

# 16 Drug-related incidents and potential harm

## Introduction

An objective of the National Drug Strategy is to minimise the harmful effects on the population of both licit and illicit drugs. The NDSHS contributes to this by exploring and reporting on the experiences of drug-related incidents and harm for Australians.

This chapter presents data on persons aged 14 years and over who were victims of drug-related incidents, where drug-related incidents occurred and what the outcomes were. Also presented are data on the perpetrators of drug-related incidents and persons who, while under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs, put themselves or others at risk of harm.

## Drug-related incidents

### Victims of drug-related incidents

Respondents were asked if they had been verbally or physically abused, or put in fear, in the past 12 months, by persons affected by either alcohol or illicit drugs. It was found that Australians aged 14 years and over were more likely to have been abused by someone affected by alcohol than someone affected by illicit drugs (Table 16.1). Other results include:

- Almost 5 million Australians aged 14 years and over (30.6%) had been abused by someone affected by alcohol. In comparison, over 2.3 million (15.1%) Australians aged 14 years and over had experienced illicit drug-related abuse.
- One in four (26.5%) persons were verbally abused by someone affected by alcohol and 11.3% were verbally abused by someone affected by illicit drugs.
- Physical abuse by someone affected by alcohol was experienced by one in 20 (4.9%) Australians. There was a greater proportion of male victims (5.8%) than female victims (3.9%).
- Although males were more likely than females to have experienced verbal or physical abuse in the past 12 months, a greater proportion of females was put in fear. For alcohol and illicit drug-related abuse respectively, one in six (15.6%) and one in 10 (9.6%) females were put in fear.
- Australians aged 20–29 years were the age group most likely to have experienced both alcohol and illicit drug-related abuse, reported by 47.7% and 21.1% respectively, in this age group.

**Table 16.1: Victims of drug-related incidents in the past 12 months, persons aged 14 years and over, by age, by sex, Australia, 2001**

Influence and incident	Age group				Sex		Persons
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40+	Males	Females	
	(per cent)						
<b>Alcohol</b>							
Verbal abuse	32.3	41.9	31.7	18.3	29.2	23.8	26.5
Physical abuse	10.4	9.5	5.3	1.9	5.8	3.9	4.9
Put in fear	19.3	22.0	16.4	8.8	11.8	15.6	13.7
<b>Any abuse</b>	<b>39.3</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>35.9</b>	<b>21.2</b>	<b>32.3</b>	<b>29.0</b>	<b>30.6</b>
<b>Illicit drugs</b>							
Verbal abuse	12.6	16.1	13.1	8.8	12.8	9.9	11.3
Physical abuse	3.5	3.7	2.6	1.2	2.6	1.8	2.2
Put in fear	11.1	12.1	9.5	6.8	7.8	9.6	8.7
<b>Any abuse</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>15.1</b>

In 2001, patterns of alcohol-related incidents were different for recent users of alcohol, ex-drinkers and those who had never drunk. Recent drinkers were significantly more likely, compared to both ex-drinkers and those who had never drunk, to have experienced both verbal and physical abuse by someone affected by alcohol (Figure 16.1). It was also found that in the past 12 months:

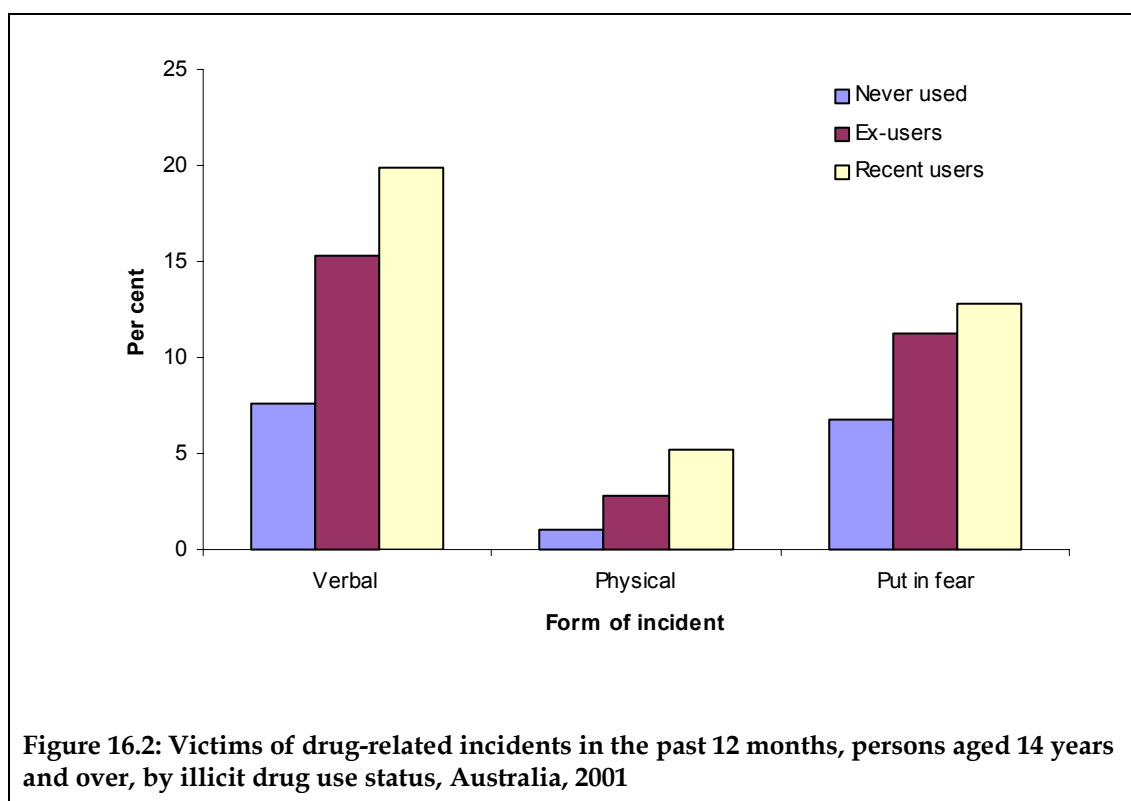
- among recent drinkers, 5.3% reported being victims of physical abuse and 14.4% were put in fear by someone affected by alcohol; and
- those who had never consumed alcohol were the group least likely to have experienced any of the incidents in the past 12 months: one in 10 (10.1%) reported being verbally abused, whilst 1.9% had been physically abused.



**Figure 16.1: Victims of alcohol-related incidents in the past 12 months, persons aged 14 years and over, by drinking status, Australia, 2001**

Consistent with the pattern of alcohol-related abuse, recent users of illicit drugs were typically more likely to have experienced each of the three incidents compared to those who had not used recently and those who had never used (Figure 16.2). The survey also found that in the past 12 months:

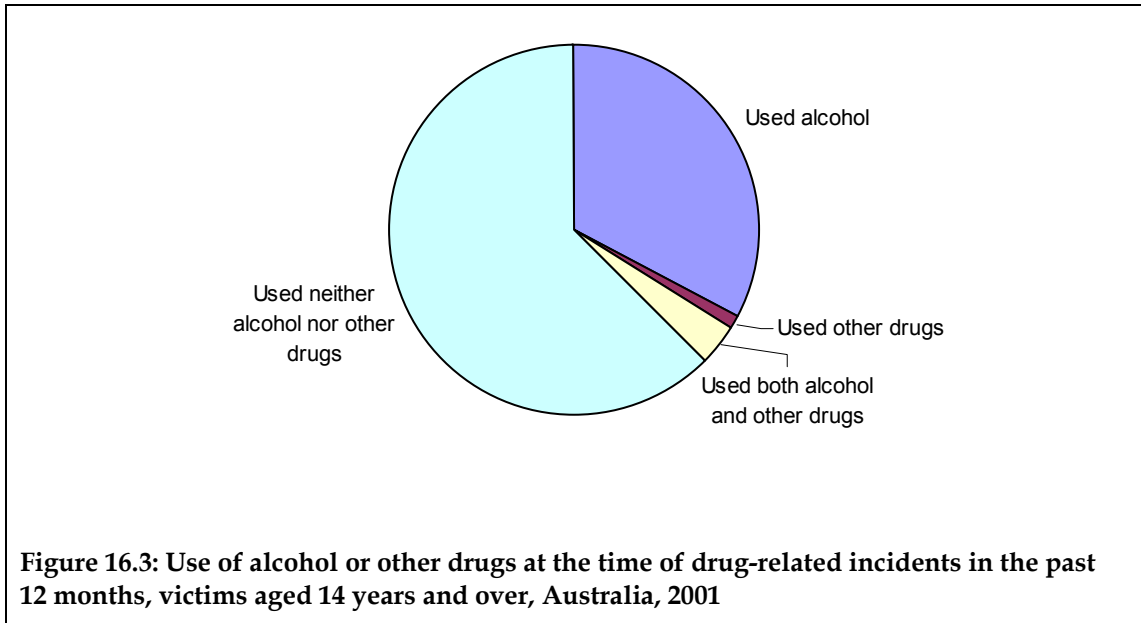
- one in five (19.9%) recent users had been verbally abused by someone affected by illicit drugs;
- illicit drug-related physical abuse was experienced by 5.2% of recent users. This was five times the proportion of never users (1.1%) who reported experiencing physical abuse; and
- 6.8% of those who had never used illicit drugs were put in fear, compared with 12.7% and 11.3% of recent and ex-users respectively.



