

Drug safety testing, disposals and dealing in an English field: Exploring the operational and behavioural outcomes of the UK's first onsite 'drug checking' service

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Abstract

Background

In a year when UK drug-related deaths and festival drug-related deaths reached their highest on record, a pilot festival drug safety testing service was introduced with the aim of reducing drug-related harm. This paper describes the operational and behavioural outcomes of this pilot and explores the relationship between drug use, supply and policing within festival grounds.

Methods

Chemists in a temporary laboratory analysed 247 substances submitted by the public to a free, confidential testing service across four days at a UK festival in July 2016. Test results were returned to service users embedded in 230 healthcare consultations delivered to approximately 900 festival-goers (one in five drug using festival-goers) that included harm reduction advice and the opportunity to use a disposal service for further substances of concern. Consultation data were collected at point of care, matched with test results, coded and analysed using SPSS

Results

Test results revealed that one in five substances was not as sold or acquired. One in five service users utilised the disposal service for further substances of concern in their possession and another one in six moderated their consumption. Two thirds of those whose sample was missold disposed of further substances, compared with under one in ten whose sample was as sold. Service users who acquired substances onsite at the festival were more than twice as likely to have been missold them as those acquired offsite, were nearly twice as likely to use the disposal service and were on average two years younger. Women were more likely to be using the drug for the first time and more likely to use the disposal service. Test results were shared with emergency services; alerts issued across site and an unanticipated feedback loop occurred to some drug suppliers.

Conclusion

This pilot suggests that festival-goers engage productively with onsite drug safety testing services when given the opportunity, such services can access harder-to-reach and new user groups and can play a part in reducing drug-related harm by identifying and informing service users, emergency services and offsite drug using communities about substances of concern. Disposals to the testing service for onward police destruction provide an externally corroborated measure of impact, reducing harm to the individual and others by removing such substances from site. Evidence of differential dealing onsite and its potential negative consequences has implications for future research and policing.

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