

Drug use patterns and the illegal drugs market in Latvia in relation to COVID-19 pandemic: Results of the European Web Survey on Drugs COVID-19



Agnese Zīle-Veisberga
(Ministry of the Interior of Latvia)

ESSD 2020 Conference Online, 24 – 25 September 2020

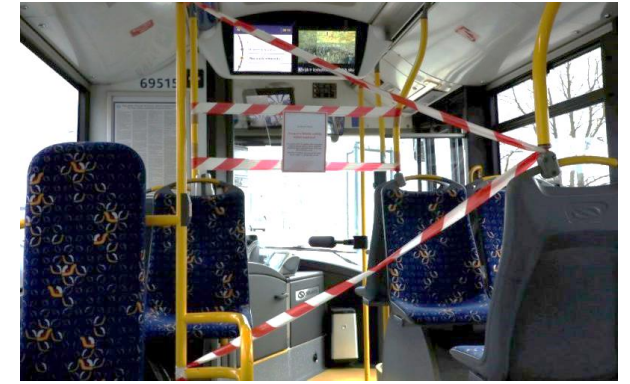
Outline

- Description of Covid -19 restriction in Latvia
- Methodology of the survey
- Results of quantitative data
- Results of qualitative data (open coding)
- Update on current situation

Covid-19 restrictions in Latvia

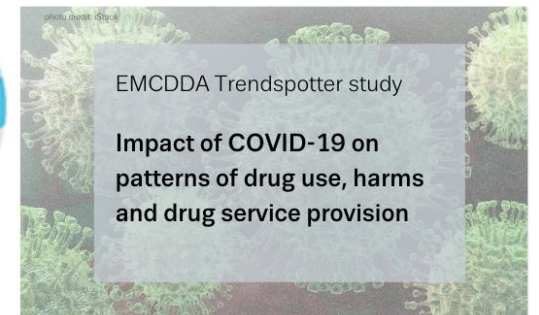
Restrictions came into force in March 2020, the most stringent period was in **April**.

- International travel closed in April, but not applicable for cargos and postal services;
- Self-isolation and quarantine for those who at risk (travelers, contact persons);
- Public gathering not allowed;
- Schools closed since April;
- Part of public places closed in April, e.g. sports clubs, catering and entertainment venues that couldn't follow the restriction measures;
- Recommended staying at home, **but not lockdown**;
- **Commuting allowed; walks allowed** within one family/household or 2 people; physical distance - 2m.



The Survey

- The [Mini European Web Survey on Drugs: COVID-19](#) — coordinated by the EMCDDA in collaboration with its [Reitox network](#) of national focal points.
- The survey was available also in Latvian and Russian languages
- Promoted on FB via European Web Survey Latvia profile between 16 April and 15 May 2020
- Target group: 18 – 50 years old residents of Latvia



Attitudes towards the survey



Posts on FB from the participants:

