



Authors: Jennifer Stafford and Lucy Burns,
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health & Ageing

Medicine

National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre

Key findings

- Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice for participants who inject drugs. Methamphetamine as the drug of choice significantly increased.
- Recent heroin use and frequency remained stable. The availability of heroin was 'very easy' and purity 'low'.
- Recent speed and base use remained stable, while ice/crystal significantly increased. The frequency of use for 'any form' of methamphetamine was higher in 2011. Overall all three forms were considered 'easy' to obtain. Ice/crystal was reported as 'high' in purity, speed 'low' and base 'medium'.
- NSW was the only jurisdiction where a sizeable number of participants were able to comment. Recent cocaine use and frequency in NSW was stable. Price remained stable. Availability was reported as 'easy' and purity as 'medium' or 'low'.
- The cannabis market remained stable. The use of cannabis remained common and frequency of use remained high, usually daily or near-daily. Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market. Price per gram varied by type. Hydroponic cannabis potency rated as 'high'.
- Extra-medical use and injection of pharmaceutical preparations continued to occur, with jurisdictional differences in patterns of use observed.
- Borrowing of needles was reported by one in ten participants in the month preceding interview. Sharing of injecting equipment was common but significantly lower in 2011. Over half of the participants re-used their own needles in the last month.
- Nearly half of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. The most common problem reported was depression, followed by anxiety. A significant increase in drug induced psychosis was reported in 2011.
- Nearly half of the national sample reported driving in the last six months. Over three-quarters drove after taking an illicit drug, mainly cannabis and heroin.
- Over one-third of the national sample reported a criminal activity in the last month, mainly drug dealing or property crime. Around one-third had been arrested in the last year.

Key findings from the 2011 IDRS: a survey of people who inject drugs

Introduction

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) monitors emerging trends in the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. In addition to a survey of people who inject drugs (PWID), the annual data collection also includes a survey of key experts (KE) who are professionals in the field of illicit drugs and the analysis of existing indicator data on drug-related issues. This is the eleventh year that all three components of the IDRS were conducted in every state and territory in Australia.

The key findings of the 2011 IDRS participant (PWID) surveys are presented in this bulletin. Regular PWID were recruited as they are considered a sentinel group able to provide information on a range of illicit drug trends and related issues. The information from the PWID survey is therefore not representative of illicit drug use in the general population, and is not representative of other people who use illicit drugs (e.g. in other geographical areas, occasional users, etc), but it is indicative of emerging trends that may warrant further monitoring and/or investigation.

Notes on interpretation:

- 'Recent' refers to the six months preceding interview
- 'Frequency' data refers to the number of days on which those participants had recently used the drug (maximum days = 180)
- ↑ Significant increase ($p > 0.05$) from previous year (2010) compared with current year (2011)
- ↓ Significant decrease ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2010) compared with current year (2011)

National Overview

Demographics

In 2011, a total of 868 participants were interviewed for the IDRS survey. The mean age of the sample was 38 years, ranging from 17-65 years. Around two-thirds of the sample was male. The majority were unemployed, with a mean income of \$414 per week. Nearly half of the sample reported having been currently in treatment (mainly methadone maintenance). Around half of the participants reported a prison history (Table 1).

Drug use patterns

Among the national sample the mean age of first injecting was 20 years (range 8-54 years). The main drug of choice and drug injected most often in the last month was heroin followed by methamphetamines and morphine. These results are similar to the 2010 IDRS; however any methamphetamine and ice/crystal as the main drug of choice and drug injected most often in the last month significantly increased between 2010 and 2011 ($P < 0.05$; Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the national sample, by jurisdiction, 2011

