

COVID-19 DRUG MARKET SURVEY SUMMARY

MONTH 2 - MAY 2020



CONTENTS

3 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

4 INTRODUCTION

5 SUMMARY OF ALL RESPONSES

8 SURVEY COMMENTS

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

11 LIMITATIONS

Executive Summary

- Crew monitored the impact that COVID-19 and the resulting restrictions had on the psychoactive drugs market.
- This document summarises **50 responses** received between 29 April and 31 May 2020.
- In May, **64% 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 MDMA powder**. 30% report taking different drugs from those they would usually take.
- **52% reported taking drugs more often** and 52% reported taking a larger quantity of drugs, reinforcing concerns around an increase in tolerance, dependence, spending, physical harms, and mental health harms.
- **13% reported taking drugs less often** and 16% reported taking a smaller quantity of drugs.
- 52% reported spending on drugs had increased and 57% reported stockpiling.
- 69% reported that the **most typical method of purchasing drugs was through face-to-face sales**. 8% reported that since the outbreak of COVID-19, social media and online markets were being used more often.
- **69% reported drug shortages**, 38% reported price increases and 28% reported drugs were now of poorer quality.
- **30% reported unintended withdrawal** as a result of the impact of COVID-19 and 27% of respondents reported difficulty in accessing prescriptions.
- **50% reported worry or anxiety** relating to the impact of COVID-19 on the way drugs are bought, sold or taken and **67% reported difficulty in getting support** related to drug use.

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

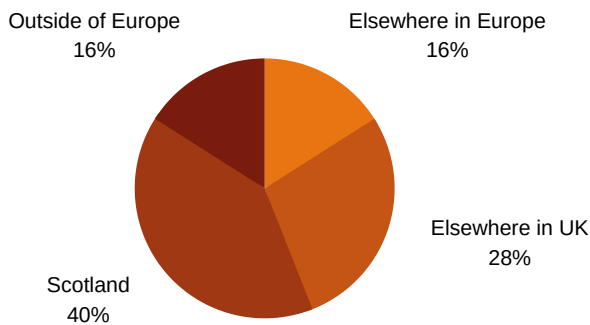
- In April 2020, we launched a 23 question, anonymous drug trend monitoring form, using the 'conversation' format on Survey Monkey.
- We asked for responses from people who take drugs, drug service staff, support staff and other professionals, as well as members of the public.
- Crew gathered 327 responses across four weeks in April 2020. The summary of month 1 results can be found here: www.crew.scot/covid-19-survey-month-one-summary
- We kept the survey open throughout May to continue monitoring changes to the drugs market but we did not advertise or push for responses. **This summary reports May responses only.**
- It is a self-selecting and self-reporting survey and does not represent any particular population.

Reporting

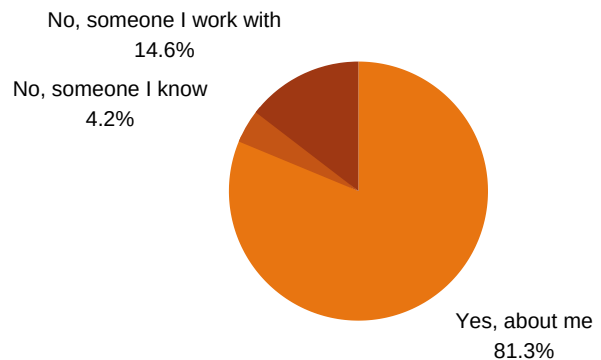
- **This document summarises the data from May 2020 (50 partial and complete responses in total).**
 - Previous summaries can be viewed by clicking the links below.
 - Our survey will remain open throughout June 2020, and you are welcome to fill it in and share.
 - **To ease comparison between months we have included the equivalent data from April in italics, in brackets after the May data. For example, if 62% of respondents in April, and 64% of respondents in May reported changes to the drugs market we would write "64% (62%) of respondents noted changes to the drugs market".** This is provided for information only, no analysis has been done to research the reasons behind any differences.
 - Due to the low number of respondents we have not split responses down by geographical area.
-
- [Take the survey.](#)
 - [Week 1 summary](#)
 - [Week 2 summary](#)
 - [Week 3 summary](#)
 - [Week 4 summary](#)
 - [Month 1 summary \(April\)](#)

Summary of all responses

Where are you based?

