



EMCDDA DOCUMENTATION CENTRE INFORMATION BULLETIN

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EVENT

SUAB webinar: The impact of the pandemic on substance use research

With contributions from SUAB's Prof. Sarah Galvani and Dr. Sam Wright, SUAB PhD researcher Marie Jameson, Prof. Mayyada Wazaify from the University of Jordan, Prof. Guilherme Messas from Santa Casa de São Paulo Brazil, and Thomas Svendsen from Stavanger University hospital Norway. Research

https://mmutube.mmu.ac.uk/media/SUAB+webinarA+The+impact+of+the+pandemic+on+substance+use+research/1_5akdoiq

Innovation and resilience in times of crisis (Part 2): The response to COVID-19 from harm reduction services

Putri, D; Shirley-Beavan, S; Bridge, J
International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC)
London: 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related restrictions have brought many changes to the lives of people around the globe. It has also magnified existing inequalities, stigma and repression faced by certain marginalised communities such as people who use drugs.

However, the response to COVID-19 has also catalysed – and accelerated – some positive developments which are central to the wellbeing of people who use drugs, particularly in the field of harm reduction.

This report aims to provide a non-comprehensive review of some of the challenges, and the responses that have been applied to best protect the health and rights of people who use drugs.

http://files.idpc.net/library/Innovation_Resilience_Harm%20Reduction.pdf

Provisional drug overdose death counts

Ahmad, F B, Rossen, L M, Sutton, P
National Center for Health Statistics
Washington, DC: 2021

Recent improvements in timeliness and data quality have prompted a re-evaluation of the length of time that data quality requirements have had to be met for states to be included in “Figure 2. 12 Month-ending Provisional Number of Drug Overdose Deaths by Drug or Drug Class.” As a result of this re-evaluation, trends for additional states are presented in Figure 2. Additional states will be added as they meet data quality and timeliness requirements.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>

Seizures of New Psychoactive Substances on the Italian territory during the COVID-19 pandemic

Vincenti, F ; Gregori, A ; Flammini, M ; et al
Forensic Science International, 2021, 110904

In recent years, the availability and the consequent consumption of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) have proliferated at an unprecedented rate, posing a significant risk to the public health and challenging the law enforcement efforts to tackle the black market. In particular, large availability on Internet and unmonitored shipping have facilitated the diffusion of NPS on national territories. In this scenario, the forensic activity based on the process of drug detection, including investigation, seizure, recognition and analytical identification is crucial to get insights into the drug black market transformation. In this study, we describe the results obtained from the analysis of hundreds of packages seized during the months of year 2020, and suspected to contain NPS because not reacting with standard field test kits. We focused on the analysis by GC-MS and HPLC-HRMS, and NPS in particular, trying to underline the most common molecules present on the Italian territory during the COVID-19 pandemic. NPS were identified in 92.6% of the samples. The most prevalent compounds were synthetic cathinones, and 3-MMC in particular, which alone accounted for 18.6% of the total cases. Other prevalent molecules were 5F-MDMB-PICA, 2-FDCK, 1cp-LSD and 1P-LSD. Fentanyl was never detected. The information obtained from drug seizures is crucial to publish national alerts, which are in turn important to assist the legislative effort to ban new compounds and the update of toxicological and analytical methods.

Are COVID-19 health-related and socioeconomic stressors associated with increases in cannabis use in individuals who use cannabis for recreational purposes?

Sznitman, S; Rosenberg, D; Lewis, N

Substance Abuse

7 July 2021

DOI: 10.1080/08897077.2021.1941513

Background:

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures implemented to mitigate transmission may increase stress, which, in turn, can be associated with changes in cannabis use. This study examined the associations between health-related and socioeconomic stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and reported increases in cannabis use. Indirect effects of health-related and socioeconomic stressors on increased cannabis use through cannabis coping motives were also tested.

