

Monitoring HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) uptake in Australia



Issue #5, January 2022

The first large-scale PrEP implementation trials began in Australia in 2016, and by 2018 more than 18,000 people started taking PrEP. PrEP was listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) in April 2018. The PBS subsidises the cost of PrEP for people eligible for Medicare in Australia. The cost to the patient for 30 pills as of January 2022 was \$42.50 for general patients and \$6.80 for concession card holders.

This report uses data from every PBS-subsidised PrEP prescription that was dispensed in Australia between 1 April 2018 and 30 September 2021. The de-identified data incorporate unique codes for linking individuals. Variables include patient details (age, sex, postcode of residence, concession status), information about dispensing (date of dispensing, quantity dispensed), and prescriber details (postcode, specialty).

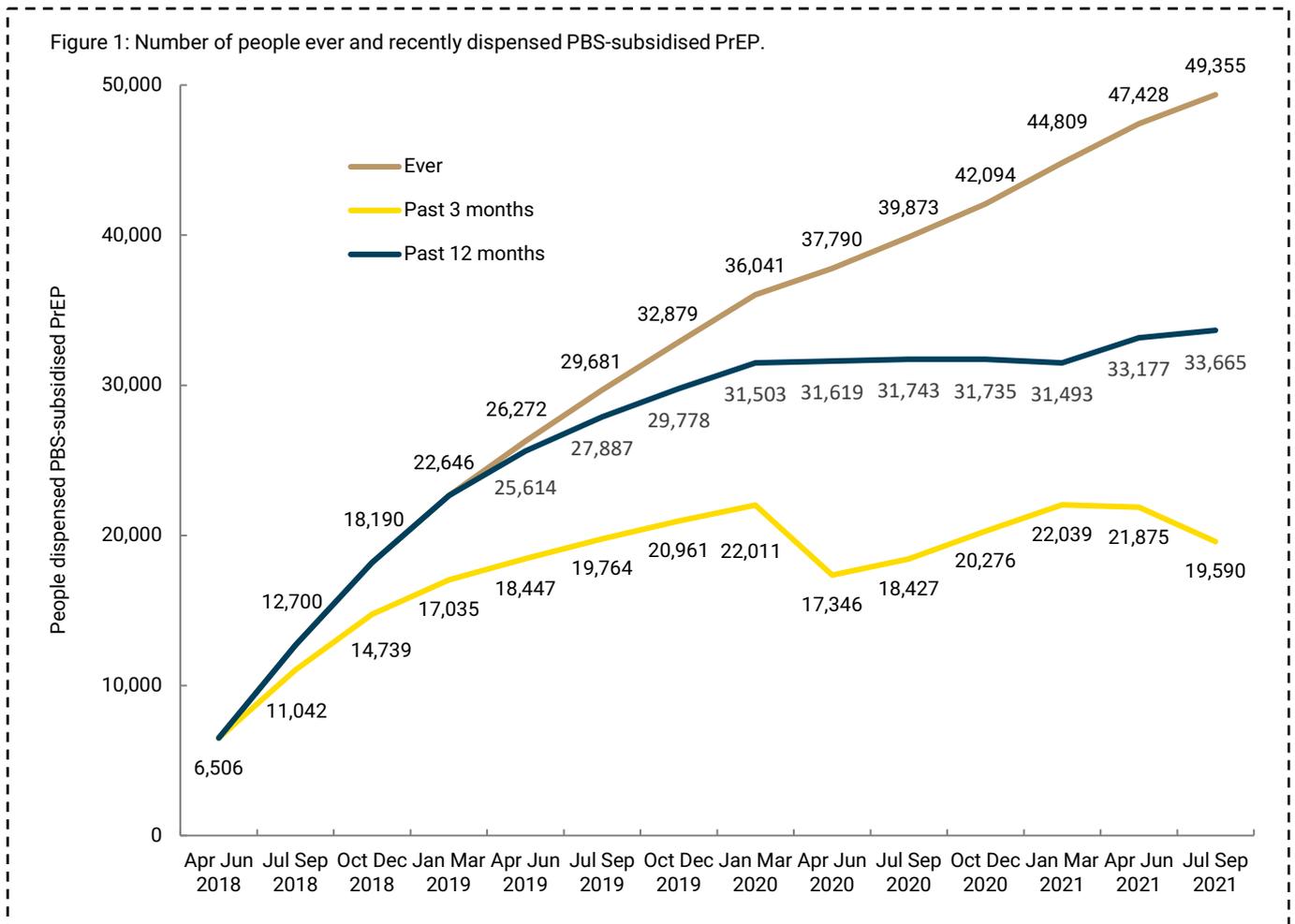
Data are presented on the total number of people who have ever initiated PBS-subsidised PrEP, as well as the number of people dispensed PrEP within each quarter, and within the past 12 months. These data are disaggregated by age, and by state or territory of patient residence. This report also includes a section investigating the effect of COVID-19-related lockdowns on monthly dispensing data by jurisdiction.