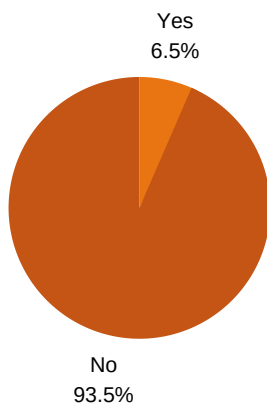


Are you filling this survey in about yourself or someone else?

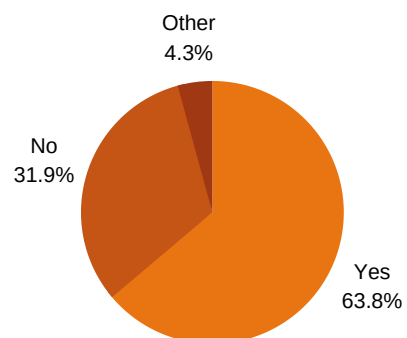


81% filled out the survey about their own drug use. This is an increase from 67% in April.

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?

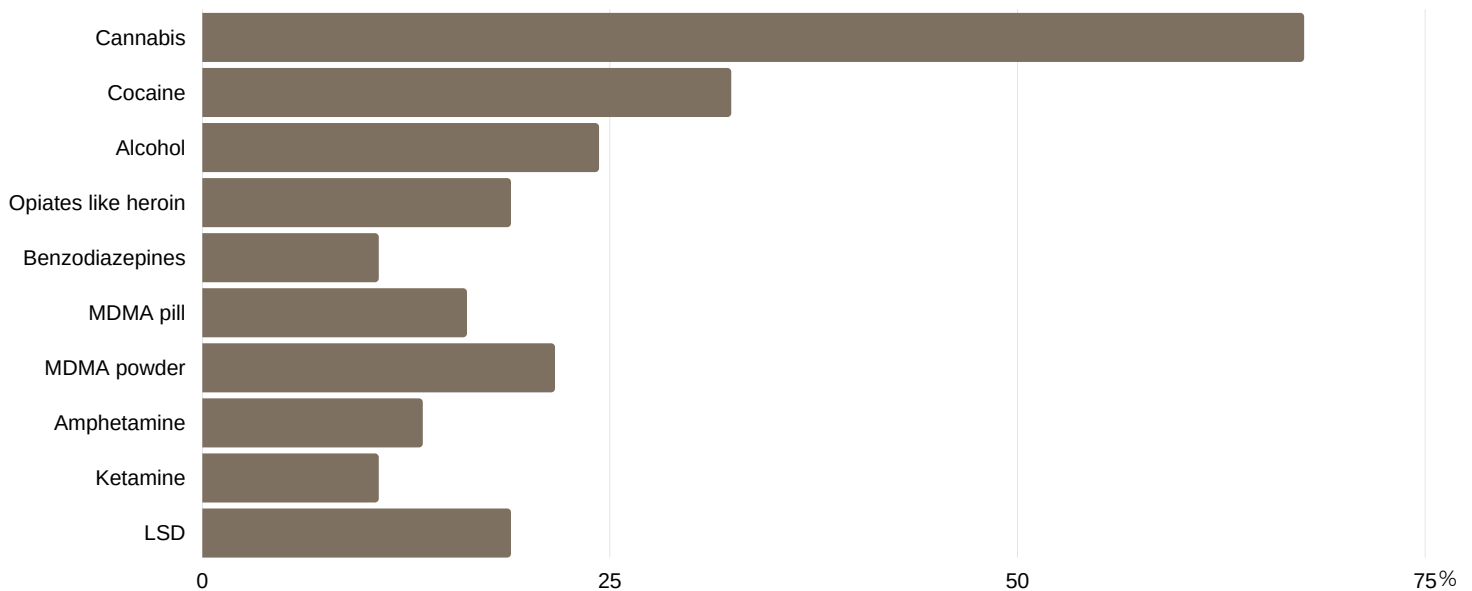


94% (92%) did not notice changes to the drug supply while the outbreak of COVID-19 was mainly confined to China. **64% (62%) did notice changes** to the supply of drugs since the outbreak in Europe.

PURCHASING

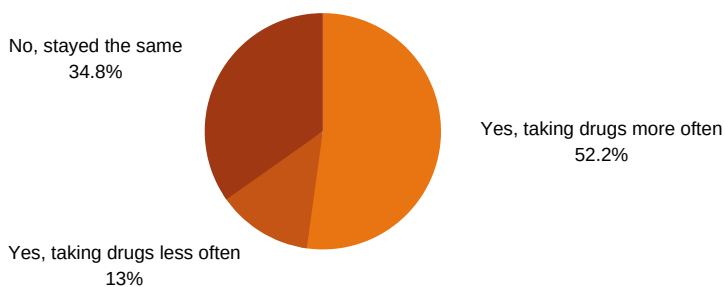
- 69% (68%) of respondents said that over the past year, **'a dealer, friend or family member (face to face)' was the main source of drugs**, followed by 'the internet (including the darkweb)' at 9% (14%). 3% (3%) used social media.
