

FEDERAL RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON DRUGS

SUMMARY

POPHARS

Drugs at the festivals: Perceptions of prevention, harm reduction, care, and law enforcement strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Around the globe, music festivals are attracting a wide range of people – especially adolescents and young adults – considering such events as places for leisure, entertainment, and socializing (Dilkes-Frayne, 2016; McCarthy, 2013; Martinus et al., 2010). Since these highly anticipated events are generally regarded as an interruption from daily activities, they have been proven archetypal settings for the use of alcohol and other drugs (Bullock et al., 2018; Dilkes-Frayne, 2016; Borlagdan et al., 2010; Luckman, 2003). Research indeed demonstrated festival audiences to use illicit drugs, tobacco, and alcohol more commonly than their age-matched cohort in the general community (Dilkes-Frayne, 2016; Hesse et al., 2012; Lim et al., 2010; Martinus et al., 2010; Lim, et al., 2008; Duff, 2005; Measham et al., 1998). So far, drug policy strategies at festivals, designed to reduce drug use and related harms, have not always demonstrated to be effective or yet remain uninvestigated in terms of effectiveness. Not uncommonly, drug related fatalities sparked a powerful debate concerning the effectiveness of current drug policies (Groves, 2018).

In Belgium, numerous prevention, harm reduction, health care and/or law enforcement strategies are currently implemented in nightlife settings, including the music festival scene. This study focused on these different interventions and their perceived impact on the behaviour of people who use drugs (PWUD) at music festivals. For the purpose of this study, 15 different drug-related actions were included:

- Festival stewards
- Information concerning the alcohol and drug policy in force at the festival
- Information banners/screens concerning alcohol and other drugs
- Information stands working from a harm reduction principle (e.g., Safe 'n Sound)
- Outreach harm reduction teams (e.g., Modus Fiesta)
- Free water services
- Drug testing services
- Relax zones/areas for non-medical care (e.g., bad trip management)
- First aid services or mobile first aid teams (e.g., Red Cross, Het Vlaamse Kruis, etc.)
- Amnesty bins/mercy bins/drop boxes
- Paying a fine to the police (i.e., *Onmiddellijke Minnelijke Schikking* (OMS), *règlement à l'amiable immédiat*)
- Plainclothes police at the festival area
- Police in uniform at the festival area
- Police interventions with sniffer dogs/detection dogs
- Control at the entrance or festival area by security staff

All of them (mainly) focus on substance use and are, at least to a certain extent, implemented in the music festival scene.

The aim of this study was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how festival attendees – in particular PWUD – and festival stakeholders perceive drug-related interventions implemented at Belgian music festivals, and to provide knowledge on the perspectives of PWUD, facilitating well-considered interventions. Additionally, an extra emphasis was put on perceptions of substance use and substance use norms at music festivals in Belgium, in order to contextualize these drug-related interventions. For this purpose, the study was divided into two parts (while also interconnecting these

parts along the line to look at matches and mismatches between both). This resulted into the following research questions:

Gaining insights into the perceptions of prevention, harm reduction, health care and law enforcement strategies and perceptions of substance use (norms) by festival attendees.

- RQ1: How do festival attendees perceive substance use (norms) present at music festivals in Belgium?
- RQ2a: How do festival attendees perceive the implemented drug-related interventions (prevention, harm reduction, health care, law enforcement) at music festivals in Belgium?
- RQ2b: How do festival attendees perceive the possible impact of these interventions on their use of substances and related behavior?

Gaining insights into the perceptions of the implemented drug-related interventions and perceptions of substance use (norms) by festival stakeholders from prevention, harm reduction, health care, and law enforcement strategies, and other festival stakeholders.

- RQ3: How do festival stakeholders perceive substance use (norms) present at Belgian festivals?
- RQ4a: How do festival stakeholders perceive their efforts in a context of drug use at music festivals in Belgium?
- RQ4b: How do festival stakeholders perceive the efforts of other drug-related interventions at music festivals in Belgium?

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method study was conducted between 2019 and 2021, combining a quantitative online survey and qualitative interviews. The quantitative study was conducted using experience sampling methodology (ESM), which is based on data collection in a real-world environment (i.e., music festivals). In the ESM study, we specifically targeted festival attendees and their perceptions regarding drug-related interventions at music festivals in Belgium. Festival attendees who met following selection criteria were included in our research:

- Having reached the age of 18 years or older;
- Currently living in Belgium;
- Planning to attend a music festival in Belgium within the next two or three months;
- Being in possession of a smartphone with internet connection.

Respondents for the ESM study were recruited online, mainly through Facebook advertisements. They were asked to complete a short survey at different times related to their music festival visit.

The qualitative study built further on the data originating from the ESM-study. Interviews were conducted with both festival attendees and festival stakeholders. For the festival attendees (of whom most participated in the ESM study), the same selection criteria were used as during the ESM study for the festival attendees. For the festival stakeholders, we targeted those who implemented and/or executed drug-related interventions at music festivals in Belgium. The purpose was to include a

diverse range of both professionals and volunteers who were specifically focusing on prevention, harm reduction, care, or law enforcement strategies, consisting of: festival organizers; stakeholders from prevention and harm reduction services; stakeholders from first aid and medical services; bouncers or security staff; police officers or chiefs; local policy representatives; and public prosecutors.

