



Research Paper

Experiences of police contact among young adult recreational drug users: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Background: While young adults who engage in recreational drug use are at increased risk of contact with police, their experiences of police contact have been largely overlooked.

Method: In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 70 young adult amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS; i.e., ecstasy [MDMA] and methamphetamine) users who had experienced intensive alcohol and other drug-related police contact (e.g., being arrested, charged, or raided by police). These interviews focused on perceptions of personal experiences of alcohol and other drug-related police contact and general perceptions of police and policing and were conducted as part of a larger longitudinal study of drug use among a population-based sample of young adults from South-East Queensland, Australia.

Results: ATS users' perceptions of their personal interactions with police and general perceptions of police and policing were influenced by a number of factors, including police behaviour, prior contact with police, friends and family members' contact with police, and perceptions of their own behaviour leading to their contact with police. While a majority of ATS users reported that their contact with police had either a neutral or negative impact on their general perceptions of police and policing, some ATS users reported that police contact had a positive impact. For 70% of ATS users, police contact was reported to have had an impact on their substance use behaviours, resulting in either modification of their substance use behaviours to avoid further police contact or reduction in their substance use.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that police contact among young adult ATS users can impact on both perceptions of police and policing and substance use behaviours, emphasising the importance of the quality and nature of police contact and its potential role in harm reduction.

Introduction

Due to their engagement in illegal behaviour, people who use drugs have increased levels of police contact. Contact with police, and how police behaviour during that contact is perceived, can have a significant impact on not only the views people form of police and policing but also compliance and cooperation with police (Mazerolle, Bennett, Davis, Sargeant, & Manning, 2013). Police contact and the resulting outcomes of that contact may also influence subsequent substance use behaviour (Shanahan, Hughes, & McSweeney, 2017; Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter, & Spittal, 2006). However, research examining police contact among people who use drugs has predominantly focused on the experiences of people who inject drugs (see Hayashi, Small, Csete, Hattirat, & Kerr, 2013; Miller et al., 2008; Small et al., 2006). Consequently, the experiences of people who engage in recreational drug use

have been largely overlooked. This study helps to address this gap in the literature by using qualitative data from a population-based study of Australian young adult amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS; i.e., ecstasy [MDMA] and methamphetamine) users to examine their personal experiences with police related to their own alcohol and other drug use.

Young adults who engage in recreational drug use are an important target group for understanding experiences with and perceptions of police and policing. In Australia, ATS are the second most widely used illicit drugs, following cannabis (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). ATS use is most common among young adults, with 7.0% and 2.8% of Australians aged 20–29 years having used ecstasy and methamphetamine in the last 12 months, respectively (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). ATS are commonly used in public spaces (e.g., nightlife entertainment districts, raves, and music festivals; Van Havere, Vanderplasschen, Lammertyn, Broekaert, &

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Bellis, 2011), settings in which there is often a strong police presence (Hughes, Moxham-Hall, Ritter, Weatherburn, & MacCoun, 2017; Hughes, Anderson, Morleo, & Bellis, 2008). These illicit stimulants are also often combined with alcohol in recreational/social settings in the context of a ‘big night out’ (Barrett, Gross, Garand, & Pihl, 2005; Pennay et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that individuals who combine alcohol and illicit stimulants in these settings consume large quantities of alcohol and are at increased risk of involvement in incidents of aggressive behaviour (Leslie, Smirnov et al., 2017; McKetin, Chalmers, Sunderland, & Bright, 2014; Miller et al., 2015). Further, as co-use of alcohol and illicit stimulants may mask impairment of psychomotor functioning, their combined use may lead to engagement in risky behaviours, such as drink driving (Pennay et al., 2015). Consequently, young adult recreational drug users’ engagement in illegal behaviour may increase their likelihood of police contact through a number of mechanisms, including intoxication in a public place, possession of illicit drugs and/or utensils, antisocial behaviour, and driving while under the influence (Sutherland & Shepherd, 2001).

Contact with police and perceptions of police and policing

Individuals’ personal interactions with police and interactions they hear about from their family and friends have a significant impact on their perceptions of police and policing (Schuck & Rosenbaum, 2005). Evidence suggests that, in general, people’s perceptions of police behaviour (e.g., whether police act in a fair and respectful manner) have either an equal or more substantial impact on their perceptions of police and policing than their judgements of police performance (e.g., whether police are good at controlling crime; Hinds & Murphy, 2007). It is argued that the behaviour of police during interactions with citizens is particularly important as it conveys information regarding an individual’s position within society (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Fair treatment (i.e., procedural justice) is proposed to indicate that an individual is valued and respected in society, while unfair treatment indicates disrespect and a marginalised position (Murphy & Cherney, 2011).

