



Te Puna  
Whakaiti Pāmamae  
Kai Whakapiri  
New Zealand  
Drug Foundation

# Drug use in Aotearoa

2022/23

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# Introduction

**This report provides an overview of 2022/23 drug use data in Aotearoa New Zealand.**

We focus on the prevalence of substance use and describe the patterns of drug consumption.

## **People use alcohol and other drugs for many reasons.**

These include pleasure and recreation, spiritual discovery, performance enhancement, experimentation, peer pressure, or to self-medicate physical problems, emotional pain or trauma.<sup>1,2</sup>

It's important to remember that drug use and drug harm are two different things. For those who use illicit substances, most will do so without encountering significant harm. However, some people will experience harm to their physical or mental health from either short or long-term use.

There is a growing body of literature on the medicinal benefits of particular illicit drugs — in fact, most of the well-known substances have established medicinal uses.

While this report does not explore why people use various substances, it is useful to keep in mind that there are a variety of reasons why New Zealanders use them.

# About the data

The data used in this report is drawn primarily from the New Zealand Health Survey (Ministry of Health) and from wastewater testing performed by the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) for the National Drug Intelligence Bureau (NDIB). Other data sources include the NZ Drug Trends Survey (Massey SHORE & Whariki) and Needle Exchange Programme data.

Each data source has strengths and limitations associated with the methodology used.

These include:

The substance use data (NZ Health Survey) is drawn from a large general population survey of New Zealanders which uses representative sampling. This allows us to gather information about substance use on a whole-population level. However, some substances are not widely used, which reduces the sample size and increases the risk of statistical errors. These errors are even more likely when looking at data for smaller demographic subgroups. This means that there may be year-to-year variation depending on recruitment in any given year, and comparing different groups of New Zealanders and trends over time needs to be done with caution. The survey also relies on self-reporting of substance use. We know that substance use carries a level of stigma in Aotearoa, so it is possible that survey participants may misrepresent their actual substance use.

The drug pricing and availability data that we present is drawn from the NZ Drug Trends Survey. This is not a representative sample of the general population, as it specifically recruits people with experience of substance use. This means that while it's not an appropriate method to draw conclusions for general population trends, it gives us detailed insights into patterns of accessing and using substances among people who use them. This is also a self-reported survey.

The wastewater testing data used in this report relies on objective measures and is not influenced by societal views on substance use or participant errors. However, wastewater testing is only able to quantify the total volume of drugs consumed in a given catchment area, and is not able to provide us with patterns of use among people living there. For example, we don't know if a larger volume of drugs detected was associated with a larger number of people taking them, an increased concentration of the active substance in the available supply, or an increase in consumption by the same number of people. At times, a decrease in detection in wastewater may also be a cause for concern — when a preferred substance is less available in the illicit market, its consumers may be switching to a different substance whose risk profile is less known. Wastewater testing is reported by Police district, however this report combines the three districts in the Auckland region.

# Key findings



## Cocaine

In 2022/23, 1.3% of adults reported using cocaine at least once in the past year, compared to 0.6% in 2017/18.



## Cannabis

Over the last decade, the proportion of adults who've used cannabis at least once in the past year has increased by 51%, from 9.4% to **14.2%**.

Past-year cannabis use has jumped **10.6 times** among 65–74-year-olds in the past decade and risen **2.5 times** among 55–64-year-olds.

Since 2016/17, there has been a more than three-fold increase in prevalence of weekly cannabis smoking among 65–74-year-olds (to **2.9%**, or around 14,000 people).

**597,000 people** aged 15+ used cannabis in the past year.

**Almost a quarter** (23.9%) of 15–24-year-olds (154,000 people) used cannabis in the past year.

Disabled people are **3.79 times more likely** to use cannabis weekly than non-disabled people.



## Stimulants

Amphetamine-type stimulant use (including methamphetamine) has remained relatively stable since 2017, with **1.1% of the general population** over the age of 15 reporting using amphetamines in the past year.

Disabled people are **5.14 times more likely** to have used amphetamines in the past year.



## Psychedelics

In 2022/23, **2.5% of adults** reported using psychedelics like LSD, compared to 1.3% in 2017/18.

# Overview

Illicit drugs are used by people in every city, town, and region of Aotearoa. This report describes some of the patterns and trends among different ages, ethnicities, genders, and locations.