Methods:

Cross-sectional survey data, based on responses from a convenience sample of 755 Israeli adults who reported frequent consumption of cannabis for recreational purposes, was analyzed using structural equation models.

Results:

About 35% of the respondents reported that they agreed to a large/very large extent that their cannabis use had increased since the COVID-19 pandemic had started. Both health and socioeconomic stressors were related to increased cannabis use during the pandemic, and coping motives mediated this relationship. The direct and indirect associations of socioeconomic stressors and increased cannabis use were stronger than the associations of health-related stressors.

Conclusions:

Cannabis consumption may serve as a means of coping with health and socioeconomic COVID-19 stressors. Particular attention should be placed on socioeconomic stressors as these may be particularly important in understanding coping related cannabis use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fear of COVID-19, demographic factors, and substance use in a multinational sample amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Ogueji, I J; Asagba, R B; Constantine-Simms, D

European Review of Applied Sociology

14, 22, p.44-54, 2021

The global pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had mental health consequences such as fear. Scholars have argued that when people are fearful, they may use substances to escape from fear, and demographic variables can have implications on how to target interventions to people. To date, little is known about how the fear of COVID-19 and demographic factors may contribute to substance use amid the COVID-19 pandemic. From 3 June to 10 June

2020, a cross-sectional study was conducted with 202 residents (Mean age = 41.77 ± 11.85; age range = 18-70 years) in 14 countries. A standardized questionnaire was utilized for data collection, SPSS (version 22.0) was utilized for data analysis, and $p < .05$ implied statistical significance. Descriptive statistics revealed that residents in Canada scored the highest mean score in the fear of COVID-19 scale, while residents in Australia scored highest in the substance use scale. Further, fear of COVID-19 had a negative nonsignificant relationship with substance use ($r = -.07$; $df = 200$; $p > .05$). Males (Mean = 18.21) scored significantly higher than females (Mean = 14.06) in substance use [$t(200) = 1.9$; $p < .05$]. The younger age group (18-28 years) scored the highest mean score in substance use compared to older age groups (29-39 years, 40-50 years, 51-61 years, and 62-72 years); however, it was not significant [$F(4, 197) = 2.04$; $p > .05$]. These data contribute to informing future studies that add more questions regarding how different variables may contribute to substance use during subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing structural discrimination: prioritising people with mental health and addiction issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lockett H, Koning A, Lacey C, et al
New Zealand Medical Journal
134, 1537, p.128-134, 2021

Structural discrimination worsens physical health inequities and significantly reduces life expectancy for people with mental health and addiction issues. Aotearoa has recently made some notable changes in health policy by formally recognising the physical health needs of people with mental health and addiction issues. The COVID-19 vaccination sequencing framework provides an important opportunity to protect and promote the health of people with addiction and mental health issues. An expert advisory group, convened as part of the Aotearoa Equally Well collaborative, considered findings of a literature review on the vulnerability of people with mental health and addiction issues of contracting and dying from COVID-19. Evidence indicates an association between mental health and addiction issues and infection risk and worse outcomes. The group concluded mental health and addiction issues should be recognised as underlying health conditions that increase COVID-19 vulnerability, and that people with these issues should be prioritised for vaccination. For too long the health system has failed to address the life expectancy gap of people with addiction and mental health issues. Now is an opportunity to change the *kōrero*. People with mental health and addiction issues experience significant physical health inequities. Addressing these inequities must be integral in modern health policy-including our COVID-19 pandemic response.