## Use of alcohol or other drugs by victims

Those who reported being victims of drug-related incidents in the past 12 months were asked whether at the time of the incident(s) they had been drinking alcohol or using drugs other than alcohol. Almost two-thirds (62.4%) of those who were abused in the past 12 months reported not being affected by alcohol or other drugs at the time of the incident (Figure 16.3). Other results include:

- A third (32.7%) had drunk alcohol at the time of the abuse.
- A further 1.1% had consumed drugs other than alcohol and 3.7% were affected by both alcohol and other drugs.



- A greater proportion of female victims (70.2%) than male victims (55.0%) reported not drinking alcohol or using other drugs at the time of the incident.
- Four in 10 (39.5%) males who had been abused reported drinking alcohol when the abuse occurred. This contrasts with one-quarter (25.6%) of females.

### Reporting of drug-related incidents to police

Respondents who had sustained physical injury as a result of alcohol or drug-related incidents were asked if the incidents were reported to the police. In 2001, almost three quarters (72.3%) of the abuse resulting in physical injury was not reported to the police:

- Of those who did not report all incidents of physical abuse to the police, the most common reason, selected by 52.5%, was the perceived trivial or unimportant nature of the incident.
- The next most common response was that the incident was a private matter (29.3%).
- One in five of those who did not report all incidents of physical abuse felt that the police could not do anything (21.8%) or thought that the police would not do anything (19.5%).

## Relationship of perpetrator to victim

Those who experienced drug-related incidents in the past 12 months were asked to indicate who was responsible for the incidents. Most commonly, the abuse was by someone not known to the victim (Table 16.2):

- Abuse by someone not known to the victim was reported in over half of the verbal (54.7%) and put in fear incidents (62.0%).
- Across all three incident categories, males were more likely than females to have been abused by someone they did not know.
- Among female victims, current or ex-spouses or partners were responsible for a third (32.5%) and almost half (43.5%) of the verbal and physical abuse respectively.
- Females were seven times more likely than males to be put in fear by a current or ex-spouse or partner (22.3% compared with 3.1%).

**Table 16.2: Relationship of perpetrators to victims of drug-related incidents, victims aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 2001**

Incident and relationship of perpetrator	Sex		Persons
	Males	Females	
	(per cent)		
<b>Verbal abuse</b>			
Current or ex-spouse or partner	8.6	32.5	19.6
Relative	8.9	18.4	13.2
Friend	12.5	12.2	12.4
Other person known to me	28.1	21.8	25.2
Someone not known to me	65.3	42.2	54.7
<b>Physical abuse</b>			
Current or ex-spouse or partner	5.7	43.5	21.3
Relative	10.5	15.5	12.6
Friend	11.6	9.1	10.6
Other person known to me	32.8	22.1	28.4
Someone not known to me	57.9	27.6	45.4
<b>Put in fear</b>			
Current or ex-spouse or partner	3.1	22.3	14.2
Relative	7.5	14.9	11.8
Friend	5.0	8.2	6.8
Other person known to me	25.8	21.5	23.3
Someone not known to me	73.4	53.6	62.0

### Notes

1. Base is those who reported being a victim of drug-related incidents in the past 12 months.
2. Respondents were able to select more than one response.

## Location of drug-related incidents

Those who reported being victims of drug-related incidents in the past 12 months were asked where the incidents had occurred (Table 16.3):

- The most common location of verbal abuse was in the street: for 45.5% of males and 31.4% of females who experienced verbal abuse, the abuse occurred in the street.
- The most common location for physical abuse was also in the street. However, almost twice the proportion of males (37.4%) than females (19.7%) experienced their physical abuse in the street.
- Furthermore, for those who were physically abused, a much greater proportion of females (48.6%) than males (15.0%) were abused in their own home.

