

1 Introduction

Background

This report is the eighth in a series which was previously titled *Statistics on Drug Abuse in Australia*. The first report was produced in 1985, under the auspices of the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NCADA). It was last published in 1994, by the (then) Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, under the National Drug Strategy (NDS). In 1997 the Department and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) entered into a Memorandum of Understanding, under which AIHW agreed to produce a two-yearly report on drug-related data which was consistent with the aims and themes of the NDS. This report is the first of these new reports.

About this report

Statistics on Drug Use in Australia 1998 follows the format of past reports in this series. Chapters are provided for each of the drug types covered by the NDS: tobacco, alcohol, pharmaceuticals and illicit drugs. Within these chapters descriptive data on consumption and, to a lesser extent, drug-related behaviours are presented. New and revised chapters cover evaluations, special population groups, drug-related health, and crime and law enforcement.

Data sources

The principal data source is the 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) conducted by the Institute on behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. This was a comprehensive national survey of Australians aged 14 years and older.

Other relevant information was obtained from:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics;
- Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care;
- Federal Office of Road Safety; and
- State and Territory health authorities.

Brief summaries of the data sources used for this report can be found in Appendix 2.

Overview of drug use in Australia

Tobacco

Approximately one-fifth of Australians aged 14 years or older were regular smokers (daily or most days) in 1998, with the highest smoking rates among persons aged 20–29 years (1998 NDSHS). The rates of recent smoking (regular and occasional) have declined slowly over the

last decade. Figures from excise and customs records suggest that the overall demand for tobacco products is declining in line with the reported usage.

Australia was ranked 17th in the world in 1996 for per capita consumption of cigarettes: on average each person aged 18 years or over consumed around 2,000 cigarettes in a year.

Alcohol

Around 68% of males and 48% of females aged 14 years or older reported drinking alcoholic beverages at least once a week in 1998. A further 17% and 24% respectively consumed alcohol 1–3 days each month. Of the regular drinkers, at least 8% of males and 4% of females consumed alcohol at levels that are considered hazardous or harmful to health.

Based on apparent consumption data, each Australian is estimated to have consumed 7.6 litres of pure alcohol per year. This corresponds to a per person annual consumption of 95 litres of beer, 19 litres of wine, and 1.3 litres of pure alcohol from spirits.

These levels of consumption ranked Australia 20th in the world for overall per capita consumption of pure alcohol, or 9th for beer consumption and 17th for wine.

Illicit drugs

Marijuana has been used at some time by around two-fifths of Australians aged 14 years or older in 1998, with approximately one-fifth of the adult population using in the previous 12 months. Of the so-called 'hard' illicit drugs, amphetamines were used by approximately 4% of persons aged 14 years or more, with lower proportions using ecstasy or hallucinogens. Approximately 1% used heroin or cocaine, or injected any illicit drug in the previous 12 months.

Rates of marijuana use, as for most illicit drugs, have increased over the decade, although rates for other drugs are lower than for marijuana.

Pharmaceuticals

Drugs that affect the central nervous system are one of the most commonly prescribed substances, making up three out of the top 10 medicines dispensed through community pharmacies in 1997–98. Prescriptions for antidepressants have been rising rapidly since 1991–92, a trend matched only by lipid-lowering drugs.

Perceptions of drug use

In the 1998 NDSHS, respondents were asked to identify the drug they thought was the most serious concern to the general community (Table 1.1). Excessive alcohol consumption was the drug-related behaviour most frequently mentioned by females (25%), with males being more concerned with heroin use (26%). This response differs from the pattern seen in previous household surveys, in which alcohol was of the most concern for both males and females.

The second most frequently mentioned concern of females in 1998 was heroin (22%), and for males, alcohol use (24%). This result represents a major shift in perceptions over past surveys. In 1993 and 1995 just 10% of all respondents identified heroin use as being of concern to the community. The third most frequently mentioned concern was smoking tobacco, by 18% of males and 17% of females. This compares with 21% of all respondents in 1993 and 24% in 1995.

The patterns for the three most frequently mentioned responses in 1998 were generally consistent across age groups. An exception was needle and syringe sharing, where younger females identified this behaviour as a major concern.

