EUROPEAN SOCIETY
FOR SOCIAL DRUG RESEARCH

# 37th Annual Conference

30 September–2 October 2026
Vilnius University • Vilnius • Lithuania

## BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Research on drug policy, markets, cultures, treatment and harm reduction

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# What's happening to heroin? Career, cohort, age, and era.

James Morgan

## Abstract

### Objectives

While a number of data sources suggest that heroin use has reached a peak, a consensus has not been reached on the extent and nature of any declines in heroin use in United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe. This conference paper aims to explore various explanations relating to declines in heroin use and changing patterns of drug use amongst the most stigmatised and socially excluded people who use drugs (PWUD).

### Methodology

Analysis is based on more than 100 semi structured interviews conducted over the past fifteen years with people with histories of heroin use. While these studies were conducted with diverse primary objectives, all interviews yielded interesting discussion regarding drug use, drug markets, availability of drugs, and changing preferences and habits over time.

### Significant results

While many questions remained unanswered some findings can be communicated. Firstly, while participants have always complained that the quality of heroin is not what it used to be, only in recent interviews has availability been questioned. Secondly, most research participants have been above the age of thirty and first started using heroin many years prior to their interviews being conducted, and their responses suggest the heroin use tends to rise up until a point, and later declines. Finally, there can be tentative suggestions that heroin was a more important drug to earlier cohorts of highly stigmatised and excluded PWUD.

### Conclusions

The main conclusion is that further research is required, to ascertain histories of drug use across many sites in both the United Kingdom and Europe. More tentative conclusions are that while the research participants most easily available to interview are older, and might be aging out of their peaks of heroin use, we are also witnessing potentially steep declines in availability and quality of heroin alongside increasing quality of crack cocaine, and the availability of counterfeit pharmaceutical drugs.

**Keywords:** Drugs; heroin; drug trends

**Funding:** All data gathered for this research was funded by internal grants from London Metropolitan University and the University of South Wales.

**Bio:** James Morgan began researching drug use when beginning his PhD in 2010 and since then has continued to research heroin use and lifestyle, with more than 100 qualitative interviews conducted to date. He first attended an ESSD conference in 2016 and has spoken at all but one of the subsequent conferences and has also contributed to the annual ESSD output publications both as author of chapters and editor. James is senior lecturer of psychology at London Metropolitan University. As well as his teaching and research activities, he also co-hosts and curates the Street Drug Discussions series of conferences and webinars.

**Contact:** JC.Morgan@londonmet.ac.uk

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# The impact of declining heroin quality on drug use trends in the North-West of England

Rob Ralphs

## Abstract

### Objectives

The Taliban regime's 2022 ban on opium production in Afghanistan led to an estimated 95% reduction in supply the following year (UNODC, 2023). As most heroin consumed in Europe originates from Afghanistan, concerns emerged about a potential shortage and increased adulteration of street heroin. This anticipated 'drought' was expected to occur 18–24 months after the ban, once existing stockpiles had been depleted. This study aimed to generate local intelligence on the availability, price, and composition of heroin.

### Methodology

This paper draws on interviews with 48 people who use 'street drugs' in the Greater Manchester area of England. The sample comprised 39 men and 9 women aged 22–58, all currently using at least one of the following: heroin, crack cocaine, synthetic cannabinoids ('Spice'), benzodiazepines, or pregabalin. Participants were recruited via drug treatment services, homeless drop-in centres, homeless charities, and supported accommodation. The study also incorporates forensic analysis of 51 heroin samples.

### Significant Results

Consistent with the European Union Drugs Agency report into heroin in Europe (EUDA, 2025), participants reported that heroin remains widely available, with prices relatively stable. However, there was a unanimous perception that heroin quality is poor. This is supported by forensic analysis showing that 71% of 51 samples tested contained less than 5% heroin. Declining heroin quality appears to be reshaping drug-use patterns. Participants reported increased use of crack cocaine, 'Spice', and pregabalin, alongside, in some cases, attempts to source synthetic opioids.

### Conclusions

These shifts in drug use behaviours raise concerns about increased risk and harm. The findings highlight the need to expand access to drug checking services and to review current treatment provision to better respond to evolving patterns of use. More flexible, responsive interventions are required to mitigate emerging risks associated with reduced heroin quality and changing drug markets.

**Keywords:** heroin, adulteration, street drugs,

**Funding:** Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

**Bio:** Rob Ralphs is Professor of Criminology and Social Policy at Manchester Metropolitan University and Co-Director of the Drugs, Policy and Social Change (DPSC) research centre. He has over 28 years of experience in applied substance use research, working closely with service providers and commissioners to improve service design and delivery. He leads GMTRENDS, the UK's only annual interdisciplinary project monitoring emerging drug use in Greater Manchester and contributes to several advisory bodies including the Greater Manchester Drug Alert Panel and the ACMD sub-committee on Novel Benzodiazepines and New Psychoactive Substances.

**Contact:** r.ralphs@mmu.ac.uk

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# Pricing and Supply Route Dynamics Following the Announced Heroin Shortage

**Davide Fortin**

## Abstract

### Objectives

Geopolitical shifts in Afghanistan's opium production, alongside heightened enforcement have generated profound market uncertainty across European illicit opiate supply chains. This study examines how vendor actors adapt pricing strategies and logistical routes on Archetype, a major darkweb marketplace, analyzing these dynamics as indicators of how information asymmetries and risks are negotiated under prohibition.

### Methodology

We utilize a longitudinal dataset of high-frequency scraped product listings from Archetype covering the 12-month period leading up to its shutdown in June 2025.

The database encompasses all opioids shipped to France, including heroin, codeine, prescription medications, and synthetic opioids. We estimate monthly trends in unit prices, quantity discounts, and shipping route adaptations to track structural market configurations over time.

### Results

Results document sustained changes in heroin prices, heavily differentiated by product type. Overall, opiate prices targeting France were higher than in the rest of Europe, despite a relatively low number of listings over the period. White heroin prices remained stable or increased due to its purity reputation, whereas brown heroin exhibited greater volatility, absorbed through intensified cutting to maintain lower retail price points. Concurrently, non-heroin markets gained prominence, suggesting supply diversification. Notably, fentanyl was available only during specific months and commanded extremely high prices. Logistically, shipments from Germany and neighboring countries dominated the French market due to lower interception risks, whereas distant hubs, like Canada, commanded premium prices.

### Conclusions

These findings demonstrate that market instability and enforcement pressure drive sophisticated, differentiated vendor responses rather than static disruptions. The premium pricing and scarcity of listings in France, combined with sporadic high-cost synthetic opioid availability, reinforce the concentration of control among strategically positioned darkweb vendors. This highlights the necessity of monitoring cryptomarket data to anticipate domestic supply shifts.

**Co-author(s):** Sophie Massin, David Décary-Hétu

**Keywords:** Heroin, Opioids, Darkweb, Drug Shortage, Fentanyl

**Funding:** The work was financed from the Programme Interministériel de Recherches Appliquées à la Lutte Antidrogue – PIRALAD (France).

**Bio:** Davide is a postdoctoral research fellow in drug policy and economics at the University of Lille. He previously held postdoctoral positions at Aix-Marseille University (SESSTIM) and ISGlobal. He obtained his PhD at Panthéon-Sorbonne University, exploring the economics of cannabis regulation with a focus on its integration into European health systems and the emergence of cannabidiol. He was previously a consultant at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and a lecturer at the University of Padua on the economic aspects of medical cannabis programmes.

**Contact:** fortin.davi@gmail.com, sophie.massin@univ-lille.fr

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# Hepatitis C Among People Who Inject Drugs in Latvia: The Role of Incarceration, HIV, and Social Inequality

Kārlis Rupainis

## Abstract

### Objectives

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection remains highly prevalent among people who inject drugs (PWID) and represents a major public health challenge. While individual risk behaviors are often emphasized, structural determinants also play a role. This study aimed to identify structural and epidemiological factors associated with HCV infection among PWID in Latvia.

### Materials and Methods

Data from a 2023 cross-sectional study on HIV and associated factors among PWID in Latvia were analyzed. HCV point-prevalence was determined by rapid testing (capillary blood). To account for the respondent-driven sampling design, analyses used weighted data representing an estimated population of 11 500 PWID. Complex samples logistic regression was used to assess associations between HCV reactivity and selected socioeconomic, behavioral, and structural variables adjusting for those significant in univariate and multivariate analysis.

