

COVID-19 DRUG MARKET SURVEY SUMMARY

MONTH 1 - APRIL 2020



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Executive Summary

- Crew monitored the impact that COVID-19 and the resulting restrictions had on the psychoactive drugs market.
- We gathered **327 responses across four weeks** in April 2020. 142 were from Scotland, 56 from elsewhere in the UK, 102 from elsewhere in Europe and 27 from elsewhere in the world.
- We gathered responses from people who take drugs, drug service staff, support staff and other professionals, as well as other members of the public.
- Overall, **62% of respondents noted changes to the drug market** due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe.
- The most commonly reported drugs were cannabis, cocaine, alcohol, heroin and benzodiazepines.
- **57% reported increased frequency of drug use**, raising concerns around an increase in tolerance, dependence, spending, physical harms and mental health harms.
- **52% reported that the quantity of drugs being taken had increased**, with 45% reporting increased spending on drugs and 52% reporting the stockpiling of drugs.
- 68% reported that the most **typical method of purchasing drugs was through face-to-face sales**. 30% reported that social media and online markets were being used more often, since the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) in Europe.
- **60% reported taking different drugs** than they usually would – in some cases people switched to drugs that were more affordable or more available to them.
- One of the most mentioned drugs in the survey was alcohol, with many people reporting that the **use of alcohol had increased**.

Introduction

Who we are

Crew has been working to reduce drug-related harm since 1992. We are a charity that provides local, Edinburgh-based support services to people who take psychostimulants and we work across Scotland to provide consultancy, training for workers and outreach at events.

Aim

We aim to gather feedback from those on the front line of drug use, and summarise these responses in real-time, in order to learn about the impact that COVID-19 and the related lockdown restrictions has on the way that people buy, sell and take drugs.

Method

- In April 2020, we launched a 23 question, anonymous drug trend monitoring form, using the 'conversation' format on Survey Monkey.
- We asked for responses from people who take drugs, drug service staff, support staff and other professionals, as well as members of the public.
- It is a self-selecting and self-reporting survey and does not represent any particular population.

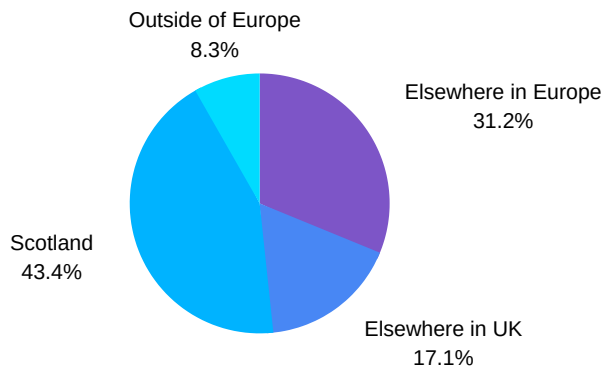
Reporting

- This document summarises **all data from weeks one to four** (327 partial and complete responses in total).
- Summaries for individual weeks can be viewed by clicking the links in the table below.
- Our survey will remain open throughout May 2020, and you are welcome to fill it in and share. However, we will now be summarising all new responses monthly, rather than weekly.
- To take the survey please visit: www.crew.scot/covid-drug-market

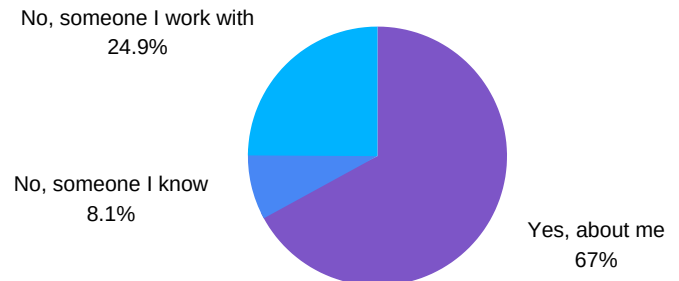
Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
58 responses	107 responses	112 responses	50 responses
<u>Week 1 summary.</u>	<u>Week 2 summary.</u>	<u>Week 3 summary.</u>	<u>Week 4 summary.</u>

Summary of all responses

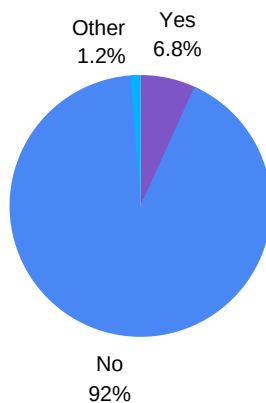
Where are you based?



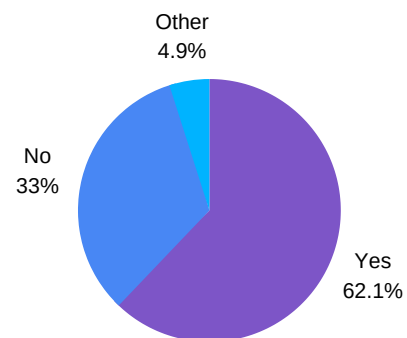
Are you filling this survey in about yourself or someone else?



Did you notice any changes to the supply of drugs while the outbreak of COVID-19 was mainly confined to China? (December 2019-January 2020)