% National	National	
	2010 (N=902)	2011 (N=868)
Mean age (years)	38	38
Male (%)	65	66
Unemployed (%)	81	79
Mean income/ week (\$)	N=804 \$366	N=831 \$414
Prison history (%)	52	55
Currently in drug treatment (%)	47	49
Mean age first injected	20	20
Drug of choice (%)		
Heroin	54	53
Speed	10	10
Base	2	1
Ice/crystal	4	9↑
Any methamphetamine [#]	16	20↑
Morphine	10	9
Oxycodone	2	2
Methadone	2	2
Cocaine	3	2
Cannabis	8	7
Drug injected most often in last month (%)		
Heroin	43	42
Speed	10	12
Base	4	2
Ice/crystal	5	11↑
Any methamphetamine [#]	19	26↑
Morphine	19	16
Oxycodone	3	2
Methadone	7	5
Cocaine	2	1

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

[#] includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine

Recent use

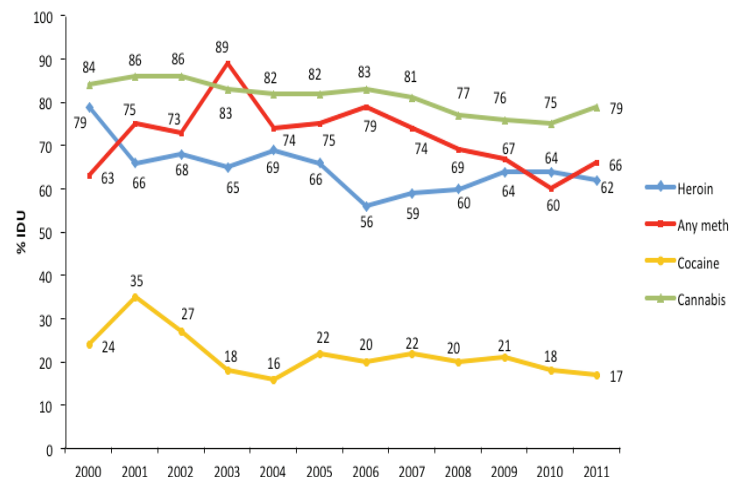
Heroin

In 2011, around two-thirds (62%) of the national sample reported use in the preceding six months on a median frequency of 72 days (i.e. around three times a week, Figure 1 and Table 2). Daily use was reported by 24% of recent heroin users. No change in recent use and frequency was found between 2010 and 2011.

Methamphetamine

Nationally, the recent use of speed powder and base remained stable, while the recent use of ice/crystal significantly increased between 2010 and 2011 ($p < 0.05$; Table 2). Nationally, the frequency of use of any form of methamphetamine (by users) was higher in 2011 but not significant (14 days in 2010, 19 days in 2011). Each methamphetamine form was reported on a median frequency of 10 days or less in the last six months. The proportion of all participants who reported daily methamphetamine use (among those recently used) was stable at 5% nationally (5% in 2010).

Figure 1: Recent use of heroin, any methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis, nationally, 2000-2011



Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

Cocaine

Similar to previous years (2003-2010), the prevalence of cocaine use in the six months preceding interview was 17% or less in all jurisdictions except NSW where it was higher (47%). Nationally recent cocaine use was stable between 2010 and 2011 (Figure 1 and Table 2). The frequency of cocaine use was also stable and remained low and sporadic in all other jurisdictions.

Cannabis

As in previous years of the IDRS, cannabis use among this group was common (Figure 1 and Table 2). Frequency of cannabis use tended to be daily or near-daily. Cannabis remained readily available in all jurisdictions.

Table 2: Recent use of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2011

	National	
	2010 (N=902)	2011 (N=868)
Recent use (%)		
Heroin	64	62
Speed	41	44
Base	51	21
Ice/crystal	39	45↑
Any Methamphetamine [#]	60	66↑
Cocaine	18	17
Cannabis	75	79
Median days of use[^]		
Heroin	72	72
Any Methamphetamine [#]	14	19
Speed	10	10
Base	10	6
Ice/crystal	7	10
Cocaine	5	5
Cannabis	180	180

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

[#] includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid methamphetamine

[^] among those who had used; max. no. of days, i.e. daily use = 180

Pharmaceuticals

Morphine remained the most commonly injected pharmaceutical opioid among the national sample. Reports of this behaviour remained highest in the NT and TAS, the jurisdictions where heroin has traditionally been the least available. Morphine and oxycodone injection remained stable over the last two years, from 43% in 2010 to 41% in 2011 (morphine) and 28% in 2010 to 31% in 2011 (oxycodone). Frequency of use, as with all extra-medical use of opioid medication, remained sporadic.