- 92% (78%) of those using multiple methods of purchasing/sourcing, said the **'face to face market has been impacted the most'**.
- 79% (46%) reported that there was 'no change to the method of purchase' they used, but 4% (18%) reported **'using online more'** and 4% (12%) reported **'using social media more'**.

10 MOST REPORTED DRUGS

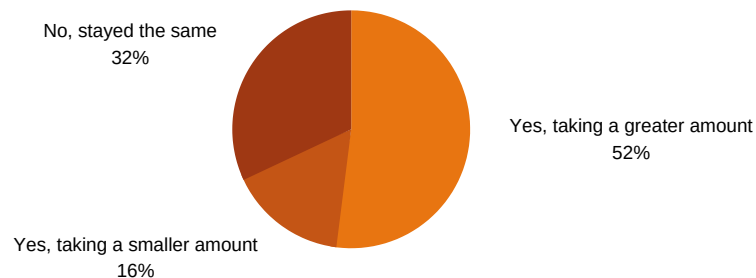


- The percentage of people reporting benzodiazepine use decreased from 26% in April to 11% in May. This may partly be due to the fact that almost all Scottish services reported the use of benzodiazepines and the number of reports from services fell from 25% in April to 15% in May.
- The percentage of people reporting cannabis use increased from 55% in April to 68% in May.