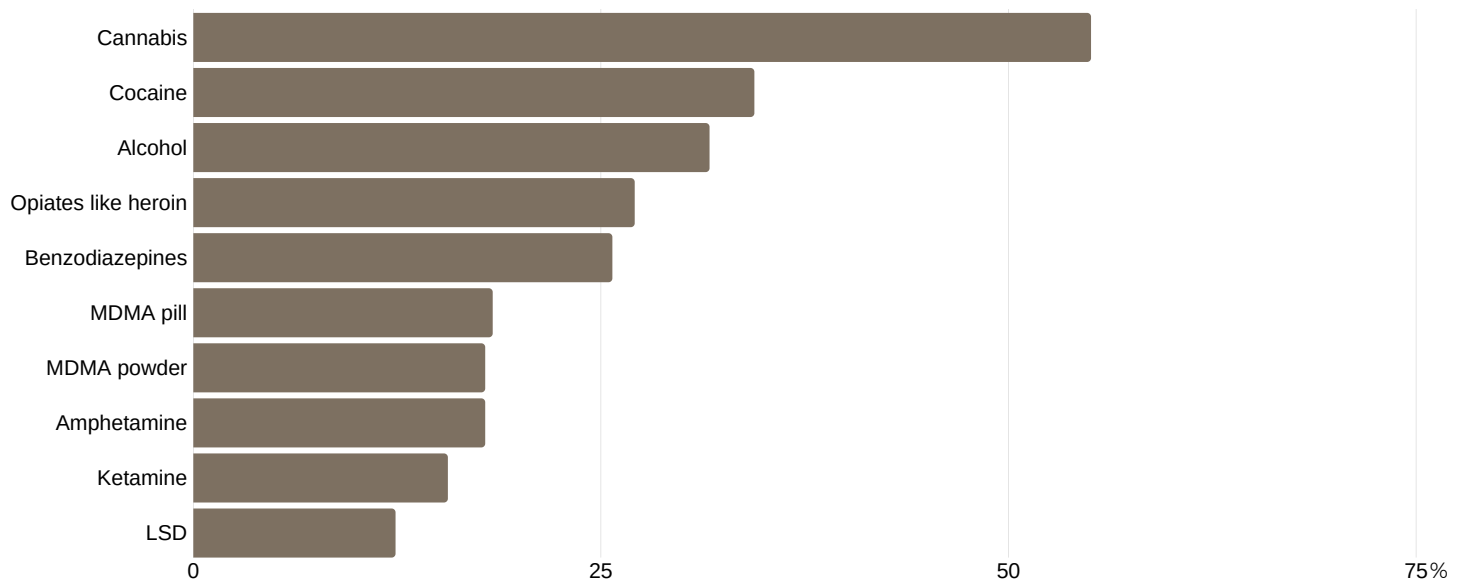
Have you noticed any changes to the supply of drugs since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe?



PURCHASING

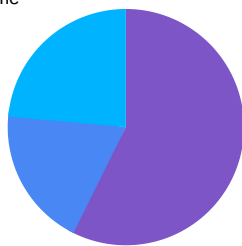
- 68% of respondents said that over the past year, **'a dealer, friend or family member (face to face)' was the main source of drugs**, followed by 'the internet (including the darkweb)' at 14%. 3% used social media.
- 78% of those using multiple methods of purchasing/sourcing, said the **'face to face market has been impacted the most'**.
- 46% reported that there was 'no change to the method of purchase' they used, but **18% reported 'using online more'** and 12% reported **'using social media more'**.

10 MOST REPORTED DRUGS



Have there been any changes in the **frequency** of drug taking (inc. alcohol) due to COVID-19?

No, stayed the same
23.6%

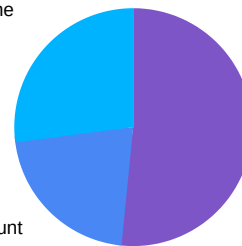


Yes, taking drugs more often
57.3%

Yes, taking drugs less often
19.1%

Have there been any changes to the **quantity** of drugs (inc. alcohol) taken due to COVID-19?

No, stayed the same
27%



Yes, taking a greater amount
51.6%

Yes, taking a smaller amount
21.4%

BEHAVIOUR

- 57% reported taking drugs **more often** and 52% reported taking a **larger quantity** of drugs.
- 19% reported taking drugs **less often** and 21% reported taking a **smaller quantity** of drugs.
- 45% reported spending on drugs had increased and 52% reported stockpiling.

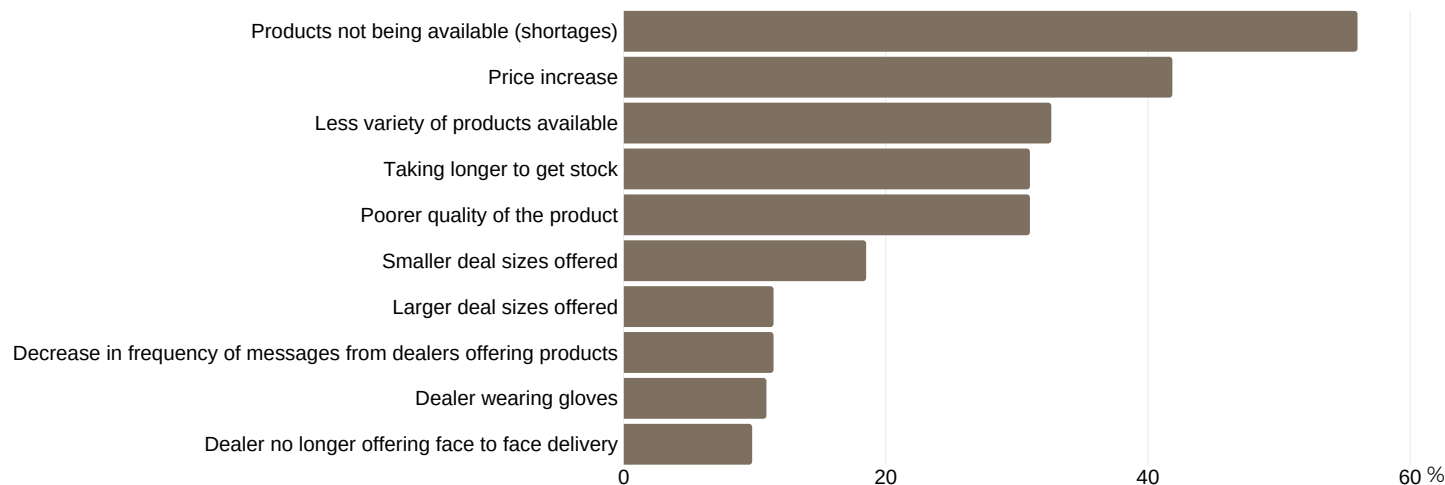
Reasons for taking more/ more frequently

- Boredom
- More time
- Stress
- Isolation
- Lack of support from networks and services
- Coping mechanism

Reasons for taking less/ less frequently

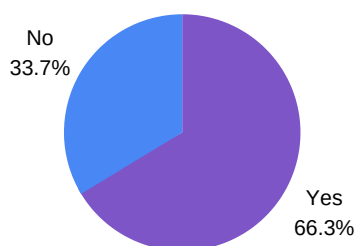
- No parties/clubs/pubs/nightlife
- Lack of availability
- No money
- Looking after their physical and mental health
- Staying with people who don't take drugs or who don't know about their drug use

MARKET CHANGES

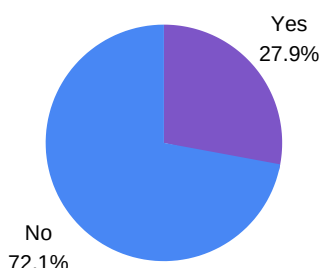


- **Product shortages was the most commonly reported drug market impact**, with 56% of respondents highlighting it.
- **42% noted a 'price increase'** which is reflective of increases in the wholesale costs of many substances.
- **31% noted that the drug was of 'poorer quality'**, 0.5% reported 'improved quality'.
- Comments commonly related to an increase in police, increased shipping times and more care taken when buying.