### Results

A total of 11 500 PWID were included in the analysis, of whom 59.5% (n=6842; 95% CI: 52.1-66.5) were HCV-reactive. In the multivariable model, HCV infection was not associated with level of education, age of initiation for drug injecting, frequency of injection, history of HCV testing, main sources of syringes and needles. PWID with incarceration history had higher odds of HCV (aOR=3.08; 95% CI: 1.37-6.93). HIV co-infection increased the odds of HCV (aOR=4.63; 95% CI: 1.50-14.30).

Males had higher odds of HCV compared to females (aOR=2.17; 95% CI: 1.07-4.42). Individuals from minority ethnic groups had higher odds of HCV infection than Latvian PWID (aOR=2.55; 95% CI: 1.06-6.14).

### Conclusions

Findings highlight structural vulnerability and social inequalities in HCV infection among PWID in Latvia. Incarceration history and HIV co-infection were independently associated with HCV, while nationality differences may reflect broader structural inequalities. These findings support interventions addressing structural conditions.

**Co-author(s):** Katrīne Kūkoja, Jekaterina Kozačenko, Anda Ķīvīte-Urtāne

**Keywords:** . People who inject drugs; Hepatitis C; Incarceration; HIV co-infection; Structural vulnerability; Respondent driven sampling

**Funding:** The participation in the ESSD Conference will be financially supported by the Rīga Stradiņš university Institute of Public Health.

**Bio:** I am Kārlis Rupainis (23), and by the time of the conference I will be a qualified public health specialist based in Rīga, Latvia. My main interests include epidemiology, evidence-based policy for drug and alcohol prevention, and statistical analysis to improve public health practice through data-driven approaches. I am committed to advancing collaboration and innovation in European public health and hope to participate in ESSD Conference to share insights, learn from peers, and contribute to discussions on strengthening prevention strategies, health systems, and outcomes.

**Contact:** rupainiskarlis@gmail.com

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# Between the prison and the streets: “carceral care” and social abandonment among homeless PWUD in Athens

**Ioanna Gouseti**

## Abstract

As one of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations, homeless people who use drugs (PWUD) in post-crisis Athens often follow life trajectories shaped by structural violence, poverty, and repeated transitions between prison, homelessness, and substance use.

Drawing on qualitative findings from a biographical life-course study involving 41 homeless PWUD in Athens, this presentation examines how imprisonment and criminalization shape pathways into recurrent homelessness and marginalization.

The findings suggest that within a social context characterized by the weakening of an already residual welfare state, the criminalization of drug use, limited housing support, and inadequate social reintegration policies, prison operates as a complex and ambivalent social institution. On the one hand, it functions as a space of punishment, discipline, and the reproduction of social suffering and violence that permeate participants’ life trajectories. On the other hand, under conditions of extreme housing insecurity and inadequate care services, prison is often experienced as a temporary space of basic survival, providing food, warmth, personal hygiene, and a basic daily routine. In this context, penal institutions may offer a temporary sense of stability amid the dangers and instability of street life, functioning as substitute forms of care in the absence of adequate welfare provision. However, repeated imprisonment further reinforces institutionalization, social stigma, and long-term marginalization.

Situating these experiences within transformations in the Greek welfare regime and punitive responses to drug use, the presentation highlights how residual welfare and penal control intertwine in the management of poverty and social abandonment. It concludes by emphasizing the need for Housing First policies, decriminalization-oriented approaches, and comprehensive interventions grounded in human rights and social justice.

**Keywords:** People Who Use Drugs (PWUD); Homelessness; Criminalization; Structural Violence; Carceral Care; Marginality

**Funding:** Part of this research was co-financed by Greece and the European Union (ESF) through the Operational Programme “Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning” (MIS-5000432, IKY).

**Bio:** Ioanna Gouseti holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Crete and is an Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Sociology of the same university. Her academic work focuses on the sociology of drug use, social exclusion, and housing precariousness. Her research examines homelessness trajectories, psychoactive substance use, poverty, and forms of social marginalization. She has published articles in international peer-reviewed journals on homelessness, social suffering, and substance use, and has participated in research projects related to poverty and housing precariousness.

**Contact:** ioannagous@gmail.com, i.gouseti@uoc.gr

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# How third-sector agencies in England promote harm reduction within the constraints of the government drugs strategy

**Viktorija Zelionaja**

## Abstract

This paper presents research from an MA dissertation project focussing on how third sector agencies in England (recovery services; accommodation services) navigate challenges to delivering harm reduction to people who use drugs in the context of successive UK government drugs strategies that have de-emphasised harm reduction in favour of abstinence-focussed targets. Due to the complex nature of substance use, the targets set by the government (on which organisational funding is based) often clash with frontline practitioners' perceptions of best practice, as the set targets lack nuance or a realistic understanding of the complexities of substance use and how recovery occurs.

This research was based on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners working in relevant third sector agencies in the East Midlands region of England, to explore practitioners' experiences of delivering support to reduce harm and promote safe drug use within the constraints of the abstinence-focussed government strategy and target-based funding requirements. These experiences are situated within a broader understanding of the 'risk environment' for people who use drugs in deprived areas (such as the East Midlands), where factors on the micro (personal), meso (organisational and government) and macro (social) levels are significant to understanding substance use and how to reduce harms. Interview data was analysed thematically, using the framework of the risk environment with a further focus on stigma against people who use drugs in the context of the 2010 and 2022 government drugs strategies, providing more context to the gathered data. Recommendations relate to how future government strategies should acknowledge the realities of harm reduction highlighted by practitioners, and a re-emphasis on harm reduction in policy, as well as acknowledging the need for third sector agencies to be able to deliver more client-focussed, flexible support to people who use drugs beyond the measures of government-set targets.

**Keywords:** illicit substance use, harm reduction, government strategy, drugs, overdose, stigma

**Funding:** no funding has been accessed for this research.

**Bio:** Viktorija Zelionaja is an MA graduate from the University of Lincoln, who specialised in the studies of interpersonal violence during her Bachelors studies, and focused on illicit substance use during her Masters studies. Throughout her Masters studies, Viktorija was also working with people with illicit substance dependencies, which further encouraged her to conduct research examining the challenges between government proposed goals and the realities of having to achieve those working with substance dependent individuals.

**Contact:** v.zelionaja@gmail.com, 25085037@students.lincoln.ac.uk

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# Socio-Psychedelic Imaginaries and Metamodernism: Interpreting Contemporary Psychedelic Culture

**Linas Tavaras**

## Abstract

The rapid expansion of the so-called “psychedelic renaissance” has generated increasingly diverse and often contradictory understandings of psychedelic substances across therapeutic, spiritual, scientific, and countercultural contexts. While recent psychedelic scholarship has produced important empirical findings, there remains a need for theoretical approaches capable of interpreting the complexity, ambiguity, and plurality of contemporary psychedelic culture beyond rigid user categories or exclusively biomedical frameworks.

This paper explores the analytical potential of combining the concept of socio-psychedelic imaginaries with metamodernism as an interpretive lens for contemporary psychedelic culture. The paper draws on ongoing qualitative ethnographic research in Lithuania and surrounding post-soviet region, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and engagement with harm reduction, and expert communities. The study examines how psychedelic substances are framed through multiple overlapping imaginaries, including expertese, spiritual/experiential, and activist oriented perspectives. Rather than functioning as isolated belief systems, these imaginaries frequently coexist within the same narratives, practices, and communities. To interpret this dynamic, the paper proposes metamodernism as a useful conceptual framework for understanding oscillation between seemingly contradictory orientations, such as science and spirituality, and institutional legitimacy and anti-establishment critique.

The presentation argues that combining socio-psychedelic imaginaries with metamodern perspectives may offer a productive theoretical approach for interpreting contemporary psychedelic culture in East-Central European contexts. More broadly, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions about how social drug research can conceptualize rapidly transforming psychoactive landscapes in ways that remain sensitive to ambiguity, reflexivity, and cultural complexity.

**Keywords:** psychedelics; metamodernism; imaginaries; drug cultures; qualitative research; Lithuania

**Funding:** Funded by the Vilnius University PhD Students Fund.

**Bio:** Linas Tavaras is a PhD candidate in Ethnology at Vilnius University, currently conducting research for his dissertation, Psychedelic Cultures in Contemporary Lithuania: A Multi-site Ethnography. He completed a BA in South Asian Studies in 2022 and an MA in Modern Asian Studies (Magna Cum Laude) in 2024 at Vilnius University. Since 2023, he has represented Youth Organisations for Drug Action (YODA) and serves on the Steering Committee of the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA). His research interests include social and cultural anthropology, psychedelic cultures, socio-psychedelic imaginaries, harm reduction, and the cultural history of psychoactive substances.