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



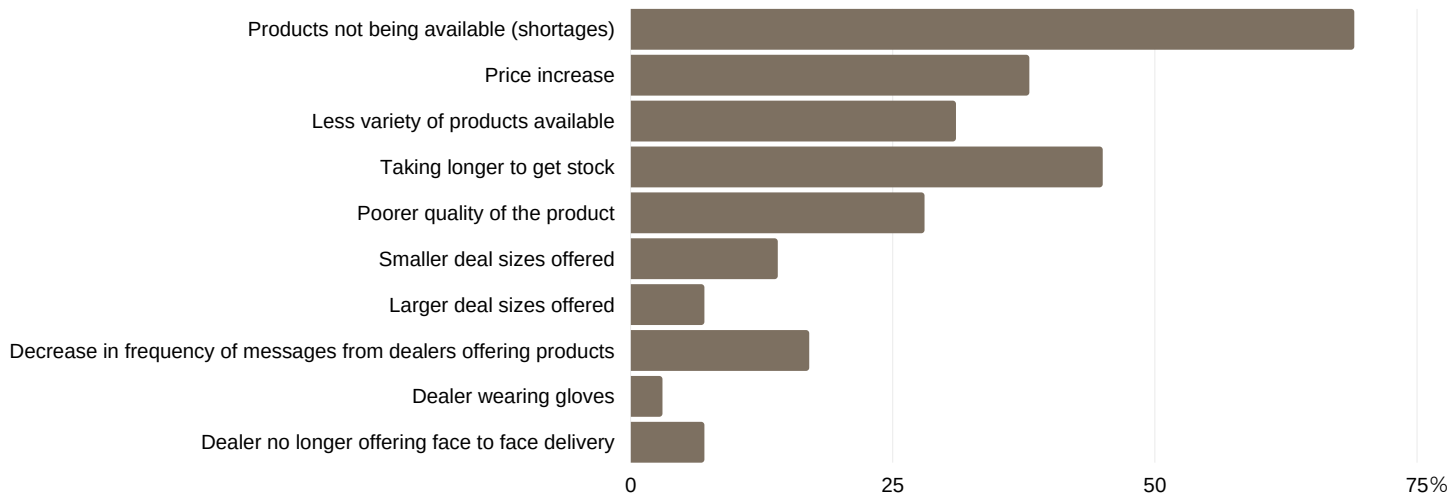
Have there been any changes to the **quantity** of drugs (inc. alcohol) taken due to COVID-19?



BEHAVIOUR

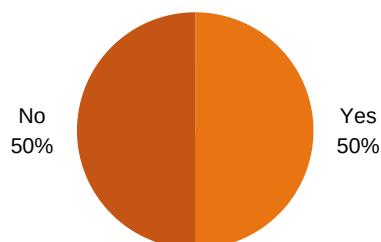
- 52% (57%) reported taking drugs **more often** and 52% (52%) reported taking a **larger quantity** of drugs. The most common reasons for this were due to stress, boredom and a lack of support, but there were also reports of people taking more due to them not getting the same effect as before. This may be due to their increased tolerance to the drug, or the drugs being of poorer quality, however without national drug checking in real time, we do not have quantitative insights into fluctuations in drug quality.
- 13% (19%) reported taking drugs **less often** and 16% (21%) reported taking a **smaller quantity**.
- 52% (45%) reported spending on drugs had increased and 57% (52%) reported stockpiling.
- 40% (36%) reported that they were more likely to grow/make their own drugs/alcohol.

MARKET CHANGES

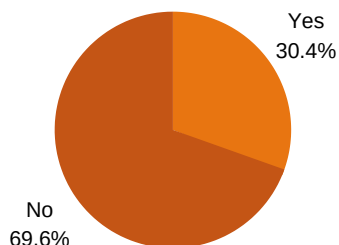


- **Product shortages was the most commonly reported drug market impact**, with 69% (56%) of respondents highlighting it. 45% (31%) report it is taking longer to get stock.
- **38% (42%) noted a 'price increase'** which is reflective of increases in the wholesale costs of many drugs.
- **28% (31%) noted that the drug was of 'poorer quality'**, No one reported 'improved quality'.
- Comments related to, no longer being able to buy face to face, dealers delivering, not being able to access to the same level, sourcing alternative drugs and drug of choice has changed.

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



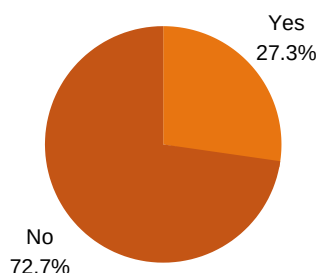
Have you (or they) experienced any unintended withdrawal symptoms due to COVID-19?