For both the interviews with festival attendees and festival stakeholders, semi-structured interviews were executed to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding implemented drug-related interventions and substance use (norms). Therefore, an interview guideline was used.

The purpose was to conduct face-to-face interviews, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the interviews were conducted online. Only face-to-face interviews were executed with the Dutch speaking festival organizers as these interviews were executed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

MAIN RESULTS & CONCLUSION

In total, 305 festival attendees completed the pre-festival questionnaire (T1), of which 187 also completed the questionnaire during (T2) and after (T3) their festival visit. The sample ($n=187$) consisted of participants with a high prevalence rate in terms of (illegal) substance use. Most of them perceived a(n) (omni)presence of substance use during their festival visit, although at varying degrees and depending on the substance (i.e., alcohol, cannabis, or other illegal drugs).

Previous to their festival visit (T1), the majority of the participants did not believe drug-related interventions would have an impact on substance use as such. Similar perceptions were expressed after encountering such interventions (T3). However, both before attending, as well as after obtaining experience with these interventions at the festival, a different pattern was found concerning participants' perceptions of the impact of drug-related interventions on related risks. Harm reduction actions were clearly believed to result in less risky use. This was in strong contrast to repressive interventions, which a substantial part of the participants believed to (slightly) increase substance-use related risks.

Similar beliefs were expressed regarding the perceived impact of drug-related interventions on personal substance use after having interacted with these interventions. However, some of these actions were only encountered by a limited number of participants (e.g., drug testing services). According to our sample, in general, drug-related interventions did not (strongly) impact illegal substance use (i.e., frequency of use), purchase behaviour (i.e., buying from unknown dealers), or alcohol or other drug consumption as a substitute. Most harm reduction interventions, however, were believed to result in less risky use and/or more awareness of illegal substance use and associated risks. This contrasted with police interventions, which, according to a substantial part of the participants, might increase substance use-related risks.

The qualitative study consisted of 40 interviews with festival attendees and 44 interviews with festival stakeholders. Both groups regarded substance use as a part of the festival culture, often referring to its hedonistic aspects. Despite, or because of, the perceived prevalence of drug use at festivals, it seemed key to many of the festival stakeholders to focus on safety and health. Moreover, **substance use norms** at festivals were perceived to depend on different aspects, such as the characteristics of the festival (e.g., music style) and the type of substances used, with certain music genres even being

commonly associated with specific substances. Festival attendees' and stakeholders' attitudes towards substance use highlighted the difference between responsible (recreational) use and problematic use, rather than that between legal and illegal substances, which was perceived of minor importance. As a matter of fact, some participants even challenged the relevance of this distinction. Further, several participants specifically acknowledged the presence of problematic use of alcohol at the festival.

At first sight, the presence of **health care services** created a feeling of safety among the festival attendees. First aid services were considered as working mainly from a medical perspective, whereas harm reduction initiatives, such as relax zones, were afforded a more specialized role in terms of substance use and a more supportive role towards PWUD. Although health care interventions were mainly perceived in a positive way, specific barriers were experienced, such as fear of being judged by the medical staff or inhibition to ask for help or to communicate crucial health information to the medical staff (e.g., due to repressive actions).

In general, a positive attitude was found among the festival attendees regarding the **harm reduction approach**. However, not all festival attendees were familiar with the concept or confused specific harm reduction services with other drug-related interventions. Both festival attendees and festival stakeholders advocated for more prevention and harm reduction initiatives, in particular drug testing services, although some festival stakeholders questioned legal aspects of such services. Harm reduction was not always taken for granted in the past, but an evolution was noticed by different stakeholders, as it is increasingly more often being implemented at festivals and has proved to be complementary to other drug-related strategies. In line, it was advocated to regard prevention and harm reduction initiatives as part of an integrated drug-related approach at festivals.

Repressive interventions were evaluated from two different perspectives by festival attendees and festival stakeholders. On the one hand, they were perceived as a necessity (e.g., law enforcement was considered to be in the best position to ensure general safety). According to several stakeholders, the main purpose of repressive interventions is to send out the clear message that the use of illegal drugs is not allowed within the confines of the festival. In this context, several festival attendees considered these interventions as having deterrent effects on some PWUD or dealers, on the one hand, while on the other, the impact of repressive interventions was generally considered to be weak, mainly because PWUD were anticipating the repressive interventions, for instance by hiding their drugs from the police. Moreover, repressive interventions were commonly believed to have a negative impact on the way festival attendees were using (e.g., taking more substances at once, fear of asking for substance related information at harm reduction stands). Finally, a discrepancy was found, inhibiting the actions of security staff; although they are confronted with substance use during their line of work, legislation does not allow them to search for illicit drugs.

Furthermore, festival stakeholders generally stressed the importance of collaboration between different drug-related strategies. More specifically, clear arrangements and a mutual understanding of the role of different actors were believed to be crucial (e.g., no police presence at the first aid or harm reduction services). In this context, a balanced drug policy where different drug use-related strategies are treated on an equal footing, was regarded as optimal. Furthermore, some stakeholders found it difficult to measure the impact of the implemented actions. Finally, an intrinsically motivated

festival organization was considered a necessary ingredient for maximizing the potential of drug-related interventions.

