Drug use in Victoria

Summary

- There have been a number of surveys that provide information about the prevalence of drug use in the Victorian community.
- Hepatitis C infection among injecting drug users in Victoria is of major concern.

Apart from the use of cannabis, only a small minority of Australian people use illegal drugs and the majority of these do so for a relatively short period of their life. However, substantial harms are related to the misuse of illegal drugs. These include overdose-related death, involvement in crime, community and family distress, and the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other blood-borne diseases (notably hepatitis C).

Cannabis includes marijuana (the most common form of cannabis) and is known by many names, such as grass, pot, hash and weed.

While the number of people dying from illegal drugs is not high compared to deaths related to the use of alcohol and tobacco, the impact is much more substantial if the years of life lost are considered.

There are a number of surveys available that provide information relating to the prevalence of drug use and the characteristics of people who use drugs in Victoria and Australia-wide.

Victorian secondary students drug use survey

Selected statistics collated in the Victorian secondary school students and drug use survey conducted in 2011, include cannabis and other illegal drug use in year 7 to 12 students.

Cannabis use (year 7 to 12 students)

- Cannabis was the most commonly used illegal substance among secondary school students.
- Across all 12 to 17-year-olds, 14 per cent stated they had used cannabis in their lifetime, 12 per cent had used it in the past year, seven per cent in the past month, and four per cent in the past week.

Other illegal drug use

- Use of an illegal drug ‘in their lifetime’ was significantly lower in 2011 compared to all previous survey years for both 12 to 15-year-olds and 16 to 17-year-olds. Between 1996 and 2011, use of at least one illegal drug in a student’s lifetime declined from 27 per cent to nine per cent, respectively, among 12 to 15-year-olds, and from 48 per cent to 23 per cent among the older age group.
- Similarly, use of at least one illegal drug in the past month was significantly lower in 2011 than in all other survey years except 2008 for the younger age group, and significantly lower than 1996, 1998 and 2002 for the older age group.

National Drug Strategy Household Survey


Cannabis use (people over 14 years)

- Cannabis is the most used illegal drug in Australia across all age groups.
- In 2010, 35.4 per cent of people aged 14 years or older in Australia had used cannabis in their lifetime.
- Recent cannabis use is highest among people aged 18 to 29 years.
Other illegal drug use (people over 14 years)
- Around 7.3 million people in Australia reported having used an illegal drug in their lifetime, and almost three million had used an illegal drug in the last 12 months.
- Males are more likely than females to have used an illegal drug.
- People aged 20 to 29 are most likely to have recently used an illegal drug.
- Ecstasy was the second most commonly used illegal drug in Australia after cannabis, with three per cent of people aged over 14 having used ecstasy in the previous 12 months.
- In 2007, 1.4 per cent of Australians aged 14 years or older had used heroin in their lifetime, and about 37,000 had used heroin in the past 12 months.
- In 2010, fewer than 400,000 people aged 14 years or older had used methamphetamines (such as ‘speed’ and ‘ice’) in the previous 12 months.

The drug market
Understanding the influence of key aspects of the drug market, such as the price, purity and availability of illegal drugs, is an important part of monitoring trends of illicit drug use and harms in the community.

Illicit Drug Reporting System
Selected statistics for Victoria from the Illicit Drug Reporting System 2012 include:
- The price of heroin per gram in 1997 was $450. This decreased to $300 in 2000 and increased to $450 per gram in 2001. In 2012, it had decreased to $300.
- The mean purity level of heroin seized increased from 35 per cent in 1996–97 to 62 per cent in 1997–98, then decreased to 46 per cent in 2001. In 2012, the median purity level had further decreased to 14 per cent.
- In 2012, the median price of methamphetamine was $200 per gram, and the price of crystal methamphetamine powder was $500 per gram.

Heroin-related mortality
Numbers of heroin-related deaths in Victoria decreased markedly in 2001 (50 deaths compared to 331 deaths in 2000), and have remained low ever since.

Blood-borne viruses
In 2009, the Department of Health received 187 notifications of newly acquired hepatitis C infections, of which 147 cases (79 per cent) reported injecting drug use as being a risk factor.

There were four new HIV cases in 2011 for which injecting drug use was reported as the only risk factor for exposure to HIV. Numbers in this category are generally low.

Where to get help
- Your doctor
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236
- DrugInfo Tel. 1300 85 85 84
- Harm Reduction Victoria Tel. (03) 9329 1500

Things to remember
- There have been a number of surveys that provide information about the prevalence of drug use in the Victorian community.
- Hepatitis C infection among injecting drug users in Victoria is of major concern.