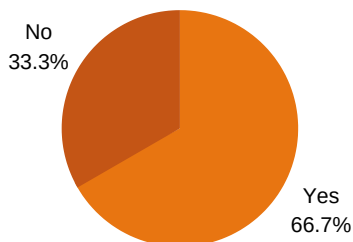
WITHDRAWAL

- **50% (66%) reported worry or feelings of anxiety.**
- **30% (28%) reported withdrawal.**
- Opiate withdrawal was the most commonly reported.
- Reported symptoms include: sleepy, apathetic, headaches, mania, pain, disorientation and mood swings.
- There was a suggestion that withdrawal symptoms were exacerbated by poor mental health and heightened mental strain.

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

- **27% (32%) reported difficulty in accessing prescriptions.**
- **67% (58%) reported difficulty in getting support related to drug use.**
- There were continuing reports of long waiting lines at pharmacies, reports of frustration about methadone being the only replacement drug they could get prescribed, and workers reported difficulty in being able to fully support clients on the phone.

Comments

In addition to the questions above, respondents were asked to expand on answers or provide more information using open text boxes. Here is a brief selection of representative comments. Thank you to all respondents for their openness and honesty.

PROHIBITION

- *"I'm not used to breaking the law or encouraging others to do so, as I have had to do during lockdown to get nicotine"/"decreased use because only inferior cheaper product available"*
[These quotes were from South Africa where the sale of cigarettes, nicotine containing products and alcohol was banned during lockdown.]

SUPPORT

- *"Face to face contact is limited, very difficult for some clients who seem to benefit from seeing a worker every day. Phone support does not work for some of the most vulnerable clients [don't have access to phone/difficulties in keeping charge/change numbers]. Hard to get the full picture of what is going on. Phone support does not always work in terms of assessing risk of harm."*
- *"I think for clients with high risk of overdose and harm from their drug use that reduced face to face contact with trusted drug and mental health professionals and support staff may also impact on how much and what drugs people are using. Services must be adapted to keep staff safe and clients from infection/transmission while supporting them to stay connected with the most vulnerable clients during Covid-19 pandemic."*

MENTAL HEALTH

- *"I've found the lockdown really hard on my mental health and my way of dealing with things is using drugs so obviously my use has massively increased so I'm praying the lockdown can end as soon as possible so I can go back to my usual daily routine (pre pandemic)."*
- *"Lockdown has had a negative impact on many people's mental health, including mine, due to not being able to socialise and see friends as normal. I doubt everyone is like this, but I've started using alcohol and coke more often to try and lift my mood and dispel boredom while I can't see my friends. I've not noticed any changes with my dealer, he's busy as ever, it's easy enough for him to get around at night and not get stopped or anything."*

SPENDING

- *"Clients seem to be not able to make as much from begging, in fear of police if they are caught, getting multiple fines. Vulnerable clients seem to be selling drugs more than I ever knew them to and getting involved in more violence connected to this. I think restrictions on begging due to lockdown and loss of income from this may have a big impact on drug markets and how people fund their drug use but I can't say for definite what this will be."*

Comments

- *"Clients who may have made a hundred pounds day from begging now cannot do this. However it seems they are still taking as much if not more drugs than before lockdown. Concerned about clients increased risk of drug debt, starting to sell drugs and turning to other methods e.g. theft."*

WORRY/CONCERNS

- *"I feel guiltier about meeting my dealer face to face and potentially getting myself and then my family ill due to this."*
- *"I'm meeting a stranger in a car park who may have met a dozen different people that day. It's an obvious risk - dealer doesn't wear mask and gloves."*
- *"Boredom and increase in stress at work, not being able to see friends who usually keep me grounded and out of trouble."*
- *"Poorer quality drugs require higher doses for the same effect. I'm using the same but buying more."*
- *"Only being able to buy small amounts during a time when I am smoking more makes me concerned about running out. I also live with someone who does not know how much I use, and so buying smaller amounts more frequently is more stressful than buying a larger supply as each purchase is another opportunity for them to notice, which may harm our relationship."*

