

Statistics on drug use in Australia 2006

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DRUG STATISTICS SERIES

Number 18

Statistics on drug use in Australia 2006

April 2007

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Canberra

AIHW cat. no. PHE 80

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This publication is part of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Drug Statistics Series. A complete list of the Institute's publications is available from the Institute's website <www.aihw.gov.au>.

ISSN: 1442-7230

ISBN-13: 978 1 74024 660 6

Suggested citation

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2007. Statistics on drug use in Australia 2006. Drug Statistics Series No. 18. Cat. no. PHE 80. Canberra: AIHW.

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Published by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Printed by

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Preface

Statistics on drug use in Australia 2006 is the twelfth in a series originally titled *Statistics on drug abuse in Australia*, which was produced by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. This publication is the fifth produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). This edition includes additional material on illicit drug use by prisoners and juvenile offenders, alcohol use among those in the workforce, and more in-depth information on methamphetamine drug use. It provides a summary of major drug-use statistical collections, which leads interested readers to the sources of more detailed information.

The *National Drug Strategy 2004–2009* cites the development of a ‘Companion document’, which is intended to contain a detailed overview of Australian drug data and information pertaining to consumption and harms. The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing commissioned the AIHW to produce this edition of *Statistics on drug use in Australia*, to fulfil the role of the *National Drug Strategy 2004–2009* ‘Companion document’.

This report includes data from the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, findings of which have been published in the AIHW publications *2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: first results*, *2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: state and territory supplement* and *2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: detailed findings*, as well as the 2004 edition of this report.

Key points

About this report

This report summarises the major drug-use statistical collections in Australia. It contains information on the use of tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs and pharmaceuticals and examines the effects of drugs on health and crime. It also focuses on the use of treatment services and substance use in various population groups, such as in youth, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, pregnant women, prisoners and employees.

Key findings

Tobacco

- In 2004, 17% of Australians aged 14 years and over were daily smokers.
- Smoking rates have declined over the period 1991 to 2004.
- In 2004-05, the Australian Government collected over \$6.7 billion from the importation and sale of tobacco products.

Alcohol

- In 2004, 9% of Australians drank daily, 41% drank weekly and 34% drank less than weekly.
- This pattern has remained relatively unchanged over the period 1991 to 2004.
- In 2004, 35% of Australians drank alcohol at levels considered risky or high risk for short-term harm and 10% at levels considered risky or high risk for long-term harm.

Illicit drugs

- In 2004, 38% of Australians aged 14 years and over had used an illicit drug in their lifetime and 15% in the last 12 months.
- Marijuana/cannabis was the most common illicit drug used (34% had used in their lifetime).
- In 2004, 9% of Australians aged 14 years and over had used methamphetamine in their lifetime and 3% in the last 12 months.

Pharmaceuticals

- In 2005, 234 million prescription medications were dispensed, of which 79% were subsidised by the Australian Government.
- Blood cholesterol medications were the top two medications in terms of cost to the Australian Government, frequency of dispensing, and prescribed daily dose.

Drugs and health

- In 2003, an estimated 8% of the burden of disease was attributable to tobacco, 2% to alcohol and 2% to illicit drugs.
- In 2004, greater psychological distress was associated with marijuana/cannabis users than non-users.
- In 2005, 46% of injecting drug users had overdosed at some point in their lives.

Special populations

- Use of tobacco and alcohol declined among secondary students between 1999 and 2005. The use of various illicit drugs either declined or remained stable.
- Births in mothers with opioid, stimulant or cannabis diagnoses were associated with several negative birth outcomes. For example, there was a substantially higher percentage of low birthweight babies born to mothers with opioid (28%) or cannabis (29%) diagnoses compared with those without such diagnoses (10%).
- In 2004–05, around half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (52%) were current smokers, 23% had used marijuana/cannabis and 28% an illicit substance in the last 12 months.
- Nearly three-fifths (59%) of prisoners had a history of injecting drugs in 2004. These prisoners were more likely to test positive to hepatitis C (56%) and hepatitis B (27%) than non-injecting drug users in prison.
- Patterns of alcohol consumption were closely linked to the prevalence of negative work-related behaviours and absenteeism in 2001.

Treatment services

- In 2004–05, alcohol was the most common principal drug of concern in treatment episodes (37%), followed by marijuana/cannabis (23%) and heroin (17%).
- There were 39,000 clients receiving pharmacotherapy treatment as at 30 June 2005: 72% were methadone maintenance clients and 28% buprenorphine clients.

Crime and law enforcement

- Marijuana/cannabis accounted for 71% of illicit drug arrests in 2004–05.
- In 2005, one in 10 prisoners was imprisoned for drug-related offences.
- In 2003–04, 88% of juvenile detainees had used an illicit substance 6 months prior to arrest and 70% were intoxicated at the time of offence.

Summary

Tobacco

Based on the results of the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS), 17% of the Australian population aged 14 years and over were daily smokers. Approximately one in four Australians (26%) was an ex-smoker and just over half the population (53%) had never smoked.

