

1 Introduction

Background

The National Drug Strategy

The National Drug Strategy (NDS) is a comprehensive, integrated approach to the harmful use of licit and illicit drugs and other substances. The NDS is managed under the direction of the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS), which brings together Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers responsible for health and law enforcement to collectively determine national policies and programs designed to reduce the harm caused by drugs to individuals, families and communities in Australia (MCDS 1998).

The Strategy aims to improve health, social and economic outcomes by preventing the uptake of harmful drug use and reducing the harmful effects of licit and illicit drugs in Australian society. Both licit and illicit drugs are the focus of Australia's harm-minimisation strategy. Harm minimisation includes preventing anticipated harm as well as reducing actual harm. Harm minimisation is therefore consistent with a comprehensive approach to drug-related harm, involving a balance between demand-reduction, supply-reduction and harm-reduction strategies.

Drug-related harm

The Institute estimates that in 1997 over 22,000 deaths and more than a quarter of a million hospital episodes were drug-related (AIHW 1999). The licit drugs (tobacco and alcohol) accounted for over 96% of the drug-related deaths and hospitalisations. The estimated direct health care cost of drug dependence and harmful use in Australia in 1992 was \$1 billion: \$833 million for tobacco; \$145 million for alcohol; and \$43 million for illicit drugs (Collins & Lapsley 1996). More recently, the Institute estimates that in 1993–94 the direct health system cost of the management of substance abuse disorders was \$274 million (this does not include the cost of managing other conditions attributable to the use of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs).

About the 1998 survey

The 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey was the most comprehensive survey concerning licit and illicit drug use ever undertaken in Australia. It gathered information from over 10,000 persons aged 14 years and over. The sample was based on households, so homeless and institutionalised persons were not included in the survey (consistent with the approach in previous years). Details of the methodology can be found in *1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: First Results* (AIHW 1999).

The survey comprised questions on drug-related knowledge, awareness, attitudes, use and behaviours. It was the sixth survey conducted under the auspices of the NDS. Previous surveys were conducted in 1985, 1988, 1991, 1993 and 1995. An Indigenous (urban)

supplement survey was conducted in 1994. The data collected in these surveys contribute to the development of policies for Australia's response to drug issues.

Comparisons with 1995 results

The 1998 survey introduced a number of methodological enhancements that could potentially affect comparison with previous survey results. A discussion of the main differences between the 1995 and 1998 surveys is in chapter 6 of the Institute's *First Results* report. One of these changes (cross-validation between lifetime and recent use) may have systematically produced marginally higher prevalence estimates than if the 1995 methodology had been used. However, the Technical Advisory Committee considered that the slight loss of comparison with 1995 was more than compensated for by the increase in the reliability of 1998 estimates.

About this report

Data presented in this report are based on estimates derived from responses weighted to the Australian population aged 14 years and over. Unless otherwise specified, the base for all estimates is the number of respondents who answered the relevant question(s) in the survey instrument. All results in this report are based on final sample weighting. This is expected to result in minimal changes to the estimates presented in the earlier report.

The report contains chapters on correlates and social aspects of drug use. For a number of the measures of low prevalence behaviours (e.g. use of injecting drugs), resultant estimates are more likely to be statistically unreliable than the same measures of high prevalence behaviours (e.g. alcohol consumption).

Readers are reminded, therefore, that in interpreting results, reference should always be made to the table of relative standard errors (Appendix 1). The demographic information in Table A.2 (Appendix 2) was used to determine the standard error on correlate data throughout this report. Results subject to relative standard errors of between 25% and 50% should be considered with caution and those with relative standard errors greater than 50% should be considered as unreliable for most practical purposes.

Throughout this report the following symbols are used:

- nil or rounded to zero
- .. not applicable
- * relative standard error greater than 50%.

Overview — the status of drug use in 1998

Lifetime and recent use of drugs

In 1998 the drugs most commonly tried in the Australian community were alcohol and tobacco (Table 1.1). The 1998 survey showed that:

- Two-thirds of Australians aged 14 years and older had tried smoking tobacco.
- Nine out of every ten persons had tried alcohol.

- Of all the illicit drugs, marijuana was used by two-fifths of all Australians aged 14 years and over, while one in ten used hallucinogens and more than one in 20 had used tranquillisers.
- Although two-thirds of all Australians aged 14 years and over smoked tobacco at some time in their life, only one in four (27%) did so in the last 12 months.
- Drinking alcohol is more common than smoking, with more than four-fifths (81%) of all Australians aged 14 years and over reported to have drunk recently.

The age at which Australians aged 14 years and over first tried drugs differed according to the type of drug, with Australians trying legal drugs (such as tobacco and alcohol) at an earlier age than illicit drugs.

Table 1.1: Summary of drug use: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over and mean age of initiation, Australia, 1998

Drug/behaviour	Drugs ever used	Drugs recently used ^(a)	Mean age of initiation
	(per cent)		(years)
Tobacco	66.2	26.6	15.8
Alcohol	90.5	80.5	17.1
Marijuana	39.1	17.9	18.8
Pain-killers/analgesics ^(b)	11.5	5.2	19.6
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills ^(b)	6.2	3.0	23.3
Steroids ^(b)	0.8	0.2	21.4
Barbiturates ^(b)	1.6	0.3	19.8
Inhalants	3.9	0.9	17.5
Heroin	2.2	0.8	21.7
Methadone ^(c)	0.5	0.2	22.1
Amphetamines ^(b)	8.8	3.7	20.0
Cocaine	4.3	1.4	22.2
Hallucinogens	9.9	3.0	18.4
Ecstasy/designer drugs	4.8	2.4	22.5
Injected illegal drugs	2.1	0.8	20.7
None of the above	6.6	14.3	..

