

***‘Queensland Chemsex Study’:***  
*Results from a cross-sectional survey of gay and other  
homosexually active men in Queensland--substance use  
and sexual activity*

Industry report for Queensland AIDS Council compiled by:  
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*Data was collected by staff and volunteers from Queensland Aids Council,  
in partnership with Lives Lived Well and community organisations.*



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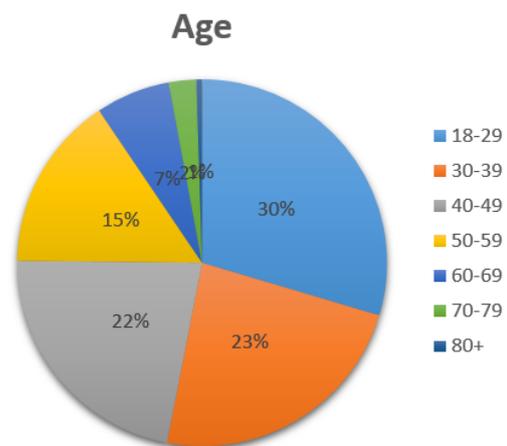
Community and public health awareness of 'chemsex' has recently come to light in Queensland, in part due to the release of a film by the same name. A wider community forum, held to view the film and discuss chemsex within the BrisbaneGBTIQ community, prompted Queensland Aids Council (QuAC) to empirically explore the nature and use of comorbid substance use and sex in Queensland, specifically as it pertains to chemsex.

While a small number of quantitative studies have been published to date, much of the research in the area has focused on qualitative methods. While this research sheds much light on individual experience it does lack breadth. Little to none of the currently available research in the area of chemsex has sampled Australian participants. QuAC were interested in getting a broad understanding of the chemsex scene in Queensland but were also interested in data that might be specific to Australians. Due to its geographic isolation, the drugs available in Australia often differ to those available in other areas of the world. Current media and academic attention is being given to crystal methamphetamine and it's prevalence within Australia, as such, this particular drug was subject to further analysis within this study.

The current study collected a large and local sample in order to inform and target the work currently being done at QuAC. The survey was conducted over a period of three months in 2016. Data was collected online and in paper and pencil forms by staff and volunteers at QuAC and at local LGBTI venues. For the purposes of this study chemsex was defined as "the use of drugs, to facilitate or enhance sex, with or without other drugs." The data reported here is that of the participants living in QLD and those whom did not report a postcode.

### **Results**

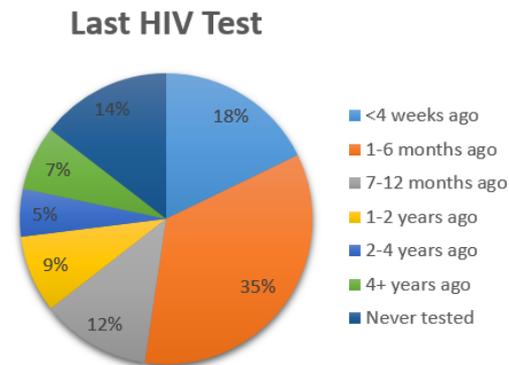
There were over 630 respondents to the survey, with 78.2% identifying as homosexual and 18% identifying as bisexual, of those who entered another sexuality, some of the responses included: "MSM", "genderfluid", "homoflexible" and "bi-curious". Nearly all participants identified as male (97.3%), with a few identifying as transgender or another gender identity (2.7%). Over half of participants were aged under 40 years old (53%). The study captured a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander participants (7.3% of the total sample) at a rate slightly higher than the population rate reported by the Australian Bureau of statistics (ABS; 4.2% in QLD). Approximately 79% reported that their cultural heritage was Anglo Australian, the remaining 21% reported a range of ethnicities including New Zealand heritage (1.3%), Italian heritage (1.1%), Chinese heritage (1.8%) and Filipino (1.3%) among others. Most participants reported having been born in Australia (82.6%) and living in a city (79.9%). However 16.7% of participants



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reported living in regional areas and 3.3% reported living in rural or remote areas which allowed for further analysis of the differences between these groups, which is provided in the following pages. Just over half of participants reported having been tested for HIV in the last six months (52.4%) and just over 20% reported either having never tested, or having last tested more than four years ago (21.7%). The portion who reported having never tested was generally constant with the figures reported in the last Gay Community Periodic Survey (GCPS; 2015). While comparisons between the current study and the most recent GCPS are



useful, they must be considered in light of the fact that different sampling and data collection methods were used and the current study was targeting a specific sub-population. The 2015 GCPS reported 12.8% of their sample had never tested for HIV, the current study had 14.5% reporting they had never tested. Approximately 9% of the sample reported they were HIV positive, which is consistent with the last GCPS who reported 8.5% of respondent reporting their status as positive.