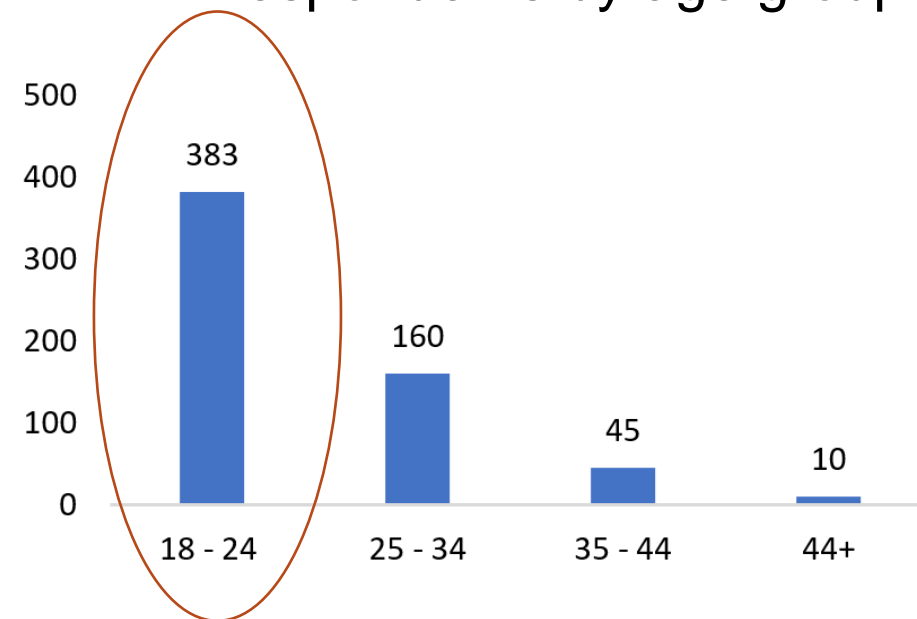
- «*it's a trap*»; «*they [police] collect IPs and will come after you*»;
- «*Everything is the same*»; «*You can get everything you want*»
- «*Seriously?*»



Sample

- Self selection sample, non-probability
- N=616
- Women=54,4%; Men=43,4%; 2,2% =non-binary or didn't want to answer
- M=24,8 years old (SD=8,69)
- 51,3% live in a city; 29,5% - town; 13,5% village

Respondents by age group



Cannabis use in past 30 days (N=599, those who indicated gender)	Male (number)	Female (number)
Daily/ almost daily	92	37
Not daily, but more than once a week /once a week	62	38
Less than once a week, but at least once a month	33	43
Never	78	216
Total	265	334

Results: Covid-19 restrictions

- 27 (4,4%) participants were in quarantine or hospital;
- 82,9% physical distancing;
- 32,9% isolation at home.



The most frequently used substances (%)

	Past 30 days	Past 12 months
Herbals cannabis/resin	51.7	68.2
MDMA	16.4	34.6
Cocaine	8.5	21.5
Amphetamine	10.2	18.0
Heroin	2.8	3.9
LSD	12.7	23.7
Synthetic cannabinoids	3.3	4.7
Cathinones	2.2	4.2

In general, would you say you have used illicit drugs more or less since the start of the COVID-19 epidemic in your country? (n=401)

24,9% hadn't used illicit drugs since Covid-19 restrictions were introduced; 34,9% the same patterns of use; 22,7% used more; 17,5% used less.

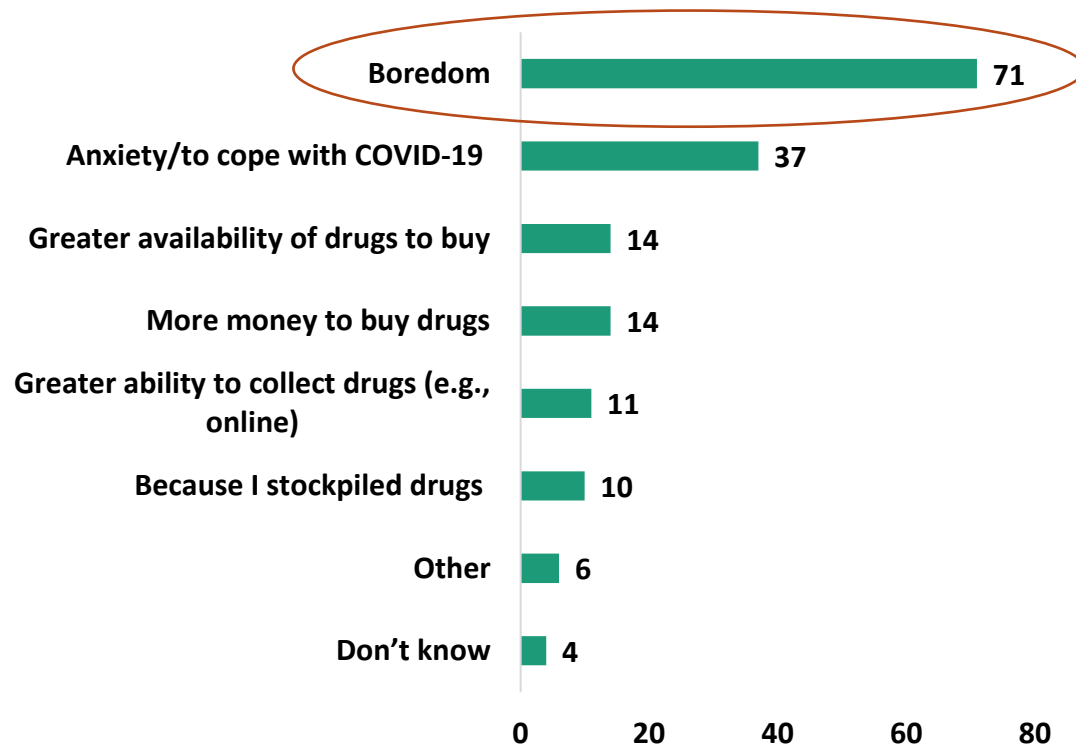
Have you changed your use of CANNABIS as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, as compared to before COVID-19?