Opioid epidemics during the pandemic: Further insights to the same story

Ayad, A E
Journal of Opioid Management
17, 1, p.9-12, 2021

The limited access to opioids remains a reality in developing countries. Recent evidence suggests that opioid epidemics are getting worse with the COVID-19 crisis. The increase in opioid abuse could be attributed to the extended lockdowns and the social distancing recommendations, hindering chronic pain patients' access to regular office visits and monitoring in addition to limited access to behavioral services like group therapies and other pain management interventions. Use of telemedicine as an alternative to in-person follow-up visits has faced many limitations due to technological challenges and cost. Chronic pain patients living in developing countries face extra burden during the pandemic. Limited access to outpatient clinics and hesitance to visit hospitals due to COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to reduction in supply of opioids, are some of the limiting factors. Unfortunately, the low-income class with limited financial capabilities faces further barriers to access the chronic pain services and treatments like opioid prescriptions. Medical entities involved in care of chronic pain patients have adopted different strategies to overcome these challenges. In addition to expanding on educational programs to medical staff and patients, modifying the strict opioid prescribing and dispensing regulations has been successful. Another positive trend has been the growing use of opioid sparing interventions, such as multimodal analgesia, regional blocks, and interventional pain procedures.

Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on substance use disorder treatment: findings from a survey of specialty providers in California

Henretty, K; Padwa, H; Treiman, K; et al
Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment
6 July 2021
DOI: 10.1177/11782218211028655

Background:

As the coronavirus pandemic public health emergency begins to ebb in the United States, policymakers and providers need to evaluate how the addiction treatment system functioned during the public health emergency and draw lessons for future emergencies. One important question is whether the pandemic curtailed the use of addiction treatment and the extent to which telehealth was able to mitigate access barriers.

Methods:

To begin to answer this question, we conducted a survey of specialty addiction treatment providers in California from June 2020 through July 2020. The survey focused specifically on provider organizations that served Medicaid beneficiaries.

Results:

Of the 133 respondents, 50% reported a decrease in patients since the stay-at-home order in March 2020, with the largest decline among new patients, and 58% said more patients were relapsing. Eighty-one percent of providers said that telemedicine use had increased since the stay-at-home order. Most said that telemedicine had moderately (48%) or completely (30%) addressed access barriers.

Conclusion:

More efforts are needed to ensure that patients, and in particular new patients, receive addiction treatment during public health emergencies.

A rise in cases of nitrous oxide abuse: neurological complications and biological findings

Einsiedler, M, Vouilleminot, P, Demuth, S, et al

Journal of Neurology, 10 July 2021 - doi: 10.1007/s00415-021-10702-7

Background:

The recent lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to a higher incidence of psychiatric manifestations and substance abuse. The recreational use of nitrous oxide is more and more widespread and neurological complications are frequent.

Methods:

We report clinical characteristics and biological findings of five consecutive patients presenting to our tertiary care center between April 2020 and February 2021 with various neurological symptoms occurring after recent nitrous oxide abuse.

Results:

Our patients presented with subacute combined degeneration of the spinal cord (4/5 patients) or with acute inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (1/5 patients). No patient had reduced vitamin B-12 titer, but all had elevated blood levels of homocysteine and methylmalonic acid. This reflects the functional deficit in vitamin B-12 that can be linked to nitrous oxide consumption. After vitamin B-12 supplementation, clinical signs regressed at least partially in all 5 patients.

Conclusion:

We report an elevated incidence of neurological complications of nitrous oxide abuse occurring during the recent COVID-19 lockdown. Nitrous oxide abuse should be tracked down in patients presenting with compatible neurological symptoms and elevated homocysteinemia. Vitamin B-12 should be supplemented as soon as the diagnosis is made.

Psychological and demographic determinants of substance use and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mougharbel F, Sampasa-Kanyinga H, Heidinger B, et al

Frontiers in Public Health, 2021, 9, 680028

Background:

Alcohol consumption and distress have increased among Canadians since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods:

We examined whether sociodemographic and COVID-19-related worries are associated with various combinations of alcohol consumption and comorbid psychological distress variables among a Canadian sample of adults. Data were derived from a sample of Canadian adults (N = 1,005, 49.6% female) who participated in an online survey in May 2020. Four multivariate ordinal logistic regression models were used to estimate the odds of binge drinking, increased alcohol consumption during the pandemic, and psychological distress. Predictor variables used in the analyses included self-reported sociodemographic characteristics, financial worries, COVID-19 impact on work, and worrying about getting ill.