**Contact:** linas.tavaras@fsf.stud.vu.lt

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# A Criminological Investigation into Psychedelic Drug Use: Soldiers, Shamans, and Supermarket Brands

**Richard G. Alexander**

## Abstract

This book provides a vital, critical criminological contribution to ongoing discussions regarding the so-called 'psychedelic renaissance' by affording an in-depth ethnographic study of unregulated contexts of psychedelic drug use. It identifies and examines three case studies representing prominent contexts of unregulated, non-clinical psychedelic drug use including: the individual psychedelic drug use of military veterans, the touristic consumption of ayahuasca 'shamanism' in Amazonian Peru, and the operation of psychedelic retreat companies within the 'spiritual supermarket' realm. Employing qualitative ethnographic methods, this book examines the various meanings being ascribed to psychedelic drugs within these unregulated contexts, exploring how their use and effects are being narratively constructed by users, facilitators, and other prevalent actors, and critically highlighting the complex socio-cultural factors at play. Findings are of key interest to any social scientist currently engaged in critical debates and research regarding psychedelic drugs, their use, and the contemporary psychedelic 'renaissance' phenomenon, and to any clinician looking for an expanded, qualitative discussion of psychedelic drug use beyond the quantitative, experimental, and clinical fields.

**Keywords:** Psychedelic drugs, psychedelic renaissance, psilocybin, ayahuasca, shamanism

**Funding:** South East Network for Social Sciences (Economic and Social Research Council).

**Bio:** Richard G. Alexander is an assistant professor in the Willem Pompe Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology at the Universit eit Utrecht, holding a Bachelor in Criminology from Manchester Metropolitan University, an MA in Global Criminology from Universiteit Utrecht, and an MA in Social Research Methods from the University of Kent. Richard achieved is PhD in 2024 having conducted ethnographic research into the narrative meanings being ascribed to psychedelic drug use in non-clinical contexts. As a researcher Richard is principally interested in drugs, drug use, and drug users, and the culturally constructed meanings surrounding them.

**Contact:** r.g.alexander@uu.nl

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# Tools, self-medication and pleasure: observations on the naturalistic use of psychedelics in 2020s Finland

Mika Tsupari

## Abstract

**Background**

The use of classic psychedelics (LSD, some psilocybin mushrooms, DMT and related plants, mescaline and 5-meo-DMT) is becoming more common in Finland and around the world.

**Objective**

I present my dissertation, which examines the use of classic psychedelics in Finland, from the perspectives of the users' motives for use, their meanings, and the reported effects of use based on 40 semi-structured thematic interviews. In addition, I examine the media frames that have been associated with psychedelics in Finland based on media material.

**Methodology**

The research was conducted using qualitative methods. The data consisted of 40 theme interviews between March 2022 and July 2022 with Finnish people who have or had used psychedelics and an additional media data set of 396 Helsingin Sanomat articles from 1960–1979 that mentioned psychedelics and 76 Helsingin Sanomat and 127 Yle articles from 2010– 2023.

**Significant Results**

Based on the results of the study, it can be stated that the renaissance of psychedelic research is not limited to the field of science, as the terminology of research, as well as the medical paradigm related to psychedelics, is becoming a well-known phenomenon in Western countries due to the Internet, the popularization of psychedelics, and the media and entertainment imagery.

**Conclusions**

The justification of psychedelic use seems to be largely influenced by the new wave of psychedelic research, self-experienced benefits, and ideals of individualism. Reported positive effects of psychedelics included feelings of euphoria and other positive feelings, even when the use was motivated by self-development or self-medication. The positive and more recreational aspects are important for users and could be an essential part of the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics, which is often overlooked in research. These aspects highlight the importance of the user's perspective on the field of drug research.

**Funding:** The research has funding for the years of 2022-2025 from the Finnish Alcohol Research Foundation (ATS).

**Bio:** Mika Tsupari is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki. His thesis focuses on psychedelics in Finland from the perspective of set and setting, motives, meanings, the culture linked to psychedelics and well-being of the users. His research interests include addiction research, drug research and harm reduction, and interactions between groups and individuals.

**Contact:** mika.tsupari@helsinki.fi

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# “We are not peer-led, we are peer-focused”: organisational constructions of youth engagement and peer work in harm reduction

**Rebeca Marques Rocha**

## Abstract

### Background

Young people are routinely excluded from the design and delivery of drug-related services, despite evidence highlighting the contributions of peer-led work to more responsive interventions. This study examines how two harm reduction organisations - Checkit!/SuchtHilfe Wien (Vienna) and Kosmicare (Lisbon) - engage young peer workers in their services, and reflect on what factors can facilitate or constrain their meaningful participation.

### Methods

This study draws on a qualitative dataset collected across Vienna and Lisbon, comprising in-depth interviews with organisational staff (n=10), participant observation of drug checking services and peer-led outreach, as well as focus group discussions with peer workers aged 18–32 (n=20).

### Results

Preliminary analysis reveals that each organisation embodies a distinct institutional logic of peer engagement, shaped by its mandate, funding context, and organisational culture. In Vienna, peer work is formalised through dedicated youth-focused projects that include training and career pathways; in Lisbon, peer engagement is more organically embedded in community outreach, affective networks and informal communities of practice. Both models present distinct opportunities and limitations for fulfilling meaningful participation rights.

### Conclusions

The study demonstrates that peer engagement in harm reduction is shaped not only by organisational willingness. Structural conditions, such as governance, funding, and institutional discourse, determine the extent to which participation becomes embedded in organisational practice. The findings provide insights into the conditions that enable meaningful peer engagement, particularly in the case of young peers. The research identifies practical implications for harm reduction services in Austria and Portugal that can have broader relevance for European debates on peer work and youth participation.

**Keywords:** Peer workers; youth engagement; harm reduction; drug checking; participation

**Funding:** Anton Proksch Institute Research Award (2025) for Early Career Researchers.

**Bio:** Rebeca Marques Rocha, is a PhD candidate in the Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations and a Junior Visiting Researcher at the Shattuck Center for Human Rights, both within the Central European University (Vienna). Her research explores youth engagement on responses to drug-related challenges, focusing on harm reduction. Between 2023 and 2026 she served as the High-Level Communications and Advocacy programme lead at Youth RISE.

**Contact:** marques-rocha_rebeca@phd.ceu.edu

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# Stitching Stories for Recovery: Methodological Innovation in European Recovery Research

Lisa Williams

## Abstract

### Objectives

Building on a presentation delivered at the 2024 ESSD conference in Manchester on creative methods for public engagement in drug policy debates, this paper advances an argument for textile arts, specifically stitching, as a research method within recovery-focused drugs research. The paper aims to: (1) articulate how arts-based methods align with rights-based and stigma-aware approaches to drugs research; (2) argue for stitching as a methodological innovation for researching recovery; and (3) examine the ethical and practical challenges of mobilising stitching as research practice.

### Methodology

The paper is situated within scholarship from recovery arts and creative health and adopts a theoretical and methodological analytical approach, drawing on feminist, socio-material and participatory research traditions. It develops a conceptual framework for stitching as a recovery-aligned qualitative method, outlining a proposal for its use with women in recovery from substance use.

### Significant Results

The paper argues that stitching is an innovative qualitative approach for drugs research which can generate embodied, sensory and material forms of knowledge often inaccessible through interview-based methods. From a human-rights perspective, stitch-based methods can support autonomy, consent and self-representation, enabling women in recovery to challenge stigma and deficit-based narratives common within European drug policy contexts. The paper also highlights key methodological challenges, including tensions between process and aesthetic quality, questions of authorship and ownership, risks associated with public display, and the labour involved in facilitation and curation.

### Conclusions

Stitching offers significant potential as a rights-aligned, participatory and analytically productive method for recovery-focused drugs research in Europe. However, the paper argues that realising this requires careful ethical governance, reflexive practice and sustained attention to power, representation and stigma within research and public engagement contexts.

**Keywords:** Arts-based methods, recovery, human rights, stigma

**Funding:** Not applicable.

**Bio:** Lisa Williams is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Manchester University, UK. She has been a regular attendee at the ESSD since 2023 where her exhibition, Behind Closed Doors, was displayed. She co-hosted the 2024 ESSD conference in Manchester with Rob Ralphs at Manchester Metropolitan University. Lisa's research brings creative methods to the study of drug use and drug policy.

**Contact:** lisa.williams-2@manchester.ac.uk

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# Harm Reduction and Low-Threshold Services in Open Drug Scenes: The Case of São Paulo

**Aline Oliveira**

## Abstract

Open drug scenes in São Paulo constitute spaces where drug use, homelessness, extreme social vulnerability and barriers to public services intersect. The city has developed integrated public services connecting mental health care and social assistance, in which harm reduction is incorporated as a strategy of care and risk management. However, these services generally do not allow drug use within their facilities, and abstinence from substance use is a condition for remaining in the service. This raises a critical question concerning the limits of harm reduction when access to care remains incompatible with continued drug use.