Have the changes to the the way drugs are bought, sold or taken caused any worry or feelings of anxiety?



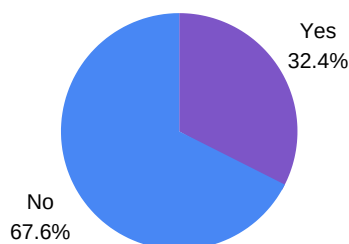
Have you (or they) experienced any unintended withdrawal symptoms due to COVID-19?



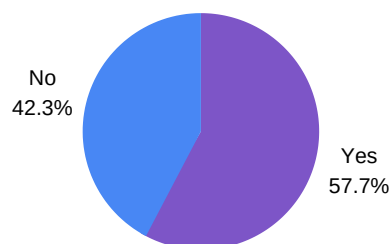
WITHDRAWAL

- **28% of respondents reported withdrawal.**
- Reported symptoms include: vomiting, diarrhea, headache, cramps, pain, depression, shaking, delusions.
- The withdrawal from drugs such as alcohol and benzodiazepines can be life threatening. Treatment and support for people in withdrawal must be prioritised.
- Check out this [withdrawal info](#) from **Drugs and me**.

Has there been any difficulty in accessing prescriptions due to COVID-19?



Has there been any difficulty in getting support related to drug use due to COVID-19?



SUPPORT

58% reported difficulty in accessing support related to drug use.

Reasons for this include:

- Lack of face to face support (and limited access to other methods).
- Security or technology challenges posed by online support.
- Difficult getting doctor's appointments.
- Some services have closed.

Summary by location

[Crew](#) is a harm reduction charity based in Edinburgh, Scotland but as we collaborate with UK and European networks, this survey was made open to all.

Raw data

This section provides brief data summaries from Scotland, the rest of the UK and the rest of the world. To see a condensed version of individual survey responses, please click the links below.

Please note we have tried to only include completed submissions, or submissions which give additional comments in addition to the tick-box questions. This data is best viewed on a computer.

Anonymous

The personal information collected included the 'closest town/city' and 'type of service' (if reported by a worker). To anonymise the service type we replaced the details with broad categories.

- 1. Justice (prison, courts, police)
- 2. Health (NHS, mental health)
- 3. Drugs (services for alcohol and other drugs inc. harm reduction)
- 4. Recovery (fellowships, recovery organisations)
- 5. Advocacy (advocacy service, activists)
- 6. Housing (supported accommodation, sheltered housing)
- 7. Youth (young people)
- 8. Local Authority (council run, partnerships)
- 9. Voluntary (charities, third sector, volunteers)
- 10. Support (advice, support, social work, counselling)

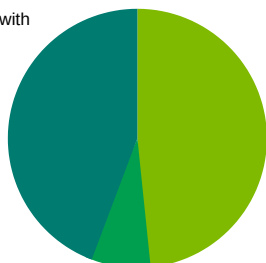
To anonymise the location we removed specific place names. Scottish responses have been collated by health board, other UK responses by county, and all global responses by country.

Scotland	Elsewhere in the UK	Elsewhere in Europe	Outside of Europe
142 responses	56 responses	102 responses	27 responses
View Scottish responses by health board	View England and Wales responses by county	View European and 'rest of the world' responses by country	

Scotland

Are you filling this survey in about yourself or someone else?

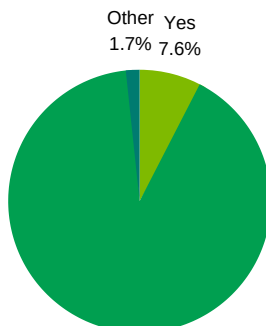
No, someone I work with
44.3%



No, someone I know
7.4%

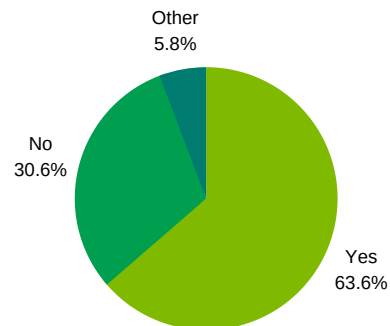
Yes, about me
48.4%

Did you notice any changes to the supply of drugs while the outbreak of COVID-19 was mainly confined to China? (December 2019-January 2020)



No
90.8%

Have you noticed any changes to the supply of drugs since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe?

