

Information & Data Sheet **5**

Illicit Drugs in the Australian Workforce: Prevalence and Patterns of Use

Petra Bywood, Ken Pidd & Ann Roche

Illicit drugs include illegal drugs (cannabis, ecstasy, heroin, cocaine, hallucinogens, barbiturates), pharmaceutical drugs used for non-medical purposes (painkillers, tranquilisers, amphetamines, barbiturates, methadone, other opiates and steroids) and other substances used inappropriately (inhalants, ketamine and gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB)).

Little is known about the prevalence and patterns of use of illicit drugs in the Australian workforce, including on-site and (more frequently) use of drugs before or after work; and any pattern of use likely to impact on an individual's capacity to work safely, productively and with proper 'duty of care' for others. Use of illicit drugs may be associated with a range of factors affecting individuals' performance in the workplace. These factors relate to productivity, work relationships and health and safety of individuals. Productivity may be reduced by illness and absenteeism, compromised work quality, reduced work rate and increased risk of making mistakes. Poor concentration, impaired judgement and slowed/altered reaction times impact on the health and safety of all employees by increasing the risk of injury, both on- and off-site. Unpredictable actions, violent and abusive behaviour and criminal activity may also contribute to a breakdown in relationships with other workers.

Patterns of illicit drug use

In the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey¹ 29,445 Australians aged 12 years or over responded to questions about their knowledge, attitudes, consumption and behaviours related to the use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. Approximately 37% of Australians reported using an illicit drug at some time in their lives and almost 15% had used an illicit drug in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Cannabis was used most commonly, with 32.6% of Australians reporting having used it at least once in their lifetime. The next most commonly used illicit drugs were amphetamines (8.8%), ecstasy/hallucinogens (7.3%), painkillers (5.3%) and cocaine (4.6%).

Approximately 50% of survey respondents over 14 years of age were employed, with 2,875 self-employed and 11,976 receiving wages, salary or in-kind payment for work. Among those in the paid workforce, 17.3% used illicit drugs in the previous 12 months compared to 11.8% not in the paid workforce ($p < 0.0001$). This pattern was consistent across most drugs, except painkillers, which were used more commonly by those not in the paid workforce (3.2% vs 2.8%, NS) (Figure 1).

Gender and age differences

Among those in the workforce, significantly more males (20.3%) than females (13.4%) reported using an illicit drug in the past 12 months ($p < 0.0001$). This gender differential was consistent across all drugs, except painkillers and tranquilisers (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Proportion of illicit drug users aged 12 years and over, by employment status and drug used, Australia 2004

