

'Open' Drug Scenes in Germany: Changes and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Coronavirus and drug treatment – German context

- (soft) lockdown due to the coronavirus in Germany started mid-March 2020 and last till mid-April
- until today there are restrictions, during the summer a huge part of social life took part in urban spaces (public places, parks, riverside...)
- situation of ‚open‘ drug scenes and homeless people in Germany were discussed in the media („how to stay home, if you have no home?“)
- new take-home regulation of opioid substitution treatment because of corona restrictions

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Drogenhilfe und Prostitution: Bahnhofsviertel im Krisenmodus



Gähnende Leere herrscht am Abend im Frankfurter Bahnhofsviertel. Foto: Arne Dedert/dpa/Symbolbild (Foto: dpa)



Aims and purpose of the study

- research study started end-March
- aim: start to document the situation as long as it is urgent
- both the situation of drug users and (especially low-threshold) drug services
- publishing interim reports



Methodology

- Qualitative online survey
- allows exploration of the situation as well as some quantifications, regional differences, etc.
- target group: employees of (mainly low-threshold) drug services in Germany working with people who use 'hard drugs' in a compulsive way; particularly those with frequent client contact
- possibility to participate via email, text or voice message (WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram)
- call with key questions posted online; promotion via social media, mailing lists, professional societies, etc.
- anonymity of people and cities



Sample

- until end of August: 56 reports from 27 cities; mostly from bigger metropolis, but also smaller towns
- regional focuses: South Germany and Hesse; rather under-represented: East and West Germany
- mostly low-threshold drug services, as well as advice centres, outreach social work, substitution doctors
- a few cities or locations with multiple responses, otherwise mostly just one report



Atmosphere and cases of infection

- initially: mostly bad/ anxious mood;
- later: different opinions regarding Covid-19, similar to the rest of the population:

"... Everything, from people who are annoyed and aggressive, more like corona-denying conspiracists, who just don't think it's okay, that some offers are not taking place to the usual extent [...] to people who are super grateful and are cordial for all offers of help. "

- Only one case of infection was reported within a drug scene, some suspected cases



Financial situation and drug market

- most problematic: financial situation, "making money" (begging, collecting of deposit bottles, prostitution, drug dealing, shoplifting etc.)
- initially: willingness to donate; donation fences
- common drugs a little more difficult to obtain, mainly because a lack of dealers in public
- majority of employees reported slight increase of drug prices
 - especially benzodiazepines and illegally traded opioid medications



Situation of drug services

- **emergency mode:**

- initially almost all offers of low-threshold services have been closed down
 - exception: drug consumption rooms (new distancing rules)
 - mobile offers for exchange of syringes, eating, hygiene options
 - outreach social work continued
 - consulting services via phone, partly creative solutions
- initially: great shortage of masks; was fixed within about 3 weeks
 - during relaxation of restrictions: gradually resuming of offers
 - employees complained about lack of personal contact



Substitution treatment

- recommended take-home regulations: mostly implemented quickly, especially for "stable" clients
- since relaxation of restrictions: take-home remains easier in around half of the cities; over all good experiences were made
- in some cases, take-home regulations have already been reduced: users *"can't handle it"*; *"emergency stock"* + resale on illicit market
- in general: illicit trade with substitution drugs seems to have increased – who are the buyers?



Public space and homelessness

- in some cities local policy reacted quickly and provided new shelters
- Elsewhere, problems have worsened significantly
 - some clients preferred to stay in public space
- overall lower presence of the scene in public
- but also increase of (perceived) public presence: because of closing of drug services and much less people around in public



Particular problems among special groups of PWUD

- women
 - reduced hygiene possibilities
 - ban of prostitution
- people who face psychological problems
- homeless people
- people without a German citizenship



Discussion

- both everyday life of drug users and work of drug services severely impaired
- differences depending on cities and regions
- “new” topic that came up: illicit trade of opioid substitution drugs
- drug services often reacted flexibly, especially at the beginning of lockdown measures
- in some cases, the wish for less bureaucratic cooperation between services and local offices was expressed



European Dimension

- comparable studies in other countries?
- already in Germany there are a lot of regional differences, comparison to other European countries is needed
- long-term effects (positive as negative) of the corona crisis in context of European drug scenes?



**Many thanks for your
attention!**

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