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Key findings

- Younger participants were more likely to be female and have been in drug treatment for less than twelve months whilst older participants were more likely to have a prison history.
- Younger participants reported initiating injecting earlier than older participants.
- Patterns of drug use were similar, although younger participants were more likely to have ever used the more potent forms of methamphetamine, base and ice.
- Frequency of drug use was similar among the younger and older IDU, though younger participants reported using cannabis more frequently than older participants.
- Younger participants were more likely to report engaging in risk behaviours and harm associated with their drug use.
- Younger participants were also more likely to report a lifetime diagnosis of asthma, while older participants were more likely to report arthritis.

Examining differences between younger and older injecting drug users in the 2009 IDRS

Introduction

Participants of the 2009 Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) survey were regular injecting drug users (IDU) residing in the capital city of each state and territory. All participants in the survey were recruited using the same eligibility criteria. For more detail on the IDRS project and the 2009 National and Jurisdiction results refer to the NDARC website (<http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/NDARCWeb.nsf/page/Drug%20Trends>). This bulletin provides a closer look at the IDRS survey results, focusing on differences between younger and older participants.

Methods

The national 2009 data was split into two groups based on the median age of the national sample (37 years). The younger group comprised of participants between 18-36 years and the older group were between 37-63.

Results

An analysis of demographic data revealed some differences between the two groups (Table 1). The older participants were significantly more likely to be male than the younger participants (70% older IDU versus 59% younger IDU; OR=1.6; 95% CI 1.23, 2.15). Older participants were more likely to have a prison history (58% older IDU versus 48% younger IDU; OR=1.5; 95% CI 1.18, 2.02).

Similar proportions of younger and older participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and reported current unemployment. There were no differences between younger and older participants in their likelihood of being in some form of drug treatment, however younger participants

were more likely to have been in drug treatment for less than twelve months.

Table 1: Demographics

	Younger IDU <37 years n=438	Older IDU 37+ years n=442
Male (%)	59	70**
ATSI (%)	11	9
Unemployed (%)	76	81
Completed Yr 12 (%)	19	24
In drug treatment (%)	45	45
In drug treatment 12 mths or less (%)	46	32*
Prison history (%)	48	58***

* significant at p<0.001 ** significant at p<0.01 *** significant at p<0.05

Younger participants reported initiation of injecting an average of two years earlier than older participants (17.7 years versus 20.9 years, $t_{877}=-8.3$, $p<0.001$; Table 2). Both groups reported methamphetamines (speed, base and crystal) as the drug they had first injected followed by heroin. Heroin was reported by both groups as the drug of choice, however the older participants were more likely to report heroin as their drug of choice (60% older IDU versus 45% younger IDU; OR=1.8; 95% CI 1.41, 2.41) compared to younger participants. Consistent with drug of choice, both groups reported heroin as the drug injected most often in the last month, however the difference between younger and older groups was not significant.

Table 2: Drug use history

	Younger IDU <37 years n=438	Older IDU 37+ years n=442
Mean age first injected	18	21*
Drug first injected		
% heroin	41	44
% methamphetamine	48	48
% morphine	6	3
Drug of choice		
% heroin	45	60***
% methamphetamine	23	19
% morphine	8	8
% cannabis	9	4
Drug injected most in last mth		
% heroin	41	46
% methamphetamine	28	21
% morphine	13	18

* significant at p<0.005 ** significant at p<0.05

The majority of younger and older participants reported lifetime use of heroin, however older participants were significantly more likely to have used heroin (91% older IDU versus 86% younger IDU; OR=1.7; 95% CI 1.11, 2.56, Table 3). Recent heroin use (i.e in the past six months)

was similar among younger and older participants. Younger participants were more likely than older participants to have ever used the more potent forms of methamphetamine, base (50% older IDU versus 58% younger IDU; OR=0.7; 95% CI 0.56, 0.95) and ice (70% older IDU versus 79% younger IDU; OR=0.6; 95% CI 0.45, 0.83). Younger participants were more likely to have used base recently than older participants (24% older IDU versus 32% younger IDU; OR=0.7; 95% CI 0.50, 0.90).

Table 3: Patterns of recent drug use among younger and older participants

	Younger IDU <37 years n=438	Older IDU 37+ years n=442
Heroin		
% ever used	86	91*
% used last 6 months	63	66
Median days used	72	60
Speed		
% ever used	90	91
% used last 6 months	52	45*
Median days used	12	12
Base		
% ever used	58	50*
% used last 6 months	32	24**
Median days used	10	10
Crystal		
% ever used	79	70***
% used last 6 months	38	36
Median days used	8	6
Cocaine		
% ever used	60	73**
% used last 6 months	21	21
Median days used	4	5
Cannabis		
% ever used	95	95
% used last 6 months	79	74*
Median days used	180	100**
Illicit Benzodiazepines		
% ever used	60	59
% used last 6 months	47	42
Median days used	12	10
Illicit Methadone		
% ever used	48	49
% used last 6 months	24	21
Median days used	7	5
Illicit Buprenorphine		
% ever used	43	28***
% used last 6 months	22	14**
Median days used	9	12

*significant at p<0.05 ** significant at p<0.01 *** significant at p<0.001

Older participants were more likely to report lifetime use of cocaine (73% older IDU versus 60% younger IDU; OR=1.7; 95% CI 1.31, 2.31). There was no significant difference in

the proportions of younger and older participants who reported recent use.