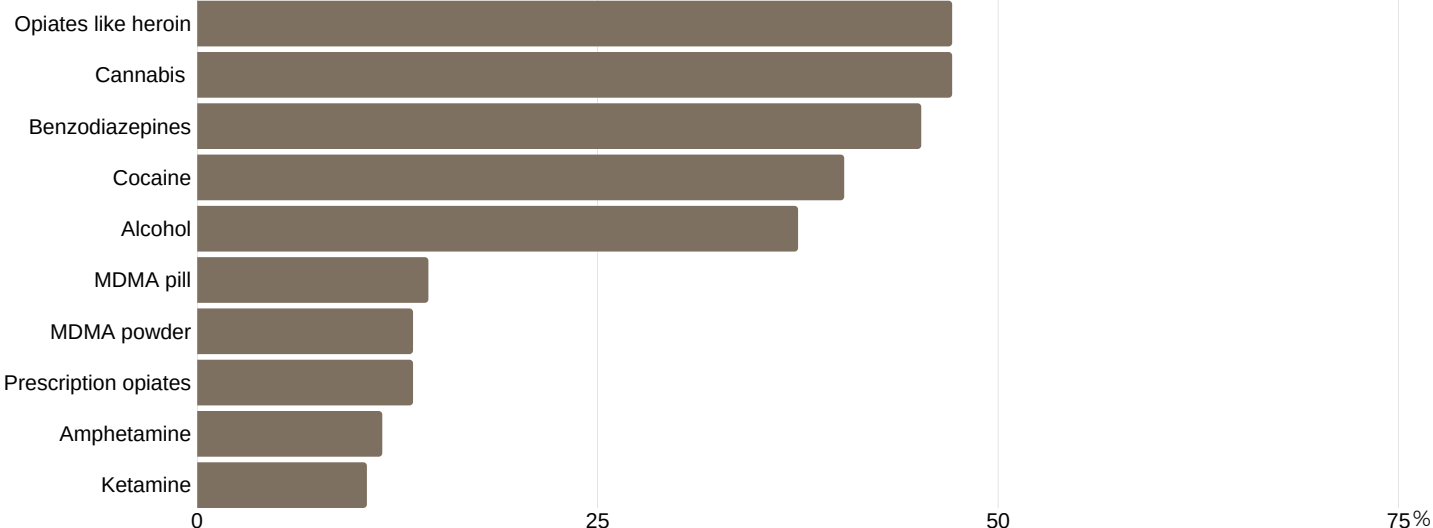


No
30.6%

Yes
63.6%

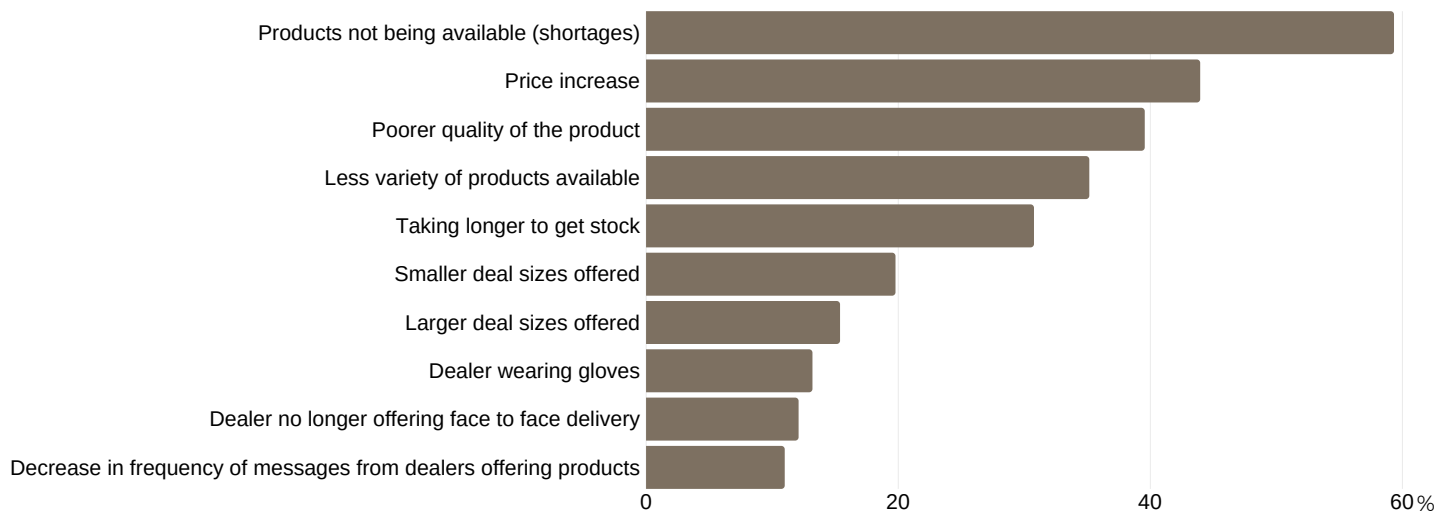
DEMOGRAPHICS

- **44% of respondents from Scotland were from services and people who work with people who take drugs**, which is higher than the rest of the UK and Europe. This is because, as a Scottish organisation, we are better connected with the services in Scotland.
- 64% of Scottish responses 'noticed changes to the supply of drugs' since the outbreak in Europe.



TYPE OF DRUG

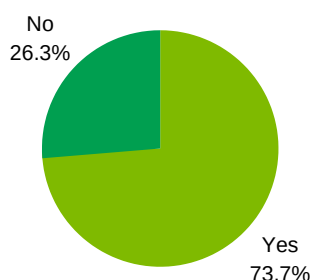
- **Benzodiazepines and opiates like heroin were in the top three most commonly reported drugs in Scotland, alongside cannabis.** This is different to the 'rest of the UK', where benzos only made it to seventh place, and 'Europe and the rest of the world', where benzos did not feature at all in the top 10.
- This is partly because these drugs are more commonly used in Scotland, but also because these drugs are most likely to be used by those presenting to services 'with problem drug use'; and 44% of responses from Scotland were from workers.



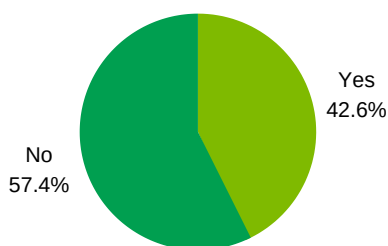
MARKET CHANGES

- Product shortages was the most commonly reported drug market impact, with 56% of respondents highlighting it.
- 42% noted a 'price increase' and 35% noted that there was 'less variety of products available'.
- 26% noted that the drug was of 'poorer quality', no one reported 'improved quality'.

Have the changes to the way drugs are bought, sold or taken caused any worry or feelings of anxiety?



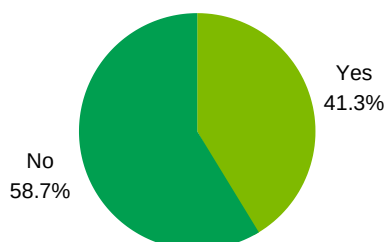
Have you (or they) experienced any unintended withdrawal symptoms due to COVID-19?



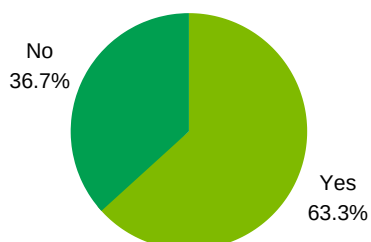
PHARMACY

- **43% of respondents noted unintended withdrawal symptoms.** This was mainly due to reduced access to drugs, either caused by reduced availability, or affordability.
- **41% noted difficulty accessing prescriptions** and comments included difficulty in obtaining prescriptions from doctors and long waits at pharmacies.
- A big thanks to the amazing pharmacy workers who are providing a critical, life saving service!

Has there been any difficulty in accessing prescriptions due to COVID-19?



Has there been any difficulty in getting support related to drug use due to COVID-19?

