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Key findings from the 2016 IDRS: A survey of people who inject drugs.

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KEY FINDINGS

- Eight hundred and seventy-seven people who inject drugs (PWID) were interviewed for the 2016 IDRS.
- Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice for participants (46%) followed by any methamphetamine (29%), with a significant increase in those specifically reporting crystal methamphetamine as their drug of choice (15% in 2015 to 21% 2016).
- In 2016, similar proportions reported heroin (39%) and methamphetamine (40%) as the drug injected most in the last month. In particular there was a significant increase in crystal as the drug most often injected in the last month (28% in 2015 to 36% in 2016).
- The proportion of the national sample who reported recent heroin use (56%) remained stable and varied by jurisdiction. In 2016, 'daily' heroin use was reported by 41% of the national sample and 17% reported 'weekly or more' use. Heroin was reported to be 'very easy' to obtain and of 'low to medium' purity.
- The trend regarding the increased use of crystal and corresponding decrease in use of speed powder continued with a significant increase in the recent use of crystal (67% in 2015 to 73% in 2016) and significant decrease in speed powder (25% in 2015 to 20% in 2016).
- A significant increase in the frequency of use of crystal was reported (median of 30 days in 2016 vs. 20 days in 2015). Significantly more participants reported 'weekly or more' crystal use (33% in 2015 to 41% in 2016). The frequency of speed and base use remained stable.
- All forms of methamphetamine were considered 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain. All forms were reported to be of 'medium' to 'high' purity.
- Nationally, the recent use of cocaine remained stable (11%) and the frequency of use low. Cocaine was reported as 'easy' to obtain and similar proportions of the national sample reporting the purity as 'low', 'medium' or 'high'.
- Large proportions (73%) report recent use of cannabis on a medium of 135 days in the last six months. A third (32%) of the sample report daily cannabis use. Hydroponic cannabis dominated the market.
- Extra-medical use and injection of pharmaceutical preparations continued to occur, with jurisdictional differences in patterns observed. Nationally, the proportions reporting recent use of oxycodone significantly decreased from 25% in 2015 to 21% in 2016, although use varied by jurisdiction. Nationally, 10% reported recently using fentanyl in 2016.
- Sharing injection equipment was common with a quarter of the sample having shared injecting equipment (excluding needles). Smaller proportions reported borrowing (7%) or lending (11%) needles. Around one-third of the participants (38%) re-used their own needles in the last month.
- Nearly half of the national sample (43%) self-reported having had a mental health problem in the last six months with depression the most commonly reported, followed by anxiety. Around one-third (29%) of the national sample reported attending a health professional for their problem.

INTRODUCTION

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) monitors emerging trends in the use, price, purity and availability of heroin, methamphetamine (speed powder, base and crystal), 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. Since 1999, all three components of the IDRS have been conducted annually in every state and territory in Australia.

The key findings of the 2016 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 illicit drug users (e.g. in other geographical areas, occasional users, etc), but most critically is indicative of emerging trends.

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 (2015) compared with current year (2016);
- ↓ Significant decrease ($p < 0.05$) from previous year (2015) compared with current year (2016).

NATIONAL OVERVIEW

Demographics

In 2016, a total of 877 participants were interviewed for the IDRS survey. The mean age of the sample was 43 years, ranging from 19-72 years (75% were aged 49 years and

under). Around two-thirds of the sample was male. The majority were unemployed, with a mean income of \$418 per week. Nearly half of the sample reported current engagement 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 injection was 20 years (range: 8-57 years). Heroin remained the most commonly reported drug of choice (46%) followed by any form of methamphetamine (29%). There was an increase in those reporting crystal methamphetamine as their drug of choice (15% in 2015 to 21% in 2016) (Table 1).

In 2016, similar proportions reported heroin (39%) and methamphetamine (40%) as the drug injected most in the last month. However, there was a significant increase in the crystal form of methamphetamine as the drug most injected in 2016 (35% vs. 28% in 2015) (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics and drug use patterns of the national sample, nationally, 2015-2016

	National	
	2015 (N=888)	2016 (N=877)
Mean age (years)	42	43
% Male	67	69
% Unemployed	83	86
Mean income/ week (\$)	(N=867) \$426	(N=858) \$418
% Prison history	55	55
% Currently in drug treatment	47	43
Mean age first injected	20	20
% Drug of choice		
Heroin	52	46
Any methamphetamine#	25	29
Speed powder	9	7
Base	1	1
Crystal	15	21↑
Morphine	10	8
Oxycodone	1	1
Methadone	3	3
Cocaine	1	1
Cannabis	4	6
% Drug injected most often last month		
Heroin	41	39
Any methamphetamine#	34	40↑
Speed powder	5	3
Base	1	1
Crystal	28	36↑
Morphine	13	12
Oxycodone	1	1
Methadone	4	5
Cocaine	1	<1

Source: IDRS participant interviews
 # includes speed powder, base and crystal

Recent use

Heroin

In 2016, over half (56%) of the national sample reported use in the preceding six months on a median of 75 days (Figure 1 and Table 2). 'Daily' use was reported by 17% of the national sample and 'weekly or more' heroin use by 41% of the national sample. While the recent use of heroin was stable, the frequency of use decreased (but not significantly) between 2015 and 2016 (90 days vs. 75 days).