67,3% of those who used cannabis in past 30 days reported no change, but 9,3% consumed more alcohol.

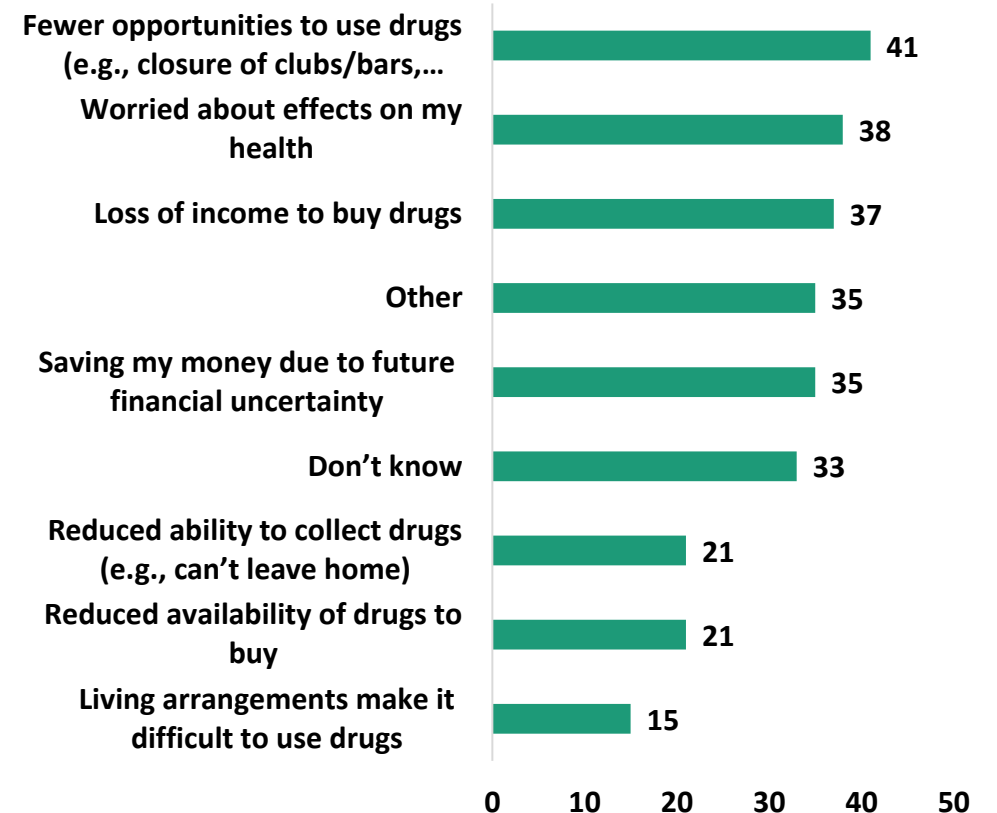
52% of those who used cannabis on a daily/almost daily basis reported no changes, but 25% used more frequently.

