

2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey

First results

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Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Board Chair

Hon. Peter Collins, AM, QC

Director

Penny Allbon

Any enquiries about or comments on this publication should be directed to:

David Batts

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

GPO Box 570

Canberra ACT 2601

Phone: (02) 6289 8515

Email: David.Batts@AIHW.gov.au

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Foreword

This report presents the summary results from the 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey. The main survey report, with more detailed analysis – subtitled *Detailed findings* – will be published later in 2008.

The AIHW undertook the survey at the request of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. The survey was approved by the AIHW Health Ethics Committee and conducted under AIHW legislation, providing a very high level of protection to the personal information collected in the survey.

The release of *First results* represents a timely and substantial contribution to research and debate on the drug-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of Australians.

I am pleased that the AIHW has been able to undertake this important survey on a topic of high policy concern to all levels of government and the community.

I would like to pay particular tribute to David Batts for his role in managing the survey and authoring the report, to co-authors Shubhada Shukla, Amber Summerill and Mark Cooper-Stanbury, and the Department's officers who worked closely with the AIHW team throughout the survey.

Behind the results produced here is the time and care taken by almost 25,000 Australians who have filled in a fairly long survey of a highly personal nature. This individual effort demonstrates the high level of community concern about licit and illicit drug use in Australia.

Penny Allbon
Director
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

April 2008

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Abbreviations, symbols and definitions

Abbreviations

AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CATI	Computer-assisted telephone interview
CURF	Confidentialised unit record file
MCDS	Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy
NCADA	National Campaign Against Drug Abuse
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NDS	National Drug Strategy
NDSHS	National Drug Strategy Household Survey
SE	Standard error
RSE	Relative standard error

Symbols

–	Nil, or rounded to zero
..	not applicable
#	2007 result significantly different from 2004 result (2-tailed $\alpha = 0.05$)
n.a.	not available

Definitions

‘Illicit drugs’ means illegal drugs (such as marijuana/cannabis), prescription or over-the-counter pharmaceuticals (such as analgesics/pain-killers or tranquillisers/sleeping pills) used for illicit purposes, and other substances used inappropriately (such as naturally occurring hallucinogens and inhalants).

‘Recent use’ is equivalent to ‘use in the previous 12 months’ and the terms are used interchangeably. Both terms refer to the 12 months preceding the survey.

Further definitions are provided in Chapter 6.

Summary

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey was conducted between July and November 2007. This was the ninth survey in a series which commenced in 1985, and was the fourth to be managed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Almost 25,000 Australians aged 12 years or older participated in the survey, in which they were asked about their knowledge of and attitudes towards drugs, their drug consumption histories, and related behaviours. Most of the analyses in this report are based on the population aged 14 years or older, as this allows consistent comparison with earlier survey results.

Tobacco

Nearly half (44.6%) of Australians aged 14 years or older had smoked 100 or more cigarettes or the equivalent amount of tobacco at some time in their lives, but less than one in five (19.4%) had smoked in the last 12 months. The proportion of the population aged 14 years or older who smoked daily declined by nearly one percentage point between 2004 and 2007, from 17.4% to 16.6%. However, the average age at which smokers took up tobacco remained stable at a little less than 16 years.

Tobacco was thought to be associated with a drug 'problem' by 2.6% of Australians aged 14 years or older and 14.3% approved the regular use of tobacco by adults; a further 22.5% neither approved or disapproved. Tobacco was the second most accessible drug: one in every two Australians aged 14 years or older (49.2%) was offered or had the opportunity to use tobacco in the last 12 months.

Daily smokers were more likely than other recent smokers or non-smokers to report high or very high levels of psychological distress.

Alcohol

Nine out of every ten Australians aged 14 years or older (89.9%) had tried alcohol at some time in their lives and 82.9% had consumed alcohol in the 12 months preceding the 2007 survey.

The proportion of the population drinking daily fell significantly (from 8.9% to 8.1%) between 2004 and 2007 whereas the average age at which people had their first full serve of alcohol (17 years of age) remained stable. The proportion of teenagers drinking at least weekly was around 22%.

One in eight people (12.1%) admitted to driving a motor vehicle and one in 17 (5.7%) admitted to verbally abusing someone while under the influence of alcohol. One-quarter (25.4%) of Australians aged 14 years or older had been verbally abused and 4.5% had been physically abused by someone under the influence of alcohol.

Alcohol was thought to be associated with a drug 'problem' by one in ten Australians (10.5%) aged 14 years or older, whereas 45.2% approved (and a further 33.8% did not oppose) the regular use of alcohol by adults. Alcohol was the most accessible drug: nine in ten Australians aged 14 years or older (89.3%) were offered or had the opportunity to use alcohol in the last 12 months.

High-risk and risky drinkers were more likely than low-risk drinkers or abstainers to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress.

Illicit drugs

Almost two in every five Australians (38.1%), aged 14 years or older, had used an illicit drug at some time in their lives and more than one in seven (13.4%) had used illicit drugs in the previous 12 months.

The most commonly-reported illicit drug used in the previous 12 months was marijuana/cannabis (9.1% of people aged 14 years or older), followed by ecstasy (3.5%), pain killers/analgesics used for non-medical purposes (2.5%) and meth/amphetamine (which includes 'ice') (2.3%).

Between 2004 and 2007, there was a significant fall in the proportion of the population aged 14 years or older who had used an illicit drug in the past 12 months, from 15.3% to 13.4%. Recent marijuana/cannabis use, in particular, had dropped significantly between 2004 and 2007, from 11.3% to 9.1%. Recent use also declined for meth/amphetamine but increased for cocaine.

The average age at which new users first tried illicit drugs remained close to 19 years of age. The most accessible illicit drugs were marijuana/cannabis and painkillers/analgesics – 17.1% and 15.4% of the population respectively were offered or had the opportunity to use these drugs for non-medical purposes, in the previous 12 months.

Driving a motor vehicle while under the influence of illicit drugs was reported by 2.9% of Australians aged 14 years or older. One in nine persons (11.0%) was verbally abused and one in 50 (2.0%) was physically abused by someone affected by illicit drugs.

Not quite nine in every ten Australians aged 14 years or older (85.2%) primarily associated an illicit drug with a drug 'problem', which was largely unchanged between 2004 and 2007. By contrast, the proportion of those who associated meth/amphetamine with a problem trebled between 2004 and 2007 from 5.5% to 16.4%. Together, the perception of marijuana/cannabis and heroin as 'problem' drugs declined by a similar amount. The proportion of Australians approving the regular use of illicit drugs was generally low. However, more than 1 in 5 either approved or 'neither approved nor disapproved' (6.6% and 16.6% respectively) the regular use of marijuana/cannabis by adults. Similar proportions approved (10.4%) or 'neither approved nor disapproved' (13.3%) the illicit use of pain-killers/analgesics.

Of Australians aged 18 years or older, more than one in five persons (20.2%) who used an illicit drug in the previous month reported high or very high levels of psychological distress; more than twice the proportion (8.7%) of those who had not used an illicit drug in the same period.