This report does not describe alcohol and tobacco consumption trends, instead focusing on illicit drugs. However, alcohol continues to be New Zealand's most frequently used substance, and 3.2 million adults\* say they had a drink in the last year. A concerning number of those who drank in the past year (21%, or around 672,000) report hazardous drinking.

New Zealand's most commonly used illicit drug is cannabis. According to the NZ Health Survey, over half a million (597,000) adults used cannabis in the last year. An estimated 199,000 used cannabis at least once a week.<sup>3</sup>

Drugs like MDMA, methamphetamine, and opioids are used by a relatively small percentage of the population. 3.6% of the population aged 15 and over used MDMA last year (around 152,000 people), 1.1% (around 47,000 people) used amphetamines, and just 0.4% (around 18,000 people) used opioids.<sup>3</sup> For most illicit substances, the overall rates of use have remained relatively stable in the last few years, according to the NZ Health Survey and wastewater testing data.

Some drugs can be prescribed by a doctor, including cannabis, some types of amphetamines, and some types of opioids (typically as pain medication). These drugs can also be obtained illicitly. Some are only available illicitly, for example heroin (an opioid), methamphetamine, and psychedelics like LSD. The NZ Health Survey asks respondents about their use of certain drugs for any purpose other than for which they were prescribed — this can otherwise be called 'illicit' use.

\*The NZ Health Survey uses the term 'adults' to describe people aged 15 and over.

## Substance use is affected by economic deprivation, disability, ethnicity and gender.

Those who live in the most deprived neighbourhoods report higher rates of past-year use of cannabis, MDMA, amphetamines, opioids and psychedelics compared to those who live in our wealthiest areas.<sup>3</sup>

### Some examples of how social factors influence substance use include:

Māori report the highest rates of past-year cannabis use (30.1%) and weekly cannabis use (11.3%). Māori people are more likely (4.01 times) to report opioid use compared with other ethnicities.

Disabled people are more likely to have used cannabis in the past week (3.79 times), or in the past year (2.13 times). Disabled people are also more likely to report past-year opioid use compared with non-disabled people (3.54 times), as well as past-year amphetamine use (5.14 times).

Men are significantly more likely than women to report past-year use of certain illicit substances like amphetamines (2.39 times), cocaine (3.6 times), and cannabis (1.31 times).

Most illicit drug use declines as people age. However, past year cannabis use has increased across all age groups in the past decade. 6.4% of 64–75-year-olds now report past year cannabis use, which is a 276% increase since 2016/17.

## Drug prices and ease of availability



88% of NZ Drug Trends Survey respondents said cannabis was easy or very easy to obtain, compared with just 51% in 2017/18.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the price of cannabis is reportedly decreasing.



Cocaine was reportedly becoming easier to obtain. This is especially the case in the urban or densely populated areas of Aotearoa; and especially in Tāmaki Makaurau.

Despite this, 28% of respondents report that the price of cocaine is increasing, compared with 13% last year.<sup>5</sup>



MDMA, however, was reportedly harder to buy this year than previous years, with 23% of those surveyed saying it was 'more difficult' to obtain in 2022/23, compared with 10% in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

## Illicit drug use prevalence remains relatively stable, and cannabis is still our most commonly used drug.

The most recent data for 2022/23 from the NZ Health Survey shows relatively stable trends in past-year adult use of cannabis (14.2%). The reported prevalence of use of amphetamines (1.1%), and MDMA (3.6%) has fallen slightly from 2021/22.

Wastewater testing in 2022/23 has revealed a national decline in methamphetamine and MDMA use, and rising cocaine use. Average methamphetamine use per person (mg per day/1000 people) fell in every district, while cocaine use increased in every district, compared with 2021/22. Rates of methamphetamine use were highest in Waikato (average 843mg/day/1000 people). The region with the second highest rate of use was Northland (698mg/day/1000 people).

The Eastern district had the largest percentage rise (450%) in the rate of cocaine use to an average 12mg/day/1000 population, however, rates remain far below those of Tāmaki Makaurau. Per capita, cocaine use was more than 2.5 times higher in Tāmaki Makaurau than in any other region (97mg/day/1000 population). The region with the next highest prevalence was Bay of Plenty (37mg/day/1000 people).<sup>4</sup>

On a per capita basis, MDMA use was highest in the Southern Police district, which includes Dunedin (average 375mg/day/1000 people). The next highest rate was in Canterbury (304mg/day/1000 people).

