

Executive Summary

The Northern Territory (NT) IDRS sample comprises a sentinel group of people aged 18 years or older who injected illicit drugs at least once monthly in the preceding six months and resided in greater Darwin. Participants were recruited via advertisements in needle syringe programs 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 2020 between June 2nd and September 4th, after COVID-19 restrictions on travel and gatherings in Australia. Interviews were delivered via phone and face-to-face. This should be factored into all comparisons of data from the 2020 sample, relative to previous years.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 78 people who regularly inject drugs were interviewed for the 2020 NT IDRS. The sample was 63% male (67% in 2019), 38% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (31% in 2019) and had a mean age of 44 years 46 years in 2019). Seven out of ten participants (67%, 44% in 2019, $p=.005$) nominated crystal methamphetamine as their drug of choice, while the proportion nominating morphine was stable at 17%.

COVID-19 Impact

This brief section was included to summarise data collected specifically related to COVID-19 and associated restrictions; subsequent sections reflect standard annual reporting.

Fourteen per cent of the sample had been tested for SARS-CoV-2, though no participants had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Since the beginning of March 2020, most participants (81%) had practiced social distancing and 36% had undergone home isolation. Almost two-thirds (63%) of participants reported injecting drugs at a different frequency in the past month as compared to February 2020; of these participants, 86% reported reduced frequency of injection. Most of those commenting on methamphetamine reported that they had

'used less' since March, although methamphetamine was reported by 69% of participants as the drug most injected in February 2020 (before COVID-19 restrictions), and by 72% in the month prior to interview. Thirty-four per cent reporting using more alcohol since March. The primary reasons cited for the decreased use of methamphetamine were 'decreased availability' (86%) and 'drug is more expensive' (77%). The main reasons given for increased use of alcohol were 'because I'm having difficulty accessing other drugs' (67%) and 'to cope with anxiety/stress of day-to-day activities' (33%). Most participants reported that crystal methamphetamine and morphine had increased in price since the beginning of March 2020 (94% and 96%, respectively). Large majorities also said that it had become 'more difficult' to obtain crystal and morphine (97% and 96%, respectively). Seven per cent of participants rated their mental health in the past four weeks as 'being worse' compared to February, and 71% reported 'similar'. The majority of participants reported 'no change' in their injecting practices since March 2020 (since COVID-19 restrictions) with regards to borrowing, lending or re-using needles. Thirteen per cent reported a decrease in 'injecting alone'. Over one-quarter (27%) of participants reportedly sought information on how to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or avoiding impacts of restrictions on drug acquisition and use. Forty-two per cent of participants reported engaging in various harm reduction behaviours to reduce the risk of acquiring COVID-19 or impacts of COVID-19 restrictions while using or obtaining drugs. Just over half (53%) of participants reported having 'more money' in the four week prior to interview compared to February, while almost half (49%) reported experiencing some financial difficulty in the past month.

Heroin

As in 2019, 5 or less per cent of the sample had recently used heroin.

Methamphetamine

Eight out of ten participants reported recent methamphetamine use (83%), slightly lower than in 2019 (89%), but with all that group reporting recent crystal methamphetamine use. Recent use of methamphetamine powder has continued to decline, from 15% in 2019 to 5% or less in 2020. The price of a point of the crystal form of methamphetamine increased significantly from \$100 in 2019 to \$200 in 2020, with availability rated as 'difficult' to 'very difficult' by nearly all of those able to comment.

Cocaine

Recent use of cocaine remained low among the Northern Territory sample, with 6% (9% in 2019, $p=0.693$) of the total sample reporting use of cocaine in the six months prior to interview.

Cannabis

Sixty per cent of the sample reported recent cannabis use (72% in 2018), most commonly hydroponically grown. The price of a gram of hydroponic cannabis was stable at \$30, as was the price of an ounce, at \$450. Hydroponic cannabis was rated as 'easy' to 'very easy' to obtain by the majority of the sample.

Pharmaceutical Opioids

Morphine remained the most commonly used opioid in the NT sample, with 32% (40% in 2019, $p=.323$) reporting non-prescribed use past 6 months in 2020, continuing a decline seen over the last five years. The median days of use was relatively stable at 75 days in the past six months. The price of 100mg morphine increased from \$80 in 2019 to \$150 in 2020, and availability was rated as 'difficult' to 'very difficult' by 96% of those who commented (34% in 2019).

Smaller proportions reported recent use of other non-prescribed pharmaceutical opioids: oxycodone (10%), methadone syrup ($n\leq 5$), Physeptone tablets ($n\leq 5$) and buprenorphine-naloxone ($n\leq 5$).

Other Drugs

Recent use of non-prescribed alprazolam declined slightly to $\leq 5\%$ (8% in 2019, $p=0.662$) of the sample, while recent use of non-prescribed 'other benzodiazepines' was stable at 8%. Small numbers reported recent use of 'new' drugs that mimic the effects of cannabis ($n\leq 5$).

Prescribed use of codeine in the sample decreased significantly from 25% to $\leq 5\%$ ($p<.001$), non-prescribed use declined from 10% to $\leq 5\%$.

Recent use of alcohol increased from 60% to 56% while recent use of tobacco was reported by 91% in 2020 (99% in 2019).

Drug-Related Harms and Other Associated Behaviours

Small numbers reported having an injection-related health problem in the month before interview ($n\leq 5$), down from 34% in 2019. The sharing of needles was stable at around 10% of the sample, although the sharing of some other injection-related equipment increased, such as tourniquets to 22% (0 in 2019, $p<.001$) and spoons to 8% (≤ 5 in 2019).

Thirty-two per cent of the sample reported recent mental health issues, primarily depression (21%, 18% in 2019) and anxiety (22%), the latter increasing from 11% ($p=.042$) in 2019.

Twenty-one per cent of the sample had been arrested in the preceding 12 months, although all categories of self-reported crime in the month before interview declined, with the 10% reporting any crime, a decrease from 32% in 2019.