

4 Illicit drug use

Introduction

This chapter presents information on illicit drug use in Australia based on results from the 1991 and 1993 National Campaign Against Drug Abuse Household Surveys, and the 1995, 1998 and 2001 NDSHS. For international comparisons of illicit drug use, refer to Chapter 6. This chapter provides a summary of illicit drug use in 2001, and presents trends in illicit drug use over the period 1991 to 2001. It also contains a new feature section on marijuana/cannabis use.

Measures of illicit drug use

Based on responses to the 2001 NDSHS, 37.7% of the Australian population aged 14 years and over had used any illicit drug at least once in their life and 16.9% had used any illicit drug at least once in the previous 12 months (Table 4.1).

Marijuana/cannabis was the most common illicit drug used, with one in three persons reporting that they had used at least once in their life and one in eight reporting they had used in the past 12 months.

In 2001, the five most common illicit drugs ever used in order of descending prevalence were marijuana/cannabis (33.1%), amphetamines (8.9%), hallucinogens (7.6%), ecstasy/designer drugs (6.1%) and pain-killers/analgesics for non-medical purposes (6.0%).

The five most common illicit drugs used in the last 12 months in order of descending prevalence were marijuana/cannabis (12.9%), amphetamines (3.4%), pain-killers/analgesics for non-medical purposes (3.1%), ecstasy/designer drugs (2.9%) and cocaine (1.3%).

The mean age of first using an illicit drug ranged from 17.6 years for those who had used inhalants to 22.8 years for those that had used tranquillisers/sleeping pills for non-medical purposes. The mean age of initiation was 18.5 years for marijuana/cannabis, 20.4 years for amphetamines and 21.9 for ecstasy/designer drugs.

Table 4.1: Summary of illicit drug use in Australia, 2001

Substance/behaviour	Drugs ever used ^(a)	Drugs recently used ^(b)		Mean age of initiation (years)
		(per cent)		
Marijuana/cannabis	33.1	12.9		18.5
Pain-killers/analgesics ^(c)	6.0	3.1		18.9
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills ^(c)	3.2	1.1		22.8
Steroids ^(c)	0.3	0.2		22.5
Barbiturates ^(c)	0.9	0.2		18.7
Inhalants	2.6	0.4		17.6
Heroin	1.6	0.2		20.7
Methadone ^(d)	0.3	0.1		21.8
Other opiates ^(c)	1.2	0.3		n.a.
Amphetamines ^(c)	8.9	3.4		20.4
Cocaine	4.4	1.3		22.6
Hallucinogens	7.6	1.1		19.1
Ecstasy/designer drugs	6.1	2.9		21.9
Injected drugs	1.8	0.6		20.2
Any illicit drug	37.7	16.9		18.6
None of the above	62.3	83.1		..

(a) Used at least once in lifetime.

(b) Used in the last 12 months.

(c) For non-medical purposes.

(d) For non-maintenance purposes.

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001.

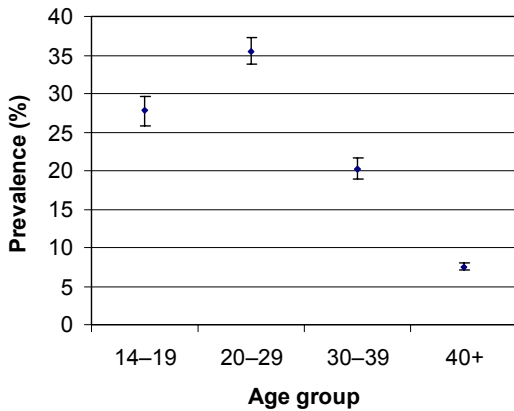
Recent illicit drug use by age

Recent illicit drug use was most prevalent among persons aged 20–29 years (Figure 4.1). Around 35% used at least one illicit drug and 30% used marijuana/cannabis in the previous 12 months. About 10% used amphetamines and ecstasy/designer drugs, around 2% injected illicit drugs and less than 1% used heroin in the previous 12 months.