USE

- *"Some people are no longer having a break from their drinking."*
- *"Use has grown exponentially during this time. There is nothing to break up the day now just more drugs day after day."*
- *"Bought more, so taking more. A change of scene."*
- *"More alcohol, substantially less other drugs."*
- *"Smoking more because I am unsupervised at home and have fewer work obligations (and easier to skive/work slowly while smoking cannabis.). It also helps to even out my mood, which reduces tension in the household due to the close quarters."*
- *"Not taking as much cause I'm not allowed out."*
- *"Usually people have a structure to their day but now that structure has been removed people are sat twiddling their thumbs so to speak. 'Idle hands do the devil's work'."*

Recommendations

May's survey results highlight similar themes to previous reports. 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 difficulty in accessing drug-related support. Reports of shortages, 'poorer quality' of products and less variety, highlight a changing drugs market. All drug use has risks, but for those who choose to take them, informed harm reduction messages are essential.

KEY MESSAGES

- As lock down eases (in many countries) and we are reunited with loved ones, it may feel like an opportunity to celebrate, but remember drug use is particularly risky at this time.
- If you have been taking less than usual -
 - Your tolerance will have reduced, meaning you will need to take less to get the desired effect.
 - If you decide to increase your use after a period of reduction or abstinence, there is a heightened overdose risk - dose low, go slow.
- In April and May, an average of 30% of respondents reported 'poorer quality' of drugs. This may reflect changes to the appearance, potency, purity or contents of a drug. If you choose to take drugs -
 - Try to only purchase from someone you trust.
 - Test your drugs before use. Reagent test kits are available online.
 - Always start with a test dose (a couple of draws, a tiny line or part of a pill).
 - Wait 2 hours before taking more.
 - If the effects are different to what you would expect then avoid taking more.
- If you have been taking more than usual -
 - This can have a negative effect on your physical and mental health.
 - Your tolerance will have increased, and although you need a greater amount to achieve the effect, taking greater amounts of drugs increases the risk of drug-related harms including overdose.
 - If you want to take less, a gradual reduction in use may help to reduce withdrawal symptoms and this is recommended for drugs such as benzodiazepines, GHB and alcohol.
 - For information on how to manage alcohol use, visit: www.crew.scot/alcohol-and-lockdown
- The SARS-CoV-2 virus can spread through aerosols and from contaminated surfaces and equipment -
 - Ensure good hygiene and follow harm reduction practices:
 - Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds before and after you handle, prepare or take drugs.
 - Clean packaging and wipe surfaces with alcohol wipes before preparing drugs.
 - Crush substances down as fine as possible before use to reduce soft tissue abrasions (cuts can increase the likelihood of disease transmission).
 - Avoid sharing paraphernalia (including snorting tools, injecting equipment, joints, pipes, vapes) - use colour coded equipment so you don't get mixed up.
 - For general hygiene advice related to COVID-19 visit: www.crew.scot/coronavirus-general-hygiene-tips
- If you would like help to better manage your drug use -
 - Find a drug service in your area: www.scottishdrugservices.com (Scotland) / <http://tripapp.org> (Europe)
 - There have been changes to services across Scotland, including injecting equipment providers (needle exchanges). For service changes, visit: www.sdf.org.uk/covid-19/service-delivery-changes
- Opiates? Carry naloxone -
 - For home delivery visit: www.sfad.org.uk/support-services/take-home-naloxone
- For more information -
 - Visit NHS Inform: www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/healthy-living/coronavirus-covid-19-and-drugs-use

Limitations and Parameters

- This document summarises all the data from month two (May 2020) of Crew's COVID-19 drug market survey.
- There were 50 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 34 and 50 people responded to each question.
- Where possible, we have provided the exact comments submitted but some responses have been abridged for clarity and conciseness.
- In April the survey was advertised through our professional networks, mailing list, social media and friends. We did not actively advertise the survey in May. We did not pay to advertise the survey or results in April or May.
- 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

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.

Love Crew? Love what we do?

Help fund our work with a much-appreciated donation

www.crew.scot/donate