

Part of the Toolbox on

PARTY DRUGS AND CRIME



Understanding
the phenomenon



EUCPN
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

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The term ‘party drugs’ does not refer to a specific pharmacological composition, but refers instead to drugs used with the intention of creating or enhancing recreational experiences, whether these be legal or illegal substances. The focus of this paper lies on understanding the relationship between party drugs and crime, and more specifically the risks associated with going out.

”

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All the papers which make up the EUCPN toolbox on party drugs and crime are available for download at

<https://eucpn.org/toolbox-partydrugsandcrime>.

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PREFACE

This paper was written in the light of the Croatian Presidency of the EUCPN. Croatia justifies its choice to focus on drug use in recreational settings as follows:

“Within the area of crime prevention, the Presidency focuses on the prevention of party-drug related crime. In the last few years, party drugs are becoming more popular amongst young drug users. It is precisely the young population, which is prone to experimentation and consumption of new drugs on the market. Besides crime related to production, distribution, possession and procurement of party drugs, different types of crimes are becoming widespread amongst drug users such as vandalism, traffic offences, property crime and violent behaviour.”

In general, offenders are more likely to use drugs and drug users are more likely to offend. However, as there are differences between recreational and problematic drug use as well as several drug user target groups and types of crime, more nuance is needed. Several categories are used to define drug-related crimes. This paper focusses mainly on the prevention of psychopharmacological crimes and of some drug law offences as negative consequences of going out and using drugs in recreational settings. The objective of this paper is to understand the phenomenon of party drugs and its relation to crime.

In Europe, drug use is principally approached from a health perspective. Nevertheless, the target group of this paper are varied actors from the criminal justice sector: policymakers, crime prevention practitioners and law enforcement.

This paper is one of four parts of the toolbox in the topic of party drugs and crime.

- Party drugs and crime: understanding the phenomenon
- Party drugs and crime: effective approaches
- Darknet drug markets: the criminal business process explained
- Darknet drug markets: recommendations drawn from a barrier model

01 “PARTY DRUGS”

What’s in a name

Providing the term ‘party drugs’ with a clear cut definition is challenging, given that the category of party drugs does not refer to a specific pharmacological composition. This category refers instead to *“drugs used with the intention of creating or enhancing recreational experiences” and highlights the fact that these are the drugs of choice during recreational activities.*¹ Consequently, this drug category cannot be confined to a simple list as the popularity of substances vary according to the time and the setting. What counts is the intention and psychoactive trait, not the composition or legal status of a substance.²

“Initially the term ‘dance drugs’ was used to describe the drugs taken by people when dancing at acid house and rave events. During the late 1990s, there was a switch in terminology from ‘dance drugs’ to ‘club drugs’ in recognition that people were taking drugs within nightclub settings and not just at outdoor and unlicensed raves and warehouse parties. [...] It also reflected the expansion in the palette of drugs consumed across clubbing weekends from the ‘primary dance drugs’ (ecstasy, amphetamines and LSD) of the early acid house and rave scene, to also include ‘secondary dance drugs’ (such as ketamine, cannabis, GHB/GBL and Viagra) from the late 1990s onwards, for which the primary motive might not be to enhance dancing but to enhance or mitigate against the ‘primary dance drugs’. [...] More recent, and particularly outside the UK, the term ‘party drugs’ has come to be favoured in recognition of the wider locations for club drug use beyond dance clubs, such as festivals, beach parties, house parties, after parties and chill out parties. The verb “to party” has also evolved to become a euphemistic term for the consumption of party drugs.”³

Another explanation can be found in the reference to a new consumption pattern. Recreational drugs, in the form of alcohol and cannabis, have been used in our society since the earliest times. From the 1990s onwards, a new pattern emerged, in which people used synthetic drugs during the weekends when partying. Once the party and weekend were over, most people return to business as usual and the working week was resumed. In this context, the term 'party drugs' makes sense.⁴ However, nowadays this consumption can no longer be attributed to one time, place or population as will be explained later.

