

Illicit drug use and awareness of health and policing initiatives at music festivals among people from New South Wales who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants

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The issue

In recent years New South Wales (NSW) has been central in a heated national debate about patron safety at music festivals, particularly in regard to the use of illicit drugs and related harms [1]. Existing research indicated that festival attendees are more likely to report illicit drug use than the general population [2], and festivals may be higher risk environments for experience of drug-related harms [1, 3]. Strategies intended to maximise patron safety include increased policing and health efforts, however there has been limited research exploring patron awareness of these initiatives.

What our work found

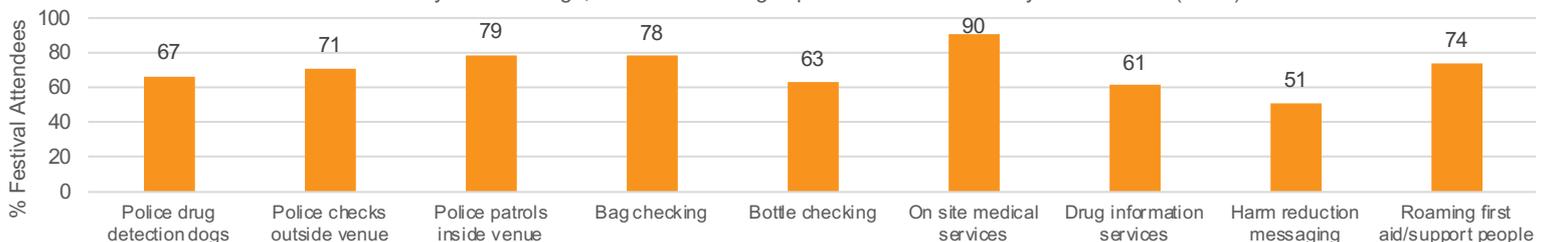
As part of the [Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System](#) (EDRS), we interviewed 100 people from Sydney, NSW who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants in April-July 2019 about their illicit drug use and experiences at Australian music festivals.

- Fourth fifths (82%, n=82) of NSW EDRS participants had attended an Australian music festival in the last year.
- Nearly all (99%, n=81) of those who had attended a festival had used any alcohol or drugs, and most (90%, n=74) had used illicit drugs (e.g., MDMA, cocaine, cannabis).
- Of the 74 people who had used illicit drugs at their last festival, less than five thought they needed medical help following their illicit drug use.

| EDRS sample who attended a festival in the past year: "What substances did you use at the last festival?" | NSW (N=82) |
|---|------------|
| Any alcohol and/or other drug % | 99 |
| Any alcohol % | 82 |
| Any illicit drug % | 90 |
| Ecstasy/MDMA % | 78 |
| Cannabis % | 34 |
| Ketamine % | 39 |
| LSD % | 27 |
| Cocaine % | 17 |

- Of those who attended a festival, most were aware of on-site medical services at their last festival (90%, n=74), and two-thirds were aware of drug information services (61%, n=50) and half were aware of harm reduction messaging (51%, n=42).
- Most were aware of police patrols inside (79%, n=65) and outside (71%, n=58) venues, and two-thirds were aware of police drug detection dogs (67%).
- Of those who reported last encountering police with drug detection dogs at a festival (n=66), one-third (35%, n=53) reported having drugs in their possession at the time. The majority of these people (97%, n=34) were carrying for personal use.
- Of those who reported that the drug detection dog sniffed them, but did not sit down (n=22), half (46%; n=10) reported that they were carrying drugs.

"To the best of your knowledge, were the following in place at the last festival you attended?" (N=82)



Implications

The vast majority of those NSW participants who had attended a festival had used alcohol and/or any illicit drug at the event. Most were aware of policing/security strategies like patrolling police and police drug detection dogs. Of those who were in possession of drugs at the time of encountering police drug detection dogs at a festival, the vast majority were carrying for personal use. Given the known harms that can occur as a result of police and drug detection dog encounters [1], these findings support evidence for improved balance between public health and safety at music festivals. This is particularly in light of the opportunity to engage people who may not otherwise come into contact with harm reduction and health education services.

References:

1. Hughes, C., et al. (2019). Australian music festival attendees: A national overview of demographics, drug use patterns, policing experiences and help seeking behaviour. *DPMP Bulletin No. 28*. NDARC: Sydney.
2. Lim, M.S., Hellard, M.E., Hocking, J.S., Spelman, T.D., & Aitken, C.K. (2010). Surveillance of drug use among young people attending a music festival in Australia, 2005–2008. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 29(2), 150-156.
3. NSW Ministry of Health (2019). Guidelines for music festival events: Music festival harm reduction. NSW Ministry of Health: Sydney.

Suggested citation: Gibbs, D. & Peacock, A. (2020). Illicit drug use and awareness of health and policing initiatives at music festivals among people from New South Wales who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants. *Drug Trends Bulletin Series*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. <http://doi.org/10.26190/5f503748a48a3>. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the Drug and Alcohol Program. ©NDARC, UNSW SYDNEY 2020. This work is copyright. You may download, display, print and reproduce this material in unaltered form only (retaining this notice) for your personal, non-commercial use or use within your organisation. All other rights are reserved. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to the information manager, NDARC, UNSW Sydney NSW 2052, Australia.