Why has your illicit drug use increased/decrease as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (mark all that apply)?

Why has your illicit drug use **increased** as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (mark all that apply)? (n=91)



Why has your illicit drug use **decreased** as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (mark all that apply)? (n=70)



Have you had difficulties in accessing illicit drugs because of COVID-19? (n=279)

- Not at all (60,2%)
- Somewhat (26,4%)
- Moderately (7,4%)
- Extremely (2,1%)
- Don't know (3,9%)

61,3% of cannabis daily/almost daily users added that they haven't had any problems to obtain the substance and 25,8% indicated that somewhat.

Most frequently obtained drugs – herbal cannabis/resin (40,1%); MDMA (12,5%) and LSD (8,6%)

Have you changed the way you have obtained illicit drugs during COVID-19 compared to before the restrictions? (n=281)

Atbilde	%
No change	62,1
Obtained larger quantities on an occasion	13,5
Obtained illicit drugs from a different dealer	7,5
Bought illicit drugs less frequently	7,5
Bought illicit drugs more frequently	6,8
Arranged for more home delivery of illicit drugs than I had before	3,9
Reduced face-to-face collection of illicit drugs compared to before	3,6
Stopped obtaining illicit drugs	2,5
Bought smaller quantities on an occasion	2,1
Bought different illicit drugs	2,1
Haven't tried to access illicit drugs	1,8
Obtained illicit drugs from surface net more than I had before COVID-19	1,8
Obtained illicit drugs from darknet more than I had before COVID-19	1,8
Arrange for more postal delivery of illicit drugs than I had before	0,7
Other	0,4
Don't know	0

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, has there been a change in the purity, price, or amount of drugs drug(s) you have obtained?

	Purity (n=278) %	Price (n=277) %	Quantity (n=276) %
Don't know	12.6	3.6	5.1
Higher	7.5	10.1	11.9
Lower	9	7.2	9.4
The same	70.9	79.1	73.6

The new normal?

Hardly any comments about Covid-19:

- «*I do a lot of sports... sometimes I smoke cannabis to relax... Now I'm using more, because I've headache and it is difficult to work in «four walls»» (to cope with anxiety)*
- «*I'm bored, I miss meeting people... I'm sad» (boredom, sadness)*
- «*My acquaintances are using more, but only those who did it before» (??)*

Most of comments about legalisation, but not in relation to Covid-19:

- «*Herbal cannabis is not a drug and should be legalised»*. «*Open your minds! You are old-fashioned; everything has changed in this world» (justification)*
- Some felt stigmatised “*cannabis is not a drug and I'm not a drug user*”. Justification of use “*I feel better, when I'm using*” (**justification**).

Comments about survey, e.g. «*not enough options*»

What is the current situation? (data of the police)

- Overall without change, some indications that **cannabis cultivation** has increased, more medicines on the illegal market;
- Any considerable change in cross-border trafficking;
- Police reports any change in **price**, but some other sources indicated an increase of cannabis price. Opportunity for dealers to increase the price?;
- Not clear with **purity**, because the purity of amphetamines has increased, which is not the case with other substances.
- The organisation of the illegal drugs market - ????

Conclusions

- The survey as a **reference point**. Will be possible to compare with situation later.
- As for now, it seems that Covid-19 **has not brought considerable change** on the illegal market in Latvia with some minor exception, e.g. more cannabis cultivation.
- It is important to look not only to prevalence data, number of seizures, purity, prices, but also to attitudes, norms and beliefs. The **life has changed** – staying at home, avoiding public places, entertainment, traveling, even attitudes towards health etc. What is the impact on the drug use patterns.

The new normal?