There was no difference in the proportion who recently used cannabis (74% older IDU versus 79% younger IDU; OR=0.7; 95% CI 0.53, 1.0) although the median days of use was lower in younger participants (100 days: older IDU versus 180 days: younger IDU, $t_{644}=-2.8$, $p<0.01$).

There were also some differences in the use of illicit buprenorphine among younger and older participants. Younger participants were more likely to report ever using (28% older IDU versus 43% younger IDU; OR=0.52; 95% CI 0.40, 0.69) and recent use (14% older IDU versus 22% younger IDU; OR=0.6; 95% CI 0.41, 0.83) of illicit buprenorphine compared to older participants. Illicit use includes buying on the street or using a friend's/family member's prescribed medication.

Frequency of use was remarkably similar between the groups for most drugs.

The vast majority of participants had used drugs the day prior to interview (92% of younger and older IDU) although younger participants were more likely to have used drugs the day prior to interview (90% older IDU versus 94% younger IDU; OR=0.6; 95% CI 0.36, 0.96).

Similar proportions of younger and older participants reported sourcing heroin from street dealers, friends and known dealers (Table 4).

Table 4: Usual source heroin

	Younger IDU <37 years n=438	Older IDU 37+ years n=442
Mobile dealer	2	8
Street dealer	14	14
Known dealer	45	49
Friend	26	21
Unknown dealer	4	3

An analysis of problems associated with injecting drug use suggests that younger participants were significantly more likely to report that they had experienced a dirty hit (14% older IDU versus 23% younger IDU; OR=0.6; 95% CI 0.40, 0.80), borrowed needles (9% older IDU versus 17% younger IDU; OR=0.5; 95% CI 0.33, 0.82) and lent others their needles (13% older IDU versus 23% younger IDU; OR=0.5; 95% CI 0.36, 0.72). Younger participants were also

more likely to have committed a crime in the last month (38% older IDU versus 52% younger IDU; OR=0.6; 95% CI 0.43, 0.73) or to have been arrested in the previous twelve months (30% older IDU versus 42% younger IDU; OR=0.6; 95% CI 0.45, 0.78; Table 5).

Table 5: Self reported problems among younger and older participants

	Younger IDU <36 years n=435	Older IDU 37+ years n=440
Problems in the past month (%)		
Overdosed	5	4
Dirty hit	23	14**
Abscesses	7	10
Borrowed needles		
Lent needles	17	9**
Shared equipment	23	13**
Any crime		
Arrested in past year	39	35
Any mental health problem in past six months		
Attended a mental health professional in past six mths	52	38**
	42	30**
	46	42
	69	71

*significant at $p<0.05$ ** significant at $p<0.01$ *** significant at $p<0.001$

Similar proportions reported having had a mental health problem in the past six months or having attended a mental health professional for issues other than drug dependence.

In 2009, participants were asked whether they had gambled in the previous thirty days. There were no differences between younger or older participants in terms of gambling.

Participants in the IDRS were also asked whether they had ever been diagnosed with a range of physical conditions. A significantly lower proportion of older participants had ever been diagnosed with asthma (26% older IDU versus 33% younger IDU; OR=0.7; 95% CI 0.55, 0.98), however fewer younger participants had ever been diagnosed with gout, rheumatism or arthritis (15% older IDU versus 7% younger IDU; OR=2.3; 95% CI 1.45, 3.57; Table 6).

Table 6: Chronic physical conditions among younger and older participants

Ever diagnosed (%)	Younger IDU <36 years n=435	Older IDU 37+ years n=440
Asthma	33	26**
Cancer	6	6
Stroke	2	3
Heart/ circulatory conditions	11	13
Gout/ rheumatism/ arthritis	7	15*
Diabetes	2	4

*significant at $p<0.05$ ** significant at $p<0.01$ *** significant at $p<0.001$

Conclusions

There were differences and similarities identified in the 2009 National sample between younger and older IDU. Larger proportions of the younger participants were female and were more likely to have been in drug treatment for less than twelve months. Older participants were more likely to have a prison history.

The younger participants reported earlier initiation of drug use compared to the older participants. A larger proportion of older participants reported heroin as their drug of choice although both groups reported heroin as the drug injected most often in the last month. Reflecting changes in the drug market over time, younger participants were more likely to have ever used the more potent forms of methamphetamine, base and ice. Frequency of use was remarkably similar between the groups for most drugs, although younger participants reported more frequent use of cannabis.

There is some indication that younger users engage in more risky behaviours and report more harm associated with their drug use than older users. Younger participants were more likely to report lending needles, borrowing needles, committing crime in the past month and being arrested in the past twelve months. They were also more likely to report harms associated with drug use including experiencing a dirty hit. Harm reduction strategies targeting younger users are needed to address the higher rates of lending and borrowing needles.

There were more reports of a lifetime asthma diagnosis from younger participants and older participants were more likely to report ever being diagnosed with gout, rheumatism or arthritis, reflecting the changing patterns of chronic illness over time.