Furthermore, there is considerable debate about whether the term 'party drugs' itself is desirable at all. Some are of the opinion that the wording not ideal because it provides drugs with a positive connotation, making it hard to take drugs seriously. A more antagonistic term would be more beneficial.⁵ Others call them 'club drugs' or 'stimulant drugs'. In any case, many people tend to avoid the term 'party drugs' and choose to refer to 'party settings' and 'risks in recreational settings'. Especially because often it is the setting that first and foremost requires attention, and only in a second instance the use of drugs.⁶

Alcohol is the drug of choice across all music and party settings.⁷ Additionally, it is the problem child when it comes to being the cause of the risks associated with going out such as health problems, safety issues and public nuisance.⁸ 'Binge drinking' and 'preloading' are two particular alcohol consumption patterns that are worrying. Although young people tend to drink less frequently than adults, they do tend to drink more in a shorter period of time.⁹ The second most popular drug is clearly cannabis and can be found in different music and party settings.¹⁰ MDMA (ecstasy) and cocaine share third place. The price and user friendliness of MDMA makes it a tad more popular, however.¹¹ Amphetamines (speed) are less popular than cocaine, however more often used than methamphetamines or GHB. Ketamine was not that common in the beginning of prevalence studies. Recently however, its popularity has definitely been on the rise.¹² New Psychoactive Substances (NPS), although receiving attention, are at this moment rather marginal in terms of their presence.¹³

Overall, taking into account the fact that drug users are a heterogeneous group and that trends in drug use might arise and disappear again quickly, there is a need for further, frequently repeated research in order to obtain a more detailed intelligence picture of drug use.¹⁴ Furthermore, prevalence varies across EU Member States.

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) constitute a peculiar and diverse category of a broad range of drugs that are not controlled by international drug laws. Unfortunately the NPS market is highly dynamic.¹⁵ Moreover, the synonym 'designer drugs' highlights the objective of producers to design the substance in such way that it falls outside the scope of drug laws.¹⁶ Overall, the use of NPS is relatively low compared to established controlled drugs. Nevertheless, these substances are not only problematic from a legal perspective, but also from a health perspective as they may cause high levels of harm, especially among the population of high-risk drug users.¹⁷ On the one hand, the true content and dosage of NPS might not be what a user expected.¹⁸ On the other hand, the fast pace in which the substances are created makes it hard for health workers to keep up and react appropriately in emergency situations.¹⁹

Recreational drug users are a diverse group

The cliché concerning the demographics of drug offenders and drug users goes that these are social outsiders operating in the margins of society. This stereotype is mainly created by the news and entertainment media and is reinforced by law enforcement and criminal justice efforts. Nevertheless, new empirical research and large crime surveys suggest that drug consumers, sellers, transactions and the drug market itself exist within all strata of society.²⁰

Consequently, amongst the broader category of recreational drug users there are different subgroups with their own culture or at least certain characteristics that necessitate a tailored approach.²¹ First, there is the large group of 'club-goers'. This is large group is not homogenous, they come in all age groups and social classes.²² The cohort of 30-40-year-olds is growing the quickest. Nevertheless, the group under 30-year-olds is the largest and is the most vulnerable to drug-related harms due to inexperience, lower tolerance, a tendency toward risky behaviour and a lower body mass index. Additionally, because of low contact rates with health services, they are hard to reach with preventive or harm-reductive approaches. Nowadays, there is an overload of information available online, however

their level of insight is low. The number of opportunities where drug users can talk or learn about these substances, without fearing judgement, is decreasing. Not only can this be attributed to a decrease in funding for preventative or harm-reduction approaches, but there also seems to be less intergenerational use. This means that fewer generations and therefore levels of experience are using together. The absence of a “drug mentor” further hinders the acquisition of knowledge. All these factors mean that in some cases, this group is somewhat ignorant about aspects such as the strength of substances, the risks of overdosing or poly drug use. Consequently, they are more exposed to the potential harms of substance use.²³

In addition, there are some other subgroups that deserve a separate approach. ‘Youngsters’, as in young drug users under the age of 18 years, often have limited experiences in going out in general, drinking alcohol or using other psychoactive substances. Additionally, due to their youthfulness, they might have a lower sense of responsibility.²⁴ Festival-goers have some characteristics that merit specific attention. Foreign nationals might not be aware of the legislation in force in a given country or the presence of preventative or harm-reduction initiatives because they might be used to more restrictive policies. Also, when a festival covers several days, repetitive substance use possibly in combination with exhaustion might lead to health concerns.²⁵ In addition, the LGBTIQ+ community also forms a separate target group.²⁶ A survey carried out by the Cyprus National Addiction Authority revealed that nearly 20% of the LBGTIQ+ population reported to have used drugs to enhance sexual experience at least once in their lifetime.²⁷ Finally, problematic users are becoming more and more a focal point for drug treatment services. As will be discussed further, recreational nightlife settings hold a certain attraction to those displaying problematic drug use. In many cases, other social problems form the basis of this damaging relationship with drug use.²⁸