Number of people ever and recently dispensed PrEP

Since being added to the PBS on 1 April 2018, 49,355 individuals were dispensed PBS-subsidised PrEP at least once.

The number of individuals dispensed PrEP within a calendar quarter increased from 6,506 in Q2 2018, to peaks of 22,011 in Q1 2020, and 22,039 in Q1 2021. By Q3 2021, the number of people who had been dispensed PrEP at least once in the past 12 months reached a peak of 33,665.



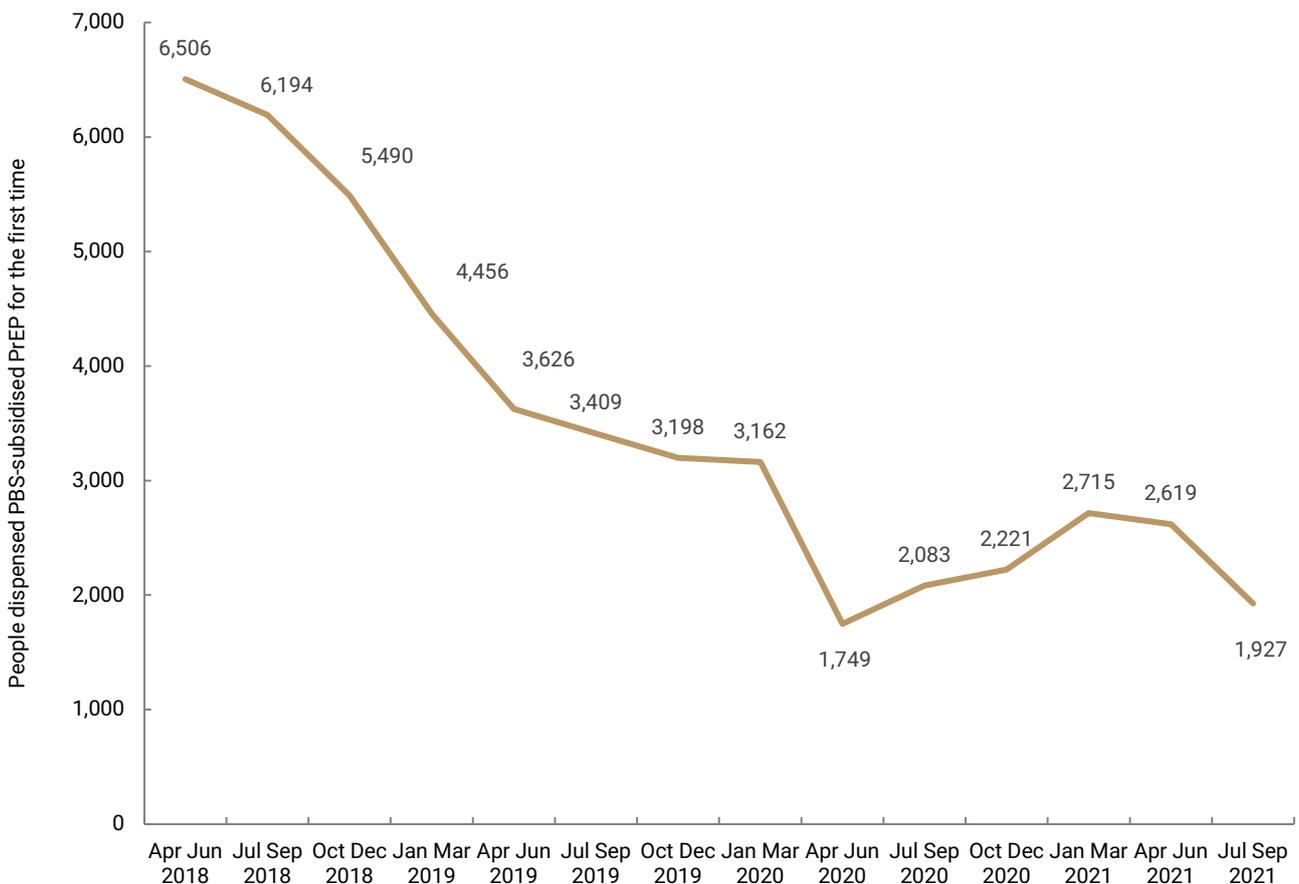


PrEP initiation

In the first three months after PBS listing, 6,506 individuals were dispensed PBS-subsidised PrEP for the first time.