In the present study, about 78% reported they were HIV negative, which is substantially lower than the 89.9% reported in the last GCPS, however the disparity is accounted for in the approximately 13% of the sample who either reported that they did not know their HIV status or did not report on their HIV status in the present study. Of those who reported their status as positive, most (87.5%) reported an undetectable viral load. The majority of the participants had heard of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP; approximately 81%) and a small number reported taking it (11.7%). The last GCPS (2015) reported 1-2% of their sample were taking PrEP. The current study purposely sampled far more participants utilising PrEP, data collection for this study targeted men who were likely to be involved in more high risk practices and were therefore more likely to be taking PrEP regardless, however findings from the present study may be an indication that use of PrEP has increased over time. The last GCPS ask participants if they believed that PrEP was available and 41.6% responded in the affirmative. The currently study asked participants to indicate if they had *heard* of PrEP, with more than 80% reporting that they had.

The present study asked participants about a variety of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) they may have contracted in the last 12 months, the most reported STI was chlamydia with 9.6% of respondent's reporting they had contracted it in the last 12 months, this was followed by gonorrhoea (8.4%), syphilis (4.5%), HPV (1.4%), Herpes (1.1%) and Hepatitis C (0.2%). Some participants reported being diagnosed with more than one STI in the last 12 months, 4.3% reported two STIs and 0.8% reported being diagnosed with three STIs.

Participants reported on their substance use patterns, with 80.9% reported having used alcohol in the last 12 months, with 55% of the sample reporting at least weekly use and 10.2% reporting daily use. The next most used drug was amyl nitrate with 44.4% reporting having used it in the last 12 months; it was also one of the most frequently used drugs with more than 10% of the total sample (exactly 25% of amyl users) reporting the use of amyl nitrate 2-3 times per week. Just over a third (34.1%) of the sample reported using marijuana

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in the last 12 months, with nearly half of those participants (14.7%) using at least weekly. Nearly a quarter of the sample reported having used Viagra in the last 12 months (23.1%); the majority of these users (12.5%) reported weekly to monthly use. Ecstasy use was reported by about a fifth of the sample (21.7%); most ecstasy users (15.7% of the total sample) were using no more often than every 3 months. Just over one sixth of the sample (16.2%) reported crystal methamphetamine use; there was a reasonable even spread of use across the time periods with 3.5% using weekly, 2.1% using every three months and 3% using every twelve months. The following drugs were used by 10% or less of the total sample in descending order: amphetamine, cocaine, GHB, ketamine, steroids and heroin. Excluding alcohol, 34.5% of the sample reported no drug use in the past 12 months.

The survey asked participants about condomless anal intercourse (CAI) in a number of scenarios. The following statistics include the full sample including those who are engaging in risk reduction practices, such as having an undetectable viral load and those on PrEP. Just under one third (31.2%) of the sample reported having CAI with partners of unknown or serodiscordant HIV status in the last 12 months, just under a quarter (24.5%) reported engaging in this behaviour while “drunk or high”. Nearly one in every ten (9.6%) participants were “unsure” if they had engaged in these behaviours. Participants were asked if they had engaged in CAI as the receptive partner during chemsex, with 43.7% reporting that they had and 5.4% reporting that they were “unsure”. Just under half (45.5%) of participants reported having engaged in CAI during chemsex as the insertive partner, with 4.9% reported they were “unsure”.

The following statistics take into account harm reduction practices that participants reported: having an undetectable viral load or use of PrEP and excluded these people from the analysis. Just over a quarter (25.6%) of the sample reported that they had engaged in CAI with partners of unknown or serodiscordant HIV status in the last 12 months, 19.8% reported having done so “while drunk or high”. Participants reported having engaged in CAI as a receptive partner (39.2%) during chemsex and as an insertive partner (42.1%). However, these statistics include participants who may have been engaging in serosorting.

Just over one third (33.5%) of the total sample reported engaging in chemsex in the last twelve months. Just over a quarter of those who reported engaging in chemsex reported doing so either weekly or fortnightly (28.2%). Thirty-five percent reported doing so monthly and 36.4% reported doing so yearly. More than three quarters of participants reported their chemsex sessions lasting less than 12 hours; specifically 43.6% reported less than four hours, 23.7% reported between 5-8 hours and 12.3% reported 9-12 hours. Each of the four hour time frames from 13 hours up to 48 hours had an average of averaged 2.4% of the sample, with a range from 0.9% to 4.3%.

