



Drug detection dog encounters and precautionary behaviours at Australian music festivals among people who regularly consume illicit stimulants in Australia, 2024

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Data was collected as part of the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS). Annual interviews were conducted with people residing in Sydney who used ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants monthly or more frequently and were aged 18 or older.

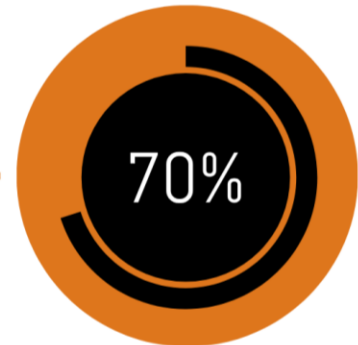
Key Findings



Among EDRS participants who recently attended a festival, **38%** reported encountering **drug detection dogs**.



Among those who encountered drug detection dogs, **66%** reported **carrying drugs**, primarily for personal use.



Among those who encountered drug detection dogs, **70%** reported **no direct interaction**.



In 2024, the national EDRS sample included 740 participants, with 444 reporting attendance at a music festival in the past year.

Introduction



Music festivals in Australia are vibrant cultural events that attract thousands of attendees each year, including individuals who engage in illicit drug use. Drug detection dogs are commonly used as a measure to deter drug possession and distribution at these events, yet their use remains controversial. Specifically, critics argue that drug detection dogs are ineffective, can violate individual rights and freedoms (e.g., via strip searches) and result in unsafe behaviours, such as preloading or concealing drugs in dangerous ways (1, 2). After the drug-related deaths of six young people attending music festivals in New South Wales (NSW) between December 2017 and January 2019, of which three were linked directly to the presence of drug dogs, it was recommended that drug dogs cease to operate at festivals (3). This recommendation was rejected by the NSW Government, however it remains unclear whether there have been any national changes in encounters with drug dogs at music festivals, particularly in the post-COVID era. This bulletin therefore aims to examine experiences with, and responses to, drug detection dogs at music festivals among a sample of people who regularly use illicit stimulants in Australia.

Methods

Data were collected as part of the 2024 Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS). Interviews were conducted with people residing in capital city areas of Australia who used ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants on a monthly or more frequent basis and were aged 18 or older.

In 2024, the EDRS sample consisted of 740 interviews and was conducted predominately via face-to-face surveys as well as telephone surveys. Please refer to the [EDRS Background and Methods](#) (4) document for further details. Data on music festival attendance, drug use at music festivals, encounters with drug detection dogs and precautionary behaviours were collected via a structured survey.

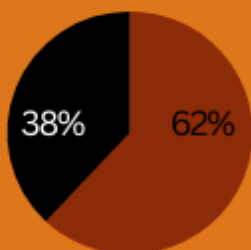
Descriptive statistics were used to present the data. For information regarding the characteristics of the EDRS sample, please refer to the [2024 EDRS report](#) (5).

Results

In 2024, 61% of the EDRS participants reported attending a music festival in the past year. Among these participants (n=444), nearly all (99%) reported using at least one drug, including alcohol, at the last festival they attended, and 92% reported using an illicit drug.

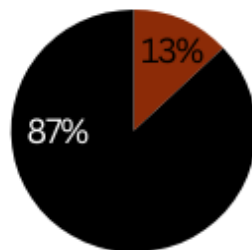
ENCOUNTERS WITH DRUG DETECTION DOGS AT FESTIVALS

Of those who attended festivals in the past year and responded (n=443), 38% encountered drug detection dogs.



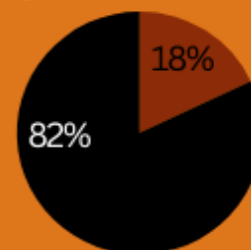
Have you encountered police with drug detection dogs at a music festival in the last 12 months?[^]

Among these, 87% expected the presence of dogs.



Did you expect dogs to be present at the festival?^{^^}

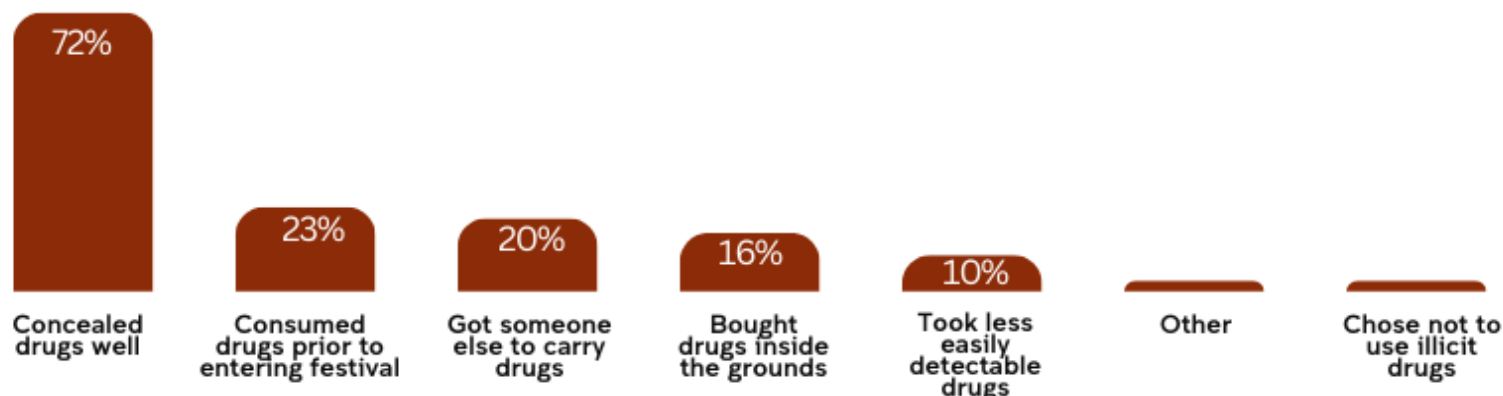
Among those that expected dogs and encountered police with drug detection dogs, 82% took precautions.



