

# 7 Special population groups

## Overview

Since 1985, the NDS has recognised that certain groups within our population are at greater risk of developing harmful drug use behaviours and require special attention in terms of education, treatment and prevention programs.

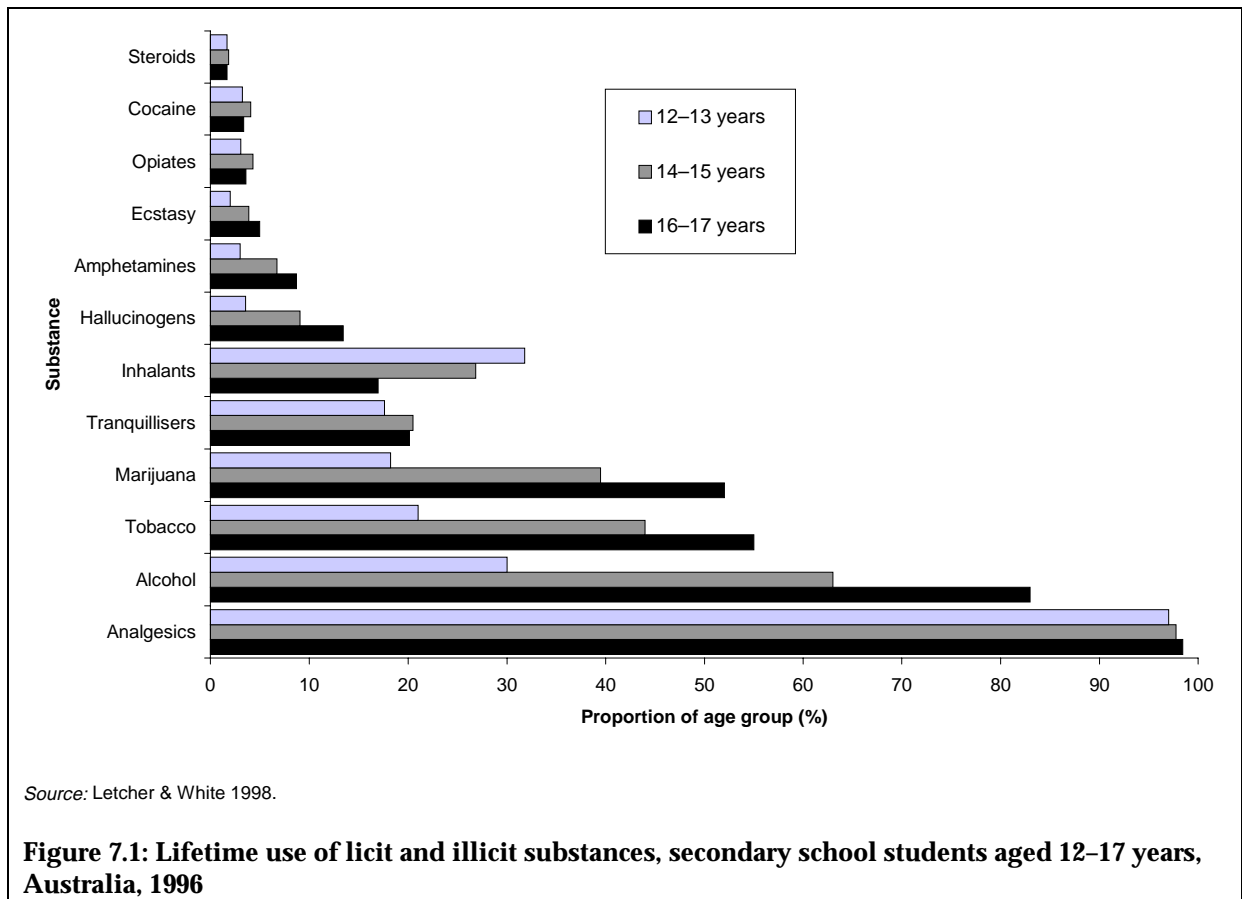
This chapter presents information on Indigenous people, women of child-bearing age, people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and young people. Injecting drug users and prisoners are also identified as being of specific concern: these are examined in Chapters 5 and 10 respectively.

