



EMCDDA DOCUMENTATION CENTRE INFORMATION BULLETIN

**CORONAVIRUS, 13 November 2020**

## EVENT

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### **Picking up the pieces – public health and COVID-19.**

North-South Joint Public Health Annual Conference  
November 17th from 10am

It will bring together leading international experts to discuss how COVID-19 has affected our lives, with a focus on how the pandemic has impacted inequalities.

It will also highlight latest policy, data and research on how the pandemic has impacted public health on the island of Ireland.

The conference is jointly organised by the Institute of Public Health, the Public Health Agency, Queen's University Belfast, and Ulster University.

Programme includes:

- Keynote addresses by two leading experts, Professor Sharon Friel and Professor Susan Michie
- Parallel workshops on a range of topics including tobacco; alcohol; physical activity; mental health; loneliness; social distancing; and excess mortality

The webinar will be relevant to stakeholders with responsibility for public health and the COVID-19 response in Ireland and Northern Ireland; health professionals; policymakers; national and local government; Healthy Ireland and Making Life Better networks; the community and voluntary sector; and the research and academic community.

<https://iph.us6.list-manage.com/track/click?u=072a329eca&id=b87c1fc937&e=ef47bc9295>

**Preliminary patterns in circumstances surrounding opioid-related deaths in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Ontario Drug Policy Research Network  
Toronto : 2020

Opioid-related deaths across Canada have been an ongoing public health crisis for over a decade. Between January and March 2020 alone, there were 1,018 opioid-related deaths recorded in Canada, the majority of which were accidental. In the midst of this ongoing crisis, a state of emergency was declared on March 17, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within Ontario, the first wave of the pandemic was managed with public health restrictions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which included physical distancing measures that resulted in reduced capacity for pharmacies, outpatient clinics, and harm reduction sites providing care to people who use drugs. Despite the intention to reduce the impact of COVID-19, there is concern that these measures could lead to unintended harms.

This report describes the preliminary patterns in circumstances surrounding opioid-related deaths in Ontario during COVID-19. An understanding of these circumstances is urgently needed to inform interventions and policies to prevent further opioid-related mortality in the midst of this pandemic.  
[https://odprn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Opioid-Death-Report\\_FINAL-2020NOV09.pdf](https://odprn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Opioid-Death-Report_FINAL-2020NOV09.pdf)

**Australian drug trends 2020: findings from the Ecstasy and related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS)**

Peacock, A; Karlsson, A; Uporova, J; et al  
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC)  
Sydney: 2020

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) is an illicit drug monitoring system which has been conducted in all states and territories of Australia since 2003, and forms part of Drug Trends.

In 2020, we have provided a suite of products with the most up-to-date findings from interviews conducted annually from 2003-2020 with a cross-sectional sentinel group of people who regularly use ecstasy and other stimulants recruited from all capital cities of Australia.

This includes:

- A report overviewing the key findings in 2020

- An infographic summarising key findings in 2020

- A methods document highlighting approaches to collating and presenting estimates

Results are not representative of all consumers or drug use in the general population and should be interpreted alongside findings from other data sources for a more complete profile of emerging trends in illicit drug use in Australia.

<https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/ndarc/resources/National%20EDRS%20Annual%20Report%202020.pdf>

### **Harm reduction in the time of COVID-19: Case study of homelessness and drug use in Dublin, Ireland**

O'Carroll, A ; Duffin, T ; Collins, J

International Journal of Drug Policy, 2020, 87, 102966

Dublin appears to have performed very well as compared to various scenarios for COVID-19 mortality amongst homeless and drug using populations. The experience, if borne out by further research, provides important lessons for policy discussions on the pandemic, as well as broader lessons about pragmatic responses to these key client groups irrespective of COVID-19. The overarching lesson seems that when government policy is well coordinated and underpinned by a science-driven and fundamentally pragmatic approach, morbidity and mortality can be reduced. Within this, the importance of strategic clarity and delivery, housing, lowered thresholds to methadone provision, Benzodiazepine (BZD) provision and Naloxone availability were key determinants of policy success. Further, this paper argues that the rapid collapse in policy barriers to these interventions that COVID-19 produced should be secured and protected while further research is conducted.

### **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on harm reduction services in Spain**

Picchio, C A ; Valencia, J ; Doran, J ; et al

Harm Reduction Journal, 2020, 17, 87

#### **Background**

Containment policies and other restrictions introduced by the Spanish government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic present challenges for marginalised populations, such as people who use drugs. Harm reduction centres are often linked to social services, mental health services, and infectious disease testing, in addition to tools and services that help to reduce the harms associated with injecting drugs. This study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on these services in four autonomous communities in Spain.