(a) Used in the last 12 months.

(b) For non-medical purposes.

(c) Non-maintenance.

Preferred drugs

In 1998 respondents to the survey were asked what their favourite or preferred drug was and, if it was not available, what their second choice was. Most Australians aged 14 years and over preferred alcohol or tobacco or no drugs at all to illicit drugs, with females more likely than males to show a preference for no drugs at all (Table 1.2).

In 1998 alcohol was the first-preference drug for over two in every five (44%) persons; tobacco was the other drug nominated most often, with approximately one in six (16%) Australians aged 14 years and older indicating it as the first preference.

The survey showed that there was a sex difference in the preference of drugs. Slightly more females (17%) than males (15%) chose tobacco as their first-preference drug, while more males (51%) nominated alcohol as their preferred drug compared with females (37%).

Table 1.2: Preferred drugs of choice: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 1998

Drug	Males		Females		Persons	
	First choice	Second choice	First choice	Second choice	First choice	Second choice
	(per cent)					
Tobacco	14.7	9.9	17.4	9.1	16.1	9.5
Alcohol	50.9	19.4	36.9	17.8	43.9	18.6
Marijuana/cannabis	5.5	8.9	3.0	6.7	4.2	7.9
Steroids ^(a)	0.1 *	0.2 *	—	—	—	0.1 *
Inhalants	—	0.1 *	—	—	—	—
Heroin	0.3	0.2	—	0.2	0.2	0.2
Methadone ^(b)	—	0.1 *	—	0.1 *	—	0.1 *
Other opiates	0.1 *	—	—	0.1 *	—	0.1 *
Amphetamines ^(a)	0.2 *	1.0	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.8
Cocaine	0.1 *	0.6	0.2	0.4	0.1 *	0.5
Hallucinogens	0.3	0.6	0.1 *	0.5	0.2	0.6
Ecstasy/designer drugs	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.4
Benzodiazepines ^(a)	—	0.1 *	—	0.1 *	—	0.1 *
None	27.1	58.4	41.6	64.2	34.4	61.1

(a) For non-medical purposes.

(b) Non-maintenance.

Availability of drugs

The 1998 survey asked respondents whether they had been offered or had the opportunity to use any of the drugs. The survey showed that of all Australians aged 14 years or over, more than half (56%) had tobacco available for use, while alcohol was available for more than four-fifths (82%) (Table 1.3). The survey also showed that higher proportions of younger people (aged 14–29 years) had access to most of the drugs, such as tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines, heroin, cocaine, hallucinogens and other designer drugs, compared with their older aged counterparts (Table 1.4).

Table 1.3: Availability of drugs in the past 12 months: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 1998

Drug	Males	Females	Persons
	(per cent)		
Tobacco	61.4	50.2	55.8
Alcohol	86.8	77.9	82.3
Marijuana	27.8	19.0	23.4
Pain-killers/analgesics ^(a)	46.5	48.5	47.5
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills ^(a)	7.4	7.8	7.6
Steroids ^(a)	2.2	0.8	1.5
Barbiturates ^(a)	1.4	1.0	1.2
Inhalants	4.4	2.6	3.5
Heroin	3.4	1.4	2.4
Amphetamines ^(a)	7.2	4.8	6.0
Cocaine	3.2	2.1	2.7
Naturally occurring hallucinogens	3.5	2.0	2.7
LSD synthetic hallucinogens	7.4	3.8	5.6
Ecstasy/designer drugs	6.3	3.2	4.8
Kava	2.4	1.3	1.8

(a) For non-medical purposes.

Table 1.4: Availability of drugs in the past 12 months: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age, Australia, 1998

Drug	Age group						All ages
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
	(per cent)						
Tobacco	69.2	77.7	62.3	56.3	42.0	26.1	55.8
Alcohol	82.0	90.9	89.5	84.2	82.6	64.0	82.3
Marijuana	47.8	49.6	24.4	11.7	8.4	2.6	23.4
Pain-killers/analgesics ^(a)	39.7	50.7	52.4	53.2	50.6	35.9	47.5
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills ^(a)	4.7	10.7	7.1	7.2	10.0	5.3	7.6
Steroids ^(a)	2.1	3.1	0.9	1.1	1.6	0.3 *	1.5
Barbiturates ^(a)	1.5	2.0	0.9	0.8	1.6	0.4 *	1.2
Inhalants	7.6	6.7	2.5	1.8	3.3	0.6	3.5
Heroin	3.3	5.7	1.6	1.7	1.5	0.6	2.4
Amphetamines ^(a)	12.2	16.3	4.4	1.6	1.7	0.4 *	6.0
Cocaine	3.7	7.0	2.4	1.3	1.4	0.2 *	2.7
Naturally occurring hallucinogens	7.5	6.4	1.3	1.0	1.5	0.3 *	2.7
LSD synthetic hallucinogens	14.5	15.3	3.1	1.3	1.3	0.4 *	5.6
Ecstasy/designer drugs	9.6	13.8	3.2	0.8	1.5	0.4 *	4.8
Kava	1.8	3.8	1.2	0.9	3.3	0.3 *	1.8

(a) For non-medical purposes.