Did you take any precautions to reduce the likelihood of detection by drug detection dogs?^{^^^}

Note. [^] Among those that attended a music festival in the past year and responded (n=443). ^{^^} Among those that encountered drug detection dogs at the last festival and responded (n=165). ^{^^^} Among those that expected dogs and encountered police with drug detection dogs at the last festival, and who responded (n=144).

PRECAUTIONARY ACTIONS TO AVOID DETECTION BY DRUG DOGS[^]



Note. [^] Among those that took precautions to reduce detection and responded (n=118). Some data labels are suppressed due to low numbers of respondents (n≤5).

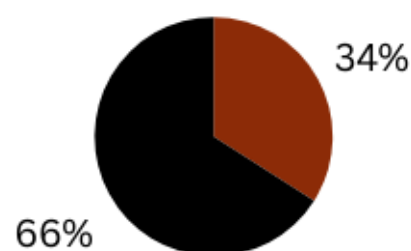
Among those who encountered dogs at the last festival they attended (n=167), 66% admitted to carrying drugs, primarily for personal use (65%). Despite this, few participants (n≤5) reported that the police found drugs.

DRUG POSSESSION DURING ENCOUNTERS WITH DRUG DETECTION DOGS

Were you carrying any drugs when you encountered the drug detection dogs?

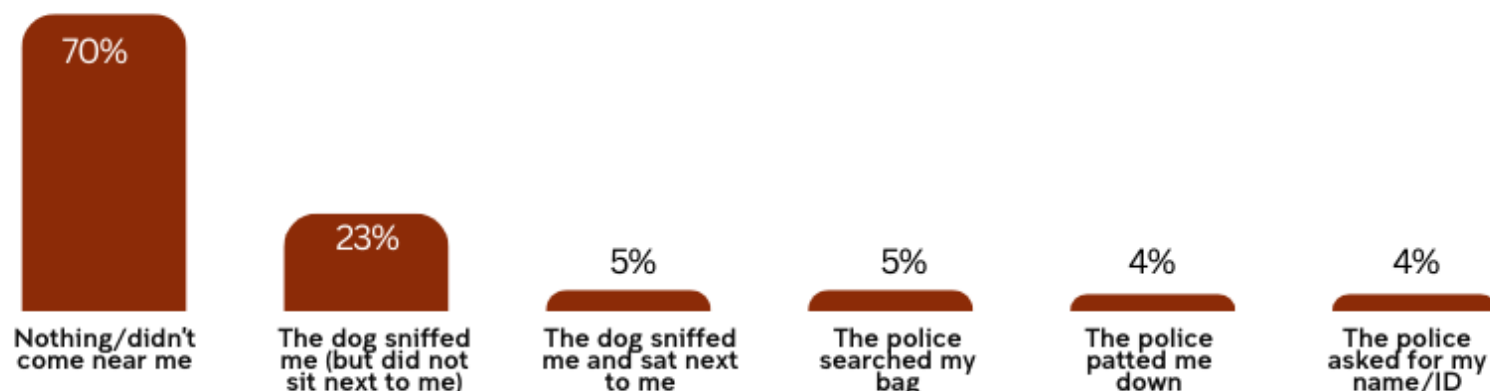


Any yes: 66%



Seventy percent of participants who encountered drug detection dogs at their most recent festival and responded (n=167) reported no direct interaction. A smaller proportion experienced being sniffed by the dogs (23%) or subjected to searches, including bag checks (5%) and pat-downs (4%). More invasive actions, such as body searches or arrests were rare (n≤5).

INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE[^]



Note. [^] Among those that encountered drug detection dogs and responded (n=167). All response options are not presented due to low numbers of respondents (n≤5).

Discussion

Among those who had attended a music festival in the past year, nearly two fifths (38%) reported that they had encountered drug detection dogs. This is considerably lower than reported by EDRS participants in 2019 (61% of those who had attended a music festival in the past year), suggesting potential reductions in the deployment of drug dogs at such events. However, among those who had encountered drug detection dogs at festivals, reported precautions and experiences appear to have remained largely similar between 2019 and 2024 (7).

Specifically, in 2024, two thirds (66%) of those who encountered drug detection dogs reported being in possession of drugs at their most recent encounter (61% in 2019), yet few (n≤5) reported that drugs were found on them (n≤5 in 2019). These findings also align with critiques from previous research regarding the efficacy of this policing initiative (1,6). Further, among those who had a past year encounter with drug dogs at festivals in 2024, the vast majority anticipated their most recent encounter (87%; 92% in 2019) and engaged in precautionary behaviours (82%; 86% in 2019) to avoid detection. Some of these behaviours, such as concealing or pre-consuming drugs, may increase health risks (1), while others, such as getting someone else to carry their drugs, may carry serious legal consequences (e.g., supply vs possession charge). That is, rather than being deterred by the expected presence of drug detection dogs, our findings suggest that people continue to adapt their behaviour in ways that could cause considerable harm/s.

Although potential reductions in drug dog encounters at festivals are encouraging, our findings continue to show that their presence does not deter carriage/use of illegal drugs and may instead increase risky behaviours. These results reinforce the argument for harm-reduction strategies over punitive measures, with evidence suggesting that policies like drug-checking services and education could mitigate risks more effectively than the current reliance on drug detection dogs (6).

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