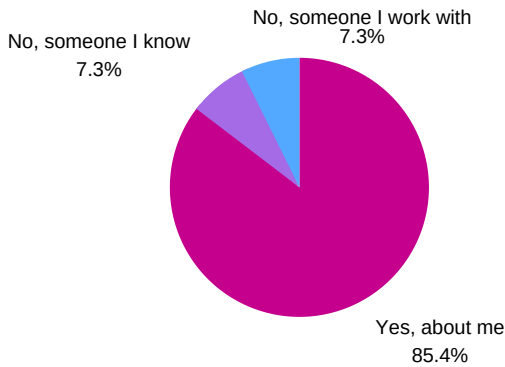


SUPPORT

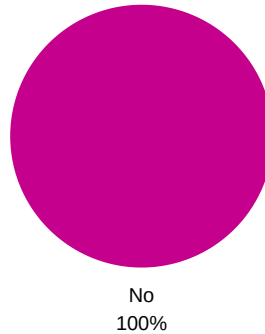
- **Almost two thirds (63%) reported difficulty accessing support for drug use.** Physical distancing measures have closed much of the face to face support.
- Many of the key front line services are charities that rely on donations and income, some of which has been halted. Many service closures will be temporary but as the economic stresses worsen, some closures may be permanent, leaving a gap in our already overstretched public health provision. **We know times are tough, but if you can spare it, please consider supporting a charity today.**

Elsewhere in the United Kingdom

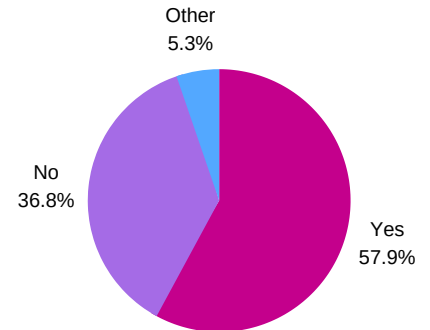
Are you filling this survey in about yourself or someone else?



Did you notice any changes to the supply of drugs while the outbreak of COVID-19 was mainly confined to China? (December 2019-January 2020)

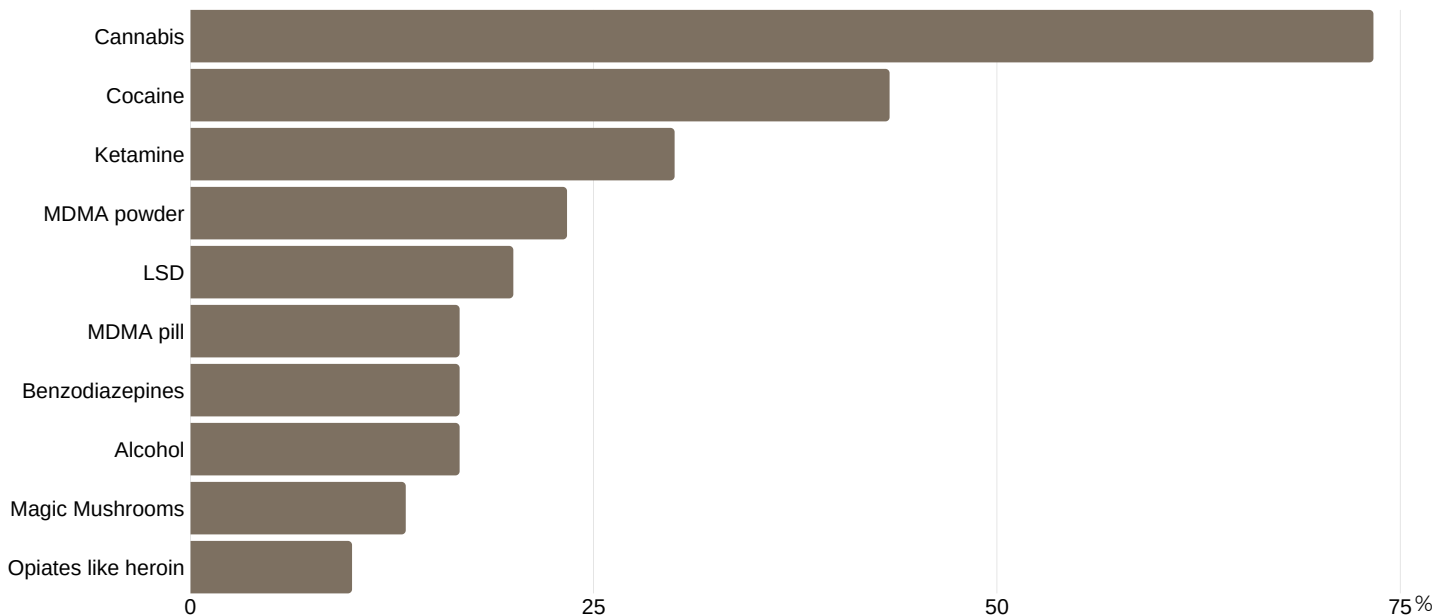


Have you noticed any changes to the supply of drugs since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe?



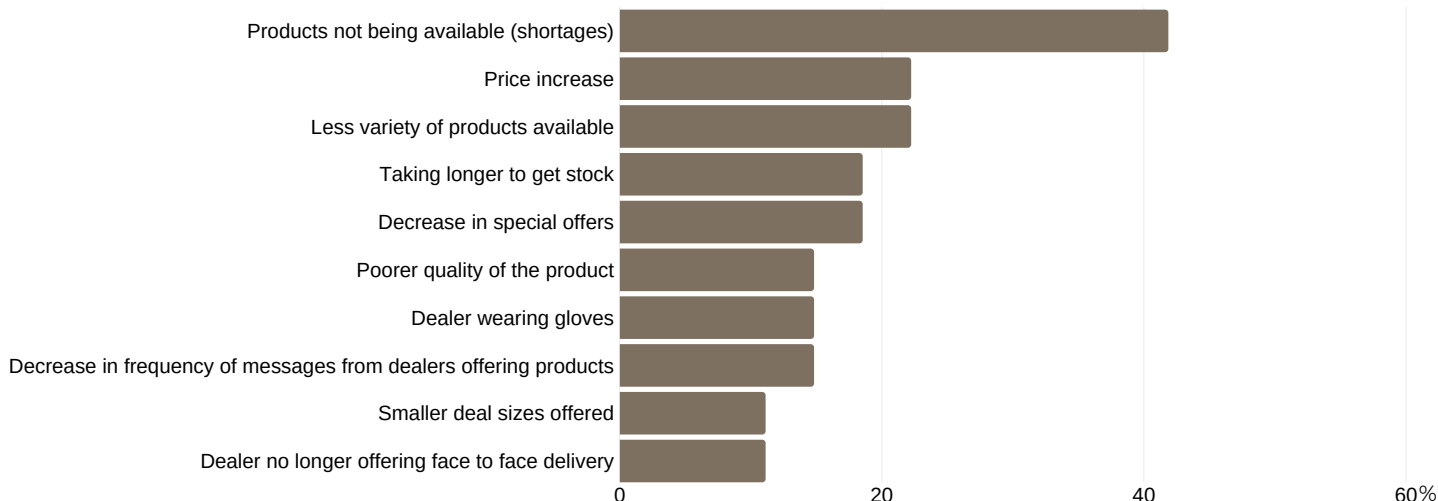
DEMOGRAPHICS

- Out of 56 responses for 'elsewhere in the UK', **54 were from England and 2 were from Wales.**
- No respondents noted a change to the supply of drugs in January 2020, but by the time the virus spread to Europe in February and March, 58% had. This highlights how quickly the pandemic has changed the drugs market.