The NDS seeks to develop responses that:

- recognise the unique settings of local communities;
- are culturally responsive;
- meet the needs of special population groups; and
- improve access to services.

## Young people

The national secondary school students drug use survey was last conducted in 1996 and collected information about alcohol, tobacco and (for the first time in 1996) illicit drug use amongst students aged 12 to 17 years. The survey, coordinated by the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, shows that both licit and illicit drug use amongst those aged 12–17 years increases with age and is on par with the level of use seen in the general population (see Chapter 5). Use of some substances amongst 16–17-year-old students exceeds that of the general population.



With the exception of inhalants and steroids, the number of young people who had ever used a substance increased with age (Figure 7.1). The substances most commonly used are painkillers/analgesics, followed by alcohol and tobacco. Marijuana use is particularly high amongst 16–17 year olds, being 33% higher than for the general population (52% versus 39%).

For marijuana, males consistently show higher consumption rates than females (Tables 7.1 and 7.2), both in terms of lifetime use and use in the past 12 months.

Excluding marijuana, there is little difference between the proportions of males and females that have ever used, or used in the past twelve months, any other illicit drug. Males consumed hard illicit drugs (such as heroin or cocaine) at a slightly higher rate than females, while females consumed substances such as painkillers/analgesics, tranquillisers and inhalants at slightly higher rates.

**Table 7.1: Summary of lifetime use of illicit drugs, secondary school students aged 12–17 years, Australia, 1996**

Substance	Age						
	12	13	14	15	16	17	12–17
(per cent)							
Males							
	(n=1,886)	(n=2,740)	(n=2,736)	(n=2,741)	(n=2,498)	(n=1,843)	(n=14,444)
Marijuana	17	25	38	48	53	57	40
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	96	97	97	98	98	97	97
Amphetamines	3	4	7	9	10	9	7
Hallucinogens	4	5	9	12	14	15	10
Cocaine	4	5	6	5	5	3	5
Ecstasy/designer drugs	2	3	4	5	6	6	4
Tranquillisers	19	18	19	20	19	19	19
Inhalants	34	31	27	22	19	17	25
Heroin <sup>(b)</sup>	3	4	6	5	5	4	5
Steroids	2	3	3	2	3	2	3
Females							
	(n=2,065)	(n=2,851)	(n=2,932)	(n=2,921)	(n=2,629)	(n=1,858)	(n=15,256)
Marijuana	10	18	31	41	46	54	33
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	97	98	99	98	99	99	98
Amphetamines	1	3	5	7	7	10	5
Hallucinogens	1	4	6	10	12	14	8
Cocaine	2	3	3	3	2	3	3
Ecstasy/designer drugs	1	2	3	4	4	5	3
Tranquillisers	16	18	20	23	21	22	20
Inhalants	31	32	30	27	18	13	26
Heroin <sup>(b)</sup>	2	4	3	4	3	3	3
Steroids	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

(a) Figures reflect both legal and illegal use.

(b) Figures reflect all illegal opiate use, including methadone use for non-medical purposes.

Source: Letcher & White 1998.

**Table 7.2: Summary of illicit drug use in the past 12 months, secondary school students aged 12–17 years, Australia, 1996**