Results:

Women were found to have higher odds of increased drinking and anxiety. Also being divorced, separated, or widowed was associated with higher odds of binge drinking and anxiety, and binge

drinking and depression. Furthermore, being 60 or older was associated with lower odds of binge drinking and depression and increased drinking and depression, as well as lower odds of increased drinking and depression and increased drinking and anxiety. High income groups were associated with higher odds of binge drinking, increased drinking, and mental distress. Compared to those less worried, being very worried about finances were associated with higher odds of binge drinking and anxiety, increased drinking and anxiety, and increased drinking and depression. Also, being very worried about getting ill with COVID was associated with higher odds of binge drinking and anxiety and increased drinking and anxiety.

Conclusion:

Our findings identify several demographic and COVID-related worries for increased odds of alcohol intake and co-morbid psychological distress during the COVID-19 pandemic, including identifying as a woman, high income groups, being divorced, separated or widowed, and experiencing financial worries and COVID illness worries. These characteristics should be considered when developing prevention and treatment programs for adults with problematic alcohol use and comorbid anxiety and depression.

New Psychoactive Substances consumption and their monitoring during Covid-19 pandemic

Di Trana, A, La Maida, N
La Clinica Terapeutica
172, 4, p.271-272, 2021

Currently, the world is facing an unprecedented change of everyday life, due to the Covid-19 pandemic that has been affecting all the nations for more than one year. The public health systems were restructured in all the countries as a response to the constant emergency status, neglecting some services like toxicological analyses. In this scenario, the current spread of the New Psychoactive Substances is less controlled than before and the data on its expected mutation come from seizures analyses. Where the global distribution of drugs of abuse was affected by the restriction, fentanyl seizures did not drop during the pandemic. Moreover, new synthesis of fentanyl analogues resulted in new toxic adulterants as by products. Furthermore, diversion of benzodiazepines and new designer benzodiazepines were reported during the pandemic period. In this scenario, the scientific community and the international agencies should tighten their collaboration in order to monitor the emerging of new unknown substances.

The impact of COVID-19 on drug use and harm reduction programming in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: a regional consultation of stakeholders and people who use drugs

Van Hout, M C, Haddad, P, Aaraj, E
International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction
13 July 2021 - DOI: 10.1007/s11469-021-00500-7

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has witnessed a slow but steady increase in the harm reduction response since 2016. It is likely that such gains are threatened by the impact of COVID-19. Very little is known about the health response and situation of people who use drugs (PWUD) during the pandemic in the region. A mixed method study was conducted by the MENA Harm Reduction Association (MENA HRA) to assess the situation of PWUD and impacts on harm reduction services during COVID-19. Twelve countries and two regional viewpoints responded to the survey. A virtual focus group was held with the MENA Network of People who Use Drugs (MENANPUD) focal points (n = 11). The study highlights how COVID-19 aggravated existing marginalization and stigmatization of PWUD and other key populations in the MENA region, with government level resourcing severely impacted by COVID-19. It further illustrates the commitment by harm reduction non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in diversifying their response, particularly through mobile outreach to drug hot spots, and the reliance of technology to support awareness raising, telemedicine, and medicine supplies. Positive shifts are observed in harm reduction policy by governments in some MENA countries and the continued commitment to support PWUD communities by existing harm reduction NGOs. Continued advocacy for and implementation of harm reduction responses at the domestic and regional levels should be underpinned by inclusion in state health emergency planning and disease control efforts, awareness raising around innovation and telemedicine to support health and NGO support systems and medicine supply chains, resourcing of NGOs, and provision of economic support for PWUD, disease surveillance, and research.

