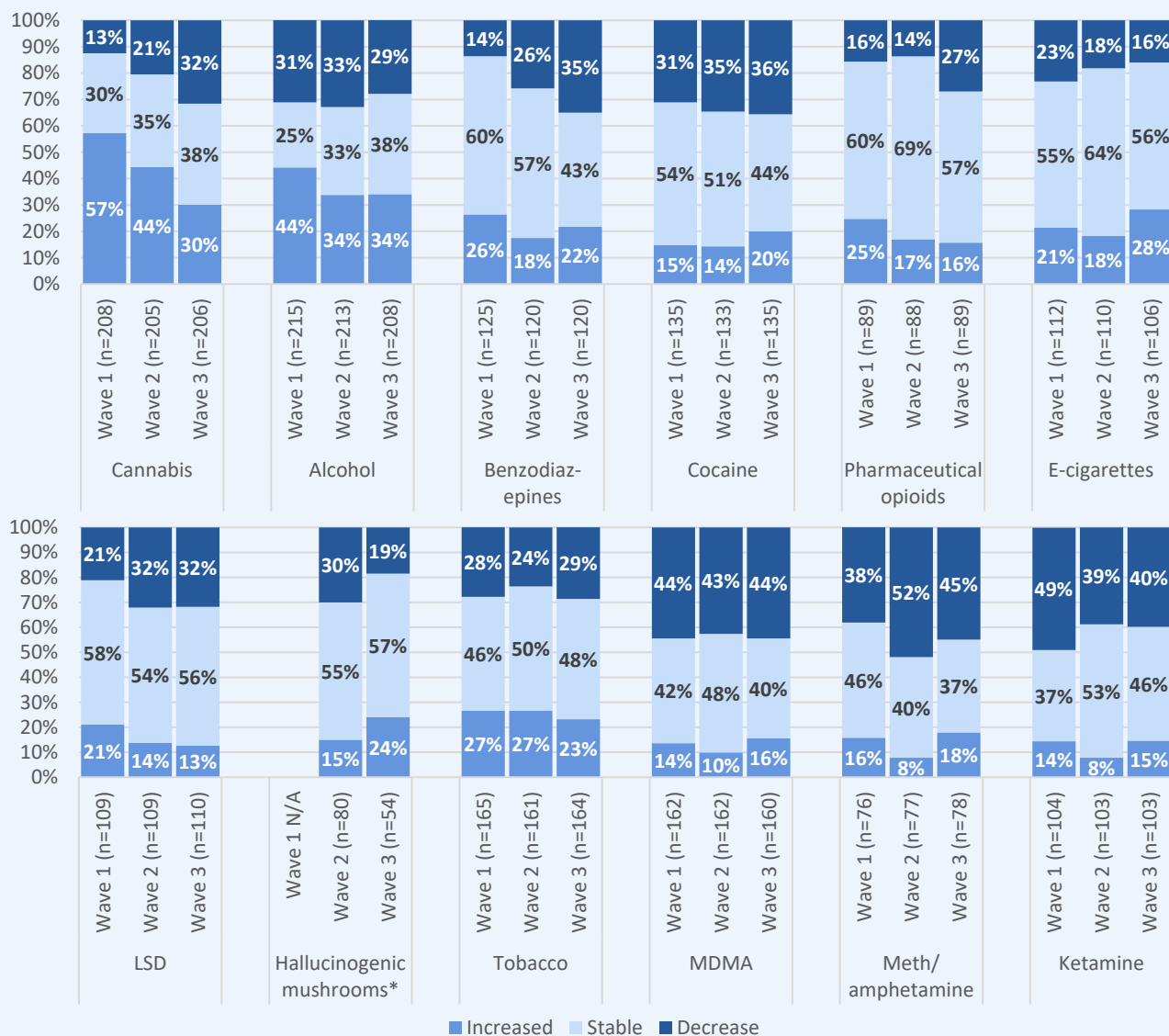
*Options added at Wave 2 survey. OAT: opioid agonist therapy. Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines. 'Feb 2020' data was collected at Wave 1 and is not a separate timepoint



ADAPT STUDY

Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

Waves 1 – 3 Perceived changes in past-month drug use compared to before March 2020



Note: *Response option added at Wave 2 survey. Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines. Not all substances displayed. Response options 'Don't know' and 'Skip' were excluded from analyses so 'n' may differ across waves.

Wave 1 survey asked about changes in drug use from the beginning of March 2020 compared to before, while Wave 2-3 surveys asked about changes in past month drug use as compared to before March 2020.