TYPE OF DRUG

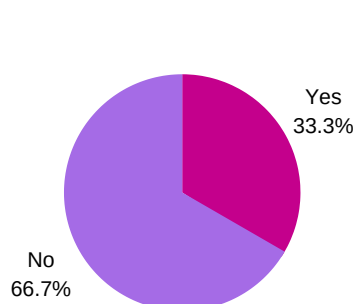
- **Cannabis was the most common drug reported, at 73%**, with cocaine in second place at 43%.
- 58% of people in England and Wales reported more than one drug. This figure was 62% in 'Europe and the rest of the world', and 78% in Scotland.



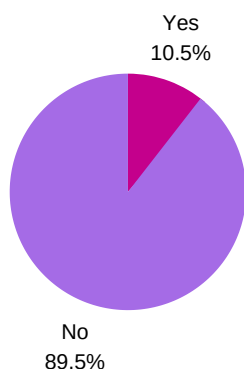
MARKET CHANGES

- Product shortages was the most commonly reported drug market impact, with 42% of respondents highlighting it.
- 22% noted a 'price increase' and that there was 'less variety of products available'.
- 15% noted that the drugs were of 'poorer quality'.

Have the changes to the way drugs are bought, sold or taken caused any worry or feelings of anxiety?



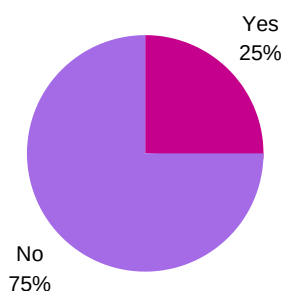
Have you (or they) experienced any unintended withdrawal symptoms due to COVID-19?



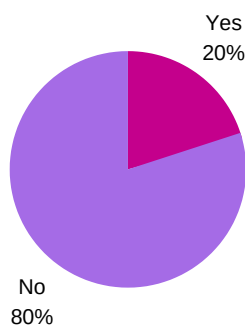
WITHDRAWAL

- 11% of people reported unintended withdrawal.
- 25% highlighted 'difficulty in accessing prescriptions'.
- The UK Government drafted [legislation](#) to better enable the emergency supply of controlled drugs if needed, but these measures are not yet in effect.

Has there been any difficulty in accessing prescriptions due to COVID-19?



Has there been any difficulty in getting support related to drug use due to COVID-19?



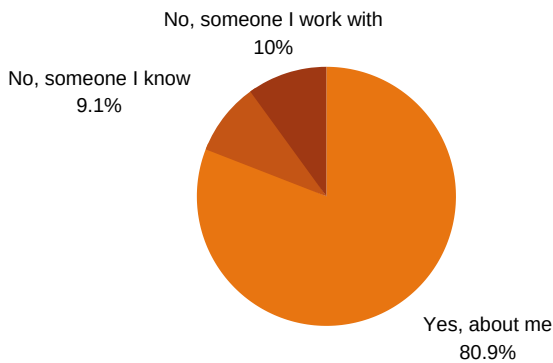
SUPPORT

The majority of support has gone digital including video recovery groups and streamed mindfulness sessions. While this is not optimal, digital communications are a great addition for many trying to access support.

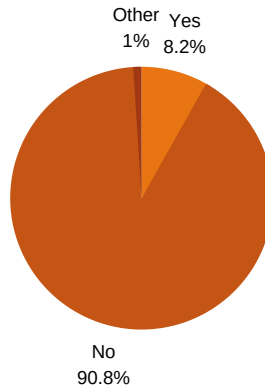
As soon as it is safe, face to face services should reopen as a priority. **Where possible, the new digital services should remain and be considered an essential part of support provision.**

Europe and the rest of the world

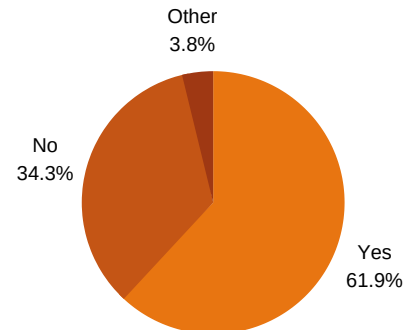
Are you filling this survey in about yourself or someone else?



Did you notice any changes to the supply of drugs while the outbreak of COVID-19 was mainly confined to China? (December 2019-January 2020)

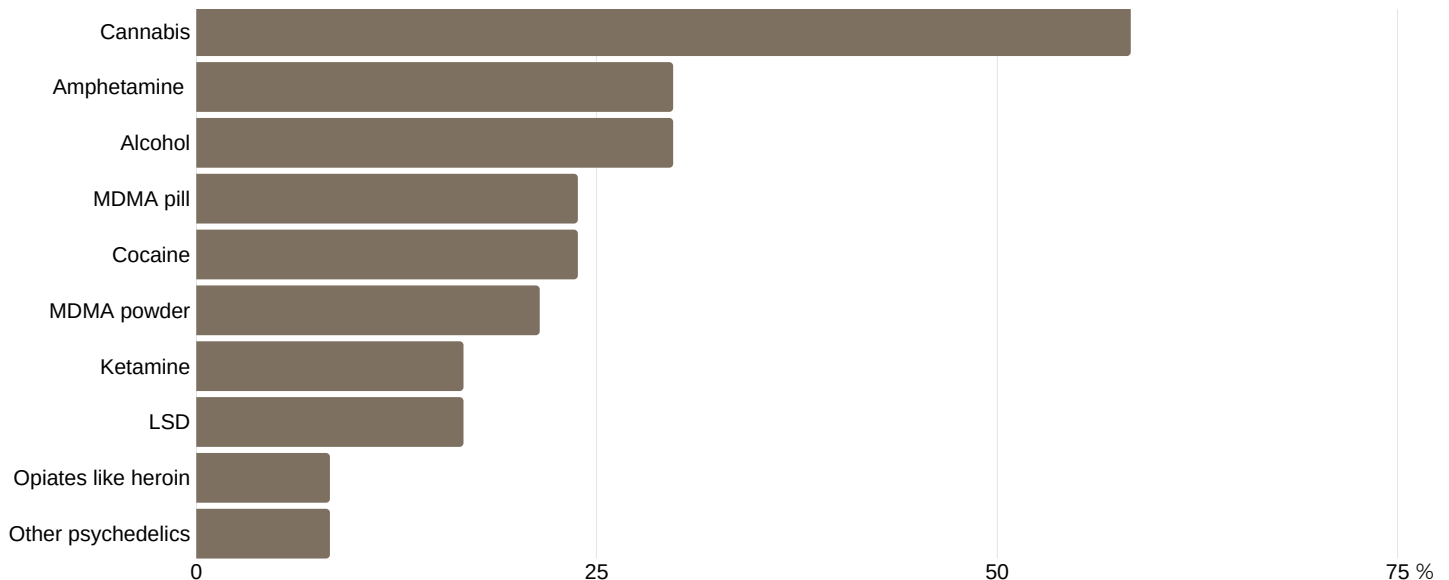


Have you noticed any changes to the supply of drugs since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe?