The most commonly reported drugs for use during chemsex, in descending order, were amyl nitrate (85.3%), alcohol (74.4%), crystal methamphetamine (65.9%) and Viagra (65.9%). More than half of participants (58.8%) reported using amyl nitrate often, very often or always, with only 14.7% stating they never use it during chemsex. Approximately 37% of participants said they use alcohol during chemsex “often”, “very often” or “always”. An additional 37% report using it “sometimes” and the remaining 25% report “never” using alcohol during chemsex. Nearly 45% reported using crystal methamphetamine “often”, “very often” or “always” during chemsex. Approximate 35% of the sample reported not using

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crystal methamphetamine during chemsex. Over 65% of participants reported using Viagra at least “sometimes” during chemsex. Marijuana was the next most used drug during chemsex with nearly 45% reporting using “often” or more frequently during chemsex. Nearly all remaining drugs on the survey were used by less than 50% of participants. After marijuana, GHB was the drug endorsed by participants as being used “often” or more frequently, 24% of participants endorsed it at this level. For details please see appendix.

### **Further analyses**

The values presented in the following sections are the significant values of mean difference between groups and were calculated with t-tests.

### **PrEP**

Those who reported being HIV positive were not included in this particular analysis, in order to analyse the differences between HIV negative PrEP users and HIV negative participants not currently using PrEP. There was no significant difference between PrEP users and non PrEP users on either age, Australian indigenous heritage or place of birth (Australia vs overseas). Those who identified as bisexual or heterosexual were more likely to not be using PrEP ( $p<.05$ ). There was a significant difference on place of residence ( $p=.05$ ) with those living in the city more likely to be on PrEP. There was significant differences in drug use between the two groups on use of amyl nitrite ( $p<.01$ ), ecstasy ( $p<.00$ ), crystal methamphetamine ( $p<.00$ ), amphetamine ( $p=.01$ ), Viagra ( $p<.00$ ), cocaine ( $p=.01$ ), GHB ( $p=.01$ ) and steroids ( $p=.01$ ). Participants not using PrEP was more likely to have endorsed use of these drugs at higher levels. There was a significant difference between the groups on time of their last HIV test ( $p<.00$ ), participants on PrEP were more likely to have had a test more recently and were more likely to have had CAI in the last 12 months, either sober ( $p<.00$ ) or under the influence of drugs or alcohol ( $p<.00$ ). Participants on PrEP were also more likely to have engaged in chemsex in the last 12 months ( $p=.00$ ). Those not on PrEP were less likely to engage in either insertive CAI ( $p=.00$ ) or receptive CAI ( $p=.01$ ).

### **Place of Residence**

There were no significant differences in HIV status between those living in regional or rural areas compared to those living in the city.

### **Use of Crystal Methamphetamine**

There were no significant differences between those who reported having used crystal methamphetamine and those who did not report having use the drug on sexuality, gender, age, Australian indigenous heritage, country of birth or those living in the city compared to rural areas. With the exception of alcohol, crystal methamphetamine users were more likely to use all other drugs asked about in this study. Users of crystal methamphetamine were more likely to report having contracted an STI in the previous 12 months ( $p<.00$ ), are more likely to have had CAI with serodiscordant or partners of unknown HIV status in the last 12 months, including when sober ( $p<.00$ ) or intoxicated ( $p<.00$ ). Crystal methamphetamine users are also more likely to have engaged in chemsex in the last 12 months ( $p<.00$ ).

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## Summary

This study has provided an overview of the current drug use and related demographic features of Queensland MSM, particularly among those from south east Queensland. While there are some disparities, a substantial portion of the results are show consistency with the most recent GCPS. However, given that it specifically targeted men engaging in drug use and chemsex, it is a more distinct subset of the population and drug use patterns reported in this study reflect that. While the survey has provided rich data for QuAC to use in furthering ongoing health promotion and harm minimisation activities, the men who participated have contributed to a larger body of research that will be of ongoing use to the community, presently and in the future.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the participants who completed the survey, to the venues who allowed data collection to take place on their premises, Queensland Aids Council, The University of Southern Queensland and Lives Lived Well.