Perceived Changes in Substance Use

Cannabis (57%, 44%, 30%) and **alcohol** (44%, 34%, 34%) remained the substances with the largest proportions of participants reporting at each wave that their use had **increased in the past four weeks** as compared to before (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020).

MDMA (44%, 43%, 44%) and **meth/amphetamine** (38%, 52%, 45%) continued to have the largest proportions of reported **decreased use** over this time period, while non-prescribed **pharmaceutical opioids** (60%, 69%, 57%) and **e-cigarettes** (55%, 64%, 56%) had the largest proportions reporting use as **stable**. (Percentages refer to **Waves 1, 2, 3** respectively).

Waves 1 – 3 Perceived availability of substances in the past four weeks



Note: Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines
Data not presented for substances where <20 participants answered at each wave

Perceived availability

Most drugs were reported as 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain across **Waves 1-3**, with no major changes across waves. The exception was the perceived availability of **meth/amphetamine**, which saw a spike in being 'very difficult' to obtain at **Wave 2** (31%, vs 15% at **Wave 1**), which then sharply decreased at **Wave 3** (8%) (although small numbers mean these figures must be interpreted with caution).

OBTAINING AND RECEIVING



At **Wave 3**, there was a small increase in the percentage of participants who received their drugs in person in the past four weeks (**76%**, vs **71%** at **Wave 2**, **69%** at **Wave 1**), although this was still less than pre-COVID-19 restrictions (**Feb 2020**, **81%**).



The proportion of participants who had their illicit drugs delivered to them in the past four weeks has varied between waves: **Feb 2020** (**40%**), **Wave 1** (**47%**), **Wave 2** (**37%**), **Wave 3** (**40%**).



A relatively small proportion of participants reported that they **grew/made own drugs** at **Wave 3** (**4%**), stable from previous waves (**6%** at **Wave 2**, **5%** at **Wave 1**, **4%** in **Feb 2020**).

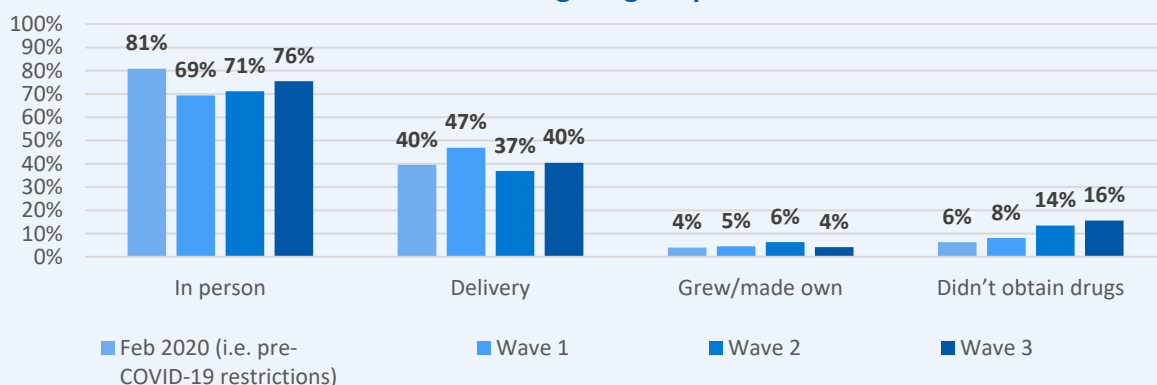


The proportion of participants who did not obtain illicit drugs in the past month continued to increase at **Wave 3** (**16%**, vs **14%** at **Wave 2**, **8%** at **Wave 1** and **6%** in **Feb 2020**).



At **Wave 3**, **6%** reported purchasing their drugs online in the past four weeks (using surface websites or dark-web markets), stable from **Wave 2** (**7%**) and **Wave 1** (**5%**).

Methods of receiving drugs in past four weeks



Note: 'Feb 2020' data was collected at Wave 1 and is not a separate timepoint

DRUG USE BEHAVIOURS



12% reported **injecting** any drug in the past four weeks (vs **10%** at **Wave 2**, **9%** at **Wave 1**).



59% reported that they had **used drugs alone** in the past four weeks; a slight decrease from **Wave 2** (**65%**) and **Wave 1** (**66%**).