Table 1.1: Drug or drug-related behaviour thought to be the most serious concern to the general community, Australia, 1998

Substance/behaviour	Age group						Total
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
Males							
Marijuana/hash use	12	4	2	3	3	4	4
Tobacco smoking	13	19	17	21	19	19	18
Heroin use	17	27	23	30	28	27	26
Sharing needles or syringes	17	12	10	11	8	12	12
Excessive use of barbiturates	1	—	1	—	3	—	1
Excessive drinking of alcohol	24	24	34	18	22	24	24
Excessive use of tranquillisers	—	—	—	1	—	—	—
Sniffing glue/petrol/solvents/rush	3	1	2	2	2	1	2
Ecstasy/designer drug use	4	4	3	6	3	1	3
Amphetamine/speed use	2	2	1	2	—	2	2
Cocaine/crack use	4	4	4	5	8	7	5
Hallucinogen use	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Excessive use of painkillers/analgesics	—	1	1	1	1	1	1
Steroid use	3	—	—	—	1	1	1
None of the above	1	1	—	—	1	1	1
Females							
Marijuana/hash use	13	7	2	2	2	4	4
Tobacco smoking	23	17	17	17	17	13	17
Heroin use	10	18	20	25	26	26	22
Sharing needles or syringes	21	18	14	13	12	21	16
Excessive use of barbiturates	—	—	—	—	—	2	1
Excessive drinking of alcohol	21	24	31	27	27	21	25
Excessive use of tranquillisers	—	—	—	2	1	1	1
Sniffing glue/petrol/solvents/rush	1	1	1	1	2	2	1
Ecstasy/designer drug use	5	6	5	4	4	3	4
Amphetamine/speed use	2	4	2	2	1	1	2
Cocaine/crack use	3	5	6	5	4	4	5
Hallucinogen use	1	—	—	—	1	—	—
Excessive use of painkillers/analgesics	—	1	1	2	2	2	1
Steroid use	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
None of the above	—	1	—	—	—	—	—

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Perceptions of drug problems

Respondents were also asked to name the drug they thought of when people talked about a 'drug problem'.

The shift in perceptions towards heroin use as a concern to the community shown in Table 1.1 is also evident from this measure, with 38% of males and 37% of females identifying heroin as the drug first thought of (Table 1.2). In 1993 heroin was mentioned by 30% of all respondents and in 1995 by 28% of respondents. By contrast, marijuana was first mentioned

by 21% of both males and females in 1998, compared to 30% of all respondents in 1993 and 31% of respondents in 1995.

The pattern in 1998 was consistent for all age groups over 20 years. For males and females aged 14–19 years, marijuana was the drug first thought of when they heard the term ‘drug problem’ mentioned.

Results suggest that, for persons aged 20 years and older, between 1993 and 1998 perceptions about heroin have displaced those previously held about marijuana.

Table 1.2: Drug first mentioned as a drug problem, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Substance	Age group						Total
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
Males							
Alcohol	14	16	13	19	14	12	15
Tobacco	5	4	3	5	4	6	4
Tea/coffee/caffeine	—	1	—	—	—	1	—
Barbiturates	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	—	1	1	—	1	—	1
Pain killers/analgesics	—	—	1	—	—	1	—
Steroids	1	—	—	1	—	1	—
Inhalants	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Marijuana	34	18	17	19	21	21	21
Naturally occurring hallucinogens	—	—	—	—	2	—	—
LSD/synthetic hallucinogens	1	—	1	—	1	—	1
Amphetamines	8	13	10	16	21	13	13
Heroin	29	41	48	38	30	33	38
Cocaine	4	5	3	1	3	7	4
Ecstasy/designer drugs	2	1	1	—	2	1	1
Other drugs	—	—	—	2	1	3	1
None of the above	1	—	—	—	—	2	1
Females							
Alcohol	10	10	12	15	19	15	13
Tobacco	3	3	3	6	3	6	4
Tea/coffee/caffeine	—	—	—	—	1	1	—
Barbiturates	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	—	1	1	2	1	1	1
Pain killers/analgesics	1	1	—	1	—	—	1
Steroids	—	—	1	—	—	1	—
Inhalants	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
Marijuana	33	23	15	20	23	20	21
Naturally occurring hallucinogens	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
LSD/synthetic hallucinogens	3	2	2	2	—	1	2
Amphetamines	8	12	11	14	13	16	13
Heroin	32	42	49	35	33	29	37
Cocaine	6	4	4	4	4	4	4
Ecstasy/designer drugs	2	2	1	2	1	1	13
Other drugs	—	—	1	—	1	4	1
None of the above	—	—	—	1	1	2	1

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.