02 RISKS IN RECREATIONAL SETTINGS

Going out is associated with a range of risks. Although not exhaustive and overlapping, we can distinguish between two main categories: health and social problems and drug-related crimes. Alongside health problems such as unconsciousness, unintentional injury, unsafe sex, brain damage and addiction, there are also possible social problems such as aggressive behaviour and public nuisance.²⁹ Drug-related public nuisance can be explained as problem behaviour in public spaces, such as manifestation of auditory and visual nuisance, hanging around, aggression and intoxication in public spaces. It is however not clear how drug-related public nuisances should be distinguished from general public nuisance.³⁰

In general, offenders are more likely to use drugs and drug users are more likely to offend.³¹ However, as there are differences between recreational or problematic drug use, several drug user target groups and types of crime, greater nuance is needed. The EMCDDA uses four categories to define drug-related crimes:

- Psychopharmacological crimes
- Economic-compulsive crimes
- Systemic crimes
- Drug law offences³²

Risks in recreational settings	
Health and social problems	Drug-related crime
Health problems	Psychopharmacological crimes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unconsciousness - unintentional injury - unsafe sex - brain damage - addiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - violence - sexual assault
Social problems	Drug law offences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - public nuisance - aggressive behaviour - regretted sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use - possession - driving under influence - dealing

As far as party settings and the risks at these settings are concerned, psychopharmacological crimes and drug law offences are most relevant. Together with economic compulsive crimes, psychopharmacological crimes make up the majority of drug-related crimes.³³ Psychopharmacological crimes are committed under the influence of a psychoactive substance, as a result of its acute or chronic use. There is no drug that has universal criminogenic properties. Behaviour is in any case behaviour also impacted by individual and environmental factors. The use of psychoactive substances may however trigger certain effects which in turn may lead to undesirable or criminal behaviour such as aggressive behaviour and violence, regretted sex and sexual assault or public nuisance. Examples of these effects are agitation, fear or paranoia, drastic mood swings, disinhibition, cognitive distortions and impaired judgement. Not only do these effects increase the odds of committing certain behaviour, but they also increase the probability of becoming a victim. Such as in the case of sexual assault while the victim is under the influence.³⁴

There is no drug that has universal criminogenic properties. Nevertheless, violence is most strongly associated with alcohol intoxication. The use of cocaine and amphetamines can also be associated with violence, however the relationship is weaker. In contrast, cannabis use is likely to reduce violence and aggression.³⁵

Drug law offences are crimes committed in violation of drug (and other related) legislations. These offences take up a sizeable part of the resources available to law enforcement and criminal justice actors. Depending on the country and its legislation, these offences include the use and possession of and dealing in illicit drugs. Driving under the influence can also be defined as a drug-law offence.³⁶

Further, the occasional risky or problematic use of psychoactive substances or addiction might also have societal consequences. Drug use can lead to direct costs in terms of traffic accidents or crime, however there are also possible indirect costs in terms of productivity losses as a result of illness or deaths. In Belgium, research has estimated these costs to amount to 1.2% of the gross domestic product. Almost half of these costs are related to alcohol.³⁷

Recreational versus problematic drug use and addiction

In 2016 the UNODC calculated that approximately 12% of people who used drugs in the past year suffer from drug use disorders.³⁸ With regard to the use of drugs to enhance recreational experiences, it is necessary to distinguish between recreational drug use and problematic drug use and drug addiction.³⁹ Recreational drug use can be defined as drug use that is entirely linked to having fun and which does not cause the user to experience negative consequences of that use. Furthermore, this recreational drug use is limited to leisure times and does not impact the normal functioning of the user in work, school or family life.⁴⁰ Still, in some cases recreational drug use may evolve to occasional risky use. In these cases, an interplay of factors related to the substance (e.g. unusual composition), the intention (e.g. expectation of the user) or the setting (e.g. characteristics of night club or event) can lead to health or safety problems such as unconsciousness, brain damage, unintentional injury or unsafe sex.⁴¹ Among many drug users in recreational settings, poly drug use is common.⁴² In such cases, a partygoer might start the night by drinking alcohol at the pub, using cocaine, going to a party where the partygoer takes an ecstasy pill and ends the night with cannabis to cool down. This combination of several psychoactive substances is a danger to the individual's health and may cause negative safety consequences.⁴³

