

NEW ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE TREND SCHEME ON DRUG USE AND USERS IN A HEALTH CRISIS CONTEXT

The OFDT's emerging phenomena detection scheme describes the trends observed by its 8 local coordinating sites in France in 2020 and up to the beginning of 2021

Since 1999, the monitoring carried out by the **Emerging Trends and New Drugs (TREND)** scheme of the French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT) has made it possible to describe the population groups that are particularly dependent on psychoactive substances and to identify emerging phenomena in the field of illicit drugs and diverted medicines. This information, gathered from a wide range of stakeholders (users, social and health workers, law enforcement officers, etc.), focuses on urban fringe spaces (streets, squats, user reception facilities, drug dealing areas) and techno party settings (alternative, commercial, gay, gay-friendly recreational settings). All of the findings are intended to inform professionals in contact with users and the public responses that are put in place.

The observations of the scheme relating to 2020 and the beginning of 2021 are now presented in an issue of the publication *Tendances*¹, which is published along with **analyses of local situations** produced by the **8 TREND coordinating sites** located in **Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Metz, Paris, Rennes and Toulouse**. Putting this data into perspective makes it possible to assess the situation during the health crisis and to understand, in line with the bulletins² published in April and May 2020, the changes in use and treatment during this period.

➤ **The most precarious users made vulnerable by the health crisis**

The health crisis has led to persistent difficulties in accessing economic resources, social rights and care for drug users in very precarious situations (living on the streets, in squats, temporary or emergency accommodation, etc.). The disruption to the operations of public authorities during 2020 led to recurrent delays in accessing rights (local health insurance fund (CPAM), family allowance fund (CAF)) and the payment of social benefits. **Specialised drug treatment centres (CSAPA) and support centres for the reduction of drug-related harm (CAARUD) have limited their counselling and treatment arrangements** (video interviews, suspension of group counselling, screening by rapid diagnostic test, etc.) which may have led to **postponements or even long-term breaks in treatment** (for example for the initiation of opioid substitution treatments). The more difficult access to harm reduction equipment may have stimulated the reuse or sharing of syringes between injecting drug users or pipes between free base cocaine users.

The observers and professionals questioned by the TREND scheme underlined an **overall deterioration in the mental health of the most precarious drug users, with increased use of alcohol and benzodiazepines** to regulate stress or depressive symptoms. In 2020, however, their polydrug use was in line with previous years. In particular, cocaine was still widely used, mainly by injection or based in order to maximise its effects; many professionals working in CSAPA and CAARUD said that they were still powerless to deal with the social and health consequences of such use.

➤ **A difficult adaptation of professional practices in addiction medicine and harm reduction**

During the first lockdown (spring 2020), harm reduction and addiction medicine stakeholders focused on some of their missions (distributing safer injection equipment, satisfying primary needs, maintaining the continuity of consultations and dispensing substitution and psychotropic drugs). Throughout the year 2020, **new methods of intervention were deployed, in particular with reinforced patrols in public and during home visits, in hotels and accommodation centres.**

¹ Clément Gérome, "Usages et usagers de drogues en contexte de crise sanitaire" [Drug uses and users in a health crisis context], *Tendances* No. 147, OFDT 2021, 8 p. <https://www.ofdt.fr/BDD/publications/docs/efxcg2bc.pdf>
Offprints available online, summaries of the 8 local sites <https://www.ofdt.fr/index.php?cID=755>

² Clément Gérome, Michel Gandilhon. Drug use, drug supply and professional practices in France at the time of COVID-19: qualitative cross observations of the TREND scheme. OFDT, 2020, Bulletins 1 <https://www.ofdt.fr/BDD/publications/docs/Bulletin-TREND-COVID-1.pdf> and 2 <https://www.ofdt.fr/BDD/publications/docs/Bulletin-TREND-COVID-2.pdf>

The lack of collective counselling has sometimes made it possible to strengthen individual support for users, and the widespread use of tele-consultations has proved suitable for some. Nevertheless, many professionals indicate that these constraints (physical distance, restricted counselling measures, mask wearing, adjusted schedules, lack of staff, etc.) have reduced the frequency and duration of contacts, sometimes impoverishing the support provided to users and leading to feelings of a loss of impetus or even professional exhaustion within teams.

➤ **Patterns of use in recreational settings marked by health restrictions**

The closure of recreational venues has led some users to meet in dwellings. **These private parties** based on acquaintance and co-optation were characterised by the absence of a substantial sound system, and of sufficient dance spaces due to the cramped conditions of dwellings, but also the possibility of unconcealed drug use. Many people report having used more drugs there than at free parties or at parties in clubs or other private establishments. **This increase is particularly reported for alcohol and cocaine use, the effects of which are considered to be more adapted to these parties** (unlike MDMA/ecstasy or hallucinogenic substances) where conversation between friends plays an important role.

From summer 2020 onwards, outdoor events could be organised again. Although some festivals have been attended by several thousand people (in Lozère in August 2020, in Brittany on New Year's Eve), organisers have preferred to limit events and the number of participants in order to avoid administrative and legal sanctions (fines, seizure of equipment, etc.).

Some people who regularly attend techno party settings also reported a change in their usage due to their absence from work (partial unemployment) or the widespread use of remote working and distance learning for students. **These situations may have been conducive to daytime consumption of alcohol, cannabis and cocaine for people who previously only used these products in the evening.** Similarly, people whose use was mainly limited to celebratory occasions or friendly gatherings indicated that they had used these products alone, sometimes on a daily basis, because of boredom, anxiety or a feeling of isolation caused by the situation related to the health crisis. However, people working in a setting conducive to drug use (hotel and restaurant industry, events, nightclub management) indicated that they had reduced their consumption (mainly of alcohol and cocaine) once they were unemployed.

➤ **Changes in the drug supply in 2020**

The various TREND sites underline that the travel restrictions introduced as part of the public health emergency had little overall effect on the availability of drugs in 2020, with the exception of the start of the first lockdown. This is due to sea and road freight activities continuing, which are the main routes for transporting these products into France. The only exception seemed to be cannabis resin, for which the Bordeaux and Lyon sites reported a price increase until autumn 2020.

In the wake of the reconfigurations of the drug supply observed in previous years, trafficking networks have above all strengthened their home delivery service, which was particularly well suited to the needs of users who would reduce the risks of checks in public. In this context, the use of digital applications and instant messaging sometimes allows them to accumulate several thousand subscribers.

Finally, this issue of *Tendances* looks at **the increased visibility of 3-MMC** during festive evenings (in Paris, Bordeaux, Marseille or Lyon for example). This **synthetic cathinone** has both euphoric and empathogenic effects and is seen as providing a combination of the effects of cocaine and MDMA/ecstasy. The use of 3-MMC was previously almost exclusively observed among men who have sex with men (MSM). As with GHB/GBL in 2018, **this diffusion among other groups** takes place at parties attended by both MSM familiar with the product and other drug users who are going to experiment with it.

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