Compared to the previous three years' average, 2022/23 saw a:

- ↑ **93% increase** in the daily consumption of **cocaine\***
- ↓ **26% decrease** in the daily consumption of **MDMA**
- ↓ **17% decrease** in the daily consumption of **methamphetamine**

\*Caution is required when interpreting these figures. The prevalence of cocaine use in New Zealand overall is very low and has remained low for the past few years (currently 1.3% of the adult population, or around 56,000 New Zealanders). This means that the numbers are small and are subject to fluctuation year on year.



# Aotearoa at a glance

By police district

## Northland

Per capita, MDMA use was lowest in Northland (average 88mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

Rates of methamphetamine use were second-highest in Northland (average 698mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

## Tāmaki Makaurau

Cocaine use per capita was highest in Tāmaki Makaurau (average 97mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

Cocaine was most commonly reported as easy or very easy to obtain in Auckland, compared with other urban centres<sup>5</sup>

## Waikato

52% reported that methamphetamine was very easy to obtain in Waikato<sup>6</sup>

Rates of methamphetamine use were highest in Waikato (average 843mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

## Bay of Plenty

The price of cannabis was second-equal lowest in the Bay of Plenty (\$309/ounce)<sup>7</sup>

The average price of a gram of MDMA was \$240, the second highest after Otago (average \$241)<sup>8</sup>

## Central

Per capita methamphetamine use was second-lowest in the Central region (average 543mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

The average price of a gram of MDMA was lowest in Manawatū-Whanganui (\$220)<sup>8</sup>

## Eastern

52% said cannabis was easily available in Gisborne/Hawke's Bay<sup>7</sup>

Rates of MDMA use were second-lowest in the Eastern Police district (average 149mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

## Wellington

Among Wellingtonians who reported using drugs in the NZ Drug Trends Survey, 32% reported using psychedelics in the past six months.<sup>9</sup>

Wellington reported the third-highest cocaine use per capita (average 29/mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

## Tasman

53% said that methamphetamine was very easy to obtain in the Nelson/Marlborough and Tasman regions<sup>6</sup>

The average price of a gram of methamphetamine was highest-equal in the Nelson/Marlborough region (average \$530/gram)<sup>6</sup>

The price of cannabis was lowest in the Nelson/Marlborough and Tasman regions (average \$310/ounce)<sup>7</sup>

## Canterbury

The average price of a gram of MDMA was second lowest in Canterbury (\$221)<sup>8</sup>

The average price of a tab of LSD was lowest in the Canterbury region (\$29 a tab)<sup>9</sup>

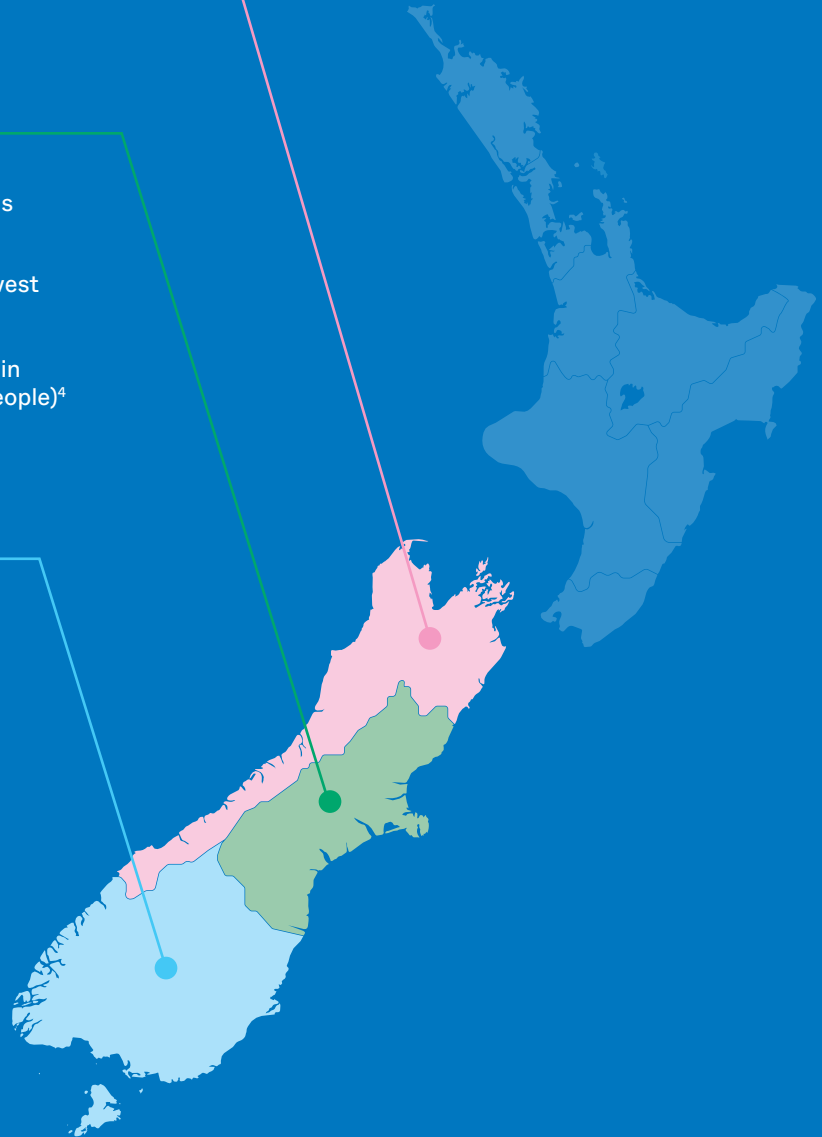
Rates of MDMA use were second highest in Canterbury (average 304mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