In case of problematic drug use, the user is less able to function normally and experiences difficulties in fulfilling the requirements of education, work or family. There is not a simple factor that explains why one user would shift towards problematic drug use or even drug addiction and another does not.⁴⁴ EMCDDA explains how the initiation of substance use is mainly driven by environmental factors, such as availability and also, yet to a lesser extent by personal characteristics such as age and experience. These personal characteristics also influence whether the use will be continued or not, together with environmental factors and the pharmacological traits of the specific psychoactive substance in question. Clearly, the pharmacological composition will be a significantly influential factor, together with both personal and environmental factor, on the pathway towards the development of health, emotional or social problems.⁴⁵ It is clear that this is not governed by the type of drug, but by the dependence someone has and possible underlying problems.⁴⁶ Recreational drug use and problematic drug use can be viewed on a continuum with only a fine line between the two. Users may transition from one side to the other.⁴⁷



Sharing is caring?

During dance events, people often feel a strong connectedness with each other. The empathogenic effects of factors such as ecstasy, such as love, connection, excitement or physical attraction surely contribute to that atmosphere. Altruism and reciprocity are common. A cigarette, a piece of chewing gum or piece of candy may be presented to or exchanged with a stranger. Also, spontaneous chats, helping someone back on his feet or sharing a drink is not uncommon.⁴⁸

For those who are not party to that experience, it is hard to grasp. Consequently, outsiders such as policymakers or law enforcement services might struggle to understand the impact of it on participants in those party settings.⁴⁹ This is also relevant within the context of police investigations. Research has shown that certain innocent acts at dance events as described above are often misinterpreted by police officers as dealing.⁵⁰ Many times, users are prepared for a party and have equipped themselves well in advance. This means they do not have to buy drugs on site. Even when drugs do change hands, this is often in a spirit of sharing between friends and not so much selling with the intention of making profits.⁵¹ Additionally, when attending an event in group, there is the practice of pooling all pills/drugs together on one person to minimise the risk of getting caught. Of course, when this person does get caught by the police, the volume he or she is carrying exceeds the quantity that is accepted as being for personal use.⁵²

The ways in which drugs are available to users is highly dependent on the psychoactive effects, the consumption patterns and the extent to which the drug is embedded in particular subcultures and social contexts.⁵³ Illicit drugs to enhance party experiences are usually acquired from the user's immediate surroundings: friends, neighbours, colleagues or family members. Only a minority report buying from "real drug dealers".⁵⁴ **Peers** are a strong influencing factor. Peers recommend a dealer or provide reassurance that a certain pill is fine to take. Furthermore, it often happens that one person in a social network takes over the role of supplier when the usual sources are not available, for example due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁵ Similar to drug users, those selling recreational drugs are often users themselves and are present in all strata of society. They do not perceive themselves as criminal drug dealers when they sell to their friends, family or acquaintances. Transactions preferably take place in settings such as someone's house and only rarely on the street.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, there are users – even though they are a minority – who obtain drugs on site or in the vicinity of clubs, discotheques or festivals.⁵⁷ It is not clear how large this minority exactly is. A survey in Lithuania reported 12% in general recreational settings,⁵⁸ while a survey in Ireland reports 33% in festival settings.⁵⁹ The more stringent the door policies are at festivals, the more people will be seeking to buy drugs on site.⁶⁰

Local dealers have an advantage over non-locals, as they have a valuable social capital in terms of a network of friends and acquaintances and knowledge of the urban nightlife and dance clubs. They are familiar with the specific cultural and social context, such as the location of rave parties and other underground music events.⁶¹ Except for selling points in the proximity of recreational settings, selling drugs for recreational purposes on the streets is rare.⁶² Additionally, there are no indications of sellers approaching unknown prospective clients. The one-directional initiative again underlines the importance of the social network.⁶³