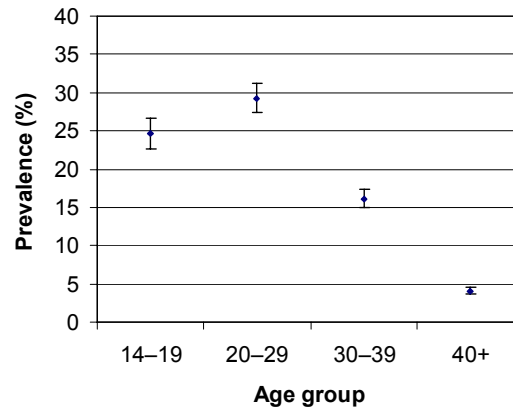
After 20–29-year-olds, persons aged 14–19 years were the most likely to have used illicit drugs in the last 12 months. More than one in four teenagers used any illicit drug and around one in four teenagers used marijuana/cannabis in the past 12 months.

From the age of 30 years, the prevalence of illicit drug use declined with age.

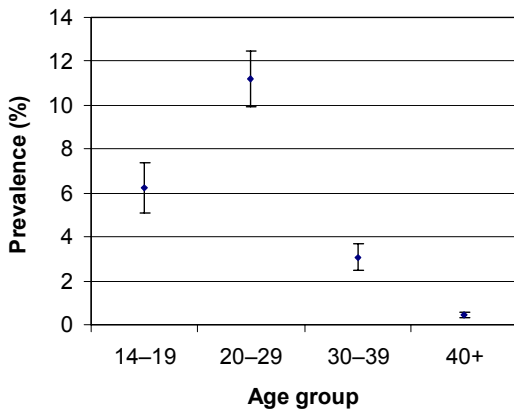
Any illicit



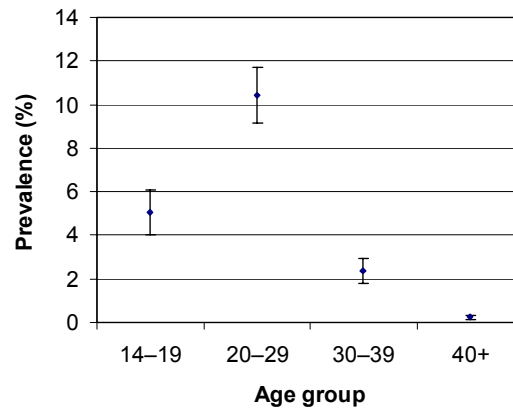
Marijuana/cannabis



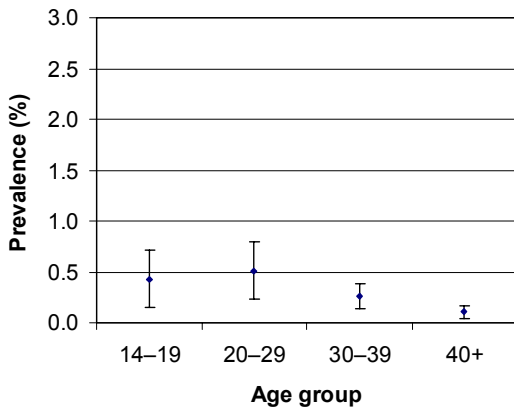
Amphetamines



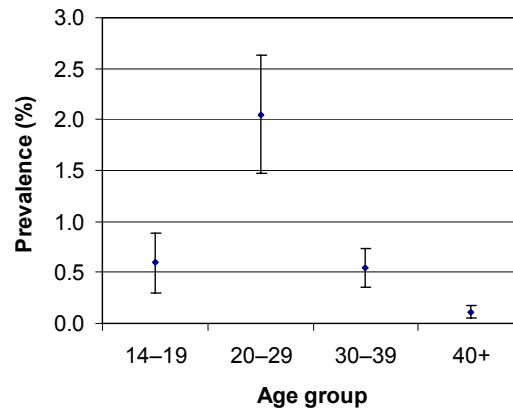
Ecstasy



Heroin



Injected illicit drugs



(a) See Appendix A for a description of confidence intervals.

