



GDS SPECIAL EDITION ON COVID-19

KEY FINDINGS REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EMBARGOED UNTIL 9AM BRITISH SUMMER TIME (BST), 9 SEPTEMBER, 2020

The GDS Special Edition on COVID-19 was developed as part of a global effort to better understand the impact of the pandemic on people's lives with a specific focus on the use of alcohol and other drugs, mental health and relationships. Almost 60,000 took part. The survey ran for 7 weeks in May and June 2020. The survey was available in 9 languages: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Demographics

- The total global sample size reported here is 55,811, including: Germany (25,812), France (6,193), Ireland (4,518), Brazil (3,653), Switzerland (3,498), Netherlands (3,277), New Zealand (2,998), United Kingdom (2,136), Australia (1,889), Austria (1,108), and United States (729).
- The global sample comprised 52% cis-men, 47% cis-women and 1% who identified as transgender, non-binary or different gender identity.
- 24% were aged under 25 years, 33% aged 25-34 years and 44% were 35+ years.
- 82% identified as 'White', 19% reported living alone, and 23% with children (0-15y).
- 28% reported having more disposable income and 23% reported having less compared with February, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19

- Reporting for themselves and their household members, 36% reported that they had some sort of underlying health condition or older age (70y+) that may increase their vulnerability to COVID-19, 11% reported that they had been tested for COVID-19, and 1% reported a positive test for COVID-19.
- 51% of the sample rated their government's leadership during COVID-19 at 8 out of 10 or higher. Respondents in New Zealand scored highest with 67% rating it 9 or 10, and respondents in Brazil scored lowest with 70% giving a zero. 46% of respondents in the USA gave a score of zero or 1 while 42% of respondents in the UK gave a score of 3 or less.

Mental health

- 32% reported ever having been diagnosed with a mental health condition, most commonly depression (20%), anxiety (17%) or a neurodevelopmental condition such as ADHD (4%) or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (1%).
- GDS used the Kessler K6 questionnaire to screen for mental health in the past 30 days, with 15% of the sample meeting the threshold for 'severe mental illness'. While rates for meeting the threshold for severe mental illness in most EU countries were about 15% or lower, rates of reporting severe mental illness in the past 30 days were significantly higher for respondents in Brazil (42%) and the USA (27%).

Changes in the use of alcohol

- 43% of the sample reported an increase in the *frequency* of drinking (25% a decrease) while 36% of the sample reported an increase in the *amount* of alcohol they drank on a typical day (22% a decrease) compared to before COVID-19.
- 30% reported starting drinking earlier in the day compared to before COVID-19 and 42% wanted to drink less in the next 30 days (please see Drinks Meter [app](#) or [website](#) for free help and advice).
- Drinking alone at home while on video/audio calls, chats or 'watch parties' was more commonly reported during COVID-19 (40%) compared to pre-COVID-19 (16%).
- Of 75% who were drinking alone at the time of the survey, 41% reported that they were drinking alone more often compared to before COVID-19.
- 41% of people with a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition reported they were drinking more due to increased stress about COVID-19 compared to 21% of people without mental health or neurodevelopmental conditions.
- Those who increased drinking and reported a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition were at least twice as likely to report feeling (more) depressed (36% vs. 13%) and/or lonely (30% vs. 15%).

Changes in the use of other drugs

- The drug types reportedly used in the past 30 days by this sample were THC containing cannabis products (28%), followed by CBD only cannabis products (9%), then cocaine (7%), MDMA (6%), prescription benzodiazepines (5%), amphetamine (4%), prescription opioids and LSD each at 3%.
- 39% of respondents who used cannabis in the past year reported increased use of THC containing cannabis products compared to before COVID-19 with the biggest increases reported by respondents in Australia (49%) and the USA (46%).
- For other drugs, 37% reported having increased their use of prescription benzodiazepines, 26% CBD only cannabis products, 23% psilocybin, and 21% for cocaine, LSD and ketamine.
- The use of drugs that are commonly used in party settings saw the biggest decreases. More than one third of respondents who reported use of MDMA (41%), cocaine (38%), amphetamine (35%) and ketamine (34%) indicated that they used less frequently when compared to before COVID-19.

