Exploring gender differences among people who inject drugs in Australia: Findings from the 2011 Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS)

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Introduction

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), conducted since 2000, monitors the price, purity and availability of heroin and other opioids, methamphetamines, cocaine and cannabis. This poster provides a closer look at gender differences among people who inject drugs (PWID) interviewed in 2011 for the IDRS.

Method

The system uses data from three sources:

- Interviews with people who inject drugs (n=868)
- Interviews with key experts who work with PWID such as health workers or law enforcement
- existing databases on drug-related issues (indicator data) such as customs

Results

Demographics

- 575 males and 289 females
- Males were significantly more likely than females to be older (39 yrs vs. 37 yrs; p<0.05), single (60% vs. 40%; p<0.05), heterosexual (93% vs. 77%; p<0.05), unemployed (83% vs. 72%; p<0.05) and to have a previous prison history (63% vs. 37%; p<0.05) (Table 1).
- Females were significantly more likely than males to have an English speaking background (99% vs. 95%; p<0.05), to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (18% vs. 12%; p<0.05) and to be in current drug treatment (55% vs. 46%; p<0.05) (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographics by gender, 2011

	Males	Females
Mean age (years)*	39	37
English speaking background* (%)	95	99
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander* (%)	12	18
Heterosexual *(%)	93	77
Single* (%)	60	40
Unemployed* (%)	83	72
Current treatment* (%)	46	55
Prison History* (%)	63	37

Source: IDRS participant interviews
* Significantly different (p<0.05)

Drug Use

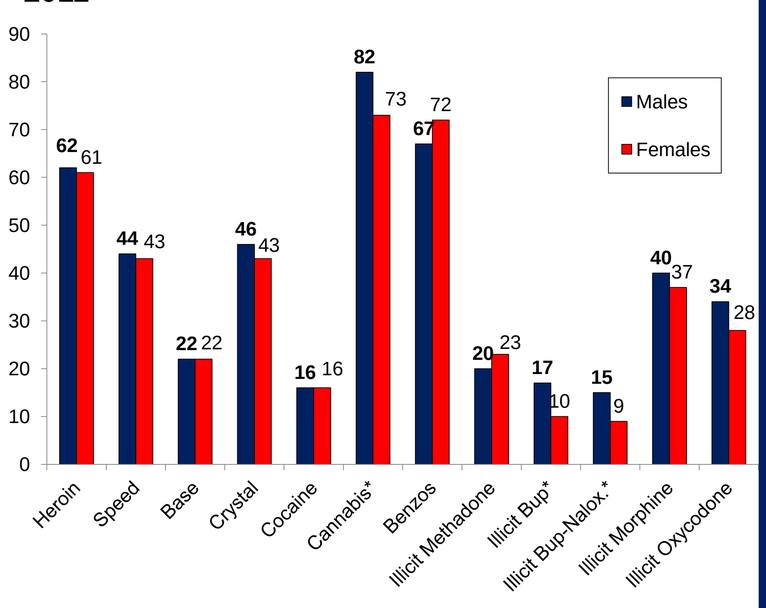
Recent use

- Males were significantly more likely than females to report recent use of cannabis (82% vs. 73%; p<0.05), illicit buprenorphine (17% vs. 10%; p<0.05) and illicit buprenorphine-naloxone (15% vs. 9%; p<0.05) (Figure 1).

Frequency of use

- Males reported a significantly higher frequency of illicit buprenorphine use (48 days vs. 32 days; p<0.05) than females.
- Females reported a significantly higher frequency of cocaine use (25 days vs. 14 days; p<0.05), illicit alprazolam (31 days vs. 230 days; p<0.05), illicit other benzodiazepines (58 days vs. 42 days; p<0.05) and illicit methadone (19 days vs. 12 days; p<0.05) than males.

Figure 1: Recent use among PWID by gender, 2011



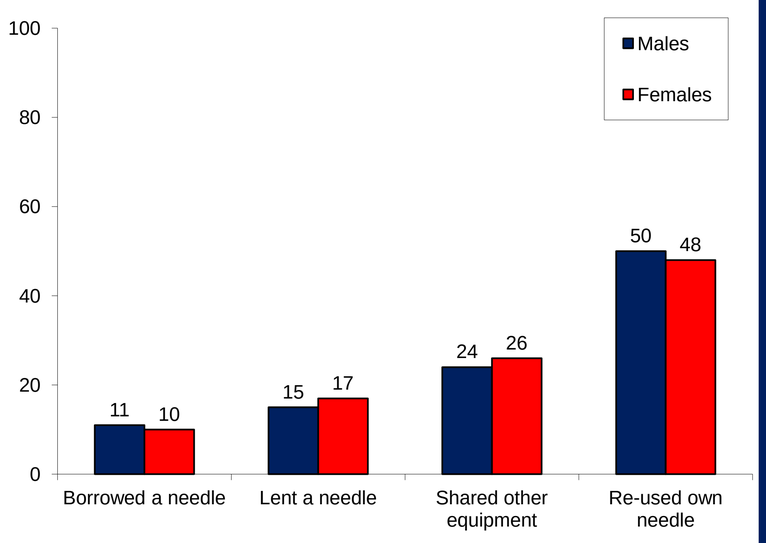
Source: IDRS participant interviews
Significantly different (p<0.05)

Risk behaviour and criminal activity

Injecting risk behaviours and problems

- No significant differences were found between males and females for borrowing a needle, lending a needle, sharing of other injecting equipment (excluding needles) and the re-use of their own needle (Figure 2).
- Among those who re-used their own injecting equipment males were significantly more likely than females to re-use spoons/mixing containers (87% vs. 77%; p<0.05).
- Females were significantly more likely than males to re-use their own tourniquets (51% vs. 35%; p<0.05).
- Females were significantly more likely than males to report problems associated with injecting (68% vs. 58%; p<0.05). In particular scarring and/or bruising (55% vs. 39%; p<0.05) and difficulty injecting (46% vs. 33%; p<0.05).

Figure 2: Borrowing and/or lending needles and sharing of injecting equipment among PWID by gender, 2011



Source: IDRS participant interviews

Self-reported mental health problems

- Participants were asked whether they had attended a health professional for a mental health problem (other than drug dependence) in the last six months. A significant gender difference was found, with a greater proportion of females self-reporting a mental health problem than males (54% vs. 46%; p<0.05) (Table 2).
- The main problem reported was depression followed by anxiety. A significantly greater number of females reported anxiety (53% vs. 41%; p<0.05), phobias (7% vs. 2%; p<0.05), panic (14% vs. 6%; p<0.05), compared to males (Table 2).
- Males were significantly more likely than females to report schizophrenia (19% vs. 11%; p<0.05) (Table 2).

Table 2: Self-report mental health problems in the preceding six months by gender, 2011

	Males	Females
Self-reported mental health problem last six months* (%)	46	54
Problem ^ (%)		
Depression	64	68
Anxiety*	41	53
Bipolar	15	18
Schizophrenia*	19	11
Panic*	6	14
Phobias*	2	7
Attended a health profession for mental health (%)	68	76

Source: IDRS participant interviews
*Significantly different p<0.05
^Among those who self-reported a recent mental health problem

Criminal activity

- Males were significantly more likely than females to report committing a crime (usually violence) in the past month (43% vs. 34%; p<0.05).
- In the last 12 months, males reported having been arrested in the last 12 months significantly more than females (40% vs. 30%; p<0.05).

Conclusion

Males were more likely to be older, single, heterosexual, unemployed and to have a previous prison history than females.

Both groups were polydrug users. Males were more likely to report the recent use of cannabis, illicit buprenorphine and illicit buprenorphine-naloxone.

However females reported a higher frequency of cocaine, illicit alprazolam, other benzodiazepine and illicit methadone use.

No differences between gender were found for borrowing, lending or sharing of injecting equipment. However, males reported re-using their own spoons/mixing containers more so than females. While females were more likely to re-use tourniquets and report injecting related problems such as scarring and/or bruising and difficulty injecting.

Females were also more likely to self-report a mental health problem in particular anxiety, phobias and panic more so than males. Males were more likely to report schizophrenia.

Further information:

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