User Perspectives on Drug Checking in Vienna: A Qualitative Study on Harm Reduction Impact

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Abstract

Objective: The evolving landscape of illicit drug markets necessitates effective approaches to harm reduction and addiction prevention for people who use drugs (PWUD). In response, integrated drug checking services - combining chemical analyses with psychosocial interventions - have been implemented in Austria and other countries. While prior research has shown to contribute to safer drug use behaviour, particularly in festival settings, little is known about its impact specific to stationary setting and how specific service components contribute to the overall impact.

Methodology: This study evaluated Vienna's multi-modal drug checking program, which offers mobile services at music events and in clubs, stationary services at a counseling center, and a pharmacy- based service. In 2024, a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was conducted involving 23 PWUD: 12 current users of at least one drug checking modality and 11 without prior experience. Interviews explored risk reduction strategies, service accessibility and the impact of service design, psychosocial interventions, and communication of results, and were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Preliminary findings indicate that drug checking influences several dimensions of behavior and knowledge among PWUD, including substance use, purchasing decisions, and knowledge on substances. Importantly, the influence often extends to the social network of service users, with the nature of this influence being strongly shaped by the specific results of the chemical analysis. The study also revealed individual variability in service use and that situational contexts and current needs shape the depth and engagement with these services.

Conclusion: Drug checking services can considerably affect behavior and knowledge among PWUD. To be effective as tool for early intervention and addiction prevention, services must allow for varying degrees of engagement, considering the important role of peers in building trust and facilitating access. Especially given limited resources acknowledging the value of both, direct and peer-mediated contacts, highlights the crucial rool of social relations in extending harm reduction impacts.

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