Methamphetamine

Nationally, the recent use of any form of methamphetamine remained stable between 2015 and 2016 overall (Figure 1). However, the recent use of speed powder significantly decreased and recent use of crystal significantly increased between 2015 and 2016 (p<0.05; Table 2). The recent use of base remained stable. Nationally, there was a significant increase in the frequency of use of any form of methamphetamine (24 days in 2015 to 36.5 days in 2016). Primary due to an increase in the frequency of crystal use (20 days in 2015 to 30 days in 2016). A significant increase was found in the proportion of participants who reported the 'daily' use of any form of methamphetamine (among those recently used; 9% in 2015 to 13% in 2016) and crystal (7% in 2015 to 11% in 2016). Significantly more participants also reported 'weekly or more' use of crystal in 2016 (41%, 33% in 2015).

Cocaine

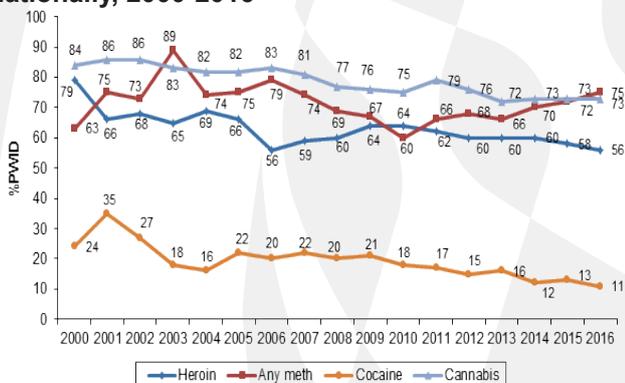
Nationally, recent cocaine use was stable (11%, Figure 1 and Table 2). The prevalence of cocaine use in the six months preceding interview was 10% or less in all jurisdictions except NSW where it was higher (25%, 34% in 2015). The frequency of cocaine use was also stable, remaining low and sporadic in all other jurisdictions. Small numbers reported using cocaine 'weekly or more' in the last six months (Figure 2). Two percent of the national sample reported 'weekly or more' use of cocaine in 2016.

Cannabis

As in previous years of the IDRS, cannabis was common nationally (Figure 1 and Table 2). Around three-quarters of the sample reported recent cannabis use with the frequency of use of 135 days in the last six months. Thirty-two percent reported using cannabis daily in the last six months (Figure 2). The results remained stable between 2015 and 2016. Daily cannabis use was reported by around one-third of the sample (32%) which was similar to previous years. Cannabis remained readily available in all jurisdictions.

Hydroponic cannabis continued to dominate the market.

Figure 1: Recent use of heroin, any methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis, nationally, 2000-2016



Source: IDRS participant interviews

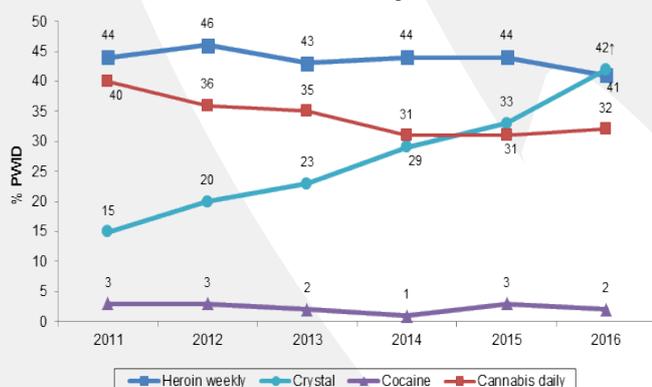
Pharmaceuticals

Morphine remained the most commonly injected pharmaceutical opioid among the national sample (27% nationally). Recent use of oxycodone significantly decreased from 25% in 2015 to 21% in 2016 (Table 2), although the recent injection of oxycodone remained stable. The recent use and injection of morphine also remained stable.

Use of benzodiazepines (typically by swallowing) remained common among this sample at 57% (result includes benzodiazepines used as prescribed). By contrast, benzodiazepine injection was relatively uncommon, a behaviour reported by 3% of the national sample (6% in 2015).

Nationally, small numbers reported the recent use of fentanyl in 2016 (10%). This finding remained stable compared to 2015 (10%).

Figure 2: 'Weekly or more'* use among participants in the last six months, nationally, 2011-2016



Source: IDRS participant interviews
 * Cannabis = daily use

Table 2: Recent use of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, oxycodone, morphine and cannabis, nationally, 2015-2016

	National	
	2015 (N=888)	2016 (N=877)
% Recent use		
Heroin	58	56
Any Methamphetamine#	72	75
Speed powder	25	20 ↓
Base	10	8
Crystal	67	73 ↑
Cocaine	13	11
Morphine	31	29
Oxycodone	25	21 ↓
Cannabis	73	73
Median days of use^		
Heroin	90	75
Any Methamphetamine#	24	36.5 ↑
Speed powder	11	6
Base	7	8
Crystal	20	30 ↑
Cocaine	4	3
Morphine	35	30
Oxycodone	10	7
Cannabis	120	135

Source: IDRS participant interviews
 # includes speed powder, base and crystal
 ^ among those who had used; maximum number of days, i.e. daily use = 180

Price, purity and availability

Heroin

The price of heroin varied among the jurisdictions ranging from \$220 to \$600 for a gram and \$50 to \$100 for a cap. The availability of heroin was reported as 'very easy' to obtain in the last six months. Purity varied with two-thirds of the national sample reporting purity as either 'low' or 'medium' (Table 3).