Party islands or locations that revolve around partying and that are typically overrun by tourists during high-season are an entirely different story. In these cases, it is likely that organised crime groups are involved in the drug market, including at the level of retail sales. Speedboats export cannabis from North Africa to the south coast of Spain. From there, it is further distributed throughout Spain and the rest of the EU.⁶⁴ Also in Croatia, there have been reports of the possible involvement of organised crime groups from the UK in an open illicit drug market.⁶⁵ In Bulgaria, the National Strategy for Combating Drugs 2020-2021 is founded on two pillars. One of them concerns the efforts with regard to drug trafficking. The police carries out frequent specialised operations, during which resorts and nightclubs are inspected.⁶⁶

Illustration of the sale of party drugs in recreational settings: the ecstasy market of Greece

There are two parallel schemes within Greece. In the 'Continental'-scheme, local Greek youth form the customer base of the market. In the 'Holiday-resort'-scheme, the clients are young Western-European tourists. Crete, Corfu and Rhodes are examples of popular Greek holiday resorts, in which young people from Great Britain and the Netherlands constitute the majority of clientele and in which accommodations are made to meet the needs of this group. Because of the deep-rooted presence of these nationals, the 'Holiday-resort'-scheme almost equates to an importation of the British and Dutch ecstasy markets to Greece.⁶⁷

In the Greek case, it happens that key actors from the local nightlife industry such as club owners, professional party-organisers or DJ's are directly or indirectly involved in the ecstasy market as importers or mid-level traders.⁶⁸

In this case, we can distinguish between four kinds of ecstasy retail sellers.

1. The first are *sellers*, who have no other reason for being in the recreational setting other than to sell.⁶⁹
2. The second group are the *user-sellers*, which exist most commonly in the case of the 'Continental'-scheme.⁷⁰ The profile corresponds to what Dorne calls a 'trading charity dealer'. It concerns young people who sell to peers, who are often friends and acquaintances. Supplying these drugs is interwoven with the social life. Enjoying the use of the drug and the context around it is much more important than profits. Even when the number of small transactions is high.⁷¹
3. Third, the *employee-sellers* are common in the 'Holiday-resort'-scheme. These people work on the premises of the aforementioned holiday resorts in roles such as flyers distributors or holiday representatives. Also bouncers play their part, often by determining who can and who cannot sell on certain premises.⁷²
4. The fourth group are the *holidaymaker-sellers*, who are again related to the 'Holiday-resort'-scheme. The main motive for these youngsters' presence in the Greek holiday resorts is to spend their holiday there. The fact that they have the opportunity to sell ecstasy is an added bonus. Although they bring drugs from their home country to Greece in some cases, they are distinct from importers because of the irregular and opportunistic nature of their actions.⁷³

03

IMPORTANCE OF PARTY SETTING VERSUS USE

03

One can differentiate between several types of party setting. A large, once-in-a-year music festival such as 'Tomorrowland' is subject to different conditions compared to rave and other underground dance parties. Likewise, the day-to-day nightlife industry that consists of smaller clubs, discotheques, lounges, dance bars and nightlife areas differs, in turn, from a holiday setting consisting of discotheques, lounges and holiday resorts full of young tourists looking for a good time. Within recreational settings, the prevalence of drug use varies according to the type of setting, the type of music and the type of target groups.⁷⁴

From niche to mainstream

Drug use and recreational activities have been linked to each other since the concept of 'youth culture' was established in the 1960s. Later during the 1980s and 1990s, the advent of electronic dance music stimulated the rise of the substances MDMA and amphetamines, which are used in ecstasy and speed respectively.⁷⁵ As far as its origin is concerned, house music can be traced back to the gay and black clubbing scenes in Chicago and Detroit.⁷⁶ Overall, the further development of the techno party scene took place in parts of Europe and remained a mainly European phenomenon in its early decades.⁷⁷ Originally, the dance scene was a niche, and the use of synthetic drugs was limited to that scene.⁷⁸

Even though recreational drug use is intertwined with counterculture, it is no longer limited to it. The consumption of these substances with the aim of enhancing recreational experiences is increasingly expanding into more mainstream settings.