Note: The above graphs are drawn to different scales.

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001.

Figure 4.1: Prevalence and 95% confidence intervals^(a) of drug use in the last 12 months, selected illicit drugs, persons aged 14 years and over, by age, Australia, 2001

National trends

The use of any illicit drug during the previous 12 months fluctuated over the period 1991 to 2001 (Table 4.2). In 2001, 16.9% of the population aged 14 years and over reported the recent use of any illicit drug.

The recent use of marijuana/cannabis remained stable around 13%, with the exception of 1998 where 17.9% of the population reported its recent use.

Heroin use has remained relatively stable since 1991 at around 0.2% to 0.4%, although it decreased from 0.8% in 1998 to 0.2% in 2001.

The use of ecstasy/designer drugs in the last 12 months increased from 1.1% in 1991 to 2.9% in 2001.

Table 4.2: Summary of recent^(a) illicit drug use: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by drug type, Australia, 1991 to 2001

Substance/behaviour	1991	1993	1995	1998	2001
	(per cent)				
Marijuana/cannabis	13.7	12.7	13.1	17.9	12.9
Pain-killers/analgesics ^(b)	n.a.	1.7	3.5	5.2	3.1
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills ^(b)	n.a.	0.9	0.6	3.0	1.1
Steroids ^(b)	n.a.	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2
Barbiturates ^(b)	1.5	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.2
Inhalants	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.9	0.4
Heroin	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.8	0.2
Methadone ^(c)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.2	0.1
Other opiates ^(b)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.3
Amphetamines ^(b)	2.6	2.0	2.1	3.7	3.4
Cocaine	0.7	0.5	1.0	1.4	1.3
Hallucinogens	1.6	1.3	1.8	3.0	1.1
Ecstasy/designer drugs	1.1	1.2	0.9	2.4	2.9
Injected drugs	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.6
Any illicit drug	22.8	14.0	17.0	22.0	16.9
None of the above	77.2	86.0	83.0	78.0	83.1

(a) Used in the last 12 months.

(b) For non-medical purposes.

(c) For non-maintenance purposes.

Sources: National Campaign Against Drug Abuse Household Survey 1991, 1993; National Drug Strategy Household Survey 1995, 1998, 2001.

Marijuana/cannabis use

This section provides more detailed analysis of marijuana/cannabis use in Australia from the 2001 NDSHS. It includes a summary of marijuana/cannabis use, and support and opposition for the personal use of marijuana/cannabis being made legal.

Summary of marijuana/cannabis use

At each age marijuana/cannabis use was more common among males than females (Table 4.3). Males were more likely than females to have ever used marijuana/cannabis, used in the last 12 months, used in the last month and used in the last week.

Around 37% of males used marijuana/cannabis at least once in their life, with 15.8% using in the last 12 months, 10.3% using in the last month and 7.6% in the last week.

In comparison, around 29% of females used marijuana/cannabis at least once in their life, with 10.0% using in the last 12 months, 5.3% using in the last month and 3.7% using in the last week.

The prevalence of marijuana/cannabis use peaked in males and females aged 20–29 years. Around 62% of males and 56% of females aged 20–29 years reported using marijuana/cannabis at least once in their life, while 16.0% of males and 8.6% of females in this age group used marijuana/cannabis in the last week.