Changes in the use of THC containing cannabis

- Overall a similar proportion of respondents with and without a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition reported an increase in their use of THC containing cannabis (40% vs. 36%). However, those with a condition were more likely to cite increasing their use to manage stress, loneliness and depression than those without.
- Further, in both groups a similar proportion reported having decreased use (24% with a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition vs. 22% without).
- Although it is often assumed that cannabis use may negatively impact mental health of people with preexisting mental health conditions, outcomes for increased use did not differ between those with and without a condition. Of note 26% of those with a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition and 18% of those without reported that increased use led to decreased physical health.
- Of 88% who reported using THC containing cannabis products alone at the time of the survey, 45% reported that they use alone more often compared to before COVID-19.

Drug markets

- While decreased availability of illegal drugs compared to before COVID-19 was reported by 56%, what is striking is that perceptions of purity and the range of drugs remained largely unchanged reflecting the resilience of the illicit drug trade and existing supplies being able to meet demand through a period of less international trade and travel.
- Over one third (36%) of respondents who used illegal/non-prescribed drugs reported that the price of illegal drugs in their country increased compared to before COVID-19.
- While over half (52%) reported that their last drug purchase was not impacted by the pandemic, some respondents reported signs of market scarcity, including paying a higher price (14%), taking longer to get the drugs than usual (10%), more difficulty finding a supplier (8%) and more difficulty finding their drug of choice (5%).
- At the last purchase between March and June 2020, 16% reported buying larger quantities compared with before COVID-19. Notably, stockpiling was reported as a reason for increased drug use, particularly for THC-containing cannabis (20%).

Drugs, harm reduction and changes in behaviours

- The use of most drugs is heavily socialised, bringing people into close contact with others. In light of physical distancing guidelines we were interested in whether people were applying personal protective behaviours. Although groups like GDS and other groups promoting harm reduction did create and promote drug specific harm reduction messages during COVID-19, 86% of people who used drugs in our sample reported not seeing any such messages.
- When asked what harm reduction strategies they were implementing to reduce risks from COVID-19, 43% reported not sharing joints, vape pens or other smoking devices.
- 37% reported minimising close contact with others during drug use or drug transactions.
- 20% reported that they prepared their own drugs and 15% reported washing hands and surfaces before preparing their drugs.

Policing of people who use drugs

- Of those who reported illegal/non-prescribed drug use, 34% reported encountering police during the COVID-19 pandemic between March and June 2020. Only 3% of these encounters were related to drugs, while nearly half (43%) were COVID-19 related.
- As policing practices vary widely by country, we recommend looking at country specific data for what occurred in these encounters. Global data indicate policing encounters of people who used drugs during COVID-19 involved asking for identity (24%), checking whether people had legitimate reasons to be moving in public spaces (20%), and informing about physical distancing rules (9%).
- A small proportion of respondents reported being harassed (4%) or beaten/hurt (1%) during police encounters.

Relationships and intimate partner abuse

- 18% of respondents who reported being in an adult intimate partnership for at least one month reported an increase in tension in their relationship in the past 30 days during COVID-19 restrictions.
- In the past 30 days during COVID-19 restrictions, 18% of participants reported experiencing abusive behaviour from a partner and 17% reported using abusive behaviour towards a partner in the past 30 days during COVID-19 restrictions.
- Of those who had experienced abusive behaviour from their partner in February, 38% reported an increase in the abuse in the past 30 days during COVID-19 restrictions.
- Of those who reported using abusive behaviour towards their partner in February, 38% reported an increase in this behaviour in the past 30 days during COVID-19 restrictions.

The GDS COVID-19 Special Edition was co-led by Prof. Adam Winstock at University College London, and Dr. Monica Barratt at RMIT University.

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