Overall, men were more likely than women to be smokers. In 2004, 19% of males were daily smokers, compared with 16% of females. People aged 20–29 years of age had the highest smoking rates, with 24% of this age group smoking daily.

Smoking rates declined over the period 1991 to 2004 (from 24% to 17% for daily smokers).

During the 2004–05 financial year, the Australian Government collected over \$6.7 billion in revenue from the importation and sale of tobacco products in Australia.

The decline in smoking rates in Australia over the past three decades has resulted in Australia being ranked one of the lowest of all countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in terms of the prevalence of daily smoking.

Alcohol

In 2004, around 84% of the population aged 14 years and over had consumed at least one full serve of alcohol in the last 12 months. People were most likely to drink either weekly (41%) or less than weekly (34%); 9% of Australians consumed alcohol on a daily basis. People aged 60 years and over recorded the highest prevalence of daily drinking (17%).

The pattern of alcohol consumption by the Australian population has remained relatively unchanged over the period 1991 to 2004.

Overall, males were more likely to consume alcohol daily (12%) or weekly (48%) compared with females (6% and 35% respectively).

Around one in five Australians (35%) aged 14 years and over consumed alcohol at risky or high-risk levels for short-term risk on at least one occasion in the last 12 months. One in ten Australians consumed alcohol at levels that are considered risky or high risk for alcohol-related harm in the long term.

Consistent with the trends in reported consumption, the apparent consumption of alcohol by Australians measured in litres per capita has remained stable during the past decade.

In 2003, Australia ranked 22nd highest in the world in terms of per capita consumption of alcohol, with approximately 7.2 litres equivalent of pure alcohol consumed per person. This corresponded to an annual per capita consumption of approximately 92 litres of beer, 20 litres of wine and 1 litre of pure alcohol from spirits.

Illicit drugs

Based on responses to the 2004 NDSHS, 38% of Australians aged 14 years and over had used any illicit drug at least once in their lifetime, and 15% had used any illicit drug at least once in the last 12 months.

Marijuana/cannabis was the most common illicit drug used, with one in three persons (34%) having used it at least once in their lifetime and 11% of the population having used it in the previous 12 months.

Recent illicit drug use was most prevalent among persons aged between 18 and 29 years in 2004, with almost one in three people (31%) in this age bracket having used at least one illicit drug in the last 12 months.

The proportion of the population who had used any illicit drug in the last 12 months fluctuated between 1991 and 2004, reaching the same level in 2004 as the prevalence in 1991 (15%). While the proportion of people who had recently used marijuana/cannabis in 2004 (11%) was the lowest over this 13-year period, the proportion using ecstasy (3%) was the highest for that substance in the same period.

Methamphetamine use was relatively uncommon in Australia in 2004: around 3% aged 14 years and over had used it in the last 12 months and 9% in their lifetime. Powder was the most common form of methamphetamine used (74%). The majority of users reported taking the drug in their own home or at a friend's house (66%).

Pharmaceuticals

Of the 234 million prescription medicines dispensed in 2005, 79% were subsidised by the Australian Government. The two prescription medicines distributed most frequently through community pharmacies, with the greatest cost to the government and with the highest defined daily dose per 1,000 population, were both medications prescribed for lipid reduction (lowering of blood cholesterol).

Drugs and health

In 2003, it was estimated that 8% of the burden of disease in Australia was attributable to tobacco use and 2% to illicit drug use. Three per cent of the total burden of disease was attributable to alcohol consumption. However, alcohol was also estimated to prevent 1% of the burden of disease in 2003.

Among those seeking assistance from health professionals, depression and anxiety were the most common mental health problems for which injecting drug users sought assistance (68% and 38% respectively).

According to the annual Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) Survey, hepatitis C prevalence among people attending needle and syringe programs remained high over the period 1997 to 2005, at around 60%.

In 2005, 46% of injecting drug users surveyed had overdosed at some point in their lifetime. The death rate from accidental opioid overdose among people aged 15–54 years increased during the late 1990s, peaking at 101.9 deaths per million persons in 1999, before declining

sharply to 34.6 deaths per million persons in 2001. Since 2001, the death rate from accidental opioid overdose has declined slightly, to 31.3 deaths per million persons in 2004.

Special population groups

Young people

Based on results from a nationally representative study, smoking prevalence and alcohol consumption declined among secondary students aged 12–17 years between 1999 and 2005. The use of various illicit drugs by this population group either declined or remained stable during this time.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

In 2004–05, 16% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples drank at risky and high-risk levels in the last week; 24% had not consumed alcohol in the last 12 months. Approximately half (52%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reported that they were current smokers, 23% that they had used marijuana/cannabis in the last 12 months and 28% that they had used an illicit substance in the last 12 months.