#### **Methods**

This is a cross-sectional study that employed a seven-section structured survey administered electronically to 20 centres in July 2020. Data from the most heavily affected months (March–June) in 2020 were compared to data from the same period in 2019. Averages were calculated with their ranges, rates, and absolute numbers.

#### **Results**

All 11 responding centres reported having had to adapt or modify their services during the Spanish state of alarm (14 March–21 June 2020). One centre reported complete closure for 2 months and four reported increases in their operating hours. The average number of service users across all centres decreased by 22% in comparison to the same period in the previous year and the average needle distribution decreased by 40% in comparison to 2019. Most centres reported a decrease in infectious disease testing rates (hepatitis B and C viruses, human immunodeficiency virus, and tuberculosis) for March, April, and May in 2020 compared to the previous year. Reported deaths as a result of overdose did not increase during the state of alarm, but 2/11 (18%) centres reported an increase in overdose deaths immediately after finalisation of the state of alarm.

#### **Conclusion**

Overall, Spanish harm reduction centres were able to continue operating and offering services by adjusting operating hours. The number of overall service users and needles distributed fell during the Spanish state of alarm lockdown period, suggesting that fewer clients accessed harm reduction services during this time, putting them at greater risk of reusing or sharing injecting equipment, overdosing, acquiring infectious diseases with decreased access to testing or discontinuing ongoing treatment such as methadone maintenance therapy, hepatitis C treatment, or antiretroviral therapy.

### **Increasing participation in a substance misuse programs: lessons learned for implementing telehealth solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Rosen, D

American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry

14 October 2020

doi: 10.1016/j.jagp.2020.10.004

### **Treatment for anxiety and substance use disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic: challenges and strategies**

Satre DD, Iturralde E, Ghadiali M, Young-Wolff KC, Campbell CI, Leibowitz AS, Sterling SA.

Journal of Addiction Medicine

14, 6, e293-e296, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing anxiety and substance use disorders (SUDs) and increase vulnerability among individuals previously free of these conditions. Numerous pandemic-related stressors—coronavirus infection fears, social distancing and isolation, activity restrictions, financial insecurity and unemployment, caregiving or childcare responsibilities—place a substantial burden both on the general population and on many health care providers. Anxiety symptoms such as worry, tension, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and sleep disruption are increasingly prevalent. For individuals in SUD treatment, anxiety can complicate efforts to achieve treatment goals. In this commentary, we outline the potential impact of anxiety on substance use problems during the COVID-19 crisis and describe key behavioral, pharmacological, and digital health treatment considerations. We highlight populations of special concern due to heightened vulnerability and challenges accessing services, strategies to support health care providers, and directions for future research.

### **The impacts of COVID-19 on mental health, substance use, and overdose concerns of people who use drugs in rural communities**

Stack E, Leichtling G, Larsen JE, Gray M, Pope J, Leahy JM, Gelberg L, Seaman A, Korthuis PT.

Journal of Addiction Medicine

3 November 2020

doi: 10.1097/ADM.0000000000000770

#### **Objectives:**

The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health, substance use, and overdose concerns among people who use drugs (PWUDs) in rural communities to explore reasons for changes and ways to mitigate COVID-19 impact in the future.

#### **Methods:**

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with PWUDs in 5 rural Oregon counties with high overdose rates. Participants were identified through participant-driven sampling along with flyer and text advertising (n = 36). Research staff conducted audio-recorded in-depth interviews via telephone, assessing COVID-19 effects on substance use, mental health, and overdose risk. Transcribed interviews were coded for themes using a semantic approach.

#### **Results:**

Participants reported various mental health symptoms and experiences due to COVID-19, including increased feelings of boredom, loneliness, and depression; increased worry and stress; and increased suicidal ideation. Participants described varying impacts of COVID-19 on substance use. Overall, participants who used only methamphetamine reported decreased use and people who used only heroin or heroin with methamphetamine reported increased use. Most participants reported that they were not concerned about overdose and that COVID-19 did not impact their concerns about overdose, despite increases in risky use and suicidal ideations.

#### **Conclusions:**

As rural communities respond to the evolving impacts of COVID-19, there is increasing need to identify strategies to address PWUD's mental, physical, and social health needs during COVID-19.

### **Expanding accessibility: Outpatient intensive treatment for substance use disorder during covid-19 pandemic**

Faur, R, Irazoqui, G, Pavlovsky, F, Wikinski, S

Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 2020, 108359

### **The next wave? Mental health comorbidities and patients with substance use disorders in under-resourced and rural areas**

Warfield, S C, Pack, R P, Degenhardt, L, et al

Journal of Subst Abuse Treatment

4 November 2020

doi: 10.1016/j.jsat.2020.108189

The rapid spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has impacted the lives of millions around the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused increasing concern among treatment professionals about mental health and risky substance use, especially among those who are struggling with a substance use disorder (SUD). The pandemic's impact on those with an SUD may be heightened in vulnerable communities, such as those living in under-resourced and rural areas. Despite policies loosening restrictions on treatment requirements, unintended mental health consequences may arise among this population. We discuss challenges that under-resourced areas face and propose strategies that may improve outcomes for those seeking treatment for SUDs in these areas.