Drawing on a qualitative approach, this study examines the institutional boundaries between harm reduction and low-threshold approaches in the context of open drug scenes in São Paulo. The Portuguese experience of harm reduction and low-threshold services is used as an analytical reference, in dialogue with emerging Brazilian policy debates on supervised consumption spaces and their feasibility in the São Paulo context. Rather than proposing a direct transfer of the Portuguese experience, the study adopts a policy translation perspective to examine how principles of low-threshold care are shaped by different institutional, social and political contexts. The analysis focuses on the intersection of drug policy, homelessness, public health, social assistance and urban governance. The study argues that the existence of integrated health and social assistance services does not necessarily imply the availability of low-threshold care. This distinction becomes particularly relevant in open drug scenes, where some people remain outside conventional service pathways precisely because continued drug use conflicts with institutional conditions of care and permanence. By placing São Paulo in dialogue with the Portuguese experience, the research contributes to international debates on human rights, access to drug services and the possibilities and limits of translating harm reduction approaches between European and Latin American contexts.

**Keywords:** harm reduction; homelessness; open drug scenes; low-threshold services; drug policy; human rights; São Paulo; Portugal.

**Funding:** Not applicable.

**Bio:** Aline Oliveira holds a Bachelor's degree in History from Universidade Estadual de Londrina (UEL) and a Specialization in Mental Health and Psychiatry from the Institute of Psychiatry at the University of São Paulo (IPq-USP). She is currently a Master's student in Public Policy and Management at Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV), Brazil.

**Contact:** alinefso.hist@gmail.com

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# Shifts in Sentencing Severity for Drug Offences in England and Wales: Lessons for European Drug Policy Reform

**Lilly Crellin**

## Abstract

European drug policy has increasingly shifted toward diversion, and proportionality, yet many jurisdictions continue to rely heavily on criminal justice sanctions. Understanding how sentencing severity responds to policy reform is therefore central to contemporary European debates. This study examines shifts in sentencing severity for drug offences in England and Wales between 2010 and 2023 as a case study for wider European drug policy reform. The objectives are to assess whether changes in sentencing severity reflect offence seriousness, specific legal and policy interventions, or broader shifts in the composition of cases reaching court.

A longitudinal time-series design is employed using ARIMA modelling. Sentencing severity is measured through an imprisonment index combining custody rates and average custodial sentence lengths. Major interventions, including the Modern Slavery Act (2015), Psychoactive Substances Act (2016), 2021 Sentencing Guidelines revision, and extension of magistrates' sentencing powers, are modelled as step and shock functions.

Results show that sentencing severity increased by approximately 30% over the study period, while offence seriousness rose by more than 50%, indicating a growing decoupling between offence gravity and penal outcomes. Once structural variables were included, severity was more strongly associated with compositional and institutional dynamics than with proportional responses to seriousness. Most legislative interventions showed no consistent measurable effect. The 2021 Sentencing Guidelines revision produced mixed short- and longer-term effects, while the extension of magistrates' sentencing powers was associated with a substantial increase in severity.

The findings argue that rising drug sentencing severity is best understood as a system-level outcome shaped by enforcement priorities, case filtering, and court structures rather than increased drug offending alone. For European policymakers, the study highlights that reforms centred only on decriminalisation rhetoric or diversion at the lower end of offending may have limited impact unless accompanied by changes to prosecution practices, sentencing frameworks, and institutional capacity.

**Co-author(s):** Carly Lightowlers, Mark Green

**Keywords:** Sentencing Severity; Drug Policy Reform; Quantitative Criminology; Time-series

**Funding:** This research is complimentary to a PhD project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), through the Centre for Doctoral Teaching: University of Liverpool. Grant Number: ES/P000401/1.

**Bio:** PhD student specialising in sentencing, spatial analysis, and data science. Based at the Geographic Data Science Lab at the University of Liverpool, Lilly's research applies advanced statistical and spatial modelling to examine how structural, policy, and social contexts shape sentencing patterns in England and Wales. Lilly is passionate about applying data science to criminology concepts, her aim is to produce insights that support fairness, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making within the criminal justice system.

**Contact:** Lilly.Crellin@liverpool.ac.uk

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# Drugs, Death and Criminal Liability: Between Legal Classification and Social Perceptions

**Michaela Roubalova**

## Abstract

According to data published by the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), crimes related to drug use significantly outnumber those related to drug supply. In contrast, this ratio appears reversed in the Czech Republic. Given the country's reputation for pursuing an innovative and evidence-based drug policy, this pattern may, at first glance, suggest that criminal enforcement prioritizes the suppression of drug trafficking rather than the prosecution of drug users.

This paper examines how culpability is assessed in cases involving psychoactive substances. The presented qualitative analysis is based on four purposively selected case studies drawn from decisions of the Supreme Court of the Czech Republic. Despite differences in the legal classification of these cases, the analysis focuses on the shared issue of determining criminal liability for a serious consequence—namely, death. It argues that the legal status of a substance should not be determinative; instead, greater weight should be given to the specific circumstances of each case. Attention is paid to how the perpetrator's use of a psychoactive substance is reflected in judicial reasoning and decision-making.

The findings illustrate how social perceptions and varying degrees of acceptance of different substances may contribute to the stigmatization and, potentially, the hidden criminalization of certain groups of users. Furthermore, they reveal a discrepancy between statutory law and its interpretation in judicial practice, which may ultimately distort the broader picture of drug crime.

**Keywords:** criminal liability; drug-related deaths; psychoactive substances; judicial decisions; Czech Republic

**Funding:** Not applicable.

**Bio:** Michaela Roubalova (formerly Stefunkova) is a lawyer by background. She works as a researcher at the Institute of Criminology and Social Prevention in Prague. She also collaborates externally with the National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction. She holds a PhD in criminal law and criminology. Her research focuses on drug-related crime, drug policy, broader issues related to drug use, and victimology.

**Contact:** michaela.roubalova@iksp.gov.cz

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# Surveilled subjectivation: narratives of drug policing among people who use prohibited drugs in Sweden

Mats Ekendahl

## Abstract

### Background

Swedish drug policy centres on prohibition and abstinence-orientation but has during recent years incorporated more harm reduction approaches. Possession and personal use of drugs is criminalized, and Sweden ranks high among EU member states in reported drug offenses per capita. Despite this, governmental authorities are encouraged to meet people who use prohibited drugs (PWUPD) with a focus on protecting their health and wellbeing to lessen their marginalization. Still, knowledge is scarce on how this dual-track policy plays out in practice.

### Methods

In the reported study, we analyse interviews with 20 PWUPD who had contact with harm reduction services and reported interactions with policing agents in Stockholm, Sweden. The data include narratives of how drug policing was experienced on the streets, in everyday lives. The analysis concerns how the participants produced themselves as subjects – what Foucault and Deleuze term subjectivation – through relations between materiality (bodies and spaces) and discourse (knowledge and power). The concept of surveilled subjectivation is deployed to elucidate what the participants could do, what they knew and who they could be or become within the framework of intensive drug policing.

### Results

The results reveal the profound importance of surveillance in subjectivation processes characterised by struggles to avoid being defined as a “drug abuser”. The participants’ bodies, material belongings and social environments always risked being linked with “junkie space”, which in turn fuelled more profiling and surveillance. Experiences of being allowed to keep illicit drugs during stop-and searches, being respected as a “user” rather than an “abuser”, and being met as a capable citizen with rights, were described as rare events that could facilitate acting honestly and self-confidently in encounters with law enforcement.

### Conclusions

We conclude that the interviewed PWUPD creatively produced spaces, appearances, strategies and, indeed, subjectivities, that enabled them to co-exist with rather than escape the omnipresent drug policing. Calls for drug law enforcement leniency towards “marginalized drug abusers” might be a small but welcome step towards decriminalization of drug possession and use. It should be acknowledged, however, that they rest on the same pathologisation and Othering of PWUPD that the participants in this study wanted to shake off.

**Keywords:** drug policing, user perspectives, subjectivation, prohibition, Sweden, Deleuze

**Funding:** Forte 2024-00511.

**Bio:** Mats Ekendahl is a Professor of Social Work at the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Sweden. His research covers a wide range of topics in the context of Swedish alcohol and drug policy, such as user perspectives, drug discourses and policy processes.

