ADAPT STUDY

Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

10.26190/n5wf-2x04

WAVE 4 – 1 PAGE SUMMARY

AUGUST 2021

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS



197 participants across Australia completed all surveys (Waves 1-4).

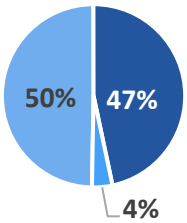


79%

The majority of participants were from capital cities.



The median age at Wave 4 was 27 (IQR=23-40).

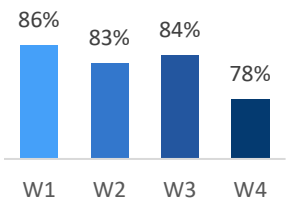


Half of participants identified as female (47% as male, 4% as non-binary).

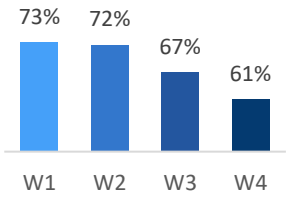


Two in five participants (42%) identified as LGBQ+ (58% as heterosexual)

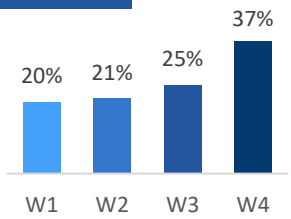
MOST COMMONLY USED SUBSTANCES IN PAST FOUR WEEKS



Alcohol was the most commonly used substance at each wave, although use declined across waves.



Cannabis remained the second most commonly used substance at each wave. However, reported use declined in recent waves despite no change in perceived availability.



E-cigarette use noticeably increased at Wave 4. Further, e-cigarettes had the largest proportion of participants (43%) reporting that their use had **increased** relative to before COVID-19 restrictions.

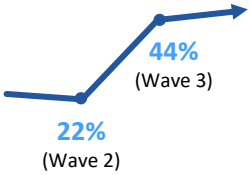
PERCEIVED CHANGES IN SUBSTANCE USE



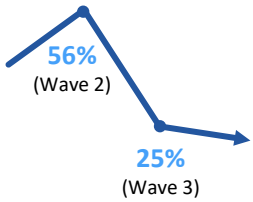
At Wave 4, changes in perceived use (i.e., **increase** / **decrease** / **stable**) of most drugs had mostly remained stable or decreased compared to before COVID-19 restrictions.

PERCEIVED AVAILABILITY OF SUBSTANCES

Apart from MDMA and meth/ amphetamine, most drugs were reported as '**easy**' or '**very easy**' to obtain, with no major changes across waves.

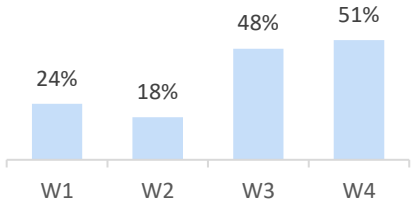


Perceived difficulty in obtaining **MDMA** doubled between Wave 2 and 3 and remained high at Wave 4.



Perceived difficulty in obtaining **meth/amphetamine** increased at Wave 2, before declining sharply at Wave 3 and stabilising at Wave 4.

How worried are you that you will get COVID-19?



COVID-19 CONCERN

Participants' concern about getting COVID-19 varied across waves, but Waves 3-4 showed that around half of participants were '**not at all worried**'.

MENTAL HEALTH



Ratings of perceived '**better**' mental health (compared to before COVID-19 restrictions) almost doubled between Wave 1 (23%) and Wave 4 (44%).



Mental health treatment remained common across waves, with almost half (47%) of participants reporting **accessing mental health treatment** in the past four weeks at Wave 4.

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ADAPT STUDY

Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

WAVE 4 BULLETIN **AUGUST 2021**

Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats' (ADAPT) Study Wave 4

BACKGROUND

What are the aims of the ADAPT Study?

The Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT) Study is exploring the **short and long-term impacts** of the **COVID-19 pandemic** on the experiences of **Australians who use illicit drugs**. Findings will be used to ensure drug-related issues during COVID-19 are better understood and more accurately represented, so as to better inform **drug treatment and harm reduction in Australia**.

What does the ADAPT Study involve?

Australians who regularly (i.e. at least once a month) used illicit drugs in 2019 were invited to complete an **online survey** initially and follow-up surveys in **2-months**, **6 months** and **12 months**. Participants could opt to complete the Wave 1 survey only.