Substance	Age						
	12	13	14	15	16	17	12–17
	(per cent)						
	<b>Males</b>						
	(n=1,886)	(n=2,740)	(n=2,736)	(n=2,741)	(n=2,498)	(n=1,843)	(n=14,444)
Marijuana	13	21	34	44	48	49	35
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	93	94	94	95	94	94	94
Amphetamines	3	3	6	7	8	7	6
Hallucinogens	3	4	7	10	12	12	8
Cocaine	3	3	4	4	3	3	3
Ecstasy/designer drugs	2	2	3	4	5	4	4
Tranquillisers	11	11	11	12	12	12	11
Inhalants	27	24	21	16	12	9	18
Heroin <sup>(b)</sup>	2	2	4	3	4	3	3
Steroids	2	2	2	2	3	2	2
	<b>Females</b>						
	(n=2,065)	(n=2,851)	(n=2,932)	(n=2,921)	(n=2,629)	(n=1,858)	(n=15,256)
Marijuana	8	16	28	39	42	48	30
Painkillers/analgesics <sup>(a)</sup>	95	95	97	97	98	98	97
Amphetamines	1	2	4	5	5	8	4
Hallucinogens	1	3	5	8	10	10	6
Cocaine	1	2	2	2	1	2	2
Ecstasy/designer drugs	0.4	1	2	3	3	4	2
Tranquillisers	9	11	13	17	14	15	13
Inhalants	25	26	23	19	11	6	19
Heroin <sup>(b)</sup>	1	2	2	3	2	2	2
Steroids	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

(a) Figures reflect both legal and illegal use.

(b) Figures reflect all illegal opiate use, including methadone use for non-medical purposes.

Source: Letcher & White 1998.

## Indigenous people

The number of Indigenous persons surveyed in the 1998 NDSHS was small (just over 200 people), therefore these estimates are indicative only and should be treated with caution. National estimates of Indigenous drug use are also available from the 1994 NDSHS Urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Supplement (CDHSH 1996), and for tobacco and alcohol from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (ABS 1996a). Care must be taken in making comparisons between 1994 and 1998 due to the low numbers of Indigenous people surveyed in 1998, and the fact that the 1994 survey was specifically designed for the urban Indigenous population.

Despite these qualifications, there is substantial agreement among the three sources, at least for tobacco smoking among Indigenous persons: each of the three surveys provides an estimate of current tobacco smoking among Indigenous persons of between 50% and 54%.

**Table 7.3: Summary of drug use, Indigenous persons, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Never used	Ever used (per cent)	Used in past 12 months
Alcohol	6	94	81
Tobacco/cigarettes	24	77	50
Marijuana	45	55	22
Any illicit drug	42	59	23
Any illicit drug other than marijuana	74	26	10

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Looking at data from the 1998 NDSHS, the most commonly used substances among Indigenous people were alcohol (81% in past 12 months) and tobacco (50% in the past 12 months) (Table 7.3). Over half of Indigenous people aged 14 years and over had tried marijuana at some point, compared with 41% of Australian-born non-Indigenous people (Table 7.6). Around 59% of Indigenous people had tried at least one illicit drug, with almost a quarter having used at least one illicit substance during the past twelve months. In comparison with Australian-born non-Indigenous people, Indigenous people are slightly less likely to drink than non-Indigenous people do.

**Table 7.4: Summary of drug use, Indigenous persons, Australia, 1994**

Substance	Never used	Ever used (per cent)	Used in past 12 months
Alcohol	16	84	62
Tobacco/cigarettes	23	77	54
Marijuana	52	48	22
Any illicit drug	46	54	29
Any illicit drug other than marijuana	81	19	6

Source: Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health 1996.

Compared with 1994, Indigenous persons' use of all substances, except alcohol, appears to have declined in 1998 (Table 7.4).

## Persons born overseas

Variables such as first language spoken other than English and main language spoken at home are better indicators of non-English speaking background than persons born overseas. However, data were not available on drug use by these groups from 1998 NDSHS results at the time of publication. Accordingly, data are presented on the drug-use patterns of persons born overseas.