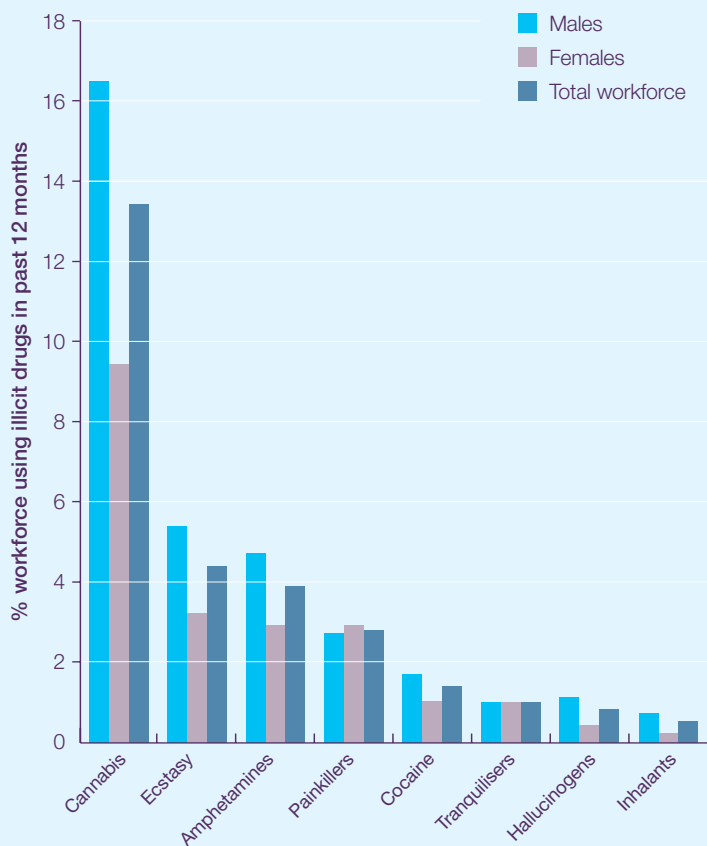


Figure 2: Proportion of employed illicit drug users aged 14 years and over, by gender and drug used, Australia 2004

Although the use of illicit drugs peaked in the 18-29 years age group (32.4%), the youngest age group (14-17 years) had the highest level of use for cannabis (29.0%) and hallucinogens (2.9%). This is not surprising as cannabis was shown to be one of the most accessible illicit drugs, with 20.6% of respondents reporting being offered or having the opportunity to use cannabis.¹ Overall, drug use declined after 30 years of age, as shown in Figure 3, except for use of painkillers, which remained relatively constant across age groups and was the most commonly used drug in those aged over 60 years.

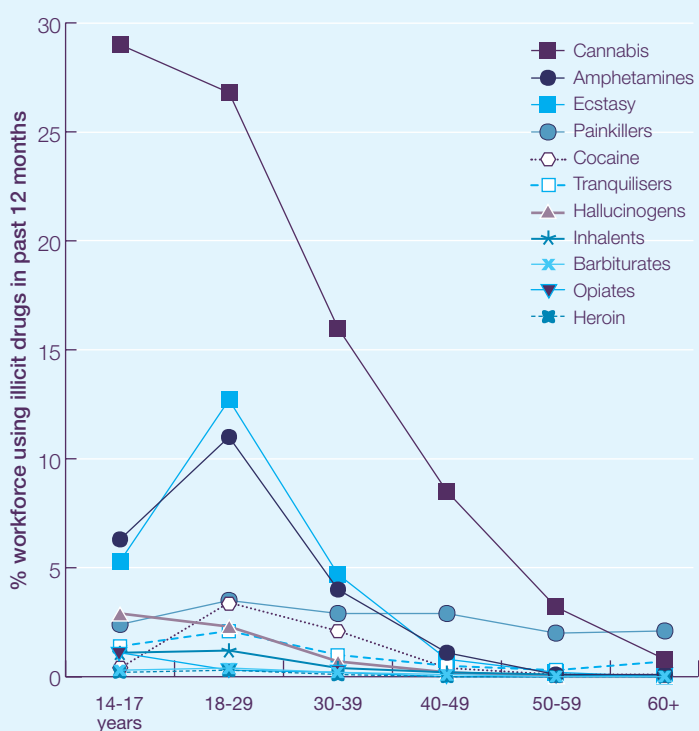


Figure 3: Proportion of employed illicit drug users aged 14 years and over, by age group and drug used, Australia 2004

Industry differences

Use of illicit drugs varied significantly across different industries ($p < 0.0001$), with the hospitality industry leading in use of all drug types. Over 31% of hospitality workers used at least one illicit drug in the past 12 months (Table 1). Construction industry workers were the second heaviest users of drugs (24.1%), followed by the retail industry (20.7%). Industries reporting lower levels of use were education (9.2%), mining (12.0%) and administration (12.3%). Across all industries, cannabis was the drug of choice, followed by ecstasy, amphetamines, painkillers and cocaine. Using the ANZSIC codes to examine more narrowly defined industries, workers in commercial fishing (40.5%) had the highest level of use of at least one illicit drug. Other groups reporting relatively high levels of use (30-37%) included employees in motion picture, radio and television services; accommodation, cafes and restaurants; libraries, museums and the arts; and construction trade services. In contrast, industries with lower levels of use were defence (4.9%); rail transport (7.2%); and basic material wholesaling (7.7%).