(Don't) call me "Dr.": The role of credibility in communicating substance use research to federal and state policymakers

Long, E C; Pugel, J; Giray, C et al
Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research
45, SUPPL 1, 190A, 2021

Purpose:

The stress, anxiety, depression, and isolation caused by COVID-19 have resulted in marked increases in the use of alcohol and other substances. For example, between February and April 2020, the number of drinks consumed per day increased by 29%. Further, individuals with substance use disorders (SUDs) who are in recovery face unique challenges during COVID-19, such as cancellations of in-person support group meetings. Communicating these issues and evidence-based solutions to policymakers who can act on it is therefore critical. However, research on optimizing science communication efforts to policymakers is limited. In the present study, we aim to test strategies for improving the reach of research on substance use (SU) and SUDs to policymakers.

Methods:

Rapid-cycle randomized controlled trials disseminating fact sheets via email to state and federal policymakers were conducted. All fact sheets contained research on SU or supporting individuals with SUDs. Participants were randomized into equal groups to receive different email subject lines and sender names. Indicators of credibility were manipulated (i.e., use of "Dr." or "PhD" in the sender line compared to no title; use of jargon vs. none). Negative binomial regressions were conducted to test whether the experimental manipulations resulted in more email opens on a researchers' messages and clicks on their fact sheet clicks compared to a control email.

Results:

Results showed that the use of "PhD" in the sender line resulted in more email opens and clicks on the fact sheet than "Dr." However, there was an interaction effect such that the use of "Dr." in the sender line resulted in more opens when paired with the use of jargon.

Conclusions:

These results broadly suggest that the effects of credibility are more nuanced than one might expect. When communicating SU/SUD research to policymakers via email, the use of "PhD" in the sender line seems to be more effective at increasing opens and clicks than "Dr.", unless jargon is used, which points to possible effects of policymaker norms and expectations. Ultimately, this work helps to inform strategies for increasing the reach of SU/SUD research messages, which is critical for improving the use of scientific research in policy processes intended to prevent or address SU/SUDs.

Alcohol use during the COVID-19 pandemic: Role of recent perceived distress and coping drinking motives in individuals who use drugs

Tretyak, V; Claborn, K; Conway, F N; et al
Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research
45, SUPPL 1, 181A, 2021

Purpose:

Coping drinking motives are a well-established risk factor for alcohol misuse and addiction. Recent studies have shown relations between COVID-19-related psychological distress and alcohol use as a maladaptive coping mechanism; however, these studies were conducted predominantly in the general population using self-report online surveys. Studies have yet to investigate coping drinking motives and alcohol use patterns in relation to recent perceived distress during the pandemic using researcher-administered assessments of alcohol use, specifically in polysubstance users' a vulnerable population that is at greater risk of experiencing adverse consequences of alcohol and drug misuse.

Methods:

This ongoing study is investigating substance use and overdose patterns in the state of Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic in adults who use alcohol and other substances. Relations among recent perceived distress during the COVID-19 pandemic, coping drinking motives and recent alcohol use were modeled; controlling for biological sex, age, total family income, and education level. DATA: To date, 83 participants (59% female, mean age \pm SD = 31 \pm 11 years) completed a researcher-administered 28-day Alcohol Timeline Followback assessment, and self-report measures including the Coronavirus Health Impact Survey and Drinking Motives Questionnaire.

Results:

Greater recent perceived distress during the pandemic was indirectly associated with greater total drinks consumed during the heaviest drinking week in the past 28 days via greater coping drinking motives (average causal mediation effect, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, greater recent perceived distress was indirectly associated with greater total number of drinking days during the heaviest drinking week in the past 28 days via greater coping drinking motives (average causal mediation effect, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusions:

Preliminary results from this ongoing study highlight the unique role of coping drinking motives in increasing the risk for alcohol misuse in a substance-using population during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These findings underscore the importance of targeting drinking motives in prevention and intervention efforts aimed at reducing the risk of alcohol misuse in individuals who report polysubstance use.

COVID-19 pandemic impact on substance misuse: a social media listening, mixed method analysis.