**Table 7.5: Summary of drug use, persons born overseas, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Never used	Ever used (per cent)	Used in past 12 months
Alcohol	15	85	75
Tobacco/cigarettes	35	65	24
Marijuana	68	32	13
Any illicit drug	62	38	16
Any illicit drug other than marijuana	81	19	8

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Based on 1998 NDSHS data, persons born overseas are less likely to consume alcohol, smoke, or use any illicit substance compared with Australian-born non-Indigenous people. Only 38% of people born overseas had ever used any illicit substance compared with 46% of Australian-born non-Indigenous people. Similarly, only 16% of persons born overseas had consumed any illicit substance during the past twelve months, compared to 23% of Australian-born non-Indigenous people. Around 32% of people born overseas had ever tried marijuana, compared to 41% of Australian-born non-Indigenous people, and 48% of Indigenous people.

## Australian-born non-Indigenous people

Statistics on the Australian-born non-Indigenous population have been presented for comparison with the selected population groups above, and are calculated by excluding from the total number surveyed in the 1998 NDSHS persons born overseas and Indigenous people.

**Table 7.6: Summary of drug use, Australian-born non-Indigenous people, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Never used	Ever used (per cent)	Used in past 12 months
Alcohol	4	96	84
Tobacco/cigarettes	23	77	25
Marijuana	59	41	19
Any illicit drug	54	46	23
Any illicit drug other than marijuana	75	25	11

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

Data from the 1998 NDSHS show that almost half of Australian-born non-Indigenous people aged 14 years and over have ever used at least one illicit drug (Table 7.6). However, the most commonly used illicit drug is marijuana, with 41% of Australian born non-Indigenous people having tried marijuana.

## Pregnancy, breastfeeding and drug use

A major health concern is the use of both illicit and licit drugs by women who are either pregnant or breastfeeding, as this may cause health problems in both the mother and child. In this section, drug use in women of child-bearing age (ages 14–49 years) who were pregnant or breastfeeding is compared with women of child-bearing age who were neither pregnant nor breastfeeding.

Respondents in the 1998 NDSHS were asked to indicate if they were currently pregnant or breastfeeding, but not whether they were pregnant or breastfeeding at the time they reported using drugs. However, given that a typical period of pregnancy plus breastfeeding is 14 months, it is reasonable to assume that, for the majority of women indicating that they were currently pregnant or breastfeeding, drug use in the past 12 months included use while pregnant and/or breastfeeding.

Seventy-five per cent of women who were pregnant or breastfeeding at the time of the 1998 NDSHS reported consuming alcohol, tobacco or at least one illicit drug in the previous twelve months (Table 7.7). A fifth of these women had tried at least one illicit drug during the previous twelve months, with 18% having tried marijuana.

Women who were currently pregnant and/or breastfeeding were more likely to have ever used illicit or licit substances than women who were neither pregnant nor breastfeeding. However, they are also less likely to have used during the past 12 months. Sixty-two per cent of women identified as pregnant and/or breastfeeding had ever used marijuana, but only 47% of women of child-bearing age who were neither pregnant nor breastfeeding had ever tried marijuana.

**Table 7.7: Summary of drug use, women pregnant or breastfeeding, women neither pregnant or breastfeeding, aged 14–49 years, Australia, 1998**

Substance	Either pregnant or breastfeeding		
	Never used	Ever used (per cent)	Used in past 12 months
Alcohol	7	93	75
Tobacco/cigarettes	30	70	24
Marijuana	38	62	18
Any illicit drug	35	65	21
Any illicit drug other than marijuana	75	25	8
	Neither pregnant nor breastfeeding		
Alcohol	9	91	83
Tobacco/cigarettes	36	64	30
Marijuana	53	47	21
Any illicit drug	48	52	24
Any illicit drug other than marijuana	74	26	11

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1998.

The proportions who had used drugs during the past 12 months were reversed between the groups (18% and 21% respectively). Similarly, the proportion who had ever used any illicit substance was higher in the pregnant/breastfeeding group (65%), compared with women aged 14–49 years neither pregnant nor breastfeeding (52%), but the proportion who had used during the previous 12 months was higher among women who were neither pregnant nor breastfeeding.