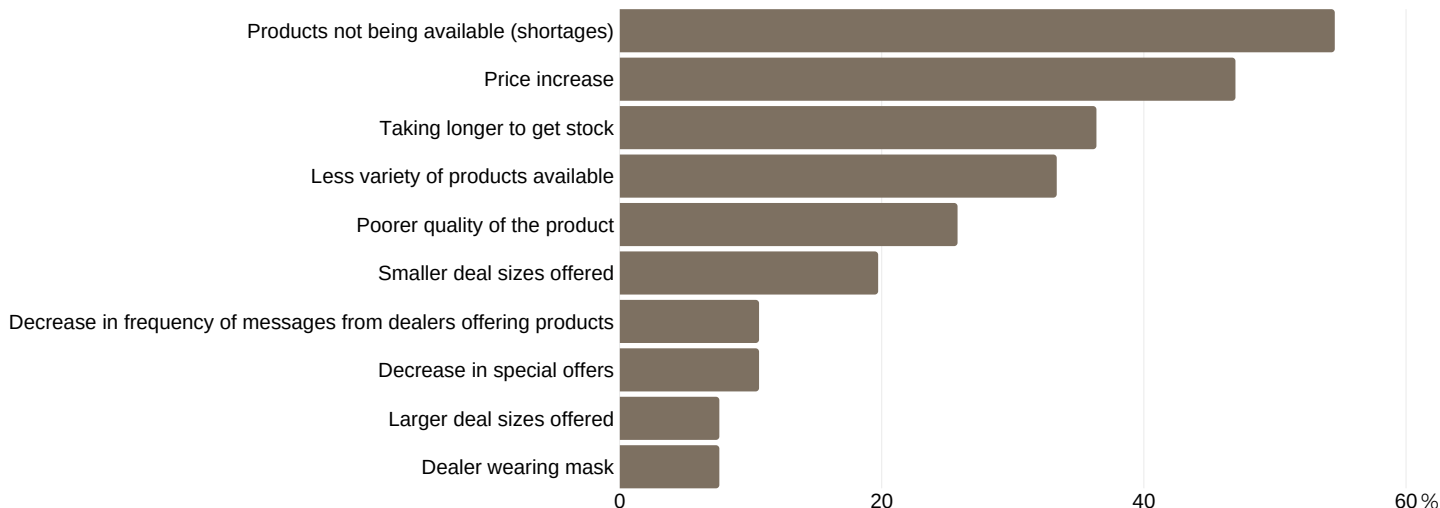
DEMOGRAPHICS

- **81% reported that they were giving answers about themselves.**
- Out of 129 responses from Europe and the rest of the world, **52 (40%) were from Germany**. The summaries in this section are therefore skewed towards German responses. A huge thank you to everyone in our networks who took the time to fill in and share the survey.



TYPE OF DRUG

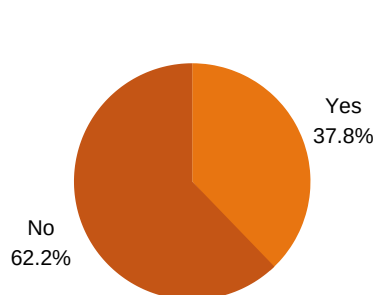
- **Cannabis was the most common drug reported, at 59%.**
- **Amphetamine was the second most common, at 30%.** In Scotland, amphetamine was the eighth most common drug reported and in the 'rest of the UK', amphetamine did not appear in the top 10.



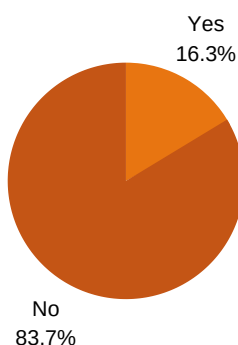
MARKET CHANGES

- Product shortages was the most commonly reported drug market impact, with 55% of respondents highlighting it. This is a global outbreak impacting a global market.
- 47% noted a 'price increase' and 36% said it was 'taking longer to get stock'.
- 26% noted that the drug was of 'poorer quality', no one reported 'improved quality'.

Have the changes to the way drugs are bought, sold or taken caused any worry or feelings of anxiety?



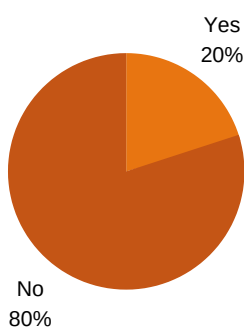
Have you (or they) experienced any unintended withdrawal symptoms due to COVID-19?



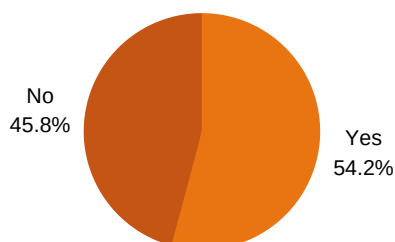
WITHDRAWAL

- 16% reported unintended withdrawal symptoms.
- We should not underestimate the health challenges posed by withdrawal, especially from depressant drugs (such as alcohol and benzodiazepines). Physical and mental health support should be given to the person withdrawing, as well as those around them.

Has there been any difficulty in accessing prescriptions due to COVID-19?



Has there been any difficulty in getting support related to drug use due to COVID-19?



SUPPORT

- 38% said that the way drugs are bought, sold or taken has caused worry or feelings of anxiety.
- 54% reported difficulty in accessing support related to drug use.
- 20% reported difficulty in accessing prescriptions due to COVID-19.

Overall Summary

- Overall **62% of respondents noted changes to the drug market** due to COVID-19 in Europe.
- **57% reported increased frequency of drug use**, raising concerns around an increase in tolerance, dependence, spending, physical harms, and mental health harms.
- **52% reported that the quantity of drugs being taken had increased**, with 45% reporting increased spending on drugs and 52% reporting the stockpiling of drugs.
- 68% reported that the most **typical method of purchasing drugs was through face-to-face sales**. 30% reported that since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe, social media and online markets were being used more often.
- **60% report taking different drugs** than they usually would – in some cases people switched to drugs that were more affordable or more available to them.
- Many people reported that the **use of alcohol had increased** and some people are drinking daily or in the morning. For those who are dependent on alcohol, access is essential to prevent withdrawal which can be life-threatening. For others alcohol was viewed as a 'go to' for stress relief, boredom and self-reward.
- **56% reported drug shortages, 42% reported price increases and 31% reported drugs were now poorer quality**. This raises concerns around harmful adulterants and novel products entering the supply chain.
- The adaptability of the drug market was exemplified by comments reporting that **dealers quickly changed their operations** by making postal deliveries, practicing social distancing and wearing gloves and masks. Many respondents were concerned about the potential increase in interactions with the police, rather than issues with the drug itself.
- **28% reported unintended withdrawal** as a result of the impact of COVID-19. Reasons for this include: a reduction in the availability of drugs (limited by supply chain shortages), reduction in the money available to purchase drugs, and for those taking prescribed drugs, reasons related to difficulty in accessing services and increased waiting times.
- **30% of respondents reported difficulty in accessing prescriptions**. Issues generally involved not being clear on when pharmacies were open, restrictions on opening times and queues at pharmacies.
- **66% reported worry or anxiety** relating to the impact of COVID-19 on the way drugs are bought, sold or taken. For workers, this focused on increased risks to clients relating to domestic violence and overdose. For people who take drugs, this mainly related to shortages, price increases and potential withdrawal. Other concerns include: increased tensions at home, a lack of privacy and/or technology to access support and the risk of taking drugs alone.

Recommendations

- This survey highlights that many people are taking larger quantities of drugs, taking drugs more frequently and spending more. This will increase drug-related harms, especially since many people also report a drop in the availability of drug-related support. Drug-related harms and deaths are already at a record level in Scotland and **we urgently recommend immediate and intensive investment in this area.**
- Reports of shortages, 'poorer quality of products' and less variety, highlight a changing drugs market. All drug use has risks and it is safer not to use drugs, especially during this time, but for those who do, informed harm reduction messages and programs are essential. **People who take drugs are encouraged to access drug testing** or 'checking' where possible and monitor the results from drug checking services. These can be found through the [WEDINOS website](#), and the [TripApp](#) and [KnowDrugs](#) apps. There is no real-time forensic testing of drugs in Scotland. **We recommend the introduction of a public drug testing program in Scotland to allow us to better respond to this evolving market.** Public health surveillance should be expanded, with significant drug market changes reported to services and the public.
- While drug use is escalating for many, the interruption to the drugs supply is an opportunity for some to reduce their drug use. Be aware that if someone stops taking drugs, or takes a reduced amount, their tolerance will be reduced, meaning they will need less of the drug to get the desired effect. **Naloxone and health promotion information on harm reduction and overdose prevention should be widely disseminated and targeted to at-risk groups.** This should be done in a timely way in order to respond effectively to the easing of lockdown and re-opening of nightlife spaces.
- **More than half of the people who responded to the survey, who said they worked in Scottish drug services, noted the use of cocaine.** Despite not traditionally being defined as a 'problem drug', the use of cocaine continues to escalate and we should expand **drug services to ensure those who take stimulants and other drugs have the provision they need** (including counselling, substitute prescribing and sterile equipment such as pipes and straws).
- It is essential prison populations are kept as small as possible to help reduce the institutional spread of SARS-CoV-2. Those in prison are also impacted by tightened regimes, reduced access to support for their drug use, and are vulnerable to changes in the drugs market. **We recommend that prisons (and all services that work with people who take drugs) closely monitor changes to drug use and report these to their local authority.**
- Numerous comments related to concerns on increased police activity and presence. This is an opportunity to keep people who use drugs out of the courts and give consideration to other methods of justice. To ensure efficiency in the criminal justice system, **consideration should be given to expanding the 'Recorded Police Warning' system to include low level offences related to all drugs, not just cannabis.**
- Physical distancing and isolation was reported to cause stress, anxiety and depression but it has presented a great opportunity to reduce the transmission of other infectious diseases such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs, such as chlamydia) and blood borne viruses (BBVs such as hepatitis C and HIV). Now is the perfect time to ramp up disease testing (and treatment) and **we encourage people to get tested for STIs and BBVs prior to physically re-engaging.**
- In many ways, our services and people have stepped up to meet these new and difficult challenges, but we are only at the beginning. More must be done, as the collective and widespread trauma of COVID-19 and subsequent challenges will fuel drug taking for years to come.

Limitations and Parameters

- This document summarises all the data from weeks one to four of Crew's COVID-19 drug market survey.
- There were 327 partial and complete responses in total. Not every respondent answered every question, therefore all percentages shown represent the percentage of the number of the respondents to that particular question. As a range, between 166 and 327 people responded to each question.
- In the weekly summaries and individual response tables, where possible, we have provided the exact comments submitted but some responses have been abridged for clarity and conciseness.
- We advertised the survey through our professional networks, mailing list, social media and friends. We did not pay to advertise the survey or results.
- It is a self-selecting and self-reporting survey and does not represent any particular population. The numbers are too small to be representative and we don't have demographic information about respondents. This also means we can't directly compare responses from different locations.
- If you have any questions on the data please contact info@crew2000.org.uk

Love a survey? Check these out!



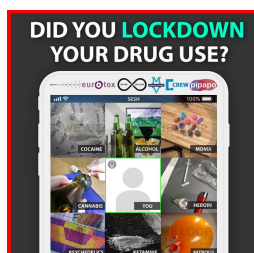
Crew

Reporting form and summaries



Release

Impact of Coronavirus on Drug Purchases Survey



Trans-European Survey

COVID-19 and drug use survey Phase 1: lockdown

Multi-organisation collaboration (inc. Crew, The Loop, Pipapo, Eurotox, Sonar, Modus Vivendi)



European Web
Survey on Drugs

EMCDDA

The Mini European Web Survey on Drugs: COVID-19



Global Drugs Survey

Global Drug Survey COVID-19 Special Edition

Thanks!

Our heartfelt thanks go out to everyone who has supported and shared their experience with Crew, including our volunteers, partners and people who accessed our services. We also thank all the key workers across our multi-agency partners, who continue to work through adversity for the greater good.

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