The number of people accessing PrEP via the PBS for the first time in each calendar quarter has steadily decreased. It declined more steeply after the first quarter of 2020, in line with COVID-19 restrictions on sexual practice and clinical visits. From Q2 2020, the number of people initiating PrEP increased to 2,715 people in Q1 2021, before decreasing again to 1,927 people in Q3 2021.

Figure 2: Number of people dispensed PBS-subsidised PrEP for the first time.



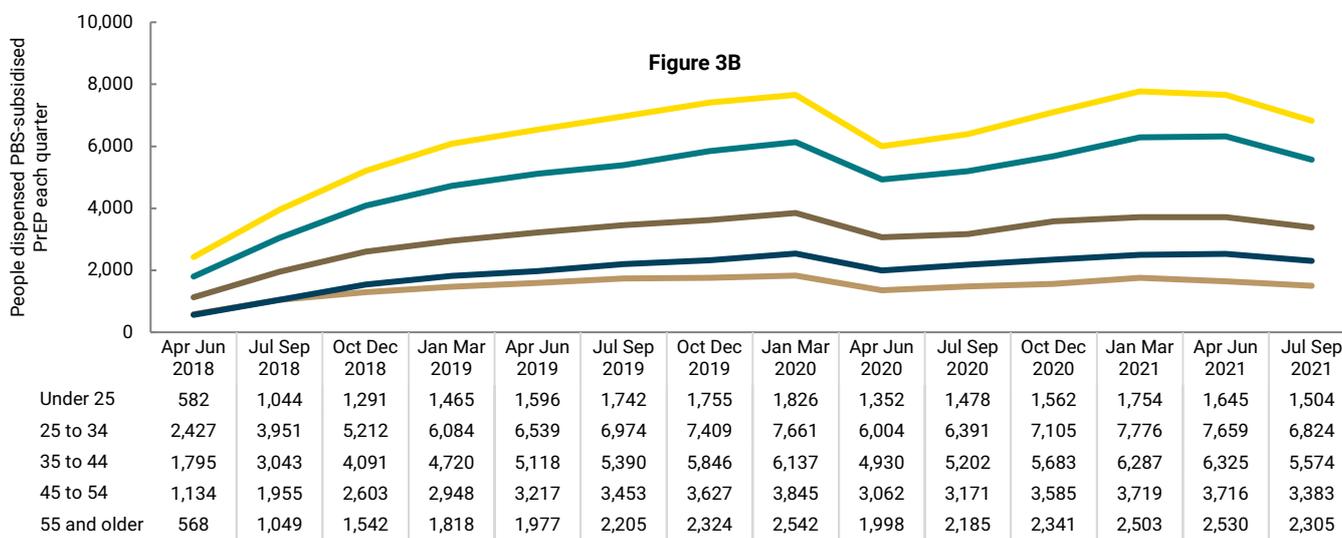
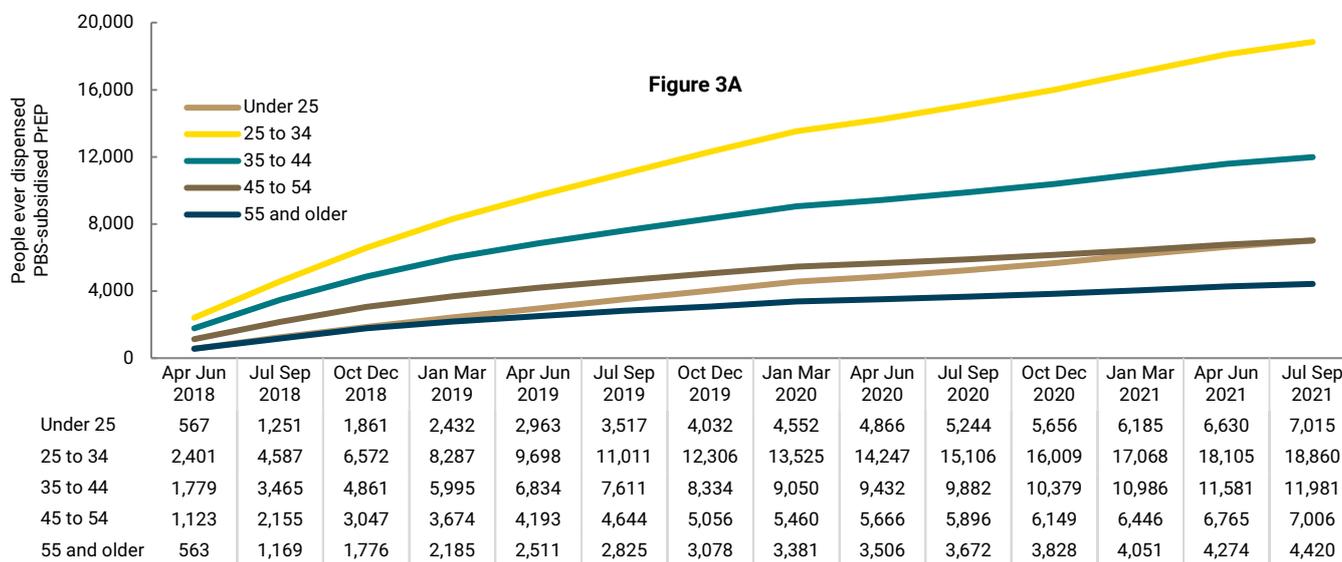