### **The impact of substance use disorder on COVID-19 outcomes**

Baillargeon J., Polychronopoulou E., Kuo Y.-F., Raji M.A.  
Psychiatric Services  
10 November 2020  
DOI: 10.1176/appi.ps.202000534

**Objective:**

The goal of this study was to examine the impact of substance use disorder on the risk of hospitalization, complications, and mortality among adult patients diagnosed as having COVID-19.

**Methods:**

The authors conducted a propensity score (PS)-matched double-cohort study (N=5,562 in each cohort) with data from the TriNetX Research Network database to identify 54,529 adult patients (≥18 years) diagnosed as having COVID-19 between February 20 and June 30, 2020.

**Results:**

Primary analysis (PS matched on demographic characteristics and presence of diabetes and obesity) showed that substance use disorder was associated with an increased risk of hospitalization (odds ratio [OR]=1.84, 95% confidence interval [CI]=1.69-2.01), ventilator use (OR=1.45, 95% CI=1.22-1.72), and mortality (OR=1.30, 95% CI=1.08-1.56).

**Conclusions:**

The findings suggest that COVID-19 patients with substance use disorders are at increased risk for adverse outcomes. The attenuation of ORs in the model that matched for chronic respiratory and cardiovascular diseases associated with substance abuse suggests that the observed risks may be partially mediated by these conditions.

**“I have to be around people that are doing what I'm doing”: The importance of expanding the peer recovery coach role in treatment of opioid use disorder in the face of COVID-19 health disparities**

Kleinman M.B., Felton J.W., Johnson A., Magidson J.F.  
Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 2020, 108182

The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing opioid epidemic are causing notable morbidity and mortality among low-income and minority populations. Peer recovery coaches (PRCs), people with lived experience of substance use and recovery, are uniquely positioned to support underserved, minority individuals who face the greatest barriers to care. This commentary combines research and clinical perspectives to describe the potential role of PRCs in reaching and supporting particularly vulnerable populations in the setting of substantial changes in the opioid use disorder (OUD) recovery landscape during COVID-19. During this time, PRCs can provide guidance from their own experience navigating changes to routines and social support systems, reduce social isolation, build trust and buy-in, and support engagement in care. Specific barriers include access to technology and underlying distrust of public and medical authorities. This article highlights the importance of expanding the reach of the PRC workforce as well as supporting their specific needs at this time to combat the intersecting devastation of two epidemics.

**"It's an emotional roller coaster... But sometimes it's fucking awesome": Meaning and motivation of work for peers in overdose response environments in British Columbia**

Pauly BB, Mamdani Z, Mesley L, et al  
International Journal of Drug Policy, 2020, 88, 103015

**Background:**

The province of British Columbia (BC), Canada is amid dual public health emergencies in which the overdose epidemic declared in 2016 has been exacerbated by restrictions imposed by the Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Experiential workers, commonly known as 'peers' (workers with past or present drug use experience) are at the forefront of overdose response initiatives and are essential in creating safe spaces for people who use drugs (PWUD) in harm reduction. Working in overdose response environments can be stressful, with lasting emotional and mental health effects. There is limited knowledge about the personal meaning that experiential workers derive from their work, which serve as motivators for them to take on these often-stressful roles.

**Methods:**

This project used a community-based qualitative research design. The research was based at two organizations in BC. Eight experiential worker-led focus groups were conducted (n = 31) where participants spoke about their roles, positive aspects of their jobs, challenges they face, and support needs in harm reduction work. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using interpretative description to uncover the meaning derived from experiential work.

**Results:**

Three themes emerged from focus group data that describe the meanings which serve as motivators for experiential workers to continue working in overdose response environments: (1) A sense of purpose from helping others; (2) Being an inspiration for others, and; (3) A sense of belonging.

**Conclusion:**

Despite the frequent hardships and loss that accompany overdose response work, experiential workers identified important aspects that give their work meaning. These aspects of their work may help to protect workers from the emotional harms associated with stressful work as well as the stigma of substance use. Recognizing the importance of experiential work and its role in the lives of PWUD can help inform and strengthen organizational supports.