## Southern

Rates of MDMA use were highest in the Southern Police district (average 375mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

Rates of methamphetamine use were lowest in the Southern Police district, which includes Dunedin (average 164mg/day/1000 people)<sup>4</sup>

The price of cannabis was highest in Otago (average \$365 per ounce)<sup>7</sup>



Note: The figures in the map relating to ease of availability, prices, and use by region are obtained from the NZ Drug Trends Survey conducted by Massey University's SHORE & Whariki Research Centre. The NZDTS surveys a very large number of people with recent experience and knowledge of drug use and drug markets across the country. While the NZDTS is not a representative sample, it broadly reflects the demographic profile and regional population distribution of New Zealand.

Figures relating to per capita drug use (mg/day/1000 people) were obtained from the national wastewater testing program conducted by the National Drug Intelligence Bureau.

The map (situated above and also on the previous page) categorises data according to Police district boundaries. One exception is Tāmaki Makaurau, which includes the three Police districts of Auckland City, Counties Manukau, and Waitemātā, Police wastewater testing data is organised according to these boundaries. Where locations do not match exactly (for example Otago), this is noted in the specific fact.

# Cannabis

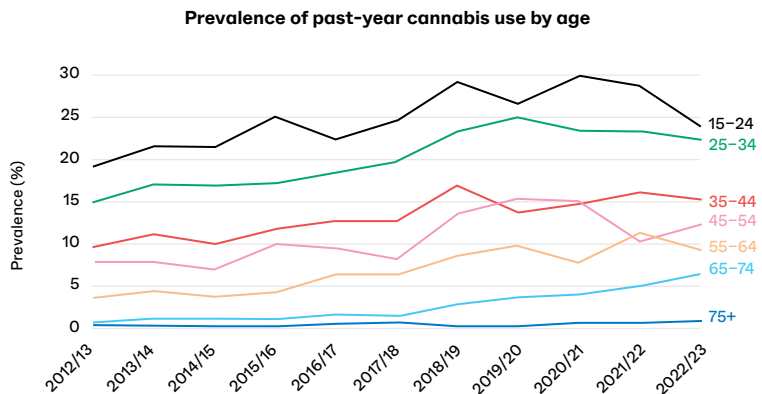
## Cannabis use has increased among older people

14.2% of adults used cannabis last year, around 597,000 people. These numbers have been relatively stable since 2018/19 and have decreased slightly compared to 2021/22.

Men are 1.3 times more likely to report cannabis use in the past year than women.<sup>3</sup>

Almost one in ten adults aged 55–64 (9.3%) now report using cannabis in the past year, which is a 2.5-fold increase from 2021/22.

Looking further back, over the past decade, past-year cannabis use has increased across people of all ages. For example, 6.4% of 64–75-year-olds reported past-year cannabis use in 2022/23, which is around ten times higher than 2012/13.<sup>3</sup>



## At-least-weekly cannabis use appears to be rising, especially among women

Since 2016/17, there has been an 80% increase in the prevalence of at-least-weekly cannabis smoking by women of all ethnicities and ages.