Gender and age distribution

Of the 49,355 individuals ever dispensed PBS-subsidised PrEP, 48,446 (98.2%) were recorded as male and 909 (1.8%) as female.

At the time of first accessing PBS-subsidised PrEP, 14.2% of people were aged under 25; 38.3% aged 25 to 34; 24.3% were 35 to 44; 14.2% were 45 to 54; and 9.0% were 55 or older.

Figure 3: Number of people ever (A) and recently (B) dispensed PrEP by age group.



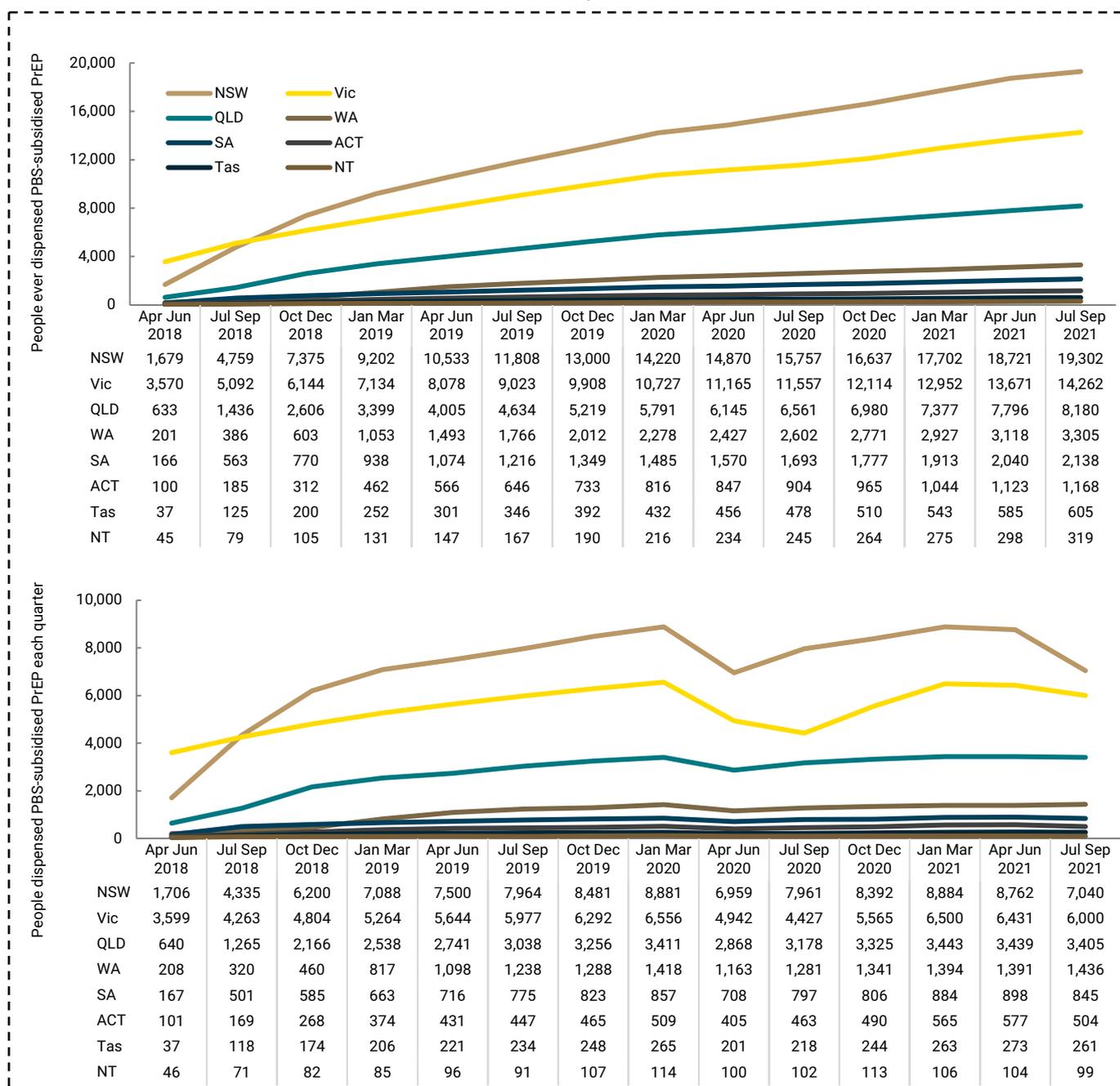


States and territories

By 31 March 2018, 18,112 individuals had received PrEP through state implementation studies (NSW 9,635; Vic 4,285; QLD 2,459; SA 657; WA 631; ACT 302; Tas 143).

New South Wales (19,302) and Victoria (14,262) accounted for 68.1% of people who had ever received PBS-subsidised PrEP by 30 September 2021.

The number of people dispensed PBS-subsidised PrEP each quarter increased in all states and territories until Q1 2020. All jurisdictions experienced reductions in PrEP dispensing in mid-2020 before increasing to pre-COVID-19 levels. Q3 2021 saw lower dispensing in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT, likely due to new lockdowns and restrictions.