Table 1: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over using illicit drugs, by industry and drug used, Australia 2004

	ANY	Cannabis	Ecstasy	Amphetamines	Painkillers	Cocaine	Tranquillisers
Hospitality	31.2	25.4	10.0	9.3	4.6	3.7	2.3
Construction	24.1	20.1	4.7	5.2	2.6	1.8	0.7
Retail	20.7	15.5	5.5	4.6	3.5	1.1	0.9
Transport	18.3	13.1	3.7	5.4	3.9	1.4	1.2
Finance	17.3	13.8	5.6	4.3	2.4	2.3	1.4
Manufacturing	17.0	12.7	4.6	4.5	2.9	0.9	0.4
Wholesale	16.4	12.8	4.6	2.8	1.8	2.0	0.5
Agriculture	15.5	13.1	3.5	4.9	1.1	0.4	0.2
Services	15.0	11.8	3.5	3.1	2.8	1.6	1.4
Administration	12.3	10.1	3.2	2.4	2.1	0.7	0.8
Mining	12.0	9.0	1.4	1.0	2.0	0.0	1.5
Education	9.2	6.4	1.8	0.9	2.2	0.3	0.3

Occupation differences

Analysis of illicit drug use across occupations revealed that tradespeople had the highest level of use, particularly for cannabis (21.1%), amphetamines (6.1%) and painkillers (3.9%) (Table 2). Ecstasy use was highest in unskilled workers (5.6%), although the difference across groups was not significant.

Table 2: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over using illicit drugs, by occupation and drug used, Australia 2004

	Tradespeople	Unskilled	Skilled	Managers	Professionals	Total
ANY	26.5	21.6	17.4	13.8	13.7	17.3
Cannabis	21.1	16.8	13.0	11.0	10.1	13.5
Ecstasy	5.2	5.6	4.2	4.0	3.8	4.4
Amphetamines	6.1	4.9	4.5	2.8	2.6	3.9
Painkillers	3.9	3.1	3.4	1.9	2.2	2.7
Cocaine	1.5	1.1	1.58	1.6	1.1	1.5
Tranquillisers	1.1	1.2	1.3	0.7	0.6	1.0
Hallucinogens	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.0	0.8

Within more narrowly defined occupations (using ASCO codes), highest levels of use were among construction tradespeople (31.4%), followed by other labourers and related workers (28.7%) and automotive tradespeople (27.1%). Drug use by food tradespersons, which may be influenced by factors in the hospitality industry, was also relatively high (23.8%). Lower levels of use were reported for farmers (6.1%) and education professionals (8.2%).

Workplace issues

Compared to alcohol, illicit drugs have a smaller but substantial effect on the workplace, particularly with respect to productivity, health and safety and work relationships.

Going to work under the influence of illicit drugs

Overall, 2.5% of the workforce reported going to work under the influence of illicit drugs and the proportions were differentially distributed according to gender, age and across industry and occupational groups. Males (3.5%) were significantly more likely to go to work under the influence of at least one illicit drug compared to females (1.2%, $p < 0.0001$). Not surprisingly, this behaviour was more common in younger people, with the greatest prevalence among those aged 18-29 years (5.9%), followed by the very young group aged 14-17 years (4.5%) (Figure 4).

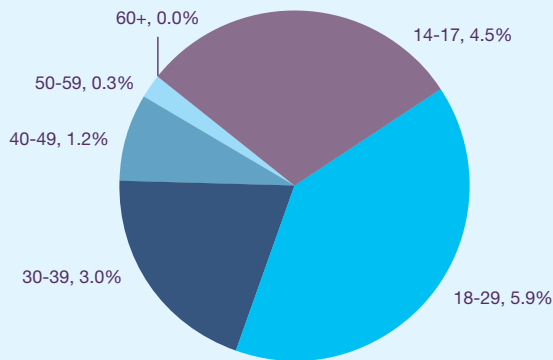


Figure 4: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over going to work under the influence of illicit drugs, by age, Australia 2004

Analysis by industry and occupation showed that tradespeople (3.9%) and unskilled workers (3.7%) had the highest prevalence of going to work under the influence of illicit drugs (Figure 5), compared to professionals (1.3%) and managers (1.6%).