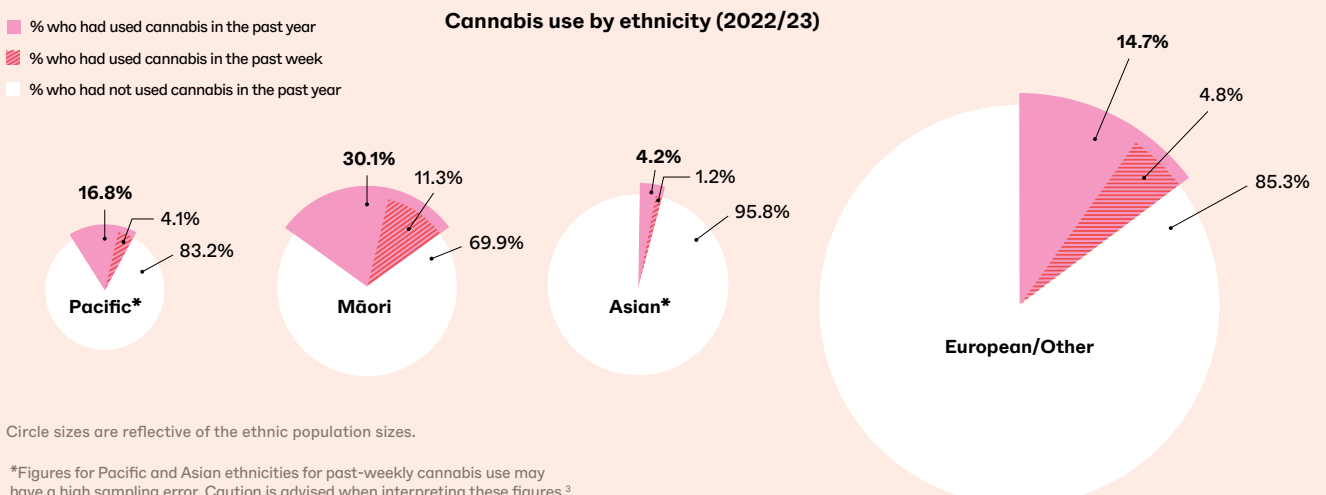
Since 2016/17, there has been a 100% increase among European women (to 3.63%), and a 77% increase among wāhine Māori (to 10.1%) of at-least weekly cannabis use.

Wāhine Māori are 3.47 times more likely to report weekly cannabis use compared with non-Māori women.<sup>3</sup> Māori men are 2.45 times more likely to report weekly cannabis use compared with non-Māori men.

Disabled people are 3.79 times more likely to report weekly cannabis use than non-disabled people.

In 2022/23, cannabis was reportedly most easily available in Gisborne/Hawke's Bay, followed by Manawatū-Whanganui, and Bay of Plenty.

The price of cannabis is lowest in Tasman/Nelson/Marlborough, followed by Taranaki, and Bay of Plenty.



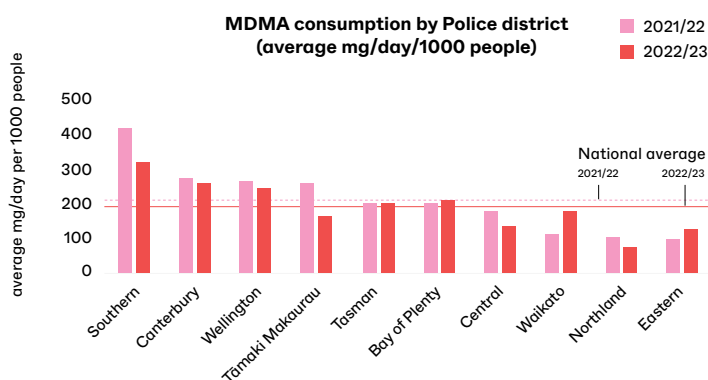
# MDMA

## MDMA use remains steady, and it is more commonly used by young people

New Zealand’s second most commonly used illicit drug is MDMA (sometimes referred to as ecstasy), with 3.6% of adults reporting use in the past year. MDMA use is concentrated among younger people. 8.1% of those aged 15–24 reported using it last year (about 52,000 people). Use becomes far less common as people get older, with around 0.2% of people aged 55 or older reporting using MDMA.<sup>3</sup>

MDMA availability may be decreasing. The 2022/23 NZ Drug Trends Survey found that 23% of people said MDMA is now harder to buy, compared with 10% in 2020.