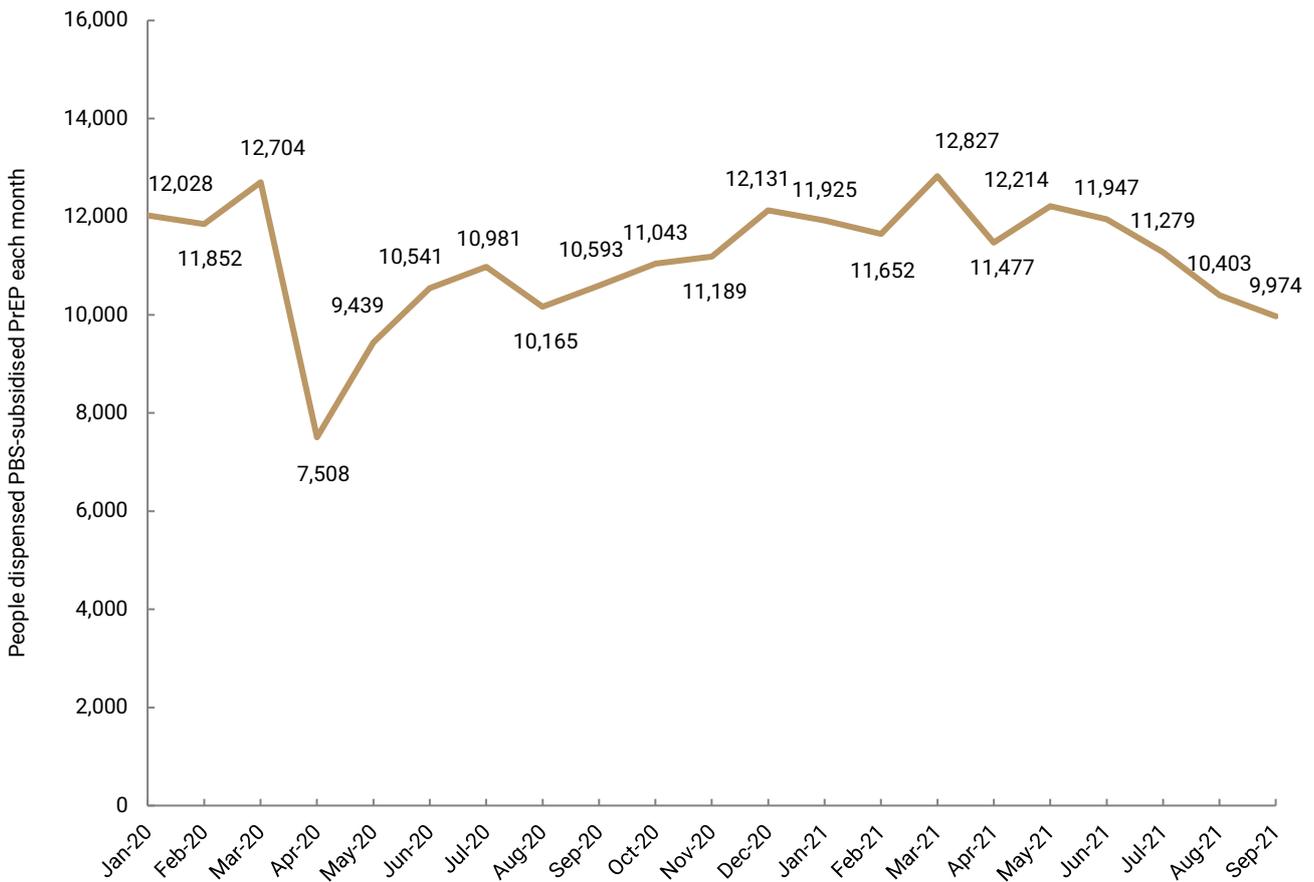


Special report: Monthly dispensing during COVID-related lockdown periods

This section reports the number of people dispensed PrEP in each calendar month just prior to and during the COVID-19-related restrictions in Australia.

The number of people dispensed PrEP decreased from 12,704 in March 2020, to 7,508 in April 2020 (40.9% decline). Over the following months, the numbers increased steadily, peaking again at 12,827 in March 2021, higher than pre-COVID-19 levels. This then decreased to 9,974 by September 2021.

Figure 5: Number of people dispensed PrEP each month between 1 January 2020 and 30 September 2021.





Lockdowns varied by state and territory, and the trend of monthly dispensing for each jurisdiction is shown in the series of graphs in Figure 6.