Wave 4 of the ADAPT Study had a **55%** response rate of the cohort sample.

About this bulletin:

This bulletin outlines preliminary findings from the **197** cohort participants who **completed ALL surveys** from **Waves 1-4**.

FLOW CHART

702 Wave 1 final sample

247 Consented to Wave 1 only

455 Consented to follow-up cohort

3 Ineligible for follow-up

452 Eligible for follow up cohort

2 withdrew at **Wave 2**
138 did not start **Wave 2**
4 started but did not complete **Wave 2**

308 Completed Wave 2 (68% of n=452)

3 could not be contacted at **Wave 3**
178 did not start **Wave 3**
1 started but did not complete **Wave 3**

268 Completed Wave 3 (59% of n=452)

3 could not be contacted at **Wave 4**
189 did not start **Wave 4**
9 started but did not complete **Wave 4**

249 Completed Wave 4 (55% of n=452)

197 Completed ALL surveys 1-4 (44% of n=452)

WAVE 1- 4 TIMELINE

Wave 1
29th Apr 2020 – 15th Jun 2020
('Feb 2020' timepoint collected at Wave 1)

Wave 2
29th Jun 2020 – 22nd Sep 2020

Wave 3
29th Oct 2020 – 13th Jan 2021

Wave 4
29th Apr 2021 – 20th Jul 2021

Citation: Baillie, G., Peacock, A., Hammoud, M., Memedovic, S., Barratt, M., Bruno, R., Dietze, P., Ezard, N., Salom, C., Degenhardt, L., Hughes, C. & Sutherland, R. (2021). Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT)' Study Wave 4. ADAPT Bulletin no. 4. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney. doi:10.26190/n5wf-2x04

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WAVE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF COHORT PARTICIPANTS

The below table presents a comparison of those who **completed ALL surveys** (i.e. **Wave 1-4**) and those who did not among the **cohort follow up sample**. These two groups were mostly similar with the exception that the former group were significantly **older.** It is also worth noting that a substantial proportion of the sample did not identify as **heterosexual**. Both these factors should be considered in all interpretation of findings. (Note that apart from *p* values presented in the table below, no further statistical analyses have been undertaken and all further bulletin results are descriptive only.)

	Invited and completed ALL surveys 1-4 (n=197)	Did not complete ALL surveys 1-4 (n=255)	*p* value for differences between groups*
Median age (IQR)	27 (IQR=23-40)	24 (IQR=21-28)	**.001***
Gender % (n)			
Women	49.7% (97)	44.8% (113)	.812
Men	46.7% (91)	50.0% (126)	
Non-binary	3.6% (7)	5.2% (13)	
Sexual orientation % (n)			
Heterosexual	57.8% (109)	57.7% (143)	.671
LGBQ+	42.2% (80)	42.3% (105)	
Completed tertiary/university qualification % (n)	67.3% (132)	60.2% (153)	.214
Area % (n)			
Capital city	79.1% (155)	74.4% (189)	.569
Regional/rural/remote	20.9% (41)	25.6% (65)	
Jurisdiction % (n)			
NSW	30.5% (60)	31.8% (81)	.418
VIC	31.0% (61)	25.1% (64)	
QLD	15.7% (31)	22.0% (56)	
WA	7.6% (15)	7.8% (20)	
SA	8.1% (16)	5.1% (13)	
ACT	2.0% (4)	3.9% (10)	
TAS	3.6% (7)	3.5% (9)	
NT	1.5% (3)	0.8% (2)	
Frequency of illicit drug use in 2019 % (n)			
Daily	28.9% (57)	29.0% (74)	.509
≥ weekly < daily	45.2% (89)	40.8% (104)	
> Monthly < weekly	13.7% (27)	18.8% (48)	
Monthly	12.2% (24)	11.4% (29)	
W1 Drug of choice % (n)			
Cannabis	39.3% (77)	40.2% (102)	.265
MDMA	10.7% (21)	15.0% (38)	
Methamphetamine	8.7% (17)	7.9% (20)	
Alcohol	8.2% (16)	8.7% (22)	
LSD	7.7% (15)	8.7% (22)	

*IQR: Interquartile range. *p value of <0.05 indicates that there is a significant difference between the two groups*
LGBQ+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or other sexual orientation.