A substantial body of literature has shown that procedural justice, which is concerned with fairness of treatment and decision-making during police encounters with citizens, is a key strategy for promoting police legitimacy (Mazerolle et al., 2013). Through increasing police legitimacy, research suggests that procedural justice-based policing can increase citizen cooperation and compliance with both the police and the law more generally (Mazerolle et al., 2013). While the majority of procedural justice research has been conducted with general population samples, a small number of studies have examined the applicability of procedural justice among offender samples (Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2012). This research suggests that the procedural justice model may be applicable among offenders (Baker et al., 2013; Tatar, Kaasa, & Cauffman, 2012; White, Mulvey, & Dario, 2015), including young adult recreational drug users (Leslie, Cherney, et al., 2017).

Contact with police and changes in substance use behaviour

Contact with police may lead to changes in substance use behaviour; however, it is unclear whether these changes are associated with police contact per se or the resulting consequences of that contact (e.g., confiscation of substances or equipment, arrest, or diversion programs). Several studies have shown that street-level drug law enforcement (e.g., confiscating injecting equipment) often results in people who inject drugs avoiding carrying injecting equipment and engaging in sharing of equipment, which increases the risk of transmission of blood borne viruses (e.g., HIV and hepatitis C; Kerr, Small, & Wood, 2005; Small et al., 2006). While these particular issues are less relevant for recreational users, there is some evidence to suggest that police contact may negatively impact on substance use behaviours in this group. One example is the controversial issue of the presence of police sniffer dogs at music festivals. In Australia, public health advocates have argued that

the presence of police and sniffer dogs at music festivals adds to the risk of overdose and death, as attendees carrying drugs may resort to consuming their entire quantity at once to avoid detection (Hughes et al., 2017). While research examining this issue is scarce, an Australian study found that 8% of regular ecstasy users who had seen a sniffer dog while carrying drugs in the last 6 months reported this behaviour (Hickey, McIlwraith, Bruno, Matthews, & Alati, 2012). Further, research also indicates that police presence at music festivals may encourage people to purchase drugs within the festival to avoid detection by police, who often search attendees as they enter the festival (Hughes et al., 2017). This has important public health implications, as attendees may purchase drugs from unknown suppliers and may be at increased risk of purchasing adulterated or mislabelled drugs (Hughes et al., 2017).

These behaviours described above align with a small body of research that indicates that police contact may result in restrictive deterrence among recreational drug users. Restrictive deterrence refers to changes in offending behaviour aimed at reducing the likelihood of police contact, such as reducing offending behaviour, changing to lower-level offences (e.g., switching from using heroin to cannabis), and employing situational strategies around offending to reduce risk of apprehension (Jacobs, 2010). This behaviour has been observed among cannabis users, with users avoiding public use and carrying only small amounts of cannabis (Erickson, van der Maas, & Hathaway, 2013; Ream, Johnson, Dunlap, & Benoit, 2010). However, it is unclear whether the effects of restrictive deterrence lead to reductions in frequency or quantity of drug use.

Method

The current study draws on interview data collected as part of 4.5-year follow-up of the Natural History Study of Drug Use (NHSDU) conducted in 2013–14. The NHSDU is a prospective study of drug use in a population-based sample of young adult ATS users in South-East Queensland, Australia. To recruit participants, a one page drug use screening questionnaire was mailed to 12,079 young adults (aged 19–23 years) randomly selected from the Brisbane and Gold Coast electoral rolls, with a response rate of 49.9%. A sampling frame was developed from this screening data, from which an ATS-user group (young adults who had used ecstasy or methamphetamine ≥ 3 times within the last 12 months; $n = 352$) was recruited. This method is described in more detail elsewhere (Smirnov, Kemp, Wells, Legosz, & Najman, 2014). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Queensland’s Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

The semi-structured interviews conducted at the 4.5-year follow-up focused on (a) experiences with and outcomes of police contact and (b) perceptions of police and policing. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants by trained interviewing staff from the NHSDU as part of a larger interviewer-administered questionnaire, which typically took between 1.5 and 2 h to complete. The qualitative interviews lasted for between 4 and 30 min, with an average of 11 min.

An objective of these interviews was to explore young adult ATS users’ perceptions of police behaviour and the impact of police contact on both their general perceptions of police and policing and their substance use behaviours. The interview schedule included topics such as: personal contact with police related to the participants’ own alcohol and/or other drug use (including the circumstances of the contact, the behaviour of the police officer[s], the participants’ own response to the police officer[s], the outcome[s] of the contact, and the impact of the contact on the participants’ relationships with family and friends, attitudes towards police, and substance use behaviour); family and friends’ experience with police related to alcohol and/or other drug use; and general attitudes regarding police and policing (e.g., the best and worst things about police and attitudes towards drug and alcohol laws). Participants were asked to think about police contact over their

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