

COVID-19: New EMCDDA study highlights decline in stimulant drug use but some rises in the use of cannabis, alcohol and prescription medicines to combat anxiety and depression

A decline in stimulant drug use but some rises in the consumption of cannabis and licit substances are among the findings presented today in a new EMCDDA report [The impact of COVID-19 on patterns of drug use and drug-related harms in Europe](#). The report describes how national confinement measures and disrupted street drug markets have reduced both the opportunities to use drugs within social environments as well as the availability of some substances. But it also suggests a rise in the use of alcohol and prescription medicines, in some groups, as a means of conquering anxiety and depression during lockdown.

The report is the second in a series of briefings resulting from an EMCDDA 'trendspotter' study, launched in April to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the drug situation and responses to it (¹). The findings released today stem from the second wave of the investigation, which focused on drug use patterns and drug-related harms during the first three months of the pandemic. The analysis draws on a range of sources, including: expert surveys, virtual consultations with professionals and NGOs and a recent 'European Web Survey on Drugs: COVID-19' (EWS-19), which received over 10 000 responses.

Survey responses from people who use drugs and evidence from national experts indicate that stimulants associated with the nightlife setting (mainly cocaine and MDMA) saw the sharpest reduction in use during this period. This is largely due to the closure of the night-time economy and orders to 'stay at home' (rather than to market factors). A few cases have been reported of physical socialising being replaced by 'streaming parties' – where people use drugs at home, listen to music and meet friends online. However, illegal raves are reported to have taken place in a number of countries.

For cannabis, the picture is mixed, with data suggesting that occasional users may have stopped or decreased their use during lockdown, while frequent users may have stocked up and consumed more. Shortages of heroin in some localities may have contributed to a decline in use of this drug and potentially resulted in an increase in demand for opioid substitution treatment as well as in the use of replacement substances. While the majority of respondents in the EWS-19 reported stable or reduced drug use, a quarter reported increased use, often due to boredom and anxiety.

Drinking alcohol alone, and in greater quantities, is reported by some respondents across user groups, as is the increased use of prescription medicines (e.g. benzodiazepines). Among high-risk drug users, motivations for

this include managing depression and withdrawal symptoms.

A survey of 15 hospital emergency lead clinicians indicated a rise in drug-related acute presentations due to mental health issues and violent harms but a reduction in drug-related hospital emergencies. An area where there is almost no evidence to date, is the level of COVID-19 infection and related health problems among people who use drugs.

The report states that: 'While undoubtedly changes in drug use patterns and new harms have emerged, with the easing of the lockdown measures and the return to a new social reality under COVID-19, it remains uncertain as to whether the identified changes will remain. It will take time and further investigation to ascertain the longer-term and lasting implications of the pandemic and resultant measures on drug-using populations.'