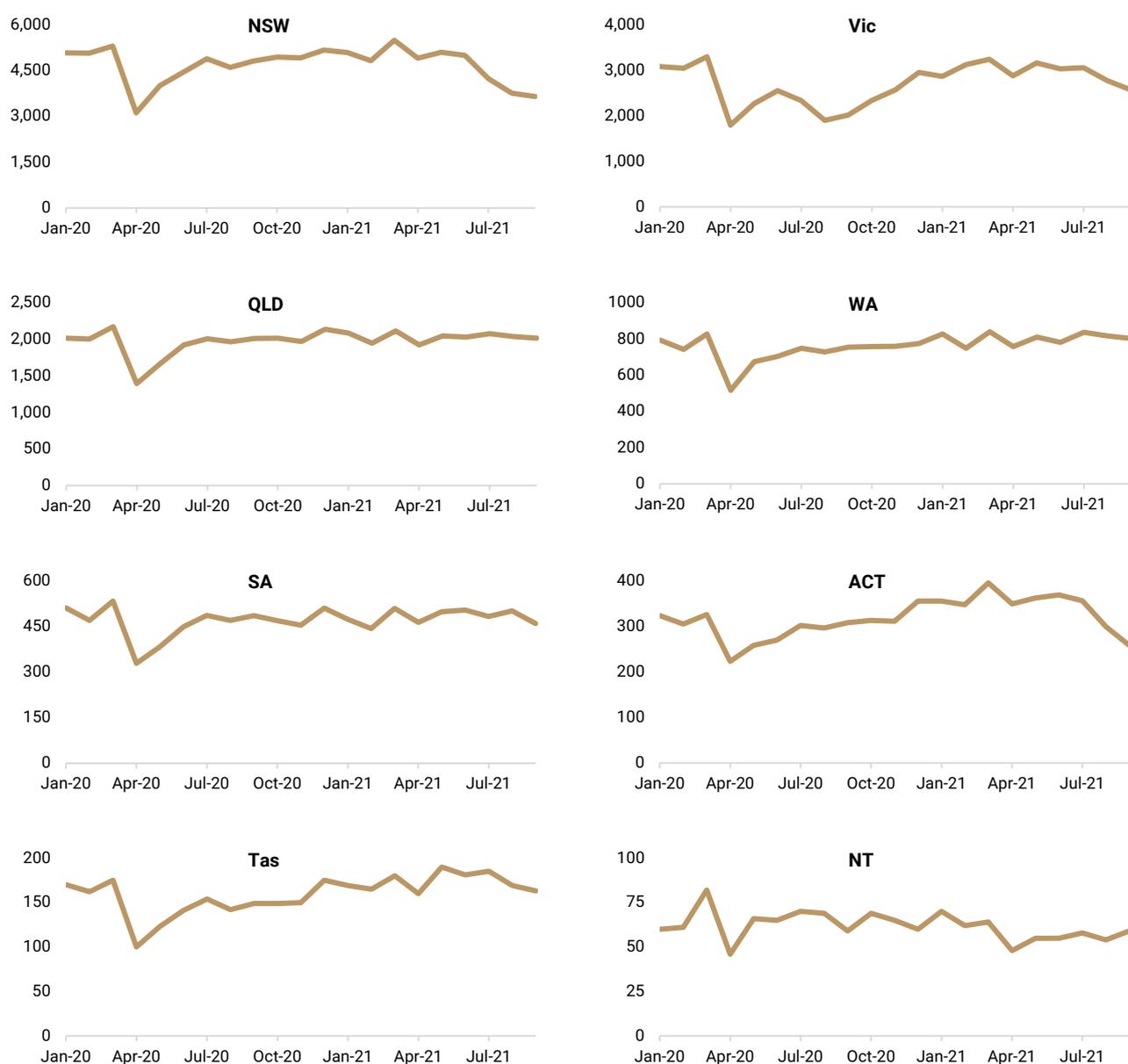
Trends were similar nationally, with the lowest number of people dispensed PrEP occurring in April 2020 for all jurisdictions.

In Victoria, monthly levels remained lower for a longer period, reflecting the lockdowns that occurred in mid to late 2020.

All jurisdictions recovered to 2019 levels by March 2021.

There were additional decreases in monthly dispensing from mid-2021 in New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT, likely due to new lockdowns and restrictions.

Figure 6: Number of people dispensed PrEP each month by state/territory of residence, 1 January 2020 to 30 September 2021.



Note. The vertical axes differ between jurisdictions.



Notes on data and methodology

The PBS dataset provides an underestimate of total PrEP purchasing in Australia. For example, it does not include PrEP purchased outside of this scheme, either at full price from a pharmacy or online from overseas. In 2021, the Gay Community Periodic Surveys found that 6% of gay and bisexual men who were using PrEP purchased it online from overseas pharmacies.¹ Overseas-born gay and bisexual men are becoming a growing focus of HIV prevention in Australia but people from that population who are not eligible for Medicare cannot purchase PBS-subsidised PrEP and are not accounted for in these data.