Wastewater testing reveals that, per capita, MDMA is used most commonly in the Southern Police district, which includes Dunedin (average 375mg/day/1000 people). Rates of use are also higher than the national average in Canterbury, Wellington, and Tāmaki Makaurau.<sup>4</sup>

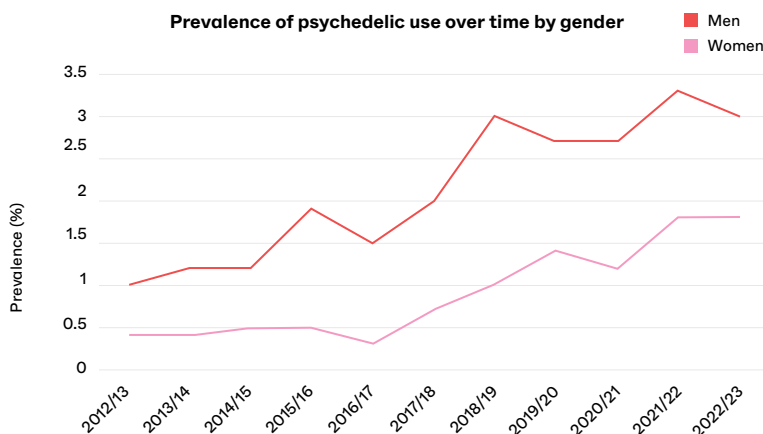


# Psychedelics

Psychedelics (or hallucinogens)\* can include LSD, psilocybin (found in certain mushrooms), and ketamine.

In 2022/23, 2.5% of adults (around 103,000 people) reported taking psychedelics in the past year, compared with 1.9% in 2017/18.

Over the last decade, more men and women reported taking psychedelics, with 3% of men and 1.8% of women reporting taking psychedelics in the past year.



\*The New Zealand Health Survey uses the term 'hallucinogens' to describe this class of drugs.

# Cocaine

## Cocaine appears to be more widely used in the past year, especially in Tāmaki Makaurau

Around 1.3% of adults (around 56,000) reported using cocaine at least once in the previous year. Because the increases in cocaine use have started from a very low baseline, any changing trends should be treated with caution.

Taken together, wastewater testing, NZ Health Survey, and NZ Drug Trends Survey data for 2022/23 all indicate that cocaine use is likely increasing. NZ Health Survey data on cocaine use prevalence does not show as rapid an increase as wastewater testing data, which may indicate that existing cocaine users may be consuming larger amounts, or that the increases in prevalence of use are very recent.

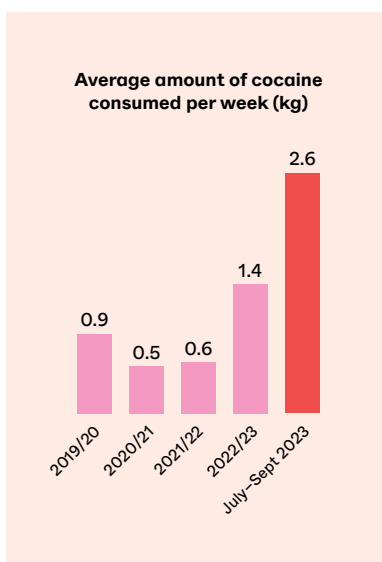
Cocaine use is much more common among men (2.2%) than among women (0.5%).<sup>3</sup> In the past decade, Māori have reported a small but statistically significant increase in use, to 2%.

The NZ Drug Trends Survey for 2022/23 found that cocaine is becoming easier to obtain, and that the price has increased compared to previous years.<sup>5</sup>

Customs seizures of cocaine spiked in the first three-quarters of 2023 to **3.59 tons**.

