

Impact of Covid-19 lockdown on youth alcohol and other drug (AOD) use

Findings from a survey of AOD services in New Zealand (8th – 24th April 2020)

Purpose of this report

This is a brief summary of findings specific to youth and youth services from a sector wide survey during the Covid-19 lockdown. It is intended to contribute to the growing knowledge base about how young people are impacted by the Covid-19 lockdown to help plan for approaches that meet their immediate and medium-term needs.

Methodology

A 14-question survey was shared across Drug Foundation networks with 64 responses from AOD services between 8th and 24th of April. Of the responses, 20 were from youth services: youth specific AOD services (n=7); youth one-stop-shops (n=4); school-based services (n=1); and AOD services with youth clients (n=8). Data from youth-only services are prioritised. Respondents' answers were coded and themed. These themes are outlined below.

These findings are reflective of young people who were already engaged with a service before lockdown, and reflects the information they were willing to share with their clinician. These findings may not reflect the situation for young people who were not accessing a support service or stopped engaging with a service during this period.

Key findings

Substance use mostly decreased due to reduced access

Most youth specific services reported a decrease in substance use (n=7), with three reporting an increase in use, and two reporting no change. General AOD services with a youth component largely reported an increase in overall use across the age ranges they supported. Reasons for reduced use were largely due to reduced access and difficulty to obtain products. One service commented on more supervision/awareness if they were living with parents being a factor for decreased use. Financial pressure was mentioned by two services. In contrast to responses to the survey from adult services, youth services did not comment that the young people they supported saw lockdown as a positive opportunity to change or stop use.

Two of the three youth services that reported seeing an increase in substance use, stated young people they supported were using more cannabis because they were bored. Two of the three services reporting increases found cannabis use had escalated to daily use during lockdown. Reasons for this increase in use was mostly attributed to boredom with less frequent mention of anxiety, dependence or isolation compared to general AOD services. Some services reported that young people they were supporting had stockpiled cannabis before the lockdown period started. Two services mentioned clients breaking their bubble to access products with one service aware of increased stealing and sex work to afford access. Outside of increased risk to obtain products, patterns of use or substance of choice did not appear to become riskier.

Withdrawal was a common experience and impacted family relationships

Six youth services mentioned withdrawal as a consequence from not using during this period. This was