⁷⁹ Neither is going out and using psychoactive substances to enhance the recreational experience still confined to parties taking place at the weekend.⁸⁰ There is a range of social settings that qualify today: having a drink during the week after work with friends at a bar, a pre-party at someone's house, a private party, a festival, or a holiday trip to a party island...⁸¹

With the rising popularity of synthetic drug use in the nineties, it became more and more an important part of youth culture in general. To a certain extent, one could speak of normalisation in the sense that it extends beyond a subculture. Still, research has not reached a consensus on the fact of whether or not sensible recreational drug use in modern times can be regarded as a normal part of youth culture. Especially because drug use and drug users vary greatly. Therefore, it is safer to speak of "*differentiated normalisation*".⁸²

In several EU countries, music preferences and venue choices prove to be predictors of drug use in recreational settings. People who like to party, and therefore visit clubs, dance events or music festivals, are more experienced with drugs.⁸³

Originally, research into drug use in certain music settings often focused on the electronic music scene and has established that typical 'club drugs' such as MDMA, cocaine and amphetamines are common in these scenes. Nevertheless, further research in Belgium has been carried out into the broader spectrum of music scenes, such as rock music, southern music and funky music, in addition to electronic dance music. When enquiring about music preferences, there is an overlap in categories: preferring one kind of music does not exclude liking other kinds of music.⁸⁴ The results of this survey amongst visitors of several party settings uncovered some trends which confirm certain clichéd presumptions. Those who like dance music are significant more likely to use cannabis, MDMA and cocaine, whilst in the case of the fans of rock music, there is a negative correlation with the use of cocaine. No link could be found between preferring southern or funky music and using illicit drugs.⁸⁵ Alcohol is the drug of choice across all music and party settings.⁸⁶

Holiday tripping

Since 2000, tourism has increased immensely. This is partially due to cheap airline tickets and appealing holiday packages and the decrease of border controls. These are important underlying factors for the increased mobilisation of youngsters. Youth travel accounts for a growing market share in the tourism industry. Together with the increased globalisation and professionalisation of the entertainment industry,⁸⁷ which in some cases views recreational settings as a commercial product, this might lead to unsafe and bacchanalian situations. The entertainment industry sells the idea of wild parties. In these party settings, the excessive and irresponsible use of psychoactive substance, especially alcohol, is encouraged. In many holiday resorts, alcoholic beverages are available around the clock. When the pubs close, the clubs are open and when the clubs close there are always other venues to drink. This is also visible in the marketing strategies of some tour operators who sell vacations with catch phrases such as 'Wake up in the wrong hotel' or 'Get the mother of all hangovers'. Tabloids further fuel this notion by publishing sensational pieces on incidents on party islands such as sex for drinks.⁸⁸

With this relative newly found freedom, it is common in Europe for young people to cross borders to attend nightlife events. This might be for straightforward drug tourism (visiting coffee shops) or in order to attend a large music festival.⁸⁹ Other popular destinations are so-called party capitals such as Ibiza, Amsterdam, Athens, Berlin or Mykonos.⁹⁰ These places are a particular category of party settings and require special attention with regard to the use of psychoactive substances to enhance recreational experiences and the risks involved with partying.⁹¹ It is not that certain geographical locations attract the presence or the use of party drugs. It depends on what they have to offer and what they are known for.⁹² It might be the longer hours of operation in the nightlife areas, cheaper drugs or the perception of less strict enforcement that form the main motivations to make a party trip.⁹³

The holiday period might equate to a time of excess and experimentation. People working in the nightlife industry might also be fulfilling the role of important facilitators when it comes to creating the hedonistic atmosphere that

dominates the party islands. They are the ones with the ability to influence the behaviour of tourists and promote the use of alcohol and drugs.⁹⁴

Although this form of tourism leads to economic benefits, there are also negative consequences for the local communities. A community that becomes overrun with party tourists will deal with public nuisance in many forms. Further, it leads to changes in the way of life of locals, for example an increase in local drug use or an increase in local minors visiting discotheques at an early age. Additionally, mounting pressure is placed upon public health and social services. Standard aid often requires more resources because of the language barrier or assistance in collecting money to return home.⁹⁵

