Drug use and awareness of health and policing initiatives at music festivals among people who regularly consume illicit stimulants, 2019 and 2023

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Introduction

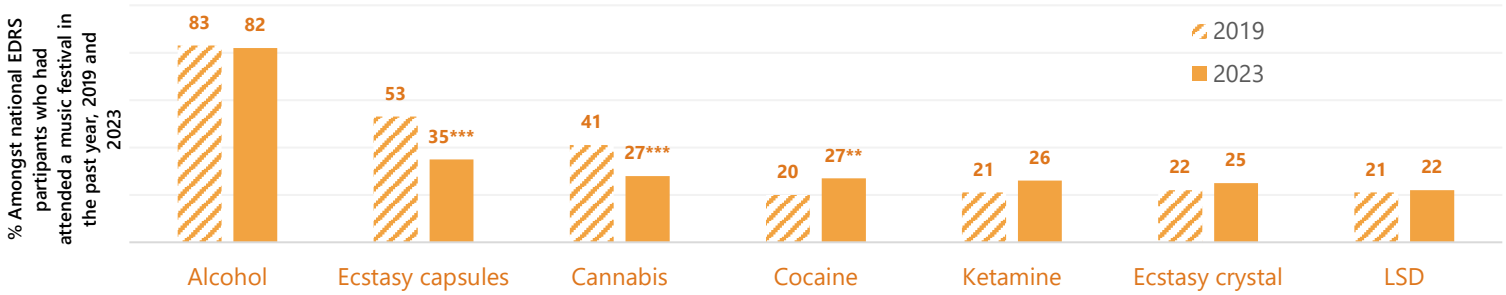
Drug use at music festivals has generated concern following several prominent cases of drug toxicity in this setting [1, 2]. Additional health and policing measures have been enforced at festivals in recent years across several states and territories with the goal of increasing patron safety [e.g., 3]. However, much of the evidence on drug use at festivals is from prior to these additional safety measures and the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant shifts in drug use patterns subsequent. Using annual cross-sectional samples of people who regularly use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants recruited from all Australian capital cities in 2019 and 2023, we aimed to examine drug use and awareness of health and policing strategies at music festivals.

Results

As part of the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS), 797 and 708 people in 2019 and 2023, respectively, were interviewed across Australia between April-July about their drug use and experiences at Australian music festivals. Findings by jurisdiction are in Supplement 1 and 2.

- Two thirds (68%, n=539 in 2019; 67%, n=463 in 2023) of the sample in 2019 and 2023 reported attending a music festival in the past year.
- Of those who had attended a music festival in the past year and responded (n=524 and n=462 in 2019 and 2023, respectively), nearly all participants in both 2019 (97%) and 2023 (99%) reported using alcohol and/or drugs at the last festival they attended.

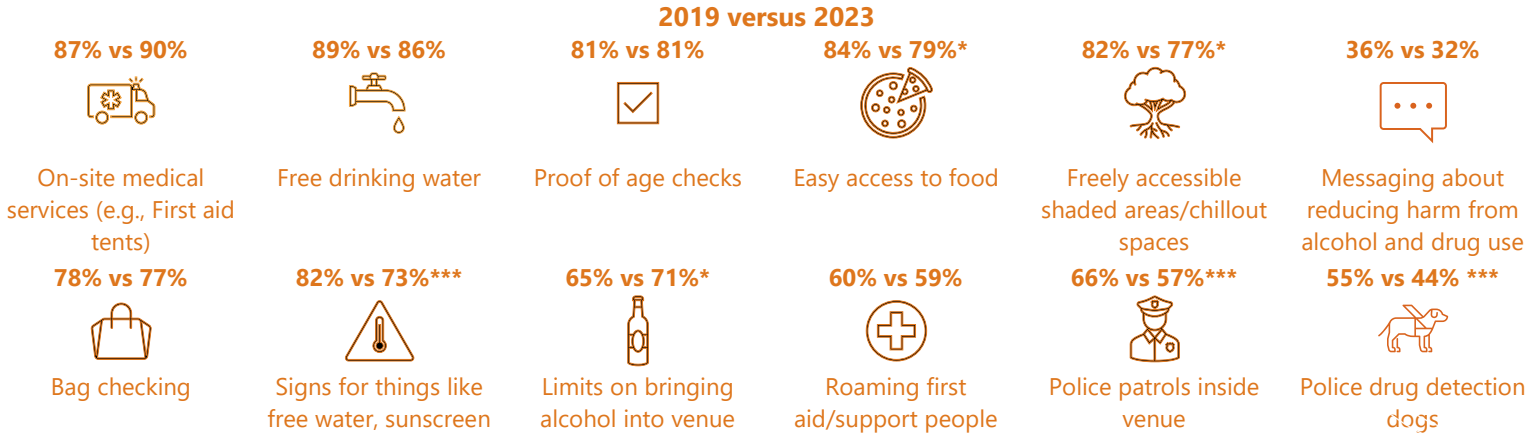
Figure 1. Most common substances used at the last music festival attended in the past year, 2019 and 2023



Note. Amongst national EDRS participants who had attended a music festival in the past year and commented, 2019 (n=538) and 2023 (n=462). Statistical significance for 2019 vs 2023 presented; *p<0.050; **p<0.010; ***p<0.001.

- Of those who had used drugs/alcohol at a music festival in the past year and commented (n=523 in 2019; n=458 in 2023), the majority (95%, respectively) reported that they did not require help from a medical or support team as a consequence of their drug use.

Figure 2. Awareness of health and policing initiatives at the last music festival attended in the past year, 2019 and 2023



Note. Most common strategies endorsed are included (see Supplement 2 for full list of strategies). Amongst national EDRS participants who had attended a music festival and commented, 2019 (n=538) and 2023 (n=462). Statistical significance for 2019 vs 2023 presented; *p<0.050; **p<0.010; ***p<0.001.

Discussion

The vast majority of people who had attended a music festival in the past year had used alcohol; illicit drug use was also common. Most participants reported awareness of various health and policing initiatives at the last music festival they attended, most commonly on-site medical services. Awareness of policing initiatives like police drug detection dogs decreased in 2023 compared to 2019. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of the festival environment as a setting for reaching people with harm reduction information around alcohol and other drugs.

References

[1] Santamarina R, et al. Drug-related deaths at Australia music festivals. IJDP. 2024, 123. [2] Black E, et al. Toxicological analysis of serious drug-related harm among electronic dance music festival attendees in New South Wales, Australia: A consecutive case series. DAD. 2020, 213. [3] Guidelines for Music Festival Event Organisers: Music Festival Harm Reduction. NSW Ministry of Health. October 2023. Recommended citation: Karlsson A, Sutherland R, Peacock A. Drug use and awareness of health and policing initiatives at music festivals among people who regularly consume illicit stimulants, 2019 and 2023. Drug Trends Bulletin Series. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2024. Available from: https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/30390

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Supplement 1: Most common substances used at the last (past year) musical festival attended, by capital city, 2023

	Sydney (n=70) %	Canberra (n=71) %	Melbourne (n=78) %	Hobart (n=36) %	Adelaide (n=52) %	Perth (n=69) %	Brisbane/ GC (n=57) %
Any alcohol	79	83	81	89	81	86	79
Ecastasy capsules	40	39	39	28	37	29	30
Cannabis	16	34	19	39	29	26	44
Cocaine	26	18	30	33	42	22	33
Ketamine	21	28	58	36	14	13	18
Ecstasy crystal	19	16	28	25	15	41	33
LSD	16	28	32	31	15	15	18

Note. Due to the particularly small sample recruited in Darwin in 2023 (N=40), data from Darwin are not presented in this table. Please contact the Drug Trends team for these data for 2019 (drugtrends@unsw.edu.au).

Supplement 2: Health and policing strategies people reported being aware of at the last (past year) music festival attended, by capital city, 2023

	Sydney (n=70) %	Canberra (n=71) %	Melbourne (n=74) %	Hobart (n=34) %	Adelaide (n=52) %	Perth (n=67) %	Brisbane/ GC (n=56) %
On-site medical services (e.g., First aid/St Johns Ambulance tents)	93	96	96	88	83	97	79
Free drinking water	89	92	95	88	79	78	89
Proof of age checks	84	76	78	79	81	96	80
Easy access to food	91	83	87	74	73	82	66
Freely accessible shaded areas/chill out spaces	89	85	81	77	58	79	63
Bag checking	87	80	62	71	83	81	80
Signs for things like free water, sunscreen	86	92	76	71	58	66	57
Limits on bringing alcohol into the venue	64	87	70	62	69	82	71
Roaming first aiders/support people	76	56	55	59	48	61	61
Police patrols inside venue	71	70	60	47	65	39	55
Police checks outside the venue	64	44	38	47	60	63	50
Police drug detection dogs	70	44	31	44	50	42	36
Bottle checking	63	47	41	44	42	54	45
Limit of number of alcoholic drinks that can be purchased at once	53	49	34	38	44	43	39
Drug information services	50	49	46	29	19	16	20
Drug checking/testing services	13	25	18	-	-	-	11
Limits on numbers to avoid overcrowding	47	52	57	59	58	31	38
Messaging about reducing harm from alcohol and drug use	36	54	41	38	21	21	20
Walk through cooling tents	14	14	20	-	-	-	-
Water sprinklers on stage/tents	24	20	34	-	14	-	13
Information on your legal rights	11	20	15	-	-	-	11

Note. Due to the particularly small sample recruited in Darwin in 2023 (N=40), data from Darwin are not presented in this table. - Data are suppressed in the table where n≤5 responded to the item. Please contact the Drug Trends team for these data for 2019 (drugtrends@unsw.edu.au).