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## Appendix

### Sexuality (N = 628)

	Number	Percentage
Gay/Homosexual	491	78.2
Bisexual	113	18
Heterosexual	13	2.1
Pansexual	6	1
Other/Free text	4	0.6
Queer	1	0.2

### Gender

	Number	Percentage
Male	611	97.3
Trans*	15	2.4
Other	2	0.3

### Age

	Number	Percentage
18-29	186	29.6
30-39	147	23.4
40-49	139	22.1
50-59	97	15.4
60-69	41	6.5
70-79	15	2.4
80+	3	0.5

### Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

	Number	Percentage
Not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	582	92.7
Aboriginal	27	4.3
Torres Strait Islander	16	2.5
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	3	0.5

### Ethnic Background

	Number	Percentage
Anglo-Australian	494	78.7
Other	134	21.3

### Place of Birth

	Number	Percentage
Australia	519	82.6
Overseas	109	17.4

### Place of Residence

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	Number	Percentage
City	502	79.9
Regional	105	16.7
Rural/Remote	21	3.3

#### Last HIV Test

	Number	Percentage
<4 weeks	112	17.8
1-6 months ago	217	34.6
7-12 months ago	76	12.1
1-2 years ago	54	8.6
2-4 years ago	33	5.3
4+ years ago	45	7.2
Never tested	91	14.5

#### HIV status

	Number	Percentage
Negative	491	78.2
Positive	56	8.9
Unknown/not reported	81	12.9

#### Viral Load of HIV positive participants

	Number	Percentage
Undetectable	49	87.5
Detectable	7	12.5

#### PrEP – of those reporting HIV negative or unknown status

	Number	Percentage
On PrEP	67	11.7
Not on PrEP	398	69.6
Never heard of PrEP	63	11
Did not answer the question	44	7.7

#### STIs

	Number	Percentage
Chlamydia	60	9.6
Gonorrhoea	53	8.4
Syphilis	28	4.5
HPV	9	1.4
Herpes	7	1.1
Hepatitis C	1	0.2
Hepatitis B	0	0
Hepatitis A	0	0
LVG	0	0

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### Multiple STIs reported

	Number	Percentage
No STIs in last 12 months	511	81.4
1 STI	84	13.4
2 STI	27	4.3
3 STI	5	0.8
4 STI	1	0.2
Total # people who contracted an STI in the last 12 months	117	18.7

### Alcohol

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	120	19.1
Everyday	64	10.2
2-3 times per week	151	24
Once a week	133	21.2
Once a month	88	14
Once every 3 months	40	6.4
Once every 6 months	19	3
Once every 12 months	13	2.1

### Amyl Nitrate

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	360	57.3
Everyday	6	1
2-3 times per week	67	10.7
Once a week	49	7.8
Once a month	52	8.3
Once every 3 months	42	6.7
Once every 6 months	24	3.8
Once every 12 months	28	4.5

### Marijuana

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	414	65.9
Everyday	37	5.9
2-3 times per week	35	5.6
Once a week	20	3.2
Once a month	33	5.3
Once every 3 months	31	4.9
Once every 6 months	26	4.1
Once every 12 months	32	5.1

### Viagra

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	483	76.9

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Everyday	2	0.3
2-3 times per week	15	2.4
Once a week	40	6.4
Once a month	38	6.1
Once every 3 months	19	3.0
Once every 6 months	13	2.1
Once every 12 months	18	2.9

#### Ecstasy

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	492	78.3
Everyday	0	0
2-3 times per week	5	0.8
Once a week	10	1.6
Once a month	22	3.5
Once every 3 months	24	3.8
Once every 6 months	31	4.9
Once every 12 months	44	7.0

#### Crystal Methamphetamine

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	526	83.8
Everyday	9	1.4
2-3 times per week	14	2.2
Once a week	22	3.5
Once a month	17	2.7
Once every 3 months	13	2.1
Once every 6 months	8	1.3
Once every 12 months	19	3.0

#### Amphetamine

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	562	89.5
Everyday	1	0.2
2-3 times per week	5	0.8
Once a week	10	1.6
Once a month	13	2.1
Once every 3 months	7	1.1
Once every 6 months	9	1.4
Once every 12 months	21	3.3

#### Cocaine

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	566	90.1
Everyday	1	0.2
2-3 times per week	3	0.5
Once a week	1	0.2

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Once a month	3	0.5
Once every 3 months	7	1.1
Once every 6 months	12	1.9
Once every 12 months	35	5.6

#### GHB

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	584	93
Everyday	0	0
2-3 times per week	4	0.6
Once a week	5	0.8
Once a month	8	1.3
Once every 3 months	7	1.1
Once every 6 months	7	1.1
Once every 12 months	13	2.1

#### Ketamine

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	604	96.2
Everyday	0	0
2-3 times per week	0	0
Once a week	0	0
Once a month	3	0.5
Once every 3 months	4	0.6
Once every 6 months	5	0.8
Once every 12 months	12	1.9

#### Steroids

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	613	97.6
Everyday	1	0.2
2-3 times per week	0	0
Once a week	2	0.3
Once a month	3	0.5
Once every 3 months	3	0.5
Once every 6 months	1	0.2
Once every 12 months	5	0.8