**Contact:** mats.ekendahl@socarb.su.se

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# European approaches to the treatment and care of co-occurring substance use and mental health conditions

**Erikas Simonavičius**

## Abstract

### Objectives

Dual disorder (DD), comprising of co-occurring substance use and mental health conditions, is associated with worse clinical outcomes, increased service needs and requires a comprehensive treatment approach. Integrated treatment, which addresses both conditions concurrently by the same specialists within the same setting, is the most effective approach for people with DD and reduces inequities in accessing appropriate care. Two studies initiated by the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) review available DD treatment options in Europe and examine integrated treatment characteristics across several countries.

### Methodology

Information relevant to DD care across Europe was derived from the EUDA's Treatment Demand Indicator, a routine data collection system capturing characteristics of people entering drug treatment, and selected indicators of mental health service accessibility. Additionally in 2022, 14 integrated treatment providers from 10 European countries responded about their treatment, outcomes and barriers when implementing integrated care. This presentation reports on the DD care in Europe and characteristics of the surveyed integrated treatment services.

### Results

The mapping of DD care showed that different approaches exist in Europe, with over half of reporting countries noting some form of integrated treatment available. Integrated care services varied by treatment settings, although similarities and common care gaps were identified between services. For example, only half of the 14 services addressed tobacco addiction or provided suicide prevention, and none accepted patients in opioid agonist therapy. Most integrated care services noted difficulties in coordinating post-treatment care due to divergent views on DD among other specialists.

### Conclusions

The analysis of DD treatment options and integrated care services across Europe identified potential improvements for supporting people with DD. Specifically, the integrated care remains scarce within the support available to this patient group. Existing and future integrated care services would benefit from addressing polysubstance use, measuring treatment outcomes and improving continuity of care.

**Co-author(s):** Francina Fonseca, Alessandra Bo, Liesbeth Vandam, Marica Ferri, Cinta Mancheño, Ines Hasselberg, Joan Mestre-Pintó, Marta Torrens, Marc Auriacombe, Alex Baldacchino, Gabriele Fischer, Andrej Kastelic, Konstantins Kokkolis, Meni Malliori, Charlotte Migchels, Narayanan Subramanian, Tore Willy Lie, Anita Whyte, Linda Montanari.

**Keywords:** dual disorder, models of care, substance use, mental health, drug treatment

**Funding:** The study on integrated care services across Europe was funded by MCDDA Contract CT.HEA.0116.10 and RIAPAd RD24/0003/0001 funded by Instituto de Salud Carlos III (ISCIII) and co-funded by the European Union.

**Bio:** Erikas Simonavičius is a Scientific Analyst in Drug policy, at the Policy and Society sector, Policy, crime and markets unit, EUDA. Erikas holds a BA in Psychology, MA (cum laude) in Clinical Psychology (both from Vilnius University, Lithuania), MSc in Addiction Studies and PhD in Addiction Research (both from King's College London). At EUDA, Erikas focuses on drug policy implementation and evaluation across Europe with a focus on addressing mental health outcomes in drug policy developments.

**Contact:** Erikas.Simonavicius@euda.europa.eu

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# Transparency in Maternal Substance Use Care: A UK-Wide Review of Health Trusts via Freedom of Information Requests

**Emma Smith**

## Abstract

### Introduction/Objectives

Substance use during pregnancy is associated with significant maternal and neonatal risks and requires coordinated, multidisciplinary care. UK national guidance (NICE CG110) outlines clear expectations for integrated, person-centred provision; however, the extent to which services align with these recommendations remains unclear. This study aimed to map perinatal service provision for pregnant women who use drugs across the UK and assess alignment with national guidance, identifying variation and potential inequities.

### Methodology

A cross-sectional mapping study was conducted using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests submitted to all NHS Trusts in England and equivalent Health Boards in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland (n = 240). Requests sought information on policies, care pathways, and service configuration. Responses were analysed descriptively and thematically using a standardised extraction framework. AI-assisted data processing supported initial coding, with all outputs verified by researchers to ensure accuracy.

### Significant Results

A total of 146 responses were received (60.8%), with 118 maternity-providing organisations included in analysis. Just over half (55.6%) reported a dedicated specialist service for this population, while 16.9% described partial provision and 26.5% reported none. Provision varied markedly by geography, with stronger specialist coverage in Scotland (64.3%) and Wales (71.4%), and more limited provision in Northern Ireland (40%). In England, service availability was highly uneven, with notable gaps in rural and coastal areas and significant intra-regional variation. Multi-agency working was inconsistently reported but, where described, typically involved collaboration between maternity, addiction, and social care services.

### Conclusions

Perinatal care for women who use drugs across the UK is highly variable and only partially aligned with NICE guidance. Substantial geographic and structural inequities persist, particularly in access to specialist and integrated care. These findings highlight the need for more consistent commissioning, clearer implementation of national standards, and investment in multidisciplinary, community-based models to improve equity and outcomes.

**Co-author(s):** Mariana Gonzalez Utrilla, Susan Gaete Carrillo, Leoni Descartes, Polly Radcliffe

**Keywords:** Perinatal substance use; health service provision; health systems mapping; health inequalities

**Funding:** No funding to declare for this research.

**Bio:** Dr Emma Smith is a researcher at the National Addiction Centre, King's College London. Her work focuses on improving outcomes for families impacted by parental substance use and has a particular interest in women's health, service design, and reducing health inequalities. Emma is a qualitative researcher by training, with a particular interest in co-produced and creative methodologies. Her work focuses on developing and evaluating interventions to support engagement with maternity and addiction services, with the aim of informing policy and practice to improve outcomes for mothers and infants affected by substance use.

**Contact:** emma.10.smith@kcl.ac.uk, mariana.gonzalez_utrilla@kcl.ac.uk, susan.gaete_carrillo@kcl.ac.uk, leoni.descartes@kcl.ac.uk, polly.radcliffe@kcl.ac.uk

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# Using creative methods to address addiction stigma in women who use substances in pregnancy: Mum Points, an interactive play developed from the Stepping Stones Study

**Kelly Macbeth Mackay**

## Abstract

Addiction stigma was identified as a barrier to engagement in care in findings from the Stepping Stones Study that explored care pathways for women who use drugs in the perinatal period in four sites in England and Scotland. Attitudes of health care practitioners, and their preparedness for example to advocate on behalf of women for services and support can have huge impacts on women's care journeys including on whether they retain care of their babies. Researchers collaborated with Outside Edge Theatre Company to translate research findings into an interactive play, Mum Points, for midwifery students, health and social care practitioners. Methodology Transcripts from interviews with 36 women who used and were receiving treatment for drugs in the perinatal period were 'workshopped' in a week of Research and Development, with three actors, a writer and researchers. Drawing on this work, the writer, Jude Christian, wrote the interactive play 'Mum Points' aimed at student midwives, nurses and health visitor and health and social care practitioners. Audience members were surveyed for feedback, and 3 focus groups took place with student midwives six months after they had seen the play Results. Mum Points was performed to 200 students and practitioners in four performances in December 2025. Audience members commented on the powerful impact of the interactive character of the 'game' both capturing women's arbitrary access to services and support and involving audience members in critical decisions about women's lives. Student midwives highlighted the impact of the play in challenging views on women who use drugs in pregnancy and changing their practices. Conclusions collaboration with theatre makes can translate research findings concerning enduring addiction stigma in health care settings for health care practitioners and students. Creative methods are rarely used as a teaching tool, but live and interactive theatre can bring stories to life, change attitudes and challenge stigma.

**Co-author(s):** Emma Smith, Polly Radcliffe

**Keywords:** Addiction stigma; creative methods; perinatal care

**Funding:** The Stepping Stones Study was funded by the National Instute for Health and Care Research (NIHR130619).

**Bio:** I am a second-year PhD researcher within the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University. My PhD examines cocaine injection in Northern Ireland in response to evidence of increasing prevalence and significant health and social harms. I hold first-class BSc and MSc degrees in Criminology and Criminal Justice, with my MSc dissertation, awarded highest in the cohort, applying Agnew's General Strain Theory to problematic alcohol use among police officers in Northern Ireland. Having lost my father to problematic alcohol use, my academic interests are informed by lived experience, shaping my commitment to harm reduction and evidence-informed policy.

**Contact:** kelly.macbeth_mackay@kcl.ac.uk, polly.radcliffe@kcl.ac.uk

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# Findings from a Narrative Review: The Environmental Factors Influencing Initiations and Transitions into Cocaine Injecting

**Naomi Elizabeth Dickson**

## Abstract

### Background

Cocaine injecting is a significantly dangerous form of injecting drug use due to the associated increased injecting frequency and subsequent risks of harm. Evidence indicates it is increasing globally, including in Northern Ireland; yet this practice remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, this narrative review examines the environmental factors influencing initiations and transitions into cocaine injecting, alongside key gaps in current understandings at an international, national and local level.