Impact of COVID-19 on party drugs

Although the production of synthetic drugs continues, the demand for them, especially for use in recreational settings, has diminished due to specific COVID-19 safety measures such as the closure of the nightlife industry and the cancellation of music festivals.⁹⁶

Focus on the environment

There are several arguments in favour of focusing interventions primarily on settings, and not just on the use of so-called party drugs itself. As mentioned before, the use of drugs is more prevalent amongst people who frequently attend recreational settings, as opposed to amongst the general population. Nevertheless, risky behaviour encompasses a much broader range of behaviours than the use of drugs alone.⁹⁷ The range of risks related to going out take place in and around party settings. It is therefore preferable to speak about recreational settings and risks at these settings instead of limiting the discussion to the use of party drugs.⁹⁸

Another argument in favour of focusing upon recreational settings can be found in the importance of recreation in young people's lives and the impact that it has on socialisation. From this perspective, the recreational setting is viewed as one of the important domains for the socialisation of young people, next to school or family settings. The party setting, and its stakeholders, influence the development of values, norms and habits concerning safety such as using drugs, sexual intercourse, driving, violence... Additionally, in our current society, young people have more time and resources to spend on recreation than they did in the past and the party setting and the industry involved are becoming more creative and successful in attracting young people. Due to a combination of these reasons, recreational spaces must receive sufficient attention in order to keep them safe and to contribute towards a positive socialisation of young people.⁹⁹

Furthermore, when the objective is to bring about positive behavioural change, it is better to have targeted efforts. Overall, to gain an effective awareness, driving home the message should be of immediate significance and the source of the message must also be trustworthy.¹⁰⁰ In connection with this topic, it is beneficial to address young people inside party settings rather than in school or through television. Furthermore, professionals active in and around the recreational nightlife shape the setting. In this regard, they are ideally positioned to have a constructive impact on the socialisation of young people and to carry out a unified message encouraging responsible and safe behaviour.¹⁰¹

Stakeholders' perspective

Professionals in and around party settings are stakeholders in recreational settings and their associated risks, as a result of the decisions they make and the actions they do or do not undertake. Stakeholders exist in several categories, from private actors such as the entertainment industry itself to public entities such as social services and law enforcement. These stakeholders have their own perspective on the use of psychoactive substances in recreational settings and on the risks that exist in these settings.¹⁰² In the case of the entertainment industry, it is a way of making a living; as far as drug treatment services are concerned, going out might pose a risk of health problems and from the perspective of law enforcement services, recreational areas are a potential concentration of psychopharmacological crimes and drug law offences.¹⁰³

Entertainment industry

The recreation industry has a direct impact on the shape of party settings and how events are experienced by participants. Examples of stakeholders in this category include club owners and managers, DJs, the bar staff or flyer distributors.¹⁰⁴ The industry offers entertainment and leisure. The aim is often to break up the weekly routine of young people for a brief period of time and to bring them into party mode by using a well-coordinated interplay of light, music, images and messages. In that context, psychoactive substances are a strong catalyst that enables them to make the transition and reach the wanted state of mind.¹⁰⁵ Overall, taking into account the fact that the entertainment industry shapes party settings, it is a crucial partner of any robust, preventive approach to minimise the risks at recreational settings.

However, the fact that a counterculture has become more mainstream, has an impact on the commercialisation and professionalisation of the entertainment industry. In some cases, this counter-culture is at odds with economic interests. Whenever the entertainment industry views recreational settings merely as spaces for consumption and as commodities to generate profits, these environments have the potential of becoming very unsafe.¹⁰⁶

Drug treatment and health services

From the perspective of drug treatment and health services, party settings are important locations of convergence: it is within these settings that drug consumption patterns are developed. Party settings contain two groups of recreational drug users. The first group of users has a relatively safe relationship with drugs overall. They have jobs and a stable life. The second group may be burdened on several fronts, such as dropping out of school, family issues, mental health issues, physical abuse... On top of or because of these burdens, they may have a problematic relationship with drug use.¹⁰⁷ For this second group, party settings are in some ways a safe haven where it is easier to make social connections. For drug treatment and health services this target group is rather hard to reach as they are inclined to wait too long before reaching out for help and are afraid of being judged.¹⁰⁸