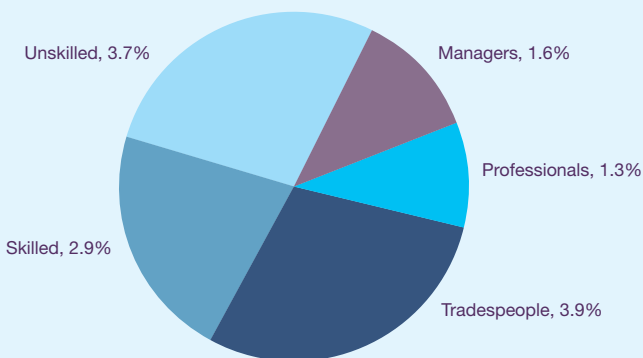


Figure 5: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over going to work under the influence of illicit drugs, by occupation, Australia 2004

In more narrowly defined occupations (ASCO codes), intermediate machine operators (7.6%), skilled agriculture and horticultural workers (6.9%), other labourers and related workers (6.4%) and construction tradespersons (6.1%) had high rates of going to work under the influence of an illicit drug.

Consistent with previous findings for alcohol use,² the hospitality industry had the highest proportion of respondents who worked while under the influence of illicit drugs (7.7%), followed by the construction industry (4.2%). Workers in education (0.7%), wholesaling (0.7%) and mining (1.0%) industries were least likely to work under the influence of drugs (Figure 6). In more narrowly defined industries, high rates of working under the influence of illicit drugs were reported in forestry (13.0%) and libraries, museums and the arts (12.6%).

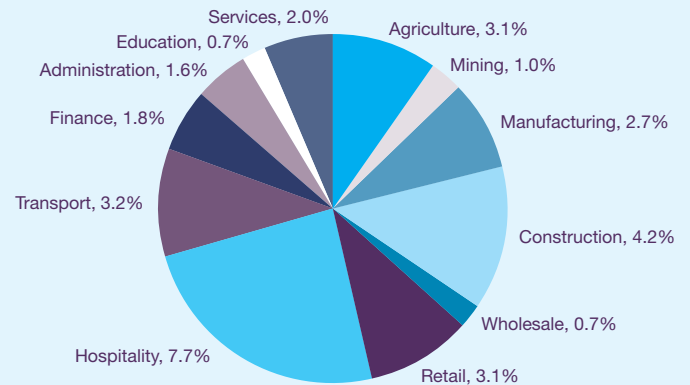


Figure 6: Proportion of the workforce aged 14 years and over going to work under the influence of illicit drugs, by industry, Australia 2004

Absenteeism

As for alcohol consumption,² survey data revealed an association between illicit drug use and absenteeism. Respondents were asked to report the number of days missed from work, school, university or TAFE (Technical and Further Education) in the previous three months due to: 1) their personal use of any illicit drugs; and 2) illness or injury. Almost 1% of the workforce (1.2% males; 0.7% females) reported taking days off due to their drug use. This behaviour was most prevalent in the 14-17 year-olds (3.4% males; 6.4% females, $p < 0.0001$). With the exception of the 14-17 years age group, drug-related absenteeism was more common among men than women (Figure 7).

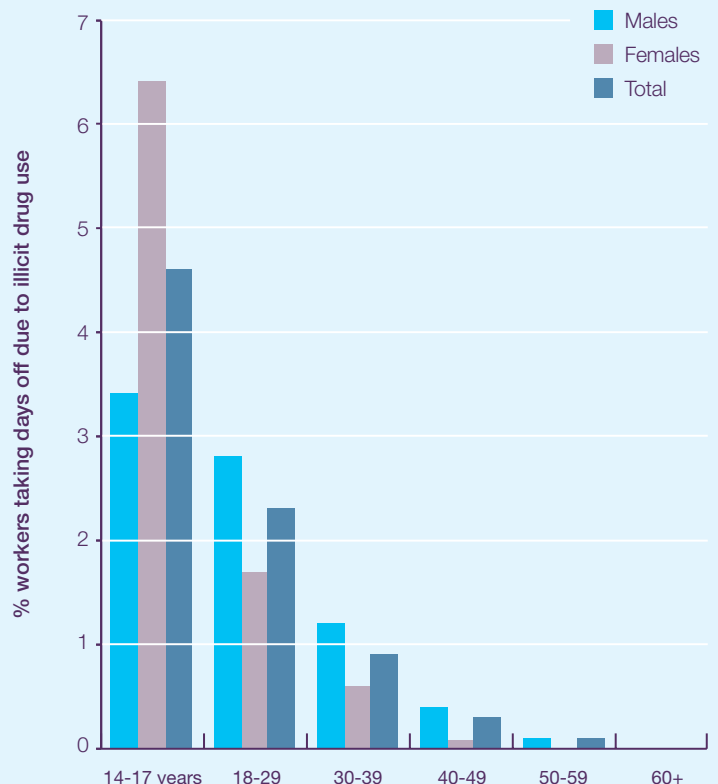


Figure 7: Proportion of workforce aged 14 years and over reporting days missed in the previous 3 months due to personal use of illicit drugs, by age group and gender, Australia 2004

Unskilled (1.7%) and skilled workers (1.0%) more commonly took days off work due to drug use than other occupations (Figure 8). Among more narrowly defined occupations (ASCO codes), the highest drug-related absenteeism was found in skilled agriculture and horticultural workers (3.2%), science, building and engineering professionals (3.0%) and other labourers and related workers (3.0%), while the lowest rates (<0.1%) were reported in farmers, cleaners, automotive tradespersons and science, engineering and related associate professionals.

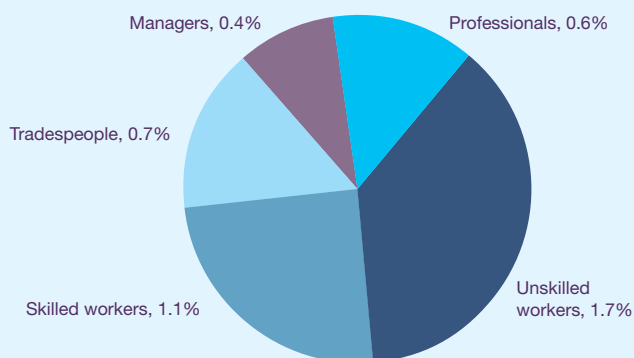


Figure 8: Proportion of workforce aged 14 years and over reporting days missed in the previous 3 months due to personal use of illicit drugs, by occupation, Australia 2004

Across industries the highest drug-related absenteeism rates were reported by retail (1.8%) and hospitality workers (1.7%). The lowest reported absenteeism rates were in the mining and education industries (<0.1%) (Figure 9).

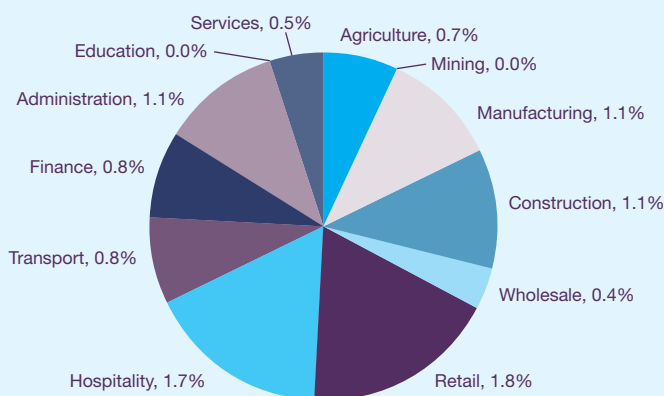


Figure 9: Proportion of workforce aged 14 years and over reporting days missed in the previous 3 months due to personal use of illicit drugs, by industry, Australia 2004

Workers who reported using at least one illicit drug were significantly more likely to take days off (47.4% in the previous 3 months) due to illness or injury compared to those who never used illicit drugs (37.7%, $p < 0.0001$). This pattern was similar for both men and women (Figure 10) and across age groups (Figure 11).

Across industries, absenteeism due to any injury or illness was more common in administration (57.3%), wholesale (48.6%) and less frequent in mining (23.0%) and agriculture (29.0%) (Table 3). Professionals (50.6%) had the highest rates of absenteeism for illness or injury, while managers had the lowest rates (38.9%).

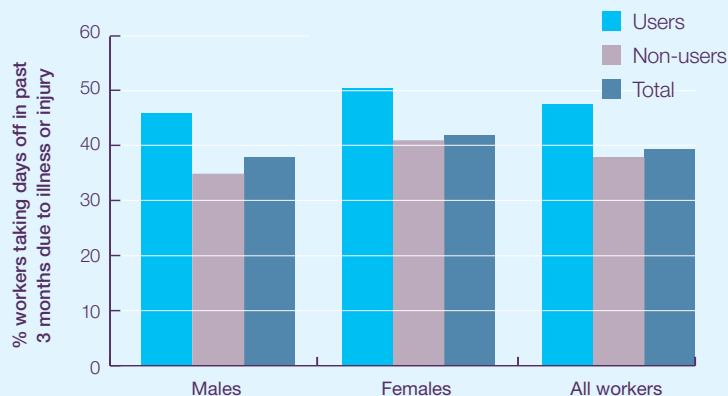


Figure 10: Proportion of workforce aged 14 years and over reporting days missed in the previous 3 months due to illness or injury, by user status and gender, Australia 2004

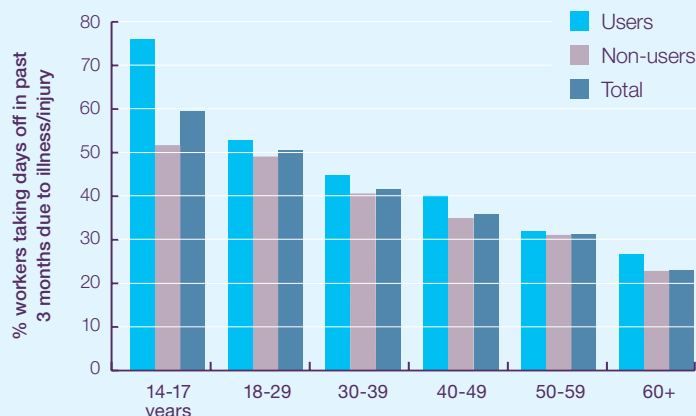


Figure 11: Proportion of workforce aged 14 years and over reporting days missed in the previous 3 months due to illness or injury, by user status and age group, Australia 2004

Table 3: Proportion of workforce aged 14 years and over reporting days missed in the previous 3 months due to illness or injury, by industry and occupation, Australia 2004

Industry	% workers missing 1 or more days	Occupation	% workers missing 1 or more days
Administration	57.3%	Professionals	50.6%
Wholesale	48.6%	Skilled workers	41.1%
Education	40.8%	Tradespeople	40.9%
Services	40.7%	Unskilled workers	40.0%
Manufacturing	40.6%	Managers	38.9%
Finance	39.4%	Total	40.2%
Retail	38.8%		
Hospitality	38.2%		
Construction	37.7%		
Transport	34.1%		
Agriculture	29.0%		
Mining	23.0%		
Total	39.9%		

References

- AIHW. 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: Detailed findings. AIHW Cat. No. PHE 66. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; 2005 (Drug Statistics Series). Report No.: 16.
- Pidd K, Berry JG, Harrison JE, Roche AM, Driscoll TR, Newson RS. *Alcohol and work: Patterns of use, workplace culture and safety*. Canberra; 2006 (AIHW Cat No. INJCAT 82). Report No.: 28.