

1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey

First results

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DRUG STATISTICS SERIES

1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey

First results

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Foreword

This report of provisional results from the 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey is the first report of a new drugs statistics series for the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. This report follows the release of selected highlights in March 1999, with the main survey report—subtitled *Correlates of Drug Use*—to be published later in the year. Two further reports will follow, covering drug-related mental and physical health, and detailed State and Territory results.

The Institute managed the conduct of the Survey on behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, and custody of the survey data set will rest with the Institute and be protected by the *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987*. Access to a public-use data set is being made available through the Social Science Data Archives at the Australian National University, with access to the Institute's data set possible following consideration of research proposals by the Institute's Ethics Committee.

Release of these results within 12 months of the completion of fieldwork represents a substantial contribution to research and debate on the drug-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of Australians.

I am pleased that the Institute has been able to assist this important survey on a topic of high policy concern to all governments and the community. Difficult issues on questionnaire design, ethics approval, analysis and release had to be settled practically and quickly.

I want to pay particular tribute to Paul Williams, one of the small Institute team outposted to the Population Health Division, Department of Health and Aged Care, who led the survey management team under the supervision of Mark Cooper-Stanbury, and to the Department's officers who worked closely with them in all phases of the survey.

The participation of over 10,000 Australians in a survey which invited admissions of possibly illegal activities is very much appreciated.

Richard Madden
Director
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
August 1999

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Summary

The 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey

Between June and September 1998, 10,030 Australians aged 14 years and older participated in the National Drug Strategy Household Survey. This was the sixth survey in a series which commenced in 1985, but was the first to be managed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Respondents were asked about their knowledge of drugs, their attitudes towards drugs, their drug consumption histories and related behaviours.

General findings

Compared with 1995, there appears to be slightly higher use in 1998 across all illicit drugs groups included in the survey, both in terms of lifetime use (that is, used at any time in one's life) and recent use (used in the last 12 months). Such consistent changes in lifetime and recent use of tobacco and alcohol were not evident.

Young females accounted for a large part of the overall increases in use of illicit substances (notably marijuana/cannabis), and it appears that for some substances female use is now on a par with use by males.

Tobacco

Tobacco was primarily associated with a drug 'problem' by fewer than one in twenty Australians; two in every five approved of the regular use of tobacco by adults, and four in every five persons approved of measures designed to reduce the harms associated with tobacco use. Two-thirds of Australians had tried tobacco at some time in their lives, and fewer than one in four were recent smokers.

One in seven persons indicated that tobacco was their first drug of choice, and the proportion recently smoking daily or most days declined by two percentage points between 1995 and 1998 to 22%. The average age at which smokers took up tobacco increased from 15.6 to 15.8 years in the same period. Under-age smokers (that is, persons aged under 18, to whom it is illegal to sell tobacco products) were likely to have been introduced to smoking by friends and acquaintances. Subsequently, two out of every five under-age smokers obtained their cigarettes from retail outlets.

Of persons aged 40–49 years who had ever smoked, 60% no longer did so.

Alcohol

About one in every seven Australians primarily associated alcohol with a drug 'problem'; three in every five approved of the regular use of alcohol by adults, and three in every five persons approved of measures designed to reduce the harms associated with alcohol use. Nine out of every ten Australians had tried alcohol at some time in their lives and three-quarters recently consumed alcohol.

Two in every five persons nominated alcohol as their first drug of choice and the proportion drinking regularly increased from 44% to 49% between 1995 and 1998. One in four persons

consumed alcohol daily or on most days in a week, and two in five consumed less often than weekly. Under-age alcohol drinkers (that is persons aged under 18, to whom it is illegal to sell alcohol) were likely to have been introduced to drinking by relatives. Subsequently, almost one in every five under-age drinkers obtained their alcohol from retail outlets.

One in six persons admitted to driving a motor vehicle, one in ten verbally abused someone, and one in fifty persons physically abused someone while under the influence of alcohol. Three in every ten persons had been verbally abused and one in every sixteen had been physically abused by someone who had been affected by alcohol.

Illicit drugs

More than three in every four Australians primarily associated an illicit drug with a drug 'problem'; one in four approved the regular use of marijuana by adults, and fewer than one in twenty persons approved the regular use of each of the other illicit drugs included in the survey. Almost one in every two Australians had used an illicit drug at some time in their lives and over one in five had used illicit drugs in the previous 12 months. One in every two persons supported measures designed to reduce harm associated with illicit drug use.

Around one in fourteen persons nominated any illicit drug as their first drug of choice, with one in eighteen nominating cannabis/marijuana as first choice. The average age at which new users first tried illicit drugs declined slightly from 16.8 years in 1995 to 16.6 years in 1998. Four in every five illicit drug users were introduced to illicit drugs by friends and acquaintances. Subsequently, most illicit drug users continued to obtain their illicit drugs from friends and acquaintances. One in sixteen persons drove a motor vehicle, one in fifty verbally abused someone, and one in two hundred physically abused someone while under the influence of illicit drugs. One in ten persons were verbally abused and one in forty were physically abused by someone affected by illicit drugs.

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Abbreviations and symbols

Abbreviations

AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CURF	Confidentialised unit record file
DHFS	Department of Health and Family Services
NCADA	National Campaign Against Drug Abuse
NDS	National Drug Strategy
SE	Standard error
RSE	Relative standard error

Symbols

–	nil or rounded to zero
..	not applicable
n.a.	not available
m	million