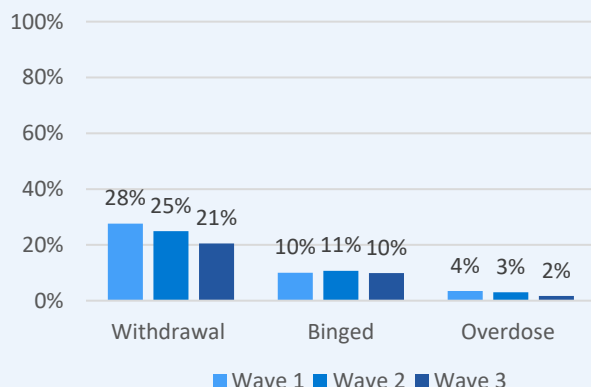


At **Wave 3**, **11%** of participants reported attending a **virtual night club/dance party** since the beginning of **March 2020**.



Of these, the largest proportion reported using **alcohol** (**72%**) and/or **cannabis** (**48%**), followed by **cocaine**, **MDMA** and **ketamine** (**16%**).

DRUG-RELATED HARMS



Participants reporting withdrawal symptoms in the past four weeks has decreased slightly across waves (28%, 25%, 21% at Waves 1, 2, 3 respectively). Among participants reporting withdrawal, the largest proportion continued to report withdrawing from cannabis (30%, 32%, 36% at Waves 1, 2, 3 respectively). The majority of these withdrawal episodes continue to be voluntary, however this proportion has decreased across waves (72%, 66%, 56% at Waves 1, 2, 3 respectively).

Note: 'Binged' defined as using drugs for ≥48 hours without sleep. 'Withdrawal' defined as experience of any of the following symptoms when stopped using drugs suddenly: difficulty sleeping, depression, anxiety, aches and pains, cravings, fatigue, hallucinations, nausea, being hot and cold, goosebumps, runny nose.

TREATMENT ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IN THE PAST FOUR WEEKS

Drug Treatment

Treatment engagement remained low:

6%

Had accessed drug treatment (stable from 6% in Wave 2, vs 4% in Wave 1)

1%

Tried but were unable to access drug treatment (vs 2% in Waves 1 & 2)

Mental Health Treatment

Accessing mental health services remained relatively common:

46%

Had accessed services (stable from 46% in Wave 2, vs 41% in Wave 1)

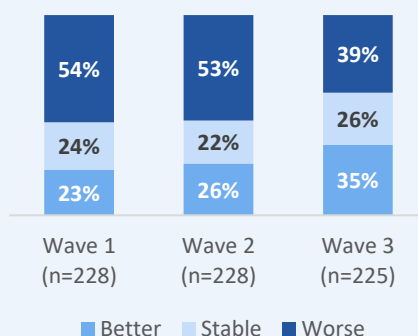
5%

Tried but were unable to access services (stable from 5% in Wave 2, vs 7% in Wave 1)

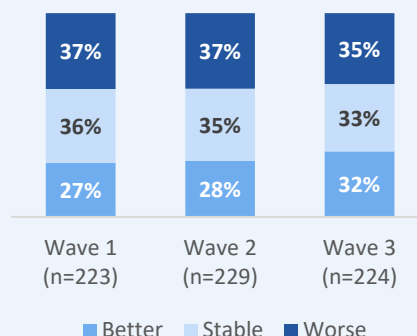
Ratings of perceived 'better' mental and physical health have increased slightly at Wave 3 (35% and 32%, respectively) compared to previous waves. However, those reporting 'worse' ratings still remained the highest proportion for both mental and physical health.

PERCEIVED CHANGES IN HEALTH RATINGS

Mental Health



Physical Health



Note: 'Perceived changes' are based on perceptions of current health as compared to before March 2020 (i.e. before COVID-19 restrictions)

SUMMARY

- Similar to previous waves, the ADAPT cohort participants who completed the Wave 3 survey comprised mostly young, well-educated capital city dwellers. Being a convenience sample, findings from the ADAPT study cannot be considered representative of all people that use drugs.
- Cannabis and alcohol continued to be the substances with the greatest proportion reporting perceived increased use in the past four weeks relative to before COVID-19 restrictions.
- However, there was considerable diversity in changes in consumption across individuals and drug types, highlighting the heterogeneity of experiences among people who use drugs.
- Perceived availability was reported as 'easy'/'very easy' for most drugs, however there was an increase in the perception of methamphetamine being 'very difficult' to obtain at Wave 2, which has since substantially reduced at Wave 3.
- The percentage of participants reporting that they had received drugs in person has steadily increased across Waves 1 – 3, likely due to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. There also continued to be a small increase in the percentage reporting not obtaining illicit drugs in the past month.
- Experience of drug-related harms remained relatively consistent across Waves 1 – 3.
- Ratings of perceived 'better' mental and physical health increased slightly at Wave 3. However, those reporting 'worse' ratings still remain the highest proportion for both mental and physical health.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The participants who contributed their valuable time to share their experiences.
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- All those who gave advice and shared information about the project.
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