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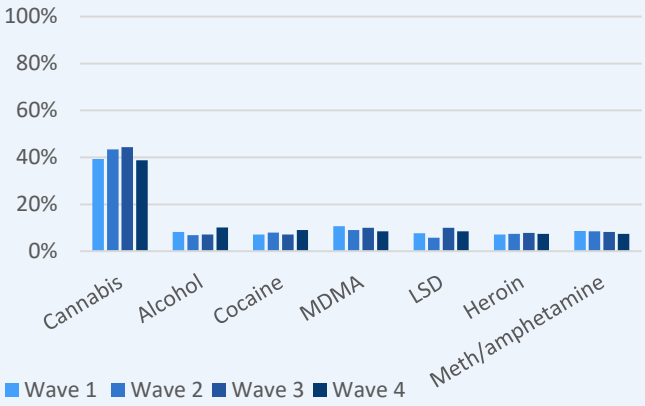
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DRUG USE

Cannabis remained the most common drug of choice at **Wave 4** (**39%**), although this was a slight decrease from **Wave 3** (**44%**) and **Wave 2** (**43%**). Approximately one-in-ten participants reported **alcohol** (**10%**), **cocaine** (**9%**), **MDMA** (**9%**) and **LSD** (**9%**) as their drug of choice at **Wave 4**, which is comparable to previous waves. At **Wave 4**, **20%** of participants reported that their **drug of choice had changed from Wave 1** (vs **15%** at **Wave 3**, **13%** at **Wave 2**).

Figure 1. Drug of choice



DRUG USE BEHAVIOURS

13% reported **injecting** any drug in the past four weeks, which was stable from previous waves (**13%**, **12%**, **13%** at **Waves 1-3** respectively).

70% reported that they had **used drugs alone** in the past four weeks; a slight decrease from **Wave 3** (**79%**) and **Wave 2** (**73%**) (data not collected at **Wave 1**).

At **Wave 4**, **5%** of participants reported attending a **virtual night club/dance party** since their last survey (vs **10%** at **Wave 3**) (data not collected at **Waves 1-2**).

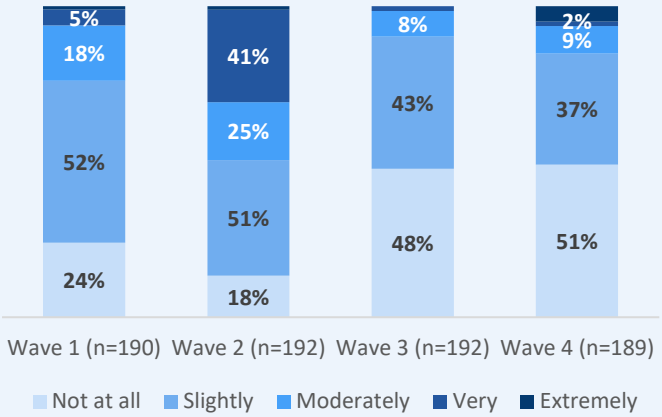
For those attending a virtual nightclub/dance party at **Wave 4**, the largest proportions reported using **alcohol** (**80%**), **MDMA** (**60%**), **cocaine** (**50%**) and/or **ketamine** (**30%**).

COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

By **Wave 4**, **82%** of participants had been **tested for COVID-19**, with **<1% testing positive**. On average, these participants had been tested a median of **2 times** (max=**21**).

Wave 2 saw a spike in participants reporting that they were '**very**' **worried about getting COVID-19** (see **Figure 2**). These numbers substantially reduced in subsequent waves, with **around half** reporting that they were '**not at all**' worried at **Waves 3-4**.

Figure 2. How worried are you that you will get COVID-19?



Note: Data labels for 'Extremely' not presented in figure to assist visual interpretation. Values for Wave 1-4 are 1%, 2%, 0% and 5% respectively