Methamphetamine

Prices for speed powder, base and crystal varied by jurisdiction, ranging from \$50-\$100 a point and \$300-\$400 a gram. Overall, the three main forms of methamphetamine were generally considered 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain, with percentages between 4% (crystal) to 23% (base) nationally also reporting all forms as 'difficult' to obtain. All of the three forms were reported to be 'medium' to 'high' purity by over two-thirds of the sample (Table 3).

Cocaine

The price of a cap of cocaine remained stable at \$50 in NSW, which remained the only jurisdiction where sufficient numbers (i.e. >10 people) were able to comment. Nationally, the availability of cocaine was reported as 'easy' to obtain and similar proportions reported the purity as 'low', 'medium' or 'high' (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. The availability of both forms of cannabis were reported as 'easy' or '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).

Injecting risk behaviours

Similar proportions to the 2015 sample reported either borrowing a needle or lending a needle in the last month. Twenty-six percent of participants reported sharing injecting equipment (excluding needles). The main equipment shared were spoons, water and tourniquets (74%, 27% and 25% respectively). Thirty-eight percent of the national sample reported re-using their own needle in the last month. The proportion of participants re-using their own injecting equipment remained stable. Among those who re-used their own injecting equipment, the majority reported re-using spoons (79%), followed by tourniquets (39%). The arm was reported as the most common last site of injection (74%; Table 4).

Self-reported mental health

Nearly half (43%) of the national sample who commented self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months. The most common mental health problems among the national sample were depression (29%) and anxiety (22%). Around one-third of the national sample (29%) reported attending a health professional for their self-reported mental health problem (Table 5).

Table 4: Injecting risk behaviour in last month, nationally, 2015-2016

	National	
	2015 (N=857)	2016 (N=860)
% Borrowed a needle	7	7
% Lent a needle	11	11
% Shared other injecting equipment#	25	26
% Re-used own needle	39	38
% Re-used own injecting equipment	53	55
% Injecting equipment reused#	(N=473)	(N=475)
Spoons	81	79
Filters	10	11
Tourniquets	42	39
Water	13	16
Swabs	4	5
Wheel filters	4	2
Other	2	2
% Last site of injection (n)		
Arm	73	74
Leg	6	5
Hand	13	11
Foot	1	2
Groin	2	3
Neck	4	5
Other	1	1

Source: IDRS participant interviews

includes spoons, water, tourniquets and filters and excludes needles

Note: 'Borrowed' – used a needle after somebody else and 'Lent' – used a needle before somebody else

Criminal activity

Thirty-nine percent of the national sample reported involvement in 'any' criminal activity in the last month. The most common forms of criminal activity were drug dealing (26%) and property crime (19%). Around one-third (31%) of the sample had been arrested in the last 12 months (Table 6). No significant differences were found between 2015 and 2016 regarding criminal activity.

Table 3: Perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and cannabis by participants who commented, nationally, 2016

	Heroin (N=457)	Methamphetamine			Cocaine (N=41)	Cannabis	
		Speed (N=119)	Base (N=48)	Crystal (N=545)		Hydro (N=447)	Bush (N=166)
% Availability (n)							
Very easy	53	39	33	58	22	49	33
Easy	38	36	35	38	39	43	45
Difficult	8	15	23	4	34	8	19
Very difficult	1	10	8	<1	5	1	4
% Purity/potency (n)							
High	19	30	29	37	29	57	26
Medium	34	38	47	32	31	31	61
Low	33	19	16	16	31	4	10
Fluctuates	13	13	9	14	10	9	4

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Table 5: Self-reported mental health problems experienced in the preceding six months, nationally, 2015-2016

	National	
	2015 (N=843)	2016 (N=863)
% Self-reported mental health problem	44	43
% Problem (n)		
Depression	29	29
Anxiety	21	22
Manic-depression/Bipolar	5	5
Schizophrenia	6	5
Panic	5	5
Paranoia	3	4
Drug induced psychosis	3	4
% Attended health professional for mental health problem	31	29

Source: IDRS participant interviews

Table 6: Proportion of IDU that reported criminal activity, 2015-2016

	National	
	2015 (N=855)	2016 (N=857)
% Arrested last 12 months	31	31
% Crime in the last month		
Drug dealing	27	26
Property	17	19
Fraud	4	4
Violence	4	4
% Any crime	39	39
% Victim of crime in last month	14	10

Source: IDRS participant interviews

MORE INFORMATION

For more detailed information on the prevalence of use, price, purity and availability, 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 2017. Past reports are available on the Drug Trends website (www.drugtrends.org.au).

Participating researchers and research centres

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