### Methodology

Multiple databases were searched for peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 1960 and 2025. Guided by Rhodes' Risk Environment Framework. Studies were included if they related to cocaine injection; however, limited cocaine-specific studies required the inclusion of broader stimulant literature.

### Key Findings

Preliminary synthesis suggests a range of physical, social, economic and policy factors influence initiations and transitions into cocaine injecting. Drug market changes, social relationships, trauma and previous drug use have been evidenced to encourage initiations and transitions, while health concerns, stable social environments and secure housing may prevent them. However, most existing research relates to other drugs such as heroin or other stimulants and is predominantly quantitative in nature, inhibiting meaningful exploration of the social, structural and gendered dynamics involved.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Findings suggest that initiations and transitions into cocaine injecting are shaped by a complex interplay of environmental factors. This review contributes towards addressing current research and theoretical gaps and has implications for the development of drug use policy, treatment and harm reduction responses. However, in-depth understanding of the factors influencing initiations and transitions into cocaine injecting remains limited by a lack of cocaine-specific research, including none in Northern Ireland, highlighting the need for further in-depth qualitative investigation.

**Keywords:** Cocaine Injecting; injecting drug use; initiations; transitions; Risk Environment Framework; environmental influences; Northern Ireland.

**Funding:** This review forms part of a Ph.D. research study, funded by the Department of Education, Northern Ireland and in collaboration with the Department of Health, Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Alcohol and Drug Alliance.

**Bio:** Kelly MacBeth Mackay is an MSc Addictions student at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London, supporting the Stepping Stones Study as a research assistant in the National Addiction Centre. She draws on a background in visual communication and storytelling in recovery-focused research and community work.

**Contact:** dickson-n17@ulster.ac.uk

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# Early Signals and Risk Environments of Synthetic Opioids in Germany: Findings from a multi-source monitoring approach

**Franziska Schneider**

## Abstract

### Objectives

Synthetic opioids, particularly highly potent compounds such as nitazenes, are increasingly discussed as an emerging threat in European drug markets [1]. This study aims to identify early signals of their presence in Germany, explore contexts of availability and use, and assess associated risks from the perspective of professionals and people who use drugs. It contributes to a broader understanding of how new substances enter and diffuse within local drug scenes.

### Methodology

The analysis is based on the “NEWS – update on synthetic opioids” [2] using a mainly qualitative, multi-source monitoring approach [3]. Data was collected through structured expert interviews with professionals from harm reduction services, addiction support, and law enforcement, complemented by case-based reports and secondary data sources (e.g., data from toxicological laboratories, regional early warning systems, analyses of drug-related deaths).

### Significant Results

Findings indicate that synthetic opioids are not yet widely spread in Germany but have been detected in an increasing number of cases, including nitazene derivatives. These substances often appear in unexpected contexts, such as adulterants or substitutes in opioid markets, increasing the risk of unintentional consumption. Particularly youth and young adults have been described to be uninformed and having low levels of risk awareness, especially when it comes to fake medication. Structural factors, including fluctuations in heroin availability and dynamics of online drug markets, are identified as key drivers for potential future spread.

Poly-drug use patterns and limited preparedness of existing services may exacerbate overdose risks. The actual spread of synthetic opioids in Germany is hard to estimate due to a wide-spread lack of toxicological testing on these new substances [2].

### Conclusions

The study showed that the role of new synthetic opioids seems to be rising in Germany and that these substances are being detected when they are tested for. The trendspotter further emphasizes the importance of early monitoring systems to detect emerging drug trends and risk environments. It highlights the need for proactive, European-level responses, including improved information exchange, targeted harm reduction strategies, and increased preparedness of health services. By focusing on contexts and risks rather than prevalence alone, this contribution advances current approaches to studying emerging drug trends.

**Co-author(s):** Heiko Bergmann, Anna-Mavie Beil, Magdalena Janz, Esther Neumeier

**Keywords:** Synthetic opioids; risk environments; qualitative drug trend monitoring.

**Bio:** Dr. Franziska Schneider is a long-time employee at the German Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction. There, she is responsible for issues related to substance use in prisons as well as the latest trends in Germany’s drug markets. In her dissertation, she primarily employed qualitative research methods and is now continuing this work as part of the NEWS project. As a criminologist, she is particularly familiar with various topics and methods in sociology.

**Funding:** Ministry of Health, Germany

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# The Scaffold Gap: Ontological Shock and Preparedness in Psychedelic Science

**Christian Tym**

## Abstract

**Problem statement and Objectives**

The therapeutic promise of psychedelic science is matched by the challenges of upscaling. As Nicolas Langlitz showed, early clinical research drew on psychedelics enthusiasts (and occasionally researchers themselves) as trial participants. The current large-scale trials necessarily recruit a broader population, including participants or patients who have no prior experience with hallucinogens. This scenario is generating the emerging challenge of 'ontological shock', in which patients new to psychedelics feel their worldview called into question in the aftermath of a psychedelic experience. Ontological shock prejudices data on potential therapeutic effectiveness, threatens the tenability of clinical trial participation and raises underexamined ethical and safety concerns. How can it be ameliorated?

**Methodological proposal**

What makes intense psychedelic experiences experientially tenable for some people and not others? This presentation introduces the 'scaffold gap' as a methodological and conceptual foundation for ongoing investigation on this issue. It proposes that ontological shock may be predictable and even mitigable by pre-assessing participants' 'ontological scaffolding'. This term intends to capture the interpretive, relational and cosmological resources upon which users draw to make sense of and integrate high-dose psychedelic experiences into their existing worldview and approach to daily life.

**Preliminary findings and hypothesis**

As a means for a preliminary conceptualisation of ontological scaffolding, the authors draw on ethnographic fieldwork with Indigenous Amazonian ayahuasca users and with psychedelics "enjoyers" in European underground contexts. We hypothesise that both Indigenous populations and psychedelics "enjoyers" – despite the very different historical depth of their respective cultural frameworks – are able to sustain high-dose experiences through the pre-interpretation of altered states of consciousness embedded in their culture or sub-culture. We present qualitative data on their interpretive frameworks and interpersonal approaches that constitute their ontological scaffolding in these contexts, which we suggest are akin to harm-reduction protocols that can inform best practice in psychedelic science.

**Co-author(s):** Margit A. Petersen

**Keywords:** Psychedelic science; psychedelic therapeutics; ontological shock; ego dissolution; Indigenous knowledge.

**Funding:** Christian Tym's post-doctoral position is funded by a Dutch Research Council (NWO) VICI research grant for the project: "Poison, Medicine, or Magic Potion? Shifting Perspectives on Drugs in Latin America (1820–2020)."

**Bio:** Christian Tym is a sociocultural and historical anthropologist who has been carrying out fieldwork in Indigenous Amazonian Shuar territories in southeast Ecuador since 2013. He is currently a post-doctoral researcher in Latin American Cultural Studies at Radboud University and a sessional teacher in Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University. His work has focused on ontological dimensions of Indigenous culture and practice, particularly how these are transforming in engagements with Christianity and the global economy. He is the author of The Early Encounters with Ayahuasca: An Ethnological History (forthcoming with UNC Press), the first monographic study of the Indigenous history of ayahuasca. Margit Anne Petersen Margit Anne Petersen is an Associate Professor and Research Director at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University. An anthropologist by training, her work explores how the self is shaped through interpersonal relations and cultural environments. Her primary research focuses on the "intoxicated sexual relations" of young people, examining how alcohol use influences norms around gender, sexuality and consent. She also leads significant projects on the non-medical use of pharmaceuticals and microdosing of psychedelic substances in Denmark. As a Sapere Aude Research Leader, she advocates for holistic, interdisciplinary approaches to understanding substance use in social contexts.

**Contact:** map.crf@psy.au.dk, christiantym@gmail.com

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# Retreat(ment): Narrating Personal Change through Authenticity

Jesper Dunell

## Abstract

### Background

Psychedelic-assisted practices have gained increasing attention as novel approaches to mental health and wellbeing. While positioned as a radical alternative to mainstream treatment, these practices are increasingly being integrated into established treatment paradigms. Critical research in the alcohol and other drug field has previously shown that “change” in treatment is shaped by normative and individualizing frameworks aligned with broader neoliberal ideas of the self-managing subject.