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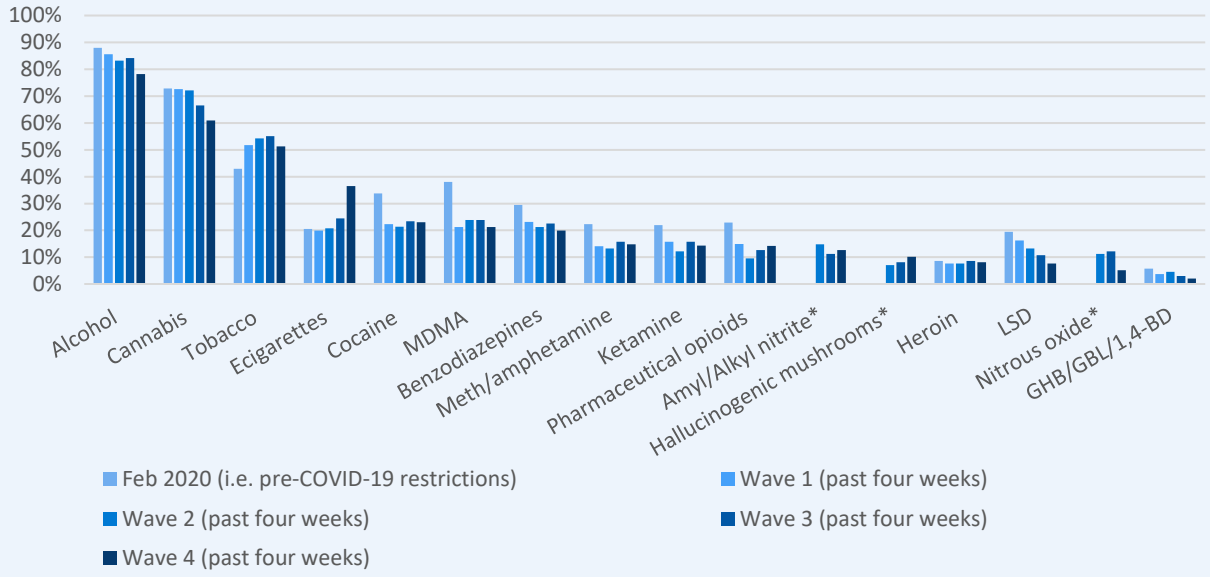
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MOST COMMONLY USED SUBSTANCES IN THE PAST FOUR WEEKS

Alcohol (**88%**, **86%**, **83%**, **84%**, **78%**), cannabis (**73%**, **73%**, **72%**, **66%**, **61%**) and tobacco (**43%**, **52%**, **54%**, **55%**, **51%**) were the main substances used in the past four weeks at each time point (percentages refer to **Feb 2020** and **Waves 1**, **2**, **3**, **4** respectively) (See **Figure 3**). At **Wave 4**, **e-cigarettes** (**37%**) remained the fourth most commonly used substance, however the percentage reporting past four-week use had increased considerably compared to previous waves.

Figure 3. Substance use in the past four weeks



*Notes: *Options added at Wave 2 survey. Data for OAT (opioid agonist therapy) medication and 'other synthetic drugs' not presented due to < 5% reporting use at each wave. Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines. 'Feb 2020' data was collected at Wave 1 and is not a separate timepoint. Of the Bulletin 4 sample (n=197), there were <10 missing cases for each drug and wave depicted in Figure 3.*

PERCEIVED CHANGES IN SUBSTANCE USE

Figure 4 (overpage) shows perceived changes in substance use in the last four weeks as compared to before (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020).

At **Wave 4**, **e-cigarettes** (**43%**) had the largest proportion of participants reporting that their use had **increased in the last four weeks** as compared to before (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020), overtaking **cannabis** (**33%**) and **alcohol** (**28%**) for the first time.

MDMA (**49%**) **nitrous oxide** (**43%**) and **cocaine** (**42%**) had the largest proportions of participants reporting **decreased use** in the last four weeks, as compared to before.