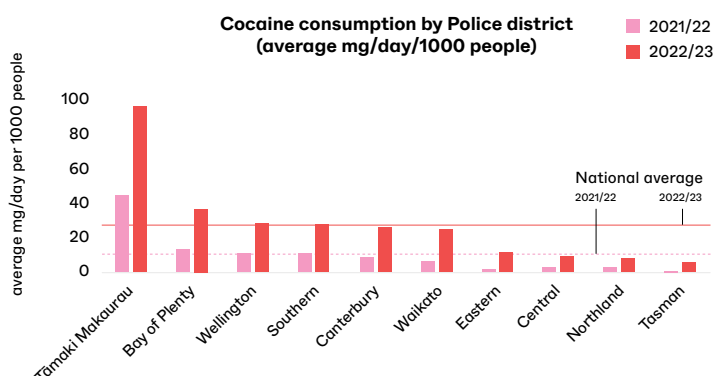
This is more than three times the total amount seized in 2022 (946kg).

**A record 3.2 tons of cocaine was intercepted at sea in a single operation in February 2023.**<sup>11, 12</sup>



Wastewater testing also reveals that the total amount of cocaine consumed in Aotearoa has more than doubled in the past two years. Latest figures for July to September 2023 show that cocaine use across those three months was 2.6 kg per week. By contrast, just 0.98 kg was consumed in the same three months of 2022.<sup>13, 14</sup>

In 2022/23, an average of 97 mg/day/1000 people was consumed, compared with 45 mg/day/1000 people in 2021/22. Cocaine use varies around the country, but it has more than doubled in every region between 2021/22 and 2022/23. Per capita, cocaine consumption is highest in Tāmaki Makaurau, and has more than doubled compared to last year.<sup>4</sup>



# Amphetamines, including methamphetamine

## Amphetamine use is concentrated in our most deprived neighbourhoods

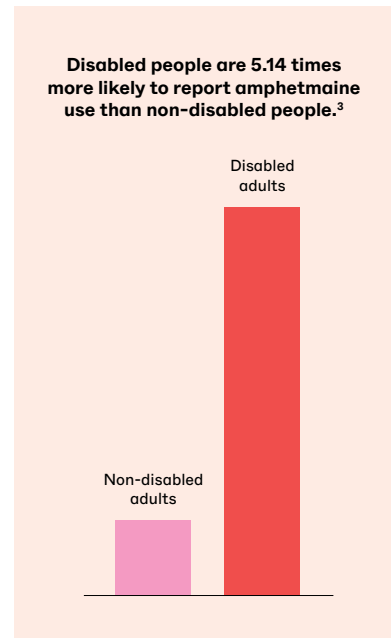
Nationally, 1.1% of adults (about 47,000 people) reported using amphetamines like methamphetamine in 2022/23.<sup>3</sup> We know that like other illicit drug use, amphetamine use is concentrated in some of our poorest neighbourhoods.

The latest data shows that disabled people are 5.14 times more likely to report amphetamine use than non-disabled people.<sup>3</sup>

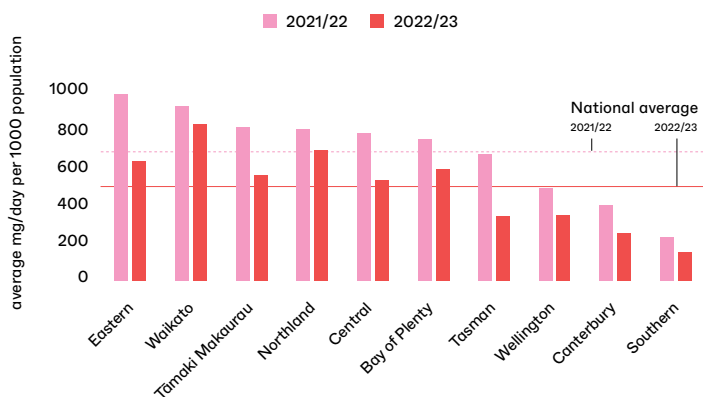
Amphetamine use is significantly more common among men than women.

Methamphetamine use varies widely across the country. Latest wastewater testing data for 2022/23 reveals that per capita use in the Waikato region is over five times higher than that in the Southern district (843mg/day/1000 people compared with 164mg/day/1000 people).