While the PBS dataset is nationally comprehensive, it can only provide information on dispensing rather than use. It is not possible to make conclusions about prevention-effective adherence, that is, whether PrEP is being used during periods of HIV risk by individuals. It is also important to interpret rates of dispensing in the context of changing usage patterns. In 2019, the Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM) PrEP guidelines were updated to support event-driven dosing for cisgender gay and bisexual men, and an increase in use of these event-driven schedules has been documented in community-based surveys (18% of gay and bisexual PrEP-using men in 2021).¹ A shift to more event-driven dosing will lead to reduced frequency of refilling PrEP prescriptions without necessarily leading to a reduction in prevention-effective adherence.

Report authors

Doug Fraser, Nicholas Medland, Hamish McManus, Rebecca Guy, Andrew E Grulich, Benjamin R Bavinton

Suggested citation

Kirby Institute. Monitoring HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) uptake in Australia (Issue 5). Sydney: Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney; 2021. ISSN: 2653-3820 (Online).

Contact

The Kirby Institute
Level 6, Wallace Wurth Building
High Street, UNSW Sydney
Kensington NSW 2052

For more information, contact Mr Doug Fraser (dfraser@kirby.unsw.edu.au) or Dr Benjamin Bavinton (bbavinton@kirby.unsw.edu.au).

¹Source: Gay Community Periodic Surveys, 2021, Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney