

# 5 Illicit drug use

## Overview

Illicit drug use is associated with around 1,000 deaths per year in Australia; however, these deaths are typically among young persons, resulting in a large number of years of life lost due to premature mortality. When combined with years lived with a disability, illicit drug use is estimated to have accounted for almost 2% of the total burden of disease in Australia in 1996 (Mathers et al. 1999).

Marijuana remains the most widely used illicit drug in Australia, with 44% of males and 35% of females reporting having used it at some time. One-quarter of males and one-fifth of females used at least one illicit drug in the 12 months before the 1998 NDSHS. Use of other illicit substances is low relative to marijuana and less than 1% of Australians injected an illicit drug in the prior 12 months.

Australians continue to disapprove of both the regular use and legalisation of illicit drugs. With the exception of marijuana use, where approximately one-quarter think regular use is acceptable, less than one in ten considers regular use of illicit drugs acceptable. Also with the exception of marijuana where approximately three in every ten persons support legalisation, less than one in ten supports the legalisation of other illicit drugs. Over 80% of Australians support increased penalties for the supply of hard illicit drugs, and almost 60% support increased penalties for the supply of marijuana.

## Opportunity to use drugs

In 1998 respondents to the NDSHS were asked if they had been offered or had the opportunity to use a range of illicit drugs (Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1: Opportunity to use illicit drugs, by sex, 1995 and 1998**

Substance	1995		1998	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	(per cent)			
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	39	40	46	49
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills <sup>(a)</sup>	7	7	7	8
Steroids <sup>(a)</sup>	1	1	2	1
Barbiturates <sup>(a)</sup>	2	1	1	1
Amphetamines <sup>(a)</sup>	6	4	7	5
Marijuana	25	16	28	19
Heroin	2	1	3	1
Cocaine	4	2	3	2
Synthetic hallucinogens/LSD	6	4	7	4
Ecstasy/designer drugs	4	2	6	3
Inhalants	4	3	4	3

(a) For non-medical purposes only.

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Almost half of all males (46%) and females (49%) had the opportunity to use or were offered painkillers or analgesics for non-medical use. These rates are higher than in 1995. Their legitimate availability through pharmacies and over the counter at other outlets is largely responsible for respondents' (correct) interpretation of 'opportunity to use for illicit purposes' being relatively high. By contrast, the opportunity to use tranquillisers and sleeping pills, which require prescriptions, is much lower. Less than one in ten Australians reported the opportunity to use or being offered these drugs for non-medical purposes, and these results were consistent with those in 1995.

Over one-quarter of males (28%) and almost one-fifth of females (19%) had been offered or had the opportunity to use marijuana. This was slightly higher than in 1995.

Proportions of people having been offered or who had the opportunity to use most other illicit drugs were very low relative to painkillers, analgesics and marijuana, with amphetamines and hallucinogens slightly more available in 1998 than in 1995.

## **Use of illicit drugs**

Almost half of all Australians aged 14 years and older have used at least one illicit substance at some time, with 48% of males and 41% of females reporting ever using illicit drugs (Table 5.2). Almost a quarter of males (24%) and almost one-fifth of females (19%) reported using at least one illicit drug in the 12 months before the 1998 NDSHS.

Marijuana has been used at some time by 44% of males and 35% of females. In the previous 12 months, 21% of males and 15% of females used marijuana.

Hallucinogens have been used at some time by 13% of males and 7% of females. In the previous 12 months 4% of males and 2% of females used hallucinogens.

Painkillers or analgesics have been used for non-medical purposes at some time by 11% of males and 12% of females, and within the past 12 months by 5% of both males and females.

Amphetamines have been used at some time by 11% of males and 7% of females. Of the other 'hard' drugs, less than one in ten Australians has ever used them. Amphetamines also rank highest in use of hard illicit drugs within the past 12 months (5% males, 3% females). Heroin was used in the past 12 months by 1% of both males and females, whilst cocaine was used by 2% of males and 1% of females. Only 1% of males reported injecting any illicit drug, and less than 0.5% of females reported doing so.

**Table 5.2: Summary of illicit drug use, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Never used	Used in past 12 months	
		Ever used (per cent)	
<b>Males</b>			
Marijuana	56	44	21
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	89	11	5
Amphetamines <sup>(a)</sup>	89	11	5
Synthetic hallucinogens/LSD	87	13	4
Cocaine	95	5	2
Ecstasy/designer drugs	94	6	3
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills <sup>(a)</sup>	94	6	3
Injecting drugs	97	3	1
Inhalants	95	5	1
Heroin	97	3	1
Barbiturates <sup>(a)</sup>	98	2	—
Steroids <sup>(a)</sup>	99	1	—
Methadone <sup>(a)</sup>	99	1	—
Any illicit drug	52	48	24
<b>Females</b>			
Marijuana	65	35	15
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	88	12	5
Amphetamines <sup>(a)</sup>	93	7	3
Synthetic hallucinogens/LSD	93	7	2
Cocaine	97	3	1
Ecstasy/designer drugs	96	4	2
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills <sup>(a)</sup>	94	7	3
Injecting drugs	99	1	—
Inhalants	97	3	1
Heroin	99	2	1
Barbiturates <sup>(a)</sup>	99	1	—
Steroids <sup>(a)</sup>	100	—	—
Methadone <sup>(a)</sup>	100	—	—
Any illicit drug	59	41	19

(a) For non-medical purposes only.

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

## Trends in illicit drug use

In 1998 marijuana was the illicit drug that the highest proportion of Australians had ever tried and had tried in the past 12 months (Table 5.3). Between 1993 and 1995 use of marijuana in the previous 12 months was constant at 13% of Australians aged 14 years and over. Results from the 1998 survey show a marked increase to 18%. Proportions of persons using other substances in the past 12 months remained relatively stable across this period, with the exception of amphetamines which doubled from 1995 to 1998.

**Table 5.3: Summary of illicit drug use, Australia, 1991 to 1998**

Substance	Lifetime use				Use within past 12 months			
	1991	1993	1995	1998	1991	1993	1995	1998
	(per cent)							
Amphetamines	8	8	6	9	3	2	2	4
Barbiturates	5	4	1	2	2	—	—	—
Cocaine	3	2	3	4	1	1	1	1
Ecstasy/designer drugs	2	3	2	5	1	1	1	2
Synthetic hallucinogens/LSD	7	7	7	10	2	1	2	3
Heroin	2	2	1	2	1	—	—	1
Inhalants	3	4	2	4	1	1	—	1
Marijuana	32	34	31	39	13	13	13	18
Steroids	n.a.	3	1	1	n.a.	—	—	—
Injecting drugs	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1

Sources: National Campaign Against Drug Abuse Household Survey 1991, National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1993, National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1995, National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

## Attitudes to drug use

Regular use of illicit drugs is considered acceptable by very few Australians (Table 5.4). Regular use of marijuana was the only illicit drug-taking behaviour that attracted support of any magnitude and this was concentrated in persons aged under 50 years. Thirty per cent of males and 21% of females supported regular use. Support by all persons in 1993 and 1995 was measured at 26% and 23% respectively. In 1998 all other illicit substance-taking was considered acceptable by less than 10%, and at levels much lower for most substances. This result was consistent with those in previous years of the survey.

In contrast, the regular use of tobacco and alcohol was considered acceptable by higher proportions of Australians. The regular use of tobacco was considered acceptable by 42% of males and 39% of females, with more than 50% support from both males and females aged under 30 years. Support by all persons in 1993 and 1995 was measured at 36% and 39% respectively.

In 1998 the regular use of alcohol was considered acceptable by 68% of males and 55% of females, with greatest support again in the younger age groups. Support by all persons in 1993 and 1995 was measured at 64% and 54% respectively.

**Table 5.4: Acceptability of regular use of illicit and licit substances, Australia, 1998**

Substance/behaviour	Age group						Total
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
	(per cent)						
	<b>Males</b>						
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	12	16	10	11	9	3	10
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills <sup>(a)</sup>	9	11	7	6	6	5	7
Steroids <sup>(a)</sup>	7	9	4	2	2	—	4
Barbiturates <sup>(a)</sup>	2	6	3	2	2	1	3
Marijuana	39	52	39	31	14	4	30
Heroin	4	5	5	2	1	—	3
Amphetamines <sup>(a)</sup>	8	11	5	2	1	—	5
Cocaine	6	7	5	3	1	—	4
Natural hallucinogens	9	13	9	5	1	—	6
LSD/synthetic hallucinogens	6	9	5	5	1	—	4
Ecstasy/designer drugs	6	12	6	3	2	—	5
Inhalants	3	4	2	1	1	—	2
Methadone <sup>(a)</sup>	4	5	4	3	1	—	3
Tobacco/cigarettes	58	51	46	38	34	26	42
Alcohol	73	71	69	71	61	61	68
	<b>Females</b>						
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	9	11	10	9	9	5	9
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills <sup>(a)</sup>	5	6	4	4	2	3	4
Steroids <sup>(a)</sup>	2	1	1	—	1	—	1
Barbiturates <sup>(a)</sup>	1	1	1	—	1	—	1
Marijuana	35	35	26	15	12	4	21
Heroin	1	2	1	1	—	—	1
Amphetamines <sup>(a)</sup>	3	4	2	1	—	—	2
Cocaine	2	2	2	—	—	—	1
Natural hallucinogens	5	4	3	1	—	1	2
LSD/synthetic hallucinogens	3	3	2	1	—	—	2
Ecstasy/designer drugs	3	4	2	1	—	—	2
Inhalants	1	—	1	—	—	—	—
Methadone <sup>(a)</sup>	1	1	1	1	—	—	1
Tobacco/cigarettes	52	52	42	34	27	27	39
Alcohol	64	62	57	53	51	47	55

(a) For non-medical purposes only.

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

## Support for legalisation of illicit drugs

Support for the legalisation of illicit substances mirrors results on the acceptability of regular use and actual use shown in earlier sections. The legalisation of marijuana was supported by 34% of males and 26% of females, with higher support by persons aged under 50 years (Table 5.5). In 1993 legalisation was supported by 25% of all persons and in 1995 by 29%. Less than one in 10 Australians aged 14 years or older supported the legalisation of heroin, amphetamines or cocaine, consistent with results in earlier surveys.

**Table 5.5: Support for legalisation of selected drugs, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Age group						Total
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
<b>Males</b>							
Marijuana	38	49	41	37	22	13	34
Heroin	5	10	11	11	5	7	8
Amphetamines	6	11	7	8	4	3	7
Cocaine	4	10	9	8	5	4	7
<b>Females</b>							
Marijuana	35	38	31	24	18	11	26
Heroin	5	6	8	6	7	5	6
Amphetamines	4	5	7	4	4	4	5
Cocaine	5	5	7	5	5	5	5

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

## Support for harm reduction measures

For the first time in the 1998 NDSHS, respondents were asked whether they supported a range of measures designed to reduce the potential for harm to heroin users. Note that these measures were not explained in detail to survey respondents. Support for such measures was slightly more likely from females than from males and from younger than from older persons (Table 5.6).

**Table 5.6: Support for harm reduction measures for heroin users, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Age group						Total
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
<b>Males</b>							
Free needle/syringe exchanges	35	58	57	50	40	31	46
Methadone maintenance programs	51	58	61	62	60	46	57
Treatment with drugs other than methadone	53	55	60	54	59	44	54
Regulated injecting rooms	29	39	36	34	30	23	32
Rapid detoxification therapy	56	66	62	58	68	57	61
<b>Females</b>							
Free needle/syringe exchanges	47	63	60	57	54	40	54
Methadone maintenance programs	59	63	61	63	58	49	59
Treatment with drugs other than methadone	53	58	54	59	54	46	54
Regulated injecting rooms	31	36	36	39	34	27	34
Rapid detoxification therapy	53	63	60	62	60	54	59

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Rapid detoxification therapy received the most support, with 61% of males and 59% of females supporting the measure. Similar proportions supported methadone maintenance programs. Regulated injecting rooms received the least support, with approximately a third of all Australians aged 14 or over indicating support.

## Support for increased penalties for supplying illicit drugs

In 1998, the overwhelming majority of respondents to the NDSHS supported increased penalties for the supply of illicit drugs (Table 5.7). Four in every five supported increased penalties for the supply of hard drugs (heroin, amphetamines, cocaine). Support was strongest in the older age groups. Similar proportions in 1993 and 1995 also supported increased penalties.

**Table 5.7: Support for increased penalties for the supply of selected drugs, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Age group						Total
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
(per cent)							
<b>Males</b>							
Marijuana	45	37	46	53	73	79	55
Heroin	79	79	82	85	93	90	85
Amphetamines	75	71	79	84	92	89	82
Cocaine	78	75	80	84	92	90	83
<b>Females</b>							
Marijuana	44	49	57	65	74	82	63
Heroin	77	83	86	85	89	89	85
Amphetamines	74	79	84	85	88	88	84
Cocaine	76	82	85	84	88	89	85

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Over half (55% males, 63% females) supported increased penalties for the supply of marijuana and support was stronger in older age groups. This result confirms the trend established in earlier years for decreasing support: in 1993 and 1995 support by all persons for increased penalties was 64% and 63% respectively.