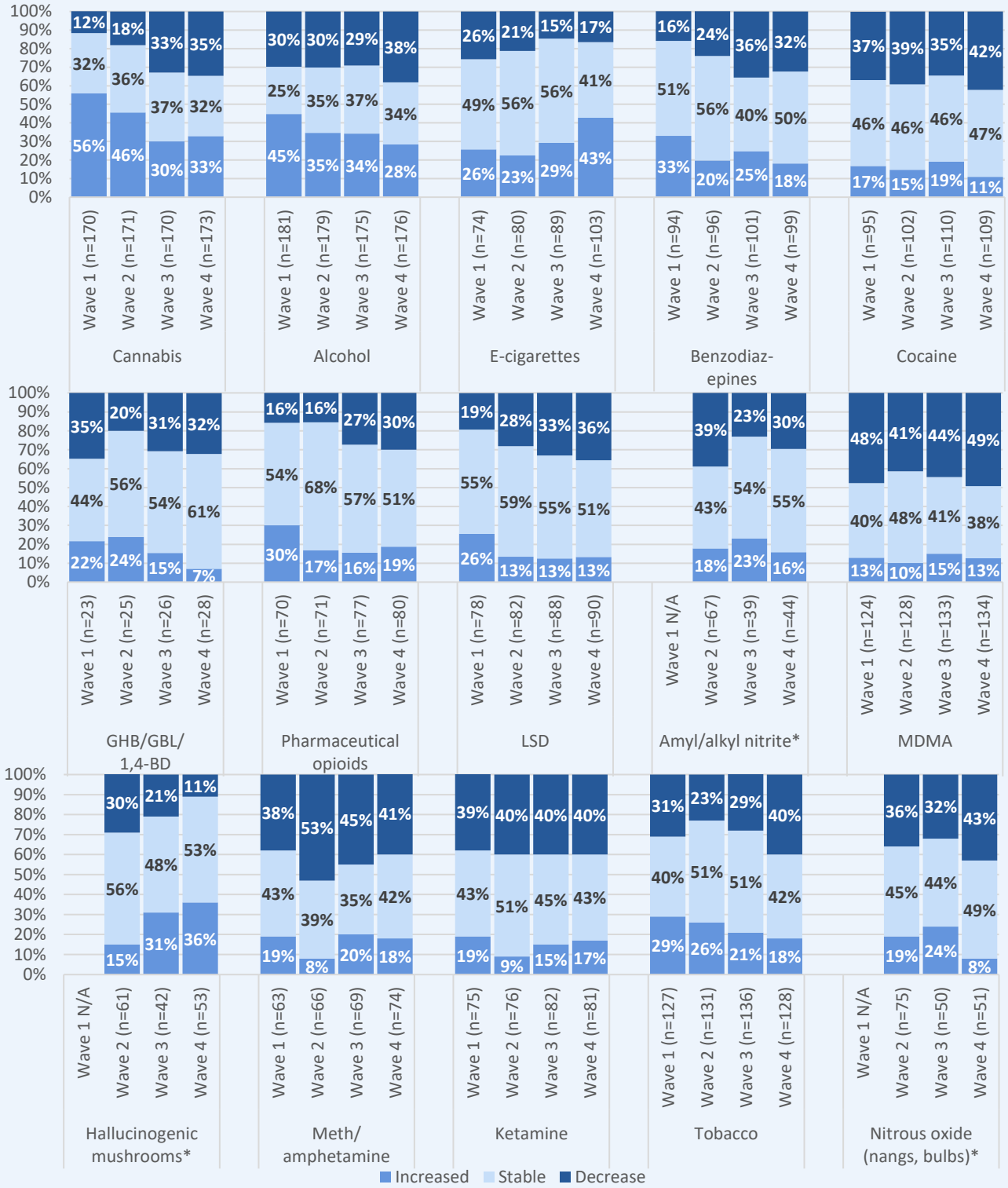
GHB (**61%**), **amyl/alkyl nitrite** (**55%**) and **hallucinogenic mushrooms** (**53%**) had the largest proportions reporting that their use had remained **stable**.

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Figure 4. Waves 1 – 4 Perceived changes in past-month drug use compared to before March 2020



*Notes: *Response option added at Wave 2 survey. Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines. Wave 1 survey asked about changes in drug use from the beginning of March 2020 compared to before, while Wave 2-4 surveys asked about changes in past month drug use as compared to before March 2020.*

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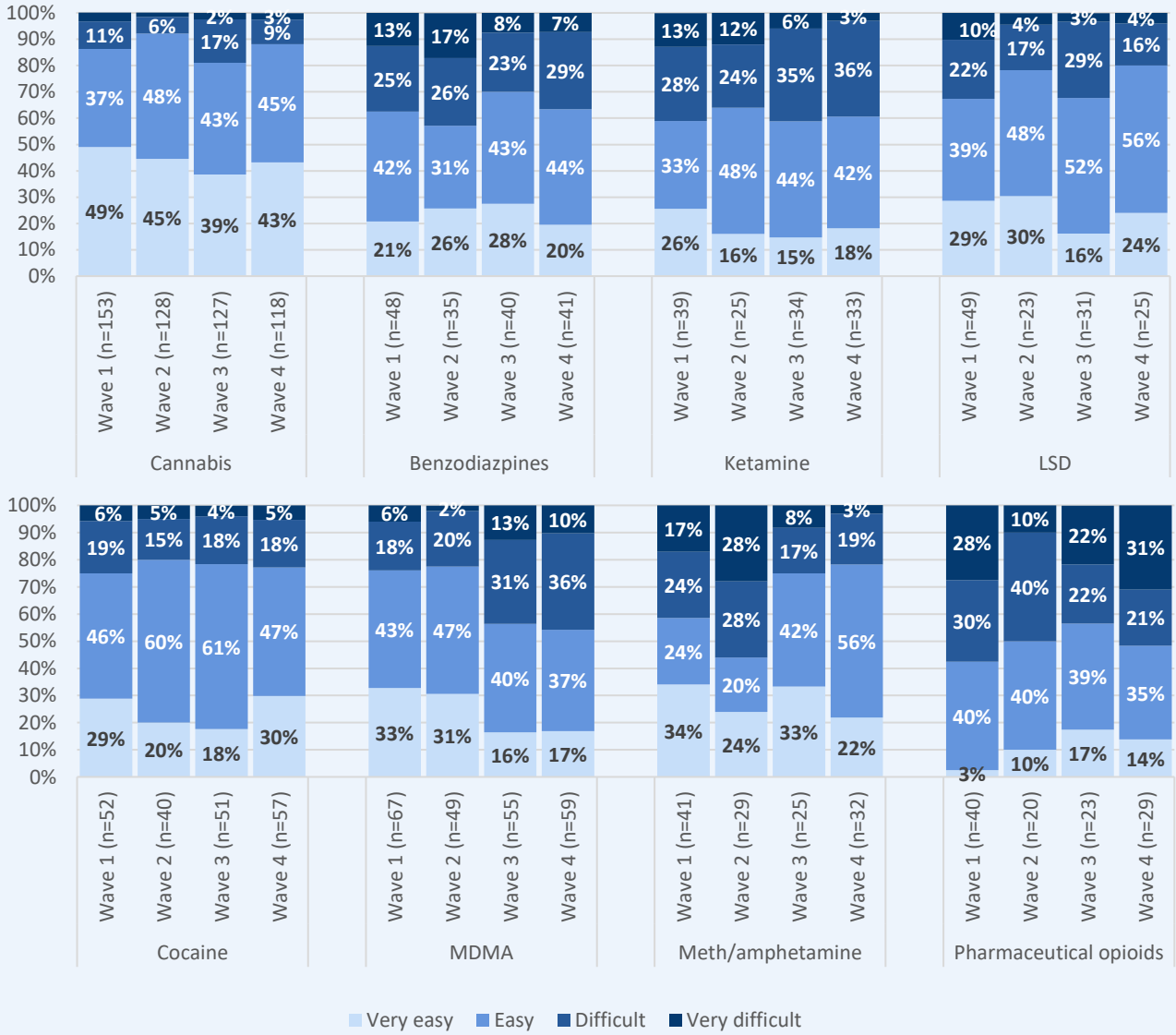
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PERCEIVED AVAILABILITY

Figure 5 shows that most drugs were reported as 'easy' or 'very easy' to obtain across **Waves 1-4**, with no major changes across waves. However, the perceived difficulty in obtaining MDMA increased at **Waves 3-4**. There was also an increase in the percentage of participants who reported that meth/amphetamine was 'very difficult' to obtain at **Wave 2**, however this declined in **Waves 3** and **4** (although small numbers mean these figures must be interpreted with caution).

Figure 5. Waves 1 – 4 Perceived availability of substances in the past four weeks



Notes: Non-prescribed use is reported for pharmaceutical medicines. Data not presented for substances where <20 participants answered at each wave.

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METHODS OF RECEIVING / PURCHASING DRUGS

At **Wave 4,** there was a **small increase** in the percentage of participants who received their drugs in person in the past four weeks (**79%** vs **74%** at **Wave 3**, **72%** at **Wave 2**, **69%** at **Wave 1**), almost returning to levels reported pre-COVID-19 restrictions (**Feb 2020**, **81%**).

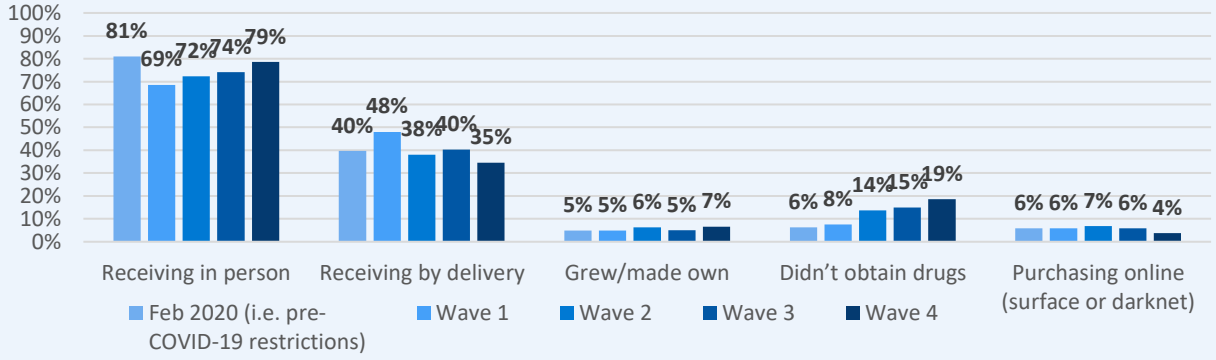
The proportion of participants who had their illicit drugs delivered to them in the past four weeks has varied between waves: **Feb 2020** (**40%**), **Wave 1** (**48%**), **Wave 2** (**38%**), **Wave 3** (**40%**), **Wave 4** (**35%**).

A relatively small proportion of participants reported that they **grew/made own drugs** at **Wave 4** (**7%**), **stable** from previous waves (**5%** at **Wave 3**, **6%** at **Wave 2**, **5%** at **Wave 1**, **5%** in **Feb 2020**).

The proportion of participants who did not obtain illicit drugs in the past month continued to **increase** at **Wave 4** (**19%**, vs **15%** at **Wave 3**, **14%** at **Wave 2**, **8%** at **Wave 1** and **6%** in **Feb 2020**).

At **Wave 4**, **4%** reported purchasing their drugs online in the past four weeks (using surface websites or dark-web markets), which is relatively **stable** from **Wave 3** (**6%**), **Wave 2** (**7%**) and **Wave 1** (**6%**).

Figure 6. Methods of receiving / purchasing drugs in past four weeks



Notes: 'Feb 2020' data was collected at Wave 1 and is not a separate timepoint. ***Receiving*** *relates to how participants have collected or come into the possession of drugs.* ***Purchasing/obtaining*** *relates to how participants organised obtaining drugs (but not actually collecting drugs). Other methods of purchasing/obtaining (apart from online) are not presented in Figure 6.*

TREATMENT ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT IN THE PAST FOUR WEEKS

Drug Treatment

Treatment engagement remained low:

6%

Had accessed drug treatment (stable from **6%** in **Wave 3**, vs **7%** in **Wave 2**, **4%** in **Wave 1**)

0.5%

Tried but were unable to access drug treatment (vs **2%** in **Waves 1-3**)

Mental Health Treatment

Accessing mental health services remained relatively common:

47%

Had accessed services (stable from **46%** in **Wave 3**, vs **47%** in **Wave 2**, **42%** in **Wave 1**)

7%

Tried but were unable to access services (stable from **4%** in **Wave 3**, vs **5%** in **Wave 2**, **7%** in **Wave 1**)

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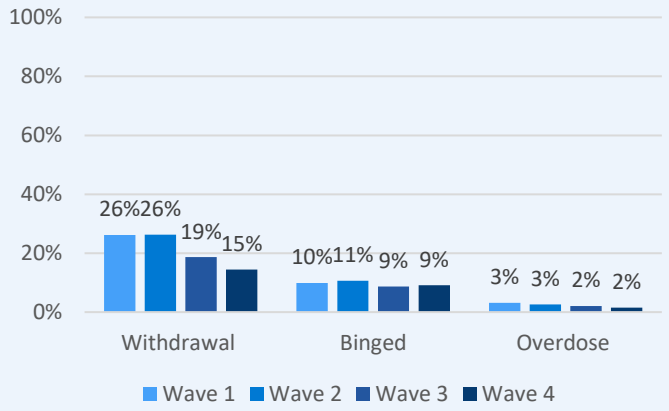
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DRUG-RELATED HARMS

Experiences of bingeing and overdose remained relatively uncommon across waves. Participants reporting withdrawal symptoms in the past four weeks has decreased slightly across waves (**26%**, **26%**, **19%**, **15%** at **Waves 1**, **2**, **3**, **4** respectively). Among participants reporting withdrawal, the largest proportion continued to report withdrawing from cannabis (**30%**, **32%**, **37%**, **37%** at **Waves 1**, **2**, **3**, **4** respectively). The majority of these withdrawal episodes continue to be voluntary (**67%**, **67%**, **57%**, **74%** at **Waves 1**, **2**, **3**, **4** respectively).