Overall, both in the quantitative and qualitative studies, similar patterns were found concerning the perceived impact of drug-related interventions at music festivals. For instance, none of the 15 interventions under study were believed to have a straightforward impact on substance use frequency. However, festival attendees seemed to have employed certain strategies to cope with repressive actions. In addition, harm reduction actions were believed to reduce substance use-related risks, while repressive actions were presumed to lead to riskier use. These main findings correspond with recent Belgian research on substance use and drug policy at festivals (Schrooten & Van Damme, 2019), showing no influence of policy specifics on attendees' intention to use. On the contrary, detrimental effects of certain repressive measures were demonstrated to potentially negatively impact PWUD's health. Moreover, results of our interviews supported the notion of the *third-person effect*, as festival attendees were generally more strongly convinced of the potential of drug-related interventions to impact substance use of others, rather than impacting their personal use and related behaviour.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of our mixed-methods research, we formulated the following recommendations, aiming to improve the synergy between drug-related interventions at festivals and their general efficacy as well as to better address the issue of legal and illegal substance use at music festivals in Belgium (and beyond).

- Implementation of an integrated and balanced drug policy at each festival, treating the four pillars – prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and repression – on an equal footing. Thus, safety and health aspects should receive a similar weight. The following should be considered:
 - An integrated policy is not only about promoting interdisciplinarity. It is also about strengthening each pillar. For instance, the efficacy of first aid or harm reduction services most probably depends on clear arrangements with other partners (e.g., law enforcement).
 - A balanced drug policy at festivals could allow law enforcement to focus more on drug dealing.
 - In the context of a balanced drug policy, a stronger emphasis could be put either on prevention or harm reduction, depending on the specific needs of the festival.
- Set-up of a coordination committee at each festival, including strong involvement of the festival organization, taking into account the following:
 - A coordination committee could take several forms. Minimally, coordination meetings should be held on a regular basis – before, during (i.e., daily), and after the festival – in order to monitor the situation on the aspect of substance use, on the one hand, and on the other, to evaluate the joint approach and related interventions. Consequently, drug-related interventions can be adapted according to the specific context.
 - A coordination committee should include representatives of the festival organization and local policy, as well as of each of the above-mentioned pillars. It takes collective decisions concerning drug-related, but also other health-related, issues (e.g., sexual health).

- To facilitate the implementation of an integrated policy, a professional (intermediary) could be appointed to assess the requirements of each festival and to assist festival organizers in drug policy implementation. This professional could also be in charge of assembling the coordination committee.
- The expertise of festival organizers should be fully deployed in order to facilitate drug-related interventions (e.g., to spread EWS messages all over the festival, to mark the location of first aid services or relax zones on the festival map, ...).
- Design of a clear legal framework in order to implement and improve drug-related interventions. The following should be taken into consideration:
 - The implementation of drug checking services at festivals should be fostered alongside other harm reduction interventions. This entails taking several intermediary steps, such as adapting federal drug legislation in order to facilitate the removal of drug checking from the grey zone in which it is presently relegated (neither outlawed nor legal). Inspiration could be found in the recently developed, world's first government drug checking licensing scheme in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2021).
 - More clarity concerning the actions of security staff in the context of illegal substances at festivals, and in nightlife settings in general, should be facilitated. At the same time, other actors should be better informed on the mandate of security agents with regard to illegal substances.
 - Drug policies should be harmonized or, in other words, coherent policies should be developed both horizontally (i.e., between pillars) and vertically (i.e., between regional and federal levels), in order to avoid the coexistence of conflicting approaches (e.g., festival organizers having to implement a different drug policy depending on the festival location of each particular festival).
- Organization of specialized training on how to deal with substance use at festivals for actors of drug-related interventions, taking the following into account:
 - A non-judgmental attitude among actors who come in contact, and/or work, with PWUD at festivals (e.g., medical and security staff) should be maintained.
 - Prevention and harm reduction trainings for actors who come into contact, and/or work, with PWUD at festivals (e.g., first aid workers, security staff, law enforcement personnel) should be rolled-out, since several stakeholders highlighted their potency in fostering cooperation between the different actors.
- Evaluation of drug-related interventions, bearing in mind the following:
 - Drug-related interventions at festivals (like in any other setting) should be evidence-based and evidence-producing. Ideally, evaluation should be conducted by an external party, adopting a longitudinal perspective (i.e., with measures taken before and after implementation of adaptations to drug-related interventions or drug policies at festivals) and including behavioural measures (e.g., going beyond mere self-reports). Here, inspiration could be found in attempts made at Australian festivals (e.g., Olsen, Wong, & McDonald, 2019). Such evaluations could not only enable the improvement of drug policies at festivals but might also fill the knowledge gap regarding the actual impact of drug-related interventions. Moreover, it might fulfil the need expressed by some harm reduction and law enforcement stakeholders to have better insights into the outcomes of their interventions.

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