Arillotta, D.; Guirguis, A.; Corkery, J.M.; et al
Brain Sciences, 2021, 11, 907

The restrictive measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic modified some previously consolidated drug use patterns. A focus on social networks allowed drug users to discuss, share opinions and provide advice during a worldwide emergency context. In order to explore COVID-19-related implications on drug trends/behaviour and on most popular psychotropic substances debated, the focus here was on the constantly updated, very popular, Reddit social platform's posts and comments. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of r/Drugs and related subreddits, using a social media listening netnographic approach, was carried out. The post/comments analysed covered the time-frame December 2019–May 2020. Between December 2019 and May 2020, the number of whole r/Drugs subreddit members increased from 619,563 to 676,581 members, respectively, thus increasing by 9.2% by the end of the data collection. Both the top-level r/Drugs subreddit and 92 related subreddits were quantitatively analysed, with posts/comments related to 12 drug categories. The drugs most frequently commented on included cannabinoids, psychedelics, opiates/opioids, alcohol, stimulants and prescribed medications. The qualitative analysis was carried out focussing on four subreddits, relating to some 1685 posts and 3263 comments. Four main themes of discussion (e.g., lockdown-associated immunity and drug intake issues; drug-related behaviour/after-quarantine plans' issues; lockdown-related psychopathological issues; and peer-to-peer advice at the time of COVID-19) and four categories of Redditors (e.g., those continuing the use of drugs despite the pandemic; the "couch epidemiologists"; the conspirationists/pseudo-science influencers; and the recovery-focused users) were tentatively identified here. A mixed-methods, social network-based analysis provided a range of valuable information on Redditors' drug use/behaviour during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further studies should be carried out focusing on other social networks as well as later phases of the pandemic.

Changes in admissions to specialty addiction treatment facilities in California during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mark TL, Gibbons B, Barnosky A, et al
JAMA Network Open, 2021, 4, 7, e2117029

For a real chance at recovery, we must destigmatize addiction

<https://sanantonioreport.org/for-a-real-chance-at-recovery-we-must-destigmatize-addiction/>

Coronavirus pandemic worsened the opioid crisis; a new law is designed to help

<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20210710/coronavirus-pandemic-worsened-opioid-crisis-new-law-is-designed-to-help>

US drug overdose deaths hit record number amid Covid pandemic

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57840635>

Drug deaths spiked by 30 percent last year, surpassing 90,000

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/07/14/upshot/drug-overdose-deaths.html>

How the pandemic worsened fentanyl overdoses

<https://ktul.com/news/local/how-the-pandemic-worsened-fentanyl-overdoses>

'Staggering loss': U.S. reported record drug overdose deaths amid COVID-19 pandemic

<https://globalnews.ca/news/8029165/us-drug-overdose-deaths-covid-pandemic/>

Drugs and the COVID-19 pandemic

<https://www.kxxv.com/brazos/drugs-and-the-covid-19-pandemic>

New data show impact of COVID-19 pandemic on substance abuse from local and national perspective

<https://www.nkytribune.com/2021/07/new-data-show-impact-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-substance-abuse-from-local-and-national-perspective/>

COVID-19 pandemic led to a nearly 30% decline in Californians admitted to addiction treatment facilities even as drug overdose deaths spike in US, study finds

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-9787871/COVID-19-pandemic-led-nearly-30-decline-Californians-admitted-addiction-facilities.html>

US drug overdoses soar to record number in 2020, fueled by pandemic

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jul/15/us-drug-overdoses-hit-record-number-2020>

Drug overdose deaths hit 'chilling' numbers in 2020 amid COVID-19 pandemic, according to CDC data

<https://www.health.com/condition/drug-addiction/drug-overdose-deaths-2020>

How can we improve COVID vaccine access for people who use drugs?

https://filtermag.org/covid-vaccines-people-drugs/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=filter

Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic: supply side approach to reducing use of substances among adolescents likely ineffective

<https://www.psychiatryadvisor.com/home/topics/addiction/substance-use-did-not-change-during-the-pandemic-among-adolescents/>