GDS2019: Drugs policing and trust: How police detect and deal with personal drug possession around the world.

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Getting caught with drugs can be a very stressful event in people's lives. Criminal records for personal possession of drugs can ruin careers and opportunities and costs the police and legal system considerable time and money for uncertain gain. Added to the problem is that laws are not equally applied across cultures with significant racial bias. For example, the UK organisation Release and the London School of Economics just released a report – *'The Colour of Injustice: 'Race', drugs and law enforcement in England and Wales'* – showing that black people were stopped and searched for drugs at almost nine times the rate of whites, and that despite lower rates of use black people were convicted of cannabis possession at 11.8 times the rate of white people. But, while we have long suspected that policing approaches to people who use drugs are likely to vary across the globe we've never had a means to test this… until a new GDS partnership.

As part of GDS2017, we approached Dr Caitlin Hughes - a criminologist and drug policy expert at the University of New South Wales Australia, to provide the first cross-national comparison of the frequency of illicit drug-related police encounters in different parts of the globe; the nature and severity/punitiveness of these drug-related police encounters and the factors that predict who is stopped and arrested for personal drug possession e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, frequency of clubbing.

This showed significant variation across the globe – in terms of the likelihood of encountering police for drugs, the locations of such encounters and the types of police modalities encountered. For example, we found people who use drugs were 4.8 times more likely to encounter police if they lived in Italy or Scotland, than if they lived in New Zealand (and this is after we accounted for the prevalence of drug use in each nation).   The nature of policing further differed with some countries like Australia being high in their use of drug detection dogs but others like Sweden being high in their use of stop and search. Do these differences matter? Well yes, as we know that some practices carry more risks and harms for people who use drugs. But unmasking variation is also important as it starts to show that countries have choices in terms of how they go about policing drugs.

So, this year GDS2019 is revisiting the Drug Policing Module so we can see how policing compares in even more countries. Repeating the module is also important as we know there have been significant changes in laws over the last few years, most notably Canada and many US states, legalising the non-medical use of cannabis. Might this impact policing? GDS2019 is going to find out!

The key questions we will be asking include whether people who use drugs have encountered police with drug detection dogs in the last year (at any setting excluding airports e.g. at a music festival); whether they have been stopped and searched for drugs; whether they have been stopped for roadside drug testing, and whether they have been arrested for drugs. We will also look at diversionary options: e.g. whether people have encountered police for drugs but received a warning or referral to treatment instead of being charged.

And finally, we will be asking what people think about the police. Why? Well we conjecture that experiences of being policed for drugs, may well impact attitudes to police…. whether you trust the police, whether you are likely to help them if asked, etc….

So, let's find out.
Experience counts.
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