

Impact of COVID-19 on the drug situation in Europe – EMCDDA Director presents findings to European Parliament

Today, EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel presented to the European Parliament the agency's recent research findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the drug phenomenon in Europe. Speaking via [video conference](#) to the [Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs \(LIBE\)](#), the Director demonstrated how the agency had been 'taking the pulse' of the impact of COVID-19 in three areas: drug use, drug services and drug markets.

Since March 2020, COVID-19 has put the EMCDDA's responsiveness to the test, both in terms of business continuity and monitoring the drug phenomenon. The Director described how the agency had acted quickly and proactively to adapt its working methods and production cycles to address new problems and needs. Using an array of methods – including a web survey, 'trendspotter' methodology and darknet monitoring – the agency has published a range of [new COVID-19 resources](#) exploring the risks faced by people who use drugs, drug market changes and how drug professionals working with this group are adapting on the frontline. The EMCDDA has also launched a COVID-19 webinar series to give a voice to key professionals working in the drugs field.

The impact of COVID-19 on drug use in Europe appears to vary according to the substance concerned. The EMCDDA research shows signs of a rise in the use of cannabis during the pandemic (as users stockpiled the drug before lockdown), as well as in the use of alcohol, benzodiazepines and other medicines. In contrast, the findings point to a decline in the demand for drugs commonly used in recreational settings (e.g. cocaine, MDMA), as people stayed at home.

Mr Goosdeel paid tribute to healthcare and social workers in drug services who had assisted clients, despite inadequate safety conditions and personal protective equipment. A lesson learnt is that all treatment and harm reduction services should be an integrated part of essential health services and that both drug professionals and clients should have full access to protective equipment, counselling and testing.

A recent EMCDDA survey found that COVID-19 had impacted on continuity of care, with a decline in the availability of drug services during the pandemic and in the numbers of those seeking help. But drug services have also adapted and innovated during the fast-changing crisis in ways that could be carried forward into the future. The Director described how telemedicine had been embraced as an alternative to face-to-face counselling during containment and how more flexible treatment modalities had been introduced. He also referred to how harm-reduction services had been swift to adapt, playing a key role in providing frontline support (e.g. providing food, water, hygiene products).

Speaking on the effect of COVID-19 on drug markets, Mr Goosdeel explained that organised crime groups have remained 'active and resilient' during the pandemic and that continued violence has been noted among suppliers and distributors. A new [EMCDDA-Europol analysis](#) reports that disruption to the drug trafficking supply chain is seen mostly at the distribution level, due to social distancing measures within the EU. With street dealing severely affected by restrictions on movement, consumers and dealers are increasingly turning to alternative methods (e.g. use of darknet markets, social media platforms and encrypted communication apps), with cashless payments and fewer face-to-face interactions. However, there is less evidence of disruption at the wholesale importation level: drug trafficking by maritime shipping continues at levels similar to the pre-pandemic period. The report also showed that production of synthetic drugs has continued in Europe, which could lead to increased availability of these drugs as containment measures lift.

Negative economic forecasts for national economies in the post-pandemic period raise particular concerns over potential budget cuts for drug services and the impact on drug users. The Director underlined the need to maintain the level of financing and resources for treatment and harm reduction programmes and to integrate prevention and treatment of COVID-19 into intervention models. He also called for sustainable and fair financing for the EMCDDA in order for it to continue its services, inform drug policymaking and contribute to a healthier and more secure Europe.