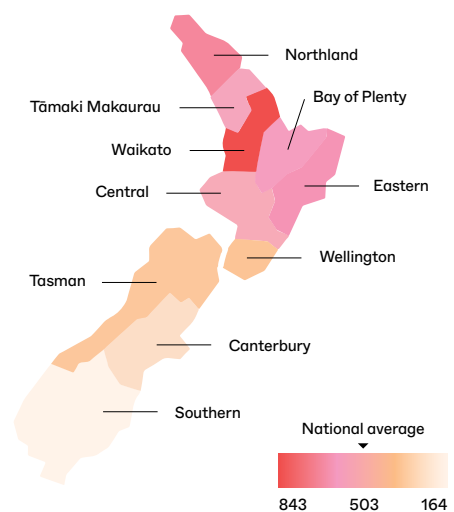
Methamphetamine use per capita is higher than the national average in every district of the North Island apart from Wellington.<sup>4</sup>



Methamphetamine consumption by Police district (average mg/day/1000 people)



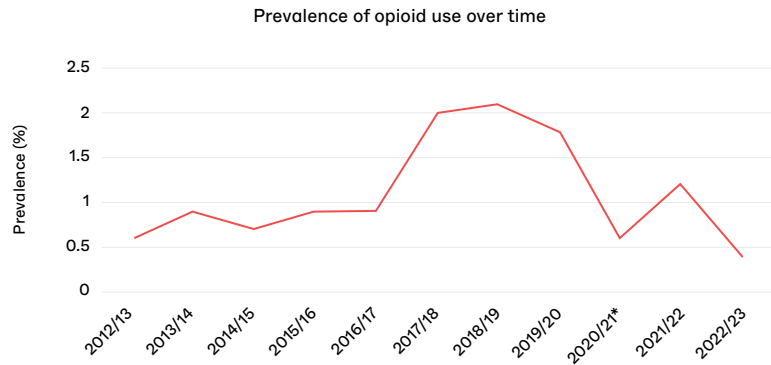
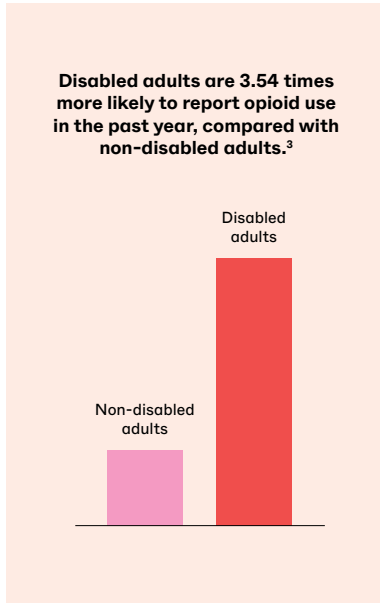
Methamphetamine consumption by Police district, 2022/23 (average mg/day/1000 people)



# Opioids

The prevalence of reported past-year opioid use (including illicit use of drugs like heroin, morphine, methadone, and codeine) has fallen significantly since 2017/18, to a low of 0.4% in 2022/23. This is around 18,000 adults.<sup>3</sup>

The relatively low prevalence of opioid use means that there can be large variation in the numbers year-to-year.



The prevalence of opioid use is higher among Māori, who are 4.01 times more likely to report opioid use than non-Māori. Notably, Māori men are 6.04 times more likely to report opioid use than non-Māori men.<sup>3 †</sup>

\*In 2020/21, there was a change to the way the question on drug use was asked in the NZ Health Survey. The Ministry of Health advises caution when comparing results from before 2020/21 with results from 2020/21 and after.

†Due to the small numbers, caution should be exercised with these figures as they are sensitive to statistical errors.

**Even people who use non-opioid drugs can be at risk of opioid overdose.**

Some illicit drugs (for example stimulants, synthetic cannabinoids) can be adulterated with ultra-potent opioids like fentanyl, which people might not be aware of when they obtain them.

## Trends in injecting

The most recent available NZ Needle Exchange Programme (NZNEP) data shows that 52–55% of client visits were to obtain sterile equipment for methamphetamine injecting. Data for previous years is not directly comparable, however, it appears that the proportion of client visits for stimulant injecting may be increasing.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, client visits for opioids (methadone, morphine, heroin) may be decreasing. In July 2020 opioid-related visits made up 41% of all the visits, compared with Quarter 2 and Quarter 4 of 2022, when they made up 28–32%.

Still, after methamphetamine, methadone was the next most common drug reportedly injected in 2022 by those who visited needle exchanges (17–19% of client visits).<sup>10</sup>

The NZNEP report also found an increase in the proportion of client visits for steroid injecting, with latest figures showing a concentration of steroid injecting in the Auckland, Mount Maunganui, Hamilton, and central Christchurch areas.

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