#### Heroin

	Number	Percentage
No use reported	617	98.2
Everyday	1	0.2
2-3 times per week	1	0.2
Once a week	1	0.2
Once a month	1	0.2
Once every 3 months	2	0.3
Once every 6 months	1	0.2

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Once every 12 months	4	0.6
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#### Reports of CAI

	CAI w partners of unknown or serodiscordant HIV status	CAI w partners of unknown or serodiscordant HIV status while “drunk or high”	CAI insertive during Chemsex	CAI receptive during Chemsex
Full sample				
Yes	31.2	24.5	46.3	43.7
No	59.2	69.1	48.7	51
Unsure	9.6	6.4	4.9	5.4
Excluding those on PrEP and HIV+ participants with an undetectable viral load				
Yes	25.6	19.8	42.1	39.2
No	64.8	73.8	52.3	55.4
Unsure	9.6	6.5	5.7	5.5

#### Frequency of engaging in chemsex (N=211)

	Number	Percentage
Weekly	28	13.6
Fortnightly	30	14.6
Monthly	72	35
Yearly	75	36.4
Other	6	-

#### Drug use during chemsex – Amyl Nitrate

	Number	Percentage
Always	54	25.6
Very Often	38	18
Often	32	15.2
Sometimes	56	26.5
Never	31	14.7

#### Drug use during chemsex - Alcohol

	Number	Percentage
Always	24	11.4
Very Often	26	12.3
Often	29	13.7
Sometimes	78	37

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Never	54	25.6
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#### Drug use during chemsex – Crystal Methamphetamine

	Number	Percentage
Always	41	19.4
Very Often	32	15.2
Often	21	10
Sometimes	45	21.3
Never	72	34.1

#### Drug use during chemsex - Viagra

	Number	Percentage
Always	28	13.3
Very Often	30	14.2
Often	31	14.7
Sometimes	50	23.7
Never	72	34.1

#### Drug use during chemsex – Marijuana

	Number	Percentage
Always	33	15.6
Very Often	32	15.2
Often	29	13.8
Sometimes	42	19.9
Never	75	35.5

#### Drug use during chemsex - Ecstasy

	Number	Percentage
Always	8	3.8
Very Often	15	7.1
Often	21	10
Sometimes	68	32.2
Never	99	46.9

#### Drug use during chemsex - Amphetamine

	Number	Percentage
Always	6	2.8
Very Often	17	8.1
Often	21	10
Sometimes	58	27.5
Never	109	51.7

#### Drug use during chemsex - Cocaine

	Number	Percentage
Always	2	0.9
Very Often	11	5.2
Often	28	13.3

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Sometimes	57	27
Never	113	53.6

#### Drug use during chemsex - GHB

	Number	Percentage
Always	9	4.3
Very Often	12	5.7
Often	30	14.2
Sometimes	43	20.4
Never	117	55.5

#### Drug use during chemsex - Ketamine

	Number	Percentage
Always	1	0.5
Very Often	6	2.8
Often	11	5.2
Sometimes	46	21.8
Never	147	69.7

#### Drug use during chemsex - Steroids

	Number	Percentage
Always	4	1.9
Very Often	2	0.9
Often	3	1.4
Sometimes	18	8.5
Never	184	87.2

#### Drug use during chemsex - Mephedrone

	Number	Percentage
Always	3	1.4
Very Often	1	0.5
Often	1	0.5
Sometimes	21	10
Never	185	87.7

#### Drug use during chemsex - Heroin

	Number	Percentage
Always	0	0
Very Often	2	0.9
Often	3	1.4
Sometimes	31	14.7
Never	175	83

#### Length of chemsex session

	Number	Percentage
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1-4 hours	92	43.6
5-8 hours	50	23.7
9-12 hours	26	12.3
13-16 hours	7	3.3
17-20 hours	7	3.3
21-24 hours	9	4.3
25-28 hours	5	2.4
29-32 hours	2	0.9
33-36 hours	4	1.9
37-40 hours	2	0.9
45-48 hours	7	3.3

Difference in drug use of those using prep compared to those not using prep

	T score	P value
Amyl nitrate	3.042	0.002
Ecstasy	4.133	.000
Crystal methamphetamine	4.158	.000
Amphetamine	4.158	.000
Viagra	4.381	.000
Cocaine	2.717	.008
GHB	2.972	.004
Heroin	1.436	.156
Ketamine	1.978	.052
Steroids	2.033	.046
Alcohol	0.036	.971
Marijuana	1.849	.065

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