Pregnant women

Recent research linking birth records to hospital data indicates that mothers who give birth with an illicit drug-related diagnosis (opioids, stimulants or cannabis) are more likely to be younger, unmarried, Australian-born and Indigenous. Births in mothers with opioid, stimulant or cannabis diagnosis are linked to several negative birth outcomes (e.g. low birthweight).

Prisoners

In 2004, almost 60% of prisoners reported a history of injecting drug use. Prisoners who injected drugs were more likely to test positive for hepatitis C (56%) and hepatitis B (27%) than non-injecting drug users in prison. Less than 1% of prisoners in 2004 tested positive for the HIV antibody.

Employees

Significant differences in the level of short-term and long-term risk levels were identified between industry groups for employed recent drinkers in 2001. Patterns of alcohol consumption were also closely linked to the prevalence of negative work-related behaviours and absenteeism. As the frequency of risky and high-risk alcohol consumption increased, so, too, did the proportion of employees missing days of work in the last 3 months, the proportion of people attending work under the influence of alcohol, and the proportion of employees who usually drank at work.

Treatment services

In the 2004-05 Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services National Minimum Data Set (AODTS-NMDS) collection, alcohol was the most common principal drug of concern in treatment episodes (37%), followed by marijuana/cannabis (23%), heroin (17%) and meth/amphetamine (11%). The proportion of treatment episodes where alcohol was the principal drug of concern increased with age, while the proportion of episodes where marijuana/cannabis was the principal drug of concern decreased with age.

Treatment episodes for clients aged 20-29 years were the most diverse in terms of drug type, with roughly similar proportions of episodes for alcohol, marijuana/cannabis, heroin and meth/amphetamine.

In 2004-05, one-quarter of treatment episodes involved clients who identified themselves as current injectors.

Almost 39,000 clients were receiving pharmacotherapy treatment at 30 June 2005, with the majority of these treatments received from a private prescriber (70%). Excluding clients where the type of drug used could not be identified, there were 25,369 (72%) methadone maintenance therapy clients and 9,947 (28%) buprenorphine maintenance therapy clients.

Crime and law enforcement

Marijuana/cannabis accounted for 71% of illicit drug arrests in 2004-05, compared with 13% of arrests related to amphetamine-type stimulants.

In 2004, one in ten sentenced prisoners was imprisoned for drug-related offences. The most common drug-related offence for which people were imprisoned was dealing/trafficking drugs.

Results based on the 2003-04 Drug Use Career of Offenders (DUCO) study show that 88% of juvenile detainees had used an illicit drug in the 6 months prior to their arrest, while 70% were intoxicated at the time of offence. The study also shows that juvenile detainees were 10 times more likely than adolescents in the general population to use amphetamine and hallucinogens and 16 times more likely to use inhalants.

Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Kate Leeds and Shubhada Shukla at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

A number of other staff at the AIHW deserve special mention and their time, assistance and support are greatly appreciated. In particular, Mark Cooper-Stanbury and David Batts made important contributions to the report. Comments and suggestions from Chrysanthe Psychogios, Qasim Shah and Anne Giovanetti are also appreciated.

Useful comments provided by referee Fearnley Szuster, from the Public Health Information Development Unit at the University of Adelaide, are gratefully acknowledged.

The authors also acknowledge the support provided by staff of the AIHW Information Services and Publishing Unit.

A number of people from other agencies provided assistance during the preparation of this report, and their time and assistance are acknowledged and greatly appreciated. Special thanks go to:

- Maxine Robinson, Vanna Mabott, George Phillips and Kirsten Buckingham from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing
- Lance Smith and Jason Payne from the Australian Institute of Criminology
- Emma Black from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
- Victoria White and Jane Hayman from the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, the Cancer Council Victoria
- Jenny Iversen and Anne McDonald from the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research
- David Berry from the Australian Taxation Office
- Rebecca Smith, Richard Lund and Danielle Ribaric from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The financial assistance provided by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing is gratefully acknowledged.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACC	Australian Crime Commission
AFP	Australian Federal Police
AIC	Australian Institute of Criminology
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AODTS-NMDS	Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services National Minimum Data Set
ASSADS	Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey
ATC	Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
DALY	Disability-adjusted life year
DDD	Defined daily dose
DUCO	Drug Use Careers of Offenders
DUMA	Drug Use Monitoring in Australia
EDRS	Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System
ERD	Ecstasy and related drug(s)
GHB	Gamma-hydroxybutyrate
IDRS	Illicit Drug Reporting System
MCDS	Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy
MDA	3,4 methylenedioxyamphetamine
MDMA	3,4 methylenedioxymethylamphetamine (ecstasy)
NCHECR	National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research
NDARC	National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
NDS	National Drug Strategy
NDSHS	National Drug Strategy Household Survey
NSP	Needle and Syringe Program
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDI	Party Drugs Initiative
PBS	Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
RPBS	Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
SAAP	Supported Accommodation Assistance Program
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Symbols

n.a.	Not available
–	Nil, or rounded to zero
. .	Not applicable
kg	Kilogram(s)
m	Million