Use of benzodiazepines (typically by swallowing) remained common among this sample at 69% (result includes benzodiazepines used as prescribed) on a median frequency of 75 days in the last six months. By contrast, benzodiazepine injection was relatively uncommon, a behaviour reported by 10% of the national sample (8% in 2010) on a median of six days. This was most often reported in TAS (23% in 2011, 16% in 2010) and the NT (22% in 2011, 23% in 2010).

Price, purity and availability

Heroin

The price of heroin varied among the jurisdictions ranging from \$250 to \$650 for a gram and \$50 to \$100 for a cap. Nationally, the availability of heroin was reported as 'very easy' to obtain in the last six months. The majority of jurisdictions reporting purity as 'low' (Table 3).

Methamphetamine

Prices for speed powder, base and ice/crystal varied across jurisdictions. Overall, nationally the three main forms of methamphetamine were generally considered 'easy' to obtain. Of the three forms, ice/crystal was reported to be of 'high' purity, base as 'medium' and speed powder was commonly reported to be 'low' (Table 3).

Cocaine

The price of a cap of cocaine remained stable at \$50 in NSW. Nationally, the availability of cocaine was reported as 'easy' to obtain and the purity as 'medium' or 'low' (Table 3).

Cannabis

The price per gram varied by type (hydroponic or bush cannabis) and by jurisdiction. Hydroponically grown cannabis continued to dominate the market. Nationally, the availability of hydroponic cannabis was reported as 'very easy' to obtain while bush cannabis was reported as 'easy'. The potency of hydroponic cannabis continued to be rated as 'high' and bush cannabis as 'medium' (Table 3).

Table 3: Recent use and Perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2011

%	Heroin	Methamphetamine			Cocaine	Cannabis	
		Speed	Base	Ice/crystal		Hydro	Bush
Availability	N=492	N=313	N=130	N=307	N=83	N=548	N=240
Very easy	48	35	32	40	25	55	33
Easy	38	45	42	43	43	39	43
Difficult	11	16	25	15	27	7	21
Very difficult	3	4	1	2	5	<1	3
Purity	N=485	N=313	N=127	N=299	N=84	N=549	N=237
High	10	20	30	40	21	58	23
Medium	35	31	39	31	32	30	60
Low	42	33	16	14	32	4	12
Fluctuates	12	16	15	16	14	9	6

Source: IDRS IDU participant interviews

Injecting risk behaviours

Among the national sample, similar proportions to the 2010 IDRS reported either borrowing a needle or lending a needle in the last month. Twenty-five percent of participants reported sharing injecting equipment (excluding needles). This is a significant decrease from 39% in 2010 ($p < 0.05$). The main equipment shared were spoons (78% among those who reported sharing other equipment). Just over half of the national sample reported re-using their own needle in the last month. The proportion of participants re-using their own injecting equipment significantly decreased from 68% in 2010 ($p < 0.05$). Among those who re-used their own injecting equipment the majority reported re-using spoons (84%), followed by tourniquets (40%). The arm was reported as the last site of injection (76%; Table 4).

Table 4: Injecting risk behaviour in last month, 2011

%	National	
	2010 (N=902)	2011 (N=868)
Borrowed a needle	10	11
Lent a needle	16	16
Shared other injecting equipment**	39	25
Re-used own needle	52	49
Re-used own injecting equipment	68	58↓
Spoons	80	84
Filters	22	13↓
Tourniquets	52	40↓
Water	18	17
Swabs	6	4
Other	3	4
Last site of injection		
Arm	76	76
Leg	4	4
Hand	13	12
Foot	2	2
Groin	2	2
Neck	3	3
Other	1	1

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

includes spoons, water, tourniquets and filters

* significant difference ($p < 0.05$)

Self-reported mental health

Nearly half of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. The most common self-reported mental health problem was depression, followed by anxiety. However, the number of participants reporting a drug induced psychosis significantly increased in 2011 ($p < 0.05$). Of those with a self-reported mental health problem, nearly three-quarters reported attending a health professional for their mental health problem, a significant decrease from 2010 (Table 5).