**Ambulance calls for substance-related issues before and after COVID-19**

Weiner S.G., Cash R.E., Hendricks M., et al

Prehospital Emergency Care

12 November 2020

DOI: 10.1080/10903127.2020.1845420

**Background:**

The United States is currently facing two epidemics: sustained morbidity and mortality from substance use and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic. We tested the hypothesis that the pandemic has disproportionately affected individuals with substance use disorder by evaluating average daily 911 ambulance calls for substance use-related issues compared with all other calls.

**Methods:**

This was a retrospective cross-sectional analysis of 911 ambulance calls before and after the start of COVID-19 in Massachusetts. We used consecutive samples of 911 ambulance calls, categorized into those which were substance-related or not. An interrupted time series analysis was performed to determine if there were changes in numbers of daily calls before a statewide declaration of emergency for COVID-19 (February 15-March 9, 2020), from the emergency declaration until a stay-at-home advisory (March 10-March 22, 2020) and following the stay-at-home advisory (March 23-May 15, 2020).

**Results:**

Compared with prior to the statewide emergency, the post-statewide emergency average of daily ambulance calls decreased from 2,453.2 to 1,969.6, a 19.7% decrease. Similarly, calls for substance-related reasons decreased by 16.4% compared with prior to the statewide emergency. However, despite an initial decrease in calls, after the stay-at-home advisory calls for substance use began increasing by 0.7 (95% confidence interval (CI) 0.4-1.1) calls/day, while calls for other reasons did not significantly change (+1.2 (95% CI -0.8 to 3.1) calls/day). Refusal of transport for substance-related calls increased from 5.0% before the statewide emergency to 7.5% after the declaration ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusions:**

After an initial decline in substance-related ambulance calls following a statewide declaration of emergency, calls for substance use increased to pre-COVID-19 levels while those for other reasons remained at a lower rate. The results suggest that COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting individuals with substance use disorder.

**Consequences of COVID-19 lockdown on the misuse and marketing of addictive substances and new psychoactive substances**

Di Trana A., Carlier J., Berretta P., et al

Frontiers in Psychiatry, 2020, 11, 584462

**Covid has moved drug use to 'a more dangerous platform'**

Cornmarket Project seeing increase in fake tablets, aggressive behaviour among addicts, clients representing as homeless, and food poverty

<https://www.independent.ie/regionals/newrossstandard/news/covid-has-moved-drug-use-to-a-more-dangerous-platform-39698666.html>

**Survey reveals major shift in Australian drug use during coronavirus pandemic**

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-08/coronavirus-creates-major-shift-in-drug-use-in-australia/12852544>

**Australia's drug habits were transformed during the pandemic, but it remains 'business as usual' for dealers**

<https://www.businessinsider.com.au/australia-drug-use-coronavirus-pandemic-supply-prices-2020-11>

**COVID-19 messaging tied to overdose spike, front-line workers say**

The number of drug overdoses in the Ottawa region appears to be on the rise, and some front-line workers say the messaging around the COVID-19 pandemic may be playing a part | CBC News, Canada

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ottawa-overdose-deaths-weekend-1.5794716>

**Opioid-related deaths in Ontario up among younger men during pandemic, reports**

Deaths jumped by nearly 40% in first months after COVID-19 hit province | CBC News, Canada

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/opioid-related-deaths-ontario-pandemic-1.5795969>

**I got addicted to dark web opiates during lockdown**

A month into the UK's coronavirus lockdown, we asked drug users how quarantine had affected their drug use. The responses mostly chimed with what various studies into lockdown drug use have shown since: people were taking fewer party drugs, but more weed, booze and psychedelics | VICE, UK

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkdb87/opiate-dependency-lockdown-university-uk>

**Dark web has become a marketplace for 'vaccines' and other pandemic scams**

<https://medium.com/bloomberg/dark-web-has-become-a-marketplace-for-vaccines-and-other-pandemic-scams-6b34839d8fa0>

**People with addiction more likely to get COVID-19, die**

<https://eu.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2020/11/10/opioid-addiction-covid-19-risks/3750466001/>

**Medics in the North West warn the pandemic may be causing increasing addiction to painkillers - video**

Alarming, new research has shown that more than a quarter of Britons have either started taking or increased their substance use of prescription drugs like opioids, alcohol and illegal drugs | ITV, UK

<https://www.itv.com/news/granada/2020-11-09/medics-in-the-north-west-warn-the-pandemic-may-be-causing-increasing-addiction-to-painkillers>

**Lockdown 2.0: what does this mean for drug use?**

Covid-19 and mental health problems are two pandemics that have simultaneously collided. The inextricable link between addiction and mental illness has been exacerbated by this pandemic | Volteface, UK

<https://volteface.me/lockdown-2-0-mean-drug-use/>

**Help for addiction treatment crucial in coronavirus crisis**

<https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2020/11/11/news/help-for-addiction-treatment-crucial-in-coronavirus-crisis-2125877/>