Within drug treatment services there is a shift from traditional intervention to a focus on problematic users, in other words from a primary to a secondary approach. Although the traditional on-site approach at location remains important to support the first group of recreational drug users, there is a need for another approach to support the second problematic group of drug users in the form of treatment and counselling. The idea is to counsel drug users who have problems with the use of recreational drugs in combination with other problems.¹⁰⁹ Secondary intervention is necessary in order to avoid a non-problematic situation turning into a problematic situation.¹¹⁰

Law enforcement

From a stakeholder such as law enforcement, one could predominantly expect a repressive perspective with regard to risks in recreational settings. Police services have their work cut out for them with enforcing the law concerning drug-related crime in party settings.¹¹¹ When partygoers are too intoxicated, police may have to respond to complaints of public nuisance, violence or sexual assault and be required to enforce drug law relating to use, possession and dealing. Also as far as driving under the influence is concerned, police services prevent the severe harm caused by traffic accidents, by setting up checkpoints on the roads around large events or nightlife areas.

However, many police forces have evolved into police services, which entails more proactive work, prevention, closer proximity to and closer collaboration with the community they serve.¹¹² It is important that police services are perceived by partygoers as trustworthy and approachable. In particular, those in need should be able to count on the police without fearing any negative repercussions.¹¹³

Police services are an important player, yet only one of many actors. Similarly, the resources at the disposal of police services are substantial, yet not enough. The various prevention actors must therefore work together and pool their resources.¹¹⁴ Interventions from a health perspective are not necessarily in conflict with the law enforcement perspective.¹¹⁵ For example, after having seized dangerous batches of illicit substances, law enforcement can, in collaboration with drug treatment services, warn drug users about the potential contaminants in the substances or of the high potency of the substance, which may be associated with an increased risk of overdose.¹¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The focus of this paper lies on understanding the relationship between party drugs and crime, and more specifically the risks associated with going out. The term 'party drugs' does not refer to a specific pharmacological composition, but refers instead to drugs used with the intention of creating or enhancing recreational experiences, whether these be legal or illegal substances.

Most drug users in party settings have a relatively safe and recreational relationship with substance use. Nevertheless, an unfortunate interplay of factors related to the substance, user or setting gives rise to occasional risky use or causes some to have a problematic relationship with substance use in party settings. In these cases, people who use drugs experience or cause risks in recreational settings.

Health problems, public nuisance, violence or driving under the influence are possible negative consequences of using psychoactive substances in party settings. Indeed, a solid preventive approach towards (problematic) drug use in party settings will also have a preventive effect on the risks in recreational settings, including the health and social problems and the problem of drug-related crime.

The use of so-called party drugs is expanding into more mainstream settings. The recreational setting is an important domain for the socialisation of young people and influences the development of values, norms and habits concerning safety such as using drugs, sexual intercourse, driving, violence and so on. It is therefore recommended to focus interventions primarily on party settings, and not just on drug use itself.

Several approaches to intervene in party settings are discussed in EUCPN (2021). Party drugs and crime: effective approaches. Part of the EUCPN Toolbox on party drugs and crime

Finally, following on from the importance of party settings, the impact of several stakeholders in the safety of recreational settings should be recognised. Each stakeholder has its own set of responsibilities and perspectives. When these are brought together, it is possible to achieve a more comprehensive approach to the risks in recreational settings, due to the broad perspective and the broad variety of interventions.

PARTY DRUGS AND CRIME

Most drug users in party settings have a relatively safe and recreational relationship with substance use.

But these substances can also pose health and social problems, and lead to drug-related crime.

THESE UNWANTED SIDE-EFFECTS CAN BE PREVENTED BY



TARGETED EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE POSITIVE BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

- > target young people inside party settings rather than in school or through television
- > the message should be of immediate significance and trustworthy



FOCUSING INTERVENTIONS PRIMARILY ON PARTY SETTINGS, AND NOT JUST ON DRUG USE ITSELF



CLOSE COLLABORATION BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS: ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY, LAW ENFORCEMENT, DRUG TREATMENT AND HEALTH SERVICES

- > professionals active in and around the recreational nightlife can influence the setting
- > combined, these different actors offer a broad perspective to help tackle problems and produce a wide range of interventions

Let's keep the party safe, together.

Discover more in our toolbox:
<https://eucpn.org/toolbox-partydrugsandcrime>.

ENDNOTES

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