Table 5: Self-reported mental health problems experienced in the preceding six months, 2011

%	National	
	2010 (N=902)	2011 (N=868)
Self-reported mental health problem (%)	49	48
Self-reported problem# (%)	N=440	N=411
Depression	65	66
Anxiety	40	45
Manic-depression/Bipolar	13	16
Schizophrenia	14	16
Panic	11	9
Paranoia	7	6
Drug induced psychosis	3	7↑
Attended health professional for self-reported mental health problem#	77	71↓

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

among those who reported a mental health issue

Driving risk behaviours

Nearly half of the national sample reported driving a vehicle in the last six months. Of those who reported recently driving, around one-fifth drove while under the influence of alcohol and over three-quarters reported driving while under the influence of an illicit drug. The main drugs reported were cannabis and heroin (Table 6).

Table 6: Driving risk behaviours among people who inject drugs in the last six months, nationally, 2011

	National	
	2010 (n=902)	2011 (n=868)
Driven in the last six months (%)	47	46
	(N=422)	(N=395)
Driven under the influence of alcohol last six months# (%)	20	18
Driven after taking an illicit drug in the last six months# (%)	82	79
Drugs used last time in the last six months^	N=347	N=312
Heroin	43	39
Methadone	14	8
Buprenorphine	4	2
Bup-naloxone	5	2
Morphine	25	16
Oxycodone	9	3
Speed	20	10
Base	10	3
Ice	13	12
Cocaine	2	<1
Benzodiazepines	14	10
Cannabis	48	30

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

Of those who had driven a vehicle in the last six months

^ Of those that had driven after taking an illicit drug

Thirty-six percent of the national sample reported a criminal activity in the last month. The most common criminal activity reported was drug dealing and property crime. Over one-third of the sample had been arrested in the last 12 months (Table 7).

Table 7: Proportion of IDU that reported criminal activity, 2011

%	National	
	2010 (N=902)	2011 (N=868)
Crime in the last month (%)		
Drug dealing	25	25
Property	21	22
Fraud	4	3
Violence	6	6
Any crime	39	39
Arrested last 12 months (%)	39	36

Source: IDRS Injecting drug user interviews

More information

For more detailed information on the prevalence of use, price, purity/potency and availability by this group, including key expert and indicator data in each jurisdiction please refer to the national and jurisdictional IDRS Drug Trends annual reports, which will be available through NDARC in early 2012. Previous years' reports are available on the NDARC website, www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au (click on 'Drug Trends').

Participating researchers and research centres

- Dr Lucy Burns, Natasha Sindicich, Jennifer Stafford, Benjamin Phillips, Sheena Arora and Rachel Sutherland, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (National, NSW, ACT & SA)
- Amy Kirwan and A/Prof. Paul Dietze, Macfarlane Burnet Institute for Medical Research and Public Health (VIC)
- Barbara de Graaff and Dr Raimondo Bruno, University of Tasmania (TAS)
- Candice Rainsford and Prof. Simon Lenton, National Drug Research Institute (WA)
- Chris Moon and Paul Rysavy, Department of Health and Families (NT)
- Dr Fairlie McIlwraith, Tina Belovic and A/Prof. Rosa Alati, Queensland Alcohol and Drug Research and Education Centre (QLD)

Acknowledgements

- The participants (PWID) and key experts who took part
- The agencies that assisted with interviewing and indicator data
- The funders, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing

These reports are available in full on the NDARC website, www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au (click on 'Drug Trends').

[Suggested citation: Stafford, J and Burns, L. (2011). Key findings from the 2011 IDRS: a survey of people who inject drugs. Drug Trends Bulletin, October 2011. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales.]