### Methods

Drawing on narrative ethnography, including observations and interviews, this study examines how change is articulated, negotiated, and constructed at a psilocybin-assisted retreat, and how transformation is made meaningful within an emerging psychedelic treatment context. The analytical focus is on identifying how narrative environments, discursive resources, and narrative practices are combined at the retreat to promote a specific understanding of what it means to reach a state of health.

### Results

The findings show that personal change and development were primarily understood through the concept of authenticity: participants were urged to internalize the problems they experienced, to assume that psilocybin can reveal hidden and intrinsic aspects of the self, and to position themselves as responsible for maintaining the positive transformations they were to undergo. Reaching a state of authenticity was considered a form of panacea, as long as personal struggles had been properly understood as shortcomings of the self.

### Conclusions

These findings suggest that, despite the apparent novelty of psychedelic practices, the moral and cultural logics that underpin their understanding of identity transformation reflect broader patterns observed in the conventional treatment system. The retreat’s focus on achieving authenticity echoed well-known therapeutic interventions that endorse work on the self and individual responsibility. The study concludes that the psychedelic retreat did not depart from such normative understandings, but rather appeared as their idealized and extreme expansion.

**Keywords:** psychedelic treatment, treatment philosophies, narrative ethnography

**Funding:** Not specified.

**Bio:** Jesper Dunell is Ph.D. student at the Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Sweden. His main research interest surrounds the meanings ascribed to drug use by individuals and in society at large.

**Contact:** jesper.dunell@socarb.su.se

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# “Back then it was just a cool rap song about Xanax”: Song lyrics and qualitative interviews with young people and drug counsellors on tranquilizer use

**Sofie H. Borup & Margit Anne Petersen**

## Abstract

### Objectives

This study focuses on the non-medical use of prescription tranquilizers among youth in a Danish (and European) context where little social-science research has focused on this type of drug. The aim of our research is to explore the relationship between drug consumption and popular culture, more specifically, rap music and song lyrics that feature prescription tranquilizers.

### Methodology

The presentation draws on three types of data: 1) Analysis of song lyrics that reference Xanax and other prescription tranquilizers. 2) Interviews with young people between 15 and 25 who have experience with tranquilizer-use in Denmark. 3) Interviews with drug treatment counsellors about young people’s problems with tranquilizers in Denmark.

### Results

Analysis of song lyrics show a variety of ways in which tranquilizers are conceptualized, used and described, across time and geographical locations. Interviews with young users show how the song lyrics help them articulate their embodied experiences of tranquilizer use and how their interpretations may shift according to their personal trajectories of use. Interviews with treatment counsellors show that they relate the increases in tranquilizer use among youth in Denmark to the rap music genre and its explicit reference to tranquilizer-culture.

### Conclusions

By comparing young people’s narratives and treatment counsellors’ perspectives with the ways in which tranquilizers are portrayed in contemporary music, our analysis refines both scientific and public debates about the influence of such music on youth and their use and understanding of such pharmaceutical products.

**Keywords:** Youth, drug use, prescription tranquilizers, music culture, mixed-methods

**Funding:** The project is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

**Bio:** Sofie Hector Borup is a sociologist and PhD student at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research at Aarhus University. Her PhD project focuses on young people’s non-medical use of tranquilizers, explored empirically through qualitative interviews and follow-up body mapping interviews, reflecting her research interest in drug use, youth life, and qualitative methods. Margit Anne Petersen is an anthropologist and associate professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research at Aarhus University. Her research focuses on grew zones between medicines and drugs, enhancement and treatment, and illegal and legal activities in young people’s everyday lives, related to drug use, drug markets and drug experiences.

**Contact:** shb.crf@psy.au.dk

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# Alpha-PVP Drug Phenomenon through the Lenses of the Finnish News Media

**Tiina Poutiainen**

## Abstract

### Background

During the past years, Finnish news media have focalised their attention on the problem of the synthetic Alpha-PVP-drug phenomenon that has rapidly become a nationwide trend. This designer drug belongs to the cathinone class and functions like a stimulant that is usually consumed by smoking, resembling the crack cocaine trend in other countries. Its effects are intense euphoria, alertness, mania, and paranoia with a fast addictive nature. This interdisciplinary research examines the phenomenon of Alpha-PVP through representations in Finnish mainstream news media. It seeks to comprehend how this drug trend can be conceptualized in relation to Finnish dual-track drug policy ideologies, as well as within the broader sociocultural landscape of drug consumption. Additionally, it explores how the balance among the themes of crime, health, and welfare, as well as the concept of moral panic, is represented in media discourses.

### Methodology

The research employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining computational experimentation and evaluation with an 8-step model developed by Aranda et al. (2021) to analyze a large-scale textual dataset critically. With this model, the Structural Topic Modeling (STM) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are applied. This approach allows for an in-depth quantitative and qualitative comprehension of how the Alpha-PVP drug trend is represented in mainstream media and the development of Finnish drug culture.

### Conclusions

The research outcomes underscore the importance of examining each drug in its own context. This research provides insights into media representations of the Alpha-PVP drug trend in Finland and the ideological discursive tensions surrounding it. It emphasizes the importance of examining drug-related issues in a context-sensitive manner, even when dealing with large textual datasets. The approach underscores the importance of combining STM and CDA to achieve a more nuanced comprehension of media discourses surrounding this emerging drug phenomenon in the reflection of People Who Use Drugs and the Finnish dual-track drug policy paradigms. The research project is funded by the Finnish Foundation of Alcohol Research in 2026.

**Co-author(s):** Ali Ünlu, Aleksi Hupli

**Keywords:** Trends in drug use; media analysis; critical discourse analysis; structural topic modelling

**Funding:** Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies, 2026.

**Bio:** Tiina Poutiainen is a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki. Her research examines cultural and societal concepts, with a particular focus on drug-related discourses and their construction in media and parliamentary contexts.

**Contact:** tiina.poutiainen@helsinki.fi

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# Selling Pills on Social Media: A Mixed Methods Study of Online Markets for Prescription Tranquilizers

**Tobias Kammersgaard**

## Abstract

### Objectives

This ongoing study aims to investigate the sale of prescription tranquilizers and related pharmaceuticals on social media.

### Methodology

The study employs a mixed methods research design, consisting of an online ethnography of markets on social media, as well as interviews with people with experiences of selling prescription tranquilizers and related medicines/drugs online.

### Results

Preliminary results from the online ethnography shed light on a market where a variety of prescription medicines are sold, as well as the social dynamics involved in trading on these platforms. Drawing on theories of 'medicalization' and 'pharmaceuticalization', we explore how prescription tranquilizers and other medicines are being 'marketed' through a focus on symptom relief. Interview data with 'dealers' illustrate how they attempted to navigate risks such as law enforcement, violence connected to organized crime groups and 'street culture', as well as moral dilemmas associated with dealing. We analyze this through a socio-material lens, focusing on the role that technologies play in producing and managing these risks.

### Conclusions

The study illustrates how new technologies such as social media apps may both produce and reduce (perceived) risks associated with the trade in prescription tranquilizers and related pharmaceuticals, affecting both the availability and marketing of these substances, as well as how the market is structured. Further, the study points to both differences between the market for prescription tranquilizers and illicit drug markets, as well as overlaps between these markets.

**Co-author(s):** Margit Anne Petersen.

**Keywords:** Drug markets, drug dealing, prescription drugs, tranquilizers, online, social media.

**Funding:** The project is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

**Bio:** Tobias Kammersgaard is a criminologist and assistant professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research at Aarhus University. He undertakes criminological drug research, exploring drug policies, drug law enforcement, police work related to drugs, and the dynamics that shape drug markets. Margit Anne Petersen is an anthropologist and associate professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research at Aarhus University. Her research focuses on grey zones between medicines and drugs, enhancement and treatment, and illegal and legal activities in young people's everyday lives, related to drug use, drug markets and drug experiences

**Contact:** tok.crf@psy.au.dk

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# Exit scam: using game analogies to map sociotechnical dynamics in the darknet drug trade

**Ákos Szigeti**

## Abstract

Norbert Elias used playing cards as an analogy describing the continuously shifting webs of mutual dependencies among the actors that form social figurations. While figuration theory has been fruitfully applied to the darknet drug trade, recent studies applying actor-network, distributed agency, and assemblage theories steered our attention to non-human actants, specifically to the agency of platforms, technological features, and drug policies. Marking the 15th anniversary of the first academic publication on cryptomarkets, this paper is aimed at exploring game analogies to describe how digital figurations operate and are affected by both human actors and non-human actants in the darknet drug trade. Authors of peer-reviewed publications on cryptomarkets are invited to submit contributions that describe empirically supported techno-social dynamics by game analogies. For example, data published by the European Union Drugs Agency (2024) shows that the plurality of cryptomarkets ended up with operators committing exit scams: intentionally shutting down the marketplaces and taking user funds that were deposited in the escrow systems. Players, as operators, may decide to exit scam if they employed a centralised cryptocurrency wallet, that however, reduces their trust-level among vendors and customers. Submitted analogies will be thematically coded and synthesised (1) to develop a state-of-the-art review paper on current academic knowledge on cryptomarkets, and (2) to inform the development of Exit scam, an educational game that demonstrates sociotechnical dynamics in the darknet drug trade. While contributors will be invited to join as co-authors of the journal article, the game will assist teaching undergraduate and postgraduate sociology and criminology courses on digital drug markets. The presentation will outline the contribution framework and invite discussion, with the aim of recruiting potential collaborators among European drug researchers.

