

Covid-19 Pandemic and the Use of Illicit Substances in Young People with Delinquent Behaviours



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Introduction

• This study is part of the JUST COVID 19 project (Universidade Católica Portuguesa), in partnership with the YO&JUST project (Universidade NOVA de Lisboa) and its overall objective is to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the use of illicit substances by young people with delinquent behaviours. Early onset of substance use in adolescence has been associated with increased delinquency and subsequent criminality, specifically including violent crime, and being at particularly high risk of serious problems later in life (Gordon et al., 2004). As the pandemic progressed, containment measures were implemented (Duarte, 2020), causing in young people various stressors such as fear of being infected, distress, loneliness, anxiety and depression (Scalia et al., 2020). These variables have caused changes in the contexts and patterns of illicit substance use.

Goals & Method

- To understand professionals' perspectives on changes in substance use by young people during the pandemic;
- To understand professionals' perspectives on changes in patterns of substance use by young people during the pandemic;
- To understand practitioners' perspectives on changes in the locations and contexts of young people's substance use during the pandemic.

Sample

- 8 professionals in total, 2 from social reintegration teams; 1 from promotion and protection team and 4 in the area of substance use.
- To achieve the defined objectives, the interviews with professionals were analysed.

Results

Substance use during the pandemic

1. Cannabis is the most widely consumed substance

"The most commonly consumed illicit substance is cannabis which is most commonly consumed usually and also during the pandemic."

2. Ecstasy consumption decreased

"Even the ecstasy, and there the ecstasy I believe that in this case, the percentage of young people who decrease the consumption is even higher than the one that keeps, I think it's like half of the young people decreased, it states that it decreased the consumption of ecstasy."

3. Cocaine consumption decreased

"Then in second place comes cocaine and ecstasy (...) and so predictably, at least in the early phase of the pandemic, when there were those confinements and the restriction of economic activity and these, of association, predictably, will have decreased."

4. Heroin and crack use remained the same

"This pattern of heroin and crack use (...) it was precisely in relation to these two substances that there was more maintenance, it's not, that there was no change."

Patterns, locations and contexts of substance use during the pandemic

1. Occasional use decreased

"Maybe in general the young people who only went out at night on Saturdays and who during the week even complied with everything (...) there was a reduction because they don't go out, they don't go to those environments."

2. Frequent use has remained the same

"Now in those cases that really were already serious, my perspective is that they managed to maintain those drug uses."

3. More drugs' at home

"What I've found is that consumption has become more at friends' houses than on the street."

4. Recreational use decreased

"(...), a consumption that takes place predominantly in recreational contexts and in moments of sociability (...) predictably, will have decreased."

5. The drug market has adapted

"And the market has also adapted, has also adapted to these needs."

Final remarks

- The high consumption of cannabis can be explained by the perceptions that young people have about the dangerousness of this substance. Ecstasy and cocaine as substances that are not consumed daily and therefore due to the restrictions of the pandemic, young people saw no need in these consumptions. On the other hand, heroin and crack are associated with more dependent consumption profiles.
- Young people who consume occasionally do so only with their peers. On the other hand, it is likely that for young people with frequent and even problematic consumption, it is more difficult to stop consuming, even in confinement.
- Before the pandemic, young people consumed mainly in the street, since these spaces were closed during this period, consumption became more hidden, in houses or clandestine spots.
- This study is a good opportunity to reflect on policies related to substance use because the drug market has managed to adapt and drug policies may benefit from a review.

References

Duarte, M. Q. et al. (2020). COVID-19 e os impactos na saúde mental: uma amostra do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*, v. 25, p. 3401-3411. ; Gordon, M. S., Kinlock, T. W., & Battjes, R. J. (2004). Correlates of early substance use and crime among adolescents entering outpatient substance abuse treatment. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 30(1), 39-59. ; Scalia, L. A. M et al. (2020). Mental health, spirituality and alternative practices for coping with health professionals in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research*, v. 8, n. 8, p. 466-471.