Table 4.3: Use of marijuana/cannabis: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 2001

Age group	Marijuana/cannabis use			
	Ever used	Used in the last 12 months	Used in the last month	Used in the last week
(per cent)				
Males				
14–19	35.2	26.6	15.6	11.0
20–29	61.6	35.1	23.1	16.0
30–39	54.8	20.8	13.8	11.5
40+	22.7	5.4	3.6	2.7
All ages	36.9	15.8	10.3	7.6
Females				
14–19	33.4	22.6	10.9	7.0
20–29	56.2	23.2	12.5	8.6
30–39	45.0	11.7	6.8	5.1
40+	14.7	2.8	1.5	1.0
All ages	29.4	10.0	5.3	3.7
Persons				
14–19	34.3	24.6	13.3	9.1
20–29	58.9	29.3	17.9	12.4
30–39	49.8	16.1	10.2	8.2
40+	18.6	4.1	2.5	1.8
All ages	33.1	12.9	7.8	5.6

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001.

Frequency of marijuana/cannabis use

Among recent users of marijuana/cannabis in 2001, 43.7% of males and 55.8% of females used marijuana/cannabis less frequently than once per month, while 12.9% of males and 12.7% of females used marijuana/cannabis about once a month (Table 4.4). Around one in four males and one in six females used marijuana/cannabis at least once a week but less than every day, and 17.1% of males and 14.3% of females used marijuana/cannabis every day.

Among males, those aged 20–29 years (19.8%) were most likely to use marijuana/cannabis every day compared with those in other age groups, while among females, those aged 30–39 years (19.1%) were most likely to use marijuana/cannabis every day.

More than one in 10 marijuana/cannabis users aged 14–19 years used the drug every day, while about one in five used once a week but less than every day, one in six used about once a month and about half used less often.

Table 4.4: Frequency of marijuana/cannabis use: proportion of recent^(a) users aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 2001

Age group	Frequency of marijuana/cannabis use			
	Every day	Once a week or more	About once a month	Less often
(per cent)				
Males				
14–19	12.4	23.0	16.8	47.8
20–29	19.8	24.5	11.4	44.2
30–39	17.8	29.4	13.3	39.6
40+	15.4	28.9	11.6	44.0
All ages	17.1	26.2	12.9	43.7
Females				
14–19	10.6	14.4	16.2	58.8
20–29	14.3	15.7	13.7	56.3
30–39	19.1	23.0	8.9	49.0
40+	12.8	17.4	9.9	60.0
All ages	14.3	17.3	12.7	55.8
Persons				
14–19	11.6	19.1	16.5	52.7
20–29	17.7	21.1	12.3	48.9
30–39	18.3	27.0	11.6	43.1
40+	14.5	24.9	11.0	49.7
All ages	16.0	22.7	12.8	48.5

(a) Used in the last 12 months.

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001.

Support for legalisation of marijuana/cannabis for personal use

In the 2001 NDSHS, respondents were asked about their level of support for the personal use of marijuana/cannabis being made legal. In 2001, 47.6% of males and 51.5% of females were opposed or strongly opposed to the personal use of marijuana/cannabis being made legal (Table 4.5). Conversely, 29.7% of males and 25.2% of females supported or strongly supported the personal use of marijuana/cannabis being made legal.

Table 4.5: Support for personal use of marijuana/cannabis being made legal: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 2001

Age group	Level of support for marijuana/cannabis being made legal			
	Support or strongly support	Oppose or strongly oppose	Neither support nor oppose	Don't know enough to say
(per cent)				
Males				
14–19	28.4	43.1	22.9	5.6
20–29	45.0	34.5	17.1	3.4
30–39	38.4	38.3	19.6	3.7
40+	21.9	56.3	16.0	5.8
All ages	29.7	47.6	17.6	5.0
Females				
14–19	26.4	47.7	19.8	6.1
20–29	36.4	40.9	19.7	3.0
30–39	31.6	44.0	19.1	5.3
40+	19.1	58.2	14.2	8.5
All ages	25.2	51.5	16.6	6.7
Persons				
14–19	27.4	45.3	21.4	5.8
20–29	40.7	37.7	18.4	3.2
30–39	34.9	41.2	19.3	4.5
40+	20.5	57.3	15.0	7.2
All ages	27.4	49.6	17.1	5.9

Source: National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2001.