**Table 16.3: Location of drug-related incidents, victims aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 2001**

Incident and location	Sex		Persons
	Males	Females	
	(per cent)		
<b>Verbal abuse</b>			
In own home	14.6	38.6	25.6
In a pub or club	36.3	23.1	30.2
At own workplace	10.6	11.2	10.9
Public transport	9.6	7.3	8.5
In the street	45.5	31.4	39.0
Somewhere else	16.9	21.7	19.1
<b>Physical abuse</b>			
In own home	15.0	48.6	29.1
In a pub or club	34.9	15.1	26.6
At own workplace	13.8	8.3	11.5
Public transport	6.4	3.3	5.1
In the street	37.4	19.7	30.0
Somewhere else	18.7	27.5	22.4
<b>Put in fear</b>			
In own home	9.8	28.9	20.8
In a pub or club	23.7	17.5	20.1
At own workplace	10.9	9.8	10.3
Public transport	16.3	12.8	14.3
In the street	54.9	42.3	47.7
Somewhere else	16.8	22.4	20.0

*Notes*

1. Base is those who reported being a victim of drug-related incidents in the past 12 months.
2. Respondents were able to select more than one response.

## Potential for drug-related harm

Survey respondents were asked if they had undertaken any of a selection of activities in the past 12 months while under the influence of either alcohol or illegal drugs. Post-survey focus groups found that interpretations of the term 'under the influence' varied. Focus group participants related 'under the influence' to concepts ranging from 'having some alcohol in their system' to 'their judgement being affected'.

### Harm related to alcohol

Driving a vehicle was the most common response by recent drinkers aged 14 years and over when asked of activities undertaken while under the influence of alcohol (Table 16.4). The survey also found that:

- more than 2 million Australians aged 14 years and over had driven a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol. Almost one in five male recent drinkers (17.9%) and one in 13 (7.8%) female recent drinkers had driven a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol; and
- the next most common activity to have been undertaken while under the influence of alcohol was verbal abuse of someone (8.1% of male recent drinkers and 4.0% of female recent drinkers).

**Table 16.4: Activities undertaken in the past 12 months while under the influence of alcohol, recent drinkers aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 2001**

Activity	Sex		Persons
	Males	Females	
	(per cent)		
Went to work	7.6	2.9	5.4
Went swimming	8.4	3.9	6.2
Operated a boat or hazardous machinery	3.2	0.3	1.8
Drove a vehicle	20.9	10.0	15.6
Created a disturbance, damage or stole goods	6.1	2.8	4.5
Verbally abused someone	9.5	5.1	7.4
Physically abused someone	2.0	0.7	1.4
	(number)		
Went to work	508,600	181,900	690,500
Went swimming	562,100	244,600	806,700
Operated a boat or hazardous machinery	214,100	18,800	232,900
Drove a vehicle	1,398,500	627,200	2,025,700
Created a disturbance, damage or stole goods	408,200	175,600	583,800
Verbally abused someone	635,700	319,800	955,500
Physically abused someone	133,800	43,900	177,700

Note: Base equals recent drinkers.

## Harm related to illicit drugs

Respondents were also asked what activities they had undertaken while under the influence of illegal drugs. As with alcohol, the activity most commonly undertaken was driving a vehicle (Table 16.5). The survey also showed that in the past 12 months:

- a greater proportion of males (30.6%) than females (16.8%) drove a vehicle while under the influence of illicit drugs; and
- the two next most common activities undertaken while under the influence of illegal drugs were going to work and swimming.

**Table 16.5: Activities undertaken in the past 12 months while under the influence of illicit drugs, recent users aged 14 years and over, by sex, Australia, 2001**

Activity	Sex		Persons
	Males	Females	
	(per cent)		
Went to work	18.4	10.5	15.1
Went swimming	19.4	9.8	15.3
Operated a boat or hazardous machinery	7.5	0.6	4.6
Drove a vehicle	30.6	16.8	24.8
Created a disturbance, damage or stole goods	5.7	3.2	4.6
Verbally abused someone	7.3	5.4	6.5
Physically abused someone	2.3	1.1	1.8
	(number)		
Went to work	283,400	117,900	401,300
Went swimming	298,900	110,100	409,000
Operated a boat or hazardous machinery	115,500	6,700	122,200
Drove a vehicle	471,400	188,700	660,100
Created a disturbance, damage or stole goods	87,800	35,900	123,700
Verbally abused someone	112,500	60,700	173,200
Physically abused someone	35,400	12,400	47,800

Note: Base equals recent illicit drug users.