**Co-author(s):** Meropi Tzanetakis

**Keywords:** drug markets, dark web, cryptomarkets, game analogies, sociotechnical dynamics, exit scam

**Funding:** Not specified.

**Bio:** Ákos Szigeti is a sociologist and postdoctoral researcher in the field of cybercrime. His PhD work combined qualitative content analysis with machine learning to better understand the operation of darknet drug markets. Recently he has extended this work by implementing cross-platform exploration of darknet markets, vendor shops, and forums. His research is aimed at describing how digital transformations affect social dynamics and criminal behaviour to inform criminal justice and drug policy discussions.

**Contact:** szigeti.akos@uni-nke.hu

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# Sticky Associations in Illicit Drug Networks. Quasi-Experimental study into Persistent Drug Recommendations on Snapchat

**Kristoffer Aagesen**

## Abstract

### Background and Aims

Markets for illicit drugs are increasingly being facilitated by social media, shaping access and behaviour for buyers and sellers. Recommendation algorithms have been shown to direct at-risk social media users towards illegal drug markets and can limit users' control over exposure to drug sellers online. This study aims to test whether users with prior drug seller connections on social media can drift out of drug networks through voluntary disengagement.

### Design

Persistence in algorithmically enforced drug network association on Snapchat is measured through a novel quasi-experimental design. 40 research profiles are placed in legal grey networks for nicotine products and sex work on Snapchat and allowed to enter illegal drug networks if recommended by Snapchat's algorithm. 30 profiles were recommended and entered drug connections, 10 did not and remained in grey market networks. In the design researchers a) removed all contacts b) observed algorithmic recommendation of drug sellers. Any recommendations after removal cannot be attributed to current network or behaviour but must reflect associations from prior exposure.

### Cases

40 researcher-controlled Snapchat profiles were used as artificial participants. 50% female and 50% male; 60% white avatars 40% black or brown avatars. All profiles were 18 years old.

### Findings

70% (21) of avatars with prior drug connections continued to receive drug seller recommendation on Snapchat, after removing all contacts. The remaining 30% (9) lost exposure to drug sellers. None of the profiles without prior drug connections (0%) gained drug seller recommendations after contact removal.

### Conclusions

Snapchat's algorithm persistently suggested drug sellers to 70% of profiles priorly in illicit drug networks two days after complete contact removal; no unexposed profiles gained new drug seller exposure. Voluntary disengagement from drug seller networks on Snapchat does not reliably clear algorithmic drug exposure.

**Keywords:** Affordance, algorithms, Illicit drugs, Micro sociology, Digital drift, Social media markets

**Funding:** Tryg foundation, Ulla V Bondeson Stiflesele and Danish Crime prevention Council.

**Bio:** Kristoffer Aagesen is a PhD fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Copenhagen. His research focuses on online deviance and black markets for drugs and other criminal activity. Working both in online and offline spaces he studies the intersection of digital technology with offline behavior in hybrid digital crime.

Aagesen develops innovative methods in digital sociology to understand social ecologies on social media as well as auditing their algorithms and the affordances they inspire. This is achieved through structured ethnography in hard to reach fields and bot based observations and interventions into criminal activity on social media.

**Contact:** kmba@soc.ku.dk

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# Drug, set, and setting in overdose events of Finnish young adults

**Teemu Kaskela**

## Abstract

### Objectives

Drug overdose events among young adults are influenced by the pharmacological properties of the drug, individual mindset at the time of use, and the social and physical context in which drugs are used. This study examines the drug use patterns, individual mindset, and social and physical settings associated with overdose events, drawing on interviews with young adults who have experienced overdose events in Finland.

### Methodology

The data consists of interviews with young people about overdose events (N=30) and ethnographic observations. Norman E. Zinberg's (1984) drug, set, and setting theoretical framework was used in the thematic analysis of the data.

### Significant Results

The main pharmacological factors behind overdose events were a lack of awareness about dosing and drug interactions, as well as the actual content of the drugs. The individual mindset at the time of overdose events was usually described as careless, whether in the short or long term. The mindset was seen as more unstable than normally. Through experience with overdose events, young people have developed strategies to manage the risk of overdose. Fear of criminal charges and documentation in medical records hindered help-seeking especially when overdoses occurred in the private apartment.

### Conclusions

To mitigate the risk of overdoses, harm reduction education should be widened to include more actors. For example, pharmacies could communicate knowledge about the different interactions between legal and illicit drugs. The threshold for calling for help in private apartments should be lowered by amending legislation on drug offences in emergency situations and by controlling health information sharing between authorities.

**Co-author(s):** Sanna Rönkä, Alix Helfer.

**Keywords:** Qualitative research; overdose; drugs; young people; Finland; harm reduction

**Funding:** This work was funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) established within the Research Council of Finland (grant numbers 372346, 372341, 372344).

**Bio:** Teemu Kaskela works as a postdoc researcher at the A-Clinic Foundation, Finland. He has used both qualitative and quantitative methods to study research subjects such as illegal drug markets, criminality, rehabilitation, and psychosocial difficulties of people who use drugs.

**Contact:** teemu.kaskela@a-klinikkasaatio.fi

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# The case of adolescent substance use in a rural district of Lithuania: context and motivations

**Aušra Pocienė**

## Abstract

The paper presents a representative quantitative youth survey conducted in 2025 in one rural area of Lithuania. The objective of the study was to explore the prevalence of use, understand the context of use, and identify the main youth motives for use. The survey was conducted at 12 schools in a rural area of a certain Lithuanian municipality. The survey was conducted among schoolchildren aged 12 to 19. Sample size - 1664 students. The study showed that the level of psychoactive substance use in this district is relatively low. Drug acquisition and use most often take place outside the school environment. The survey showed that the most popular psychoactive substances are: snus, legal medicines, and cannabis. Cannabis use is exclusively a collective action, while snus is consumed both individually and in groups. In contrast, medicine use is a highly individual act. Survey findings showed that the main motive for substance use for adolescents is to overcome anxiety and bad emotions, forget, and escape from reality. Other motives for consumption were: to experience great joy/euphoria, and to be curious and try. Also, a noticeable link between academic achievement and substance use was identified. The poorer the achievement, the more prevalent the consumption.

This research is distinctive in its approach from existing quantitative national and international studies, such as ESPAD or the ISRD, because it sheds light on the regional context. Moreover, this research not only examines the prevalence and initiation of drug use but also investigates the motivations behind their engagement with psychoactive substances. It emphasizes the importance of contextual factors influencing these motivations, including the social environments at school and home, as well as young individuals' leisure activities.

**Co-author(s):** Mindaugas Lankauskas

**Keywords:** Adolescents, substance use, motives, rural area, Lithuania

**Funding:** Klaipėda District Municipality.

**Bio:** Dr. Aušra Pocienė is a doctor of social sciences specializing in criminology. She is an associate professor in the Criminology Department at Vilnius University. She has previously worked as a researcher at the Law Institute of Lithuania. Currently, she is the Lithuanian representative at the International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD). Her scientific interests include social research methodology, sociology of punishment, criminal policy, youth delinquency and victimization, urban safety. In recent years, her scientific research has primarily focused on youth delinquency and victimization, and youth drug-related issues. She is a member of the Lithuanian Society of Criminology, the European Society of Criminology. Dr. Mindaugas Lankauskas is a lawyer, criminologist, and an expert in drug policy and drug-related crime. He was awarded a PhD in Sociology from Vilnius University in 2018. He is an associate professor in the Criminology Department at Vilnius University and also works as a researcher at the Law Institute of the Lithuanian Center for Social Sciences. He has contributed to more than 20 scientific publications, including two monographs. He is a member of the Lithuanian Society of Criminology, the European Society of Criminology, and the European Society for Social Drug Research.

**Contact:** Ausra.Pociene@fsf.vu.lt, Mindaugas.Lankauskas@fsf.vu.lt

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