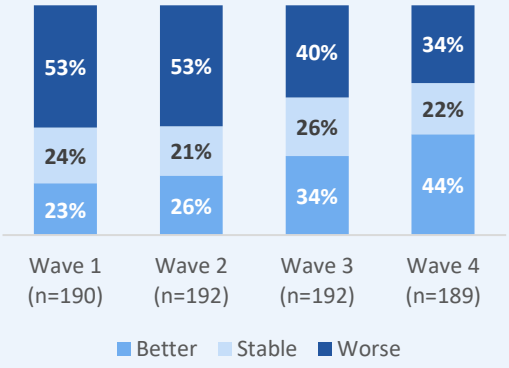
Figure 7. Drug-related harms & bingeing



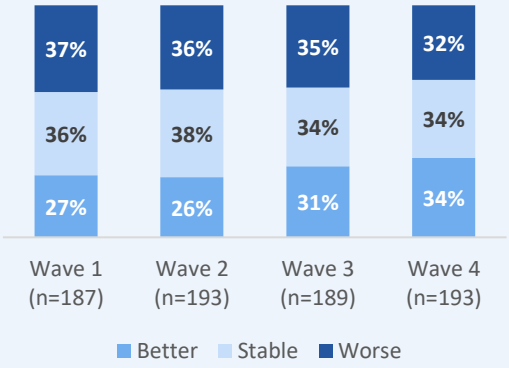
*Note: **Binged** defined as using drugs for ≥48 hours without sleep. **Withdrawal** defined as experience of any of the following symptoms when stopped using drugs suddenly: difficulty sleeping, depression, anxiety, aches and pains, cravings, fatigue, hallucinations, nausea, being hot and cold, goosebumps, runny nose. **Overdose** defined as symptoms outside the normal drug experience, which caused concerns for physical health, and where professional assistance would be helpful.*

PERCEIVED CHANGES IN HEALTH RATINGS

Mental Health



Physical Health



Ratings of perceived '**better**' **mental health** has **increased** across waves (**44%** at **Wave 4** vs **23%** at **Wave 1**), while ratings of perceived **physical health** have remained relatively consistent across waves. Those reporting that their current health was '**worse**' than compared to before March 2020 no longer comprise the highest proportions for either **mental** or **physical health**.

Note: 'Perceived changes' are based on perceptions of current health as compared to before March 2020 (i.e. before COVID-19 restrictions).

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ADAPT STUDY

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SUMMARY

- Similar to previous waves, the ADAPT cohort participants who completed the Wave 4 survey comprised **mostly young, well-educated capital city dwellers**. Being a convenience sample, findings from the ADAPT study cannot be considered representative of all people that use drugs. It should be noted that the majority of Wave 4 data was collected prior to the current COVID-19 restrictions (i.e., mid-July 2021 onwards).
- In contrast to previous waves, **e-cigarettes** (**43%**) had the largest proportion of participants reporting that their use had **increased** in the last four weeks relative to before COVID-19 restrictions, overtaking **cannabis** (**33%**) and **alcohol** (**28%**) for the first time.
- However, there was considerable diversity in changes in consumption across individuals and drug types, highlighting the heterogeneity of experiences among people who use drugs.
- Perceived availability was reported as '**easy**'/'**very easy**' for most drugs, however, the perceived difficulty in obtaining **MDMA** increased at Waves 3-4. There was an increase at Wave 2 in the percentage of participants who reported that **meth/amphetamine** was '**very difficult**' to obtain, however this subsequently declined in Waves 3 and 4.
- At Wave 4, the percentage of participants reporting that they had **received drugs in person** almost returned to levels observed pre-COVID-19 restrictions, reflecting a steady increase across Waves 1 – 4. The percentage reporting **not obtaining illicit drugs** in the past month also continued to increase across waves (**19%** at Wave 4).
- Experience of **bingeing and overdose** remained relatively low and consistent across Waves 1 – 4, while **withdrawal** has declined across waves.
- Wave 4 saw a continued increase in perceived '**better**' **mental health** ratings (**44%**), while ratings of perceived '**better**' **physical health** have remained relatively consistent across waves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The participants who contributed their valuable time to share their experiences.
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- All those who gave advice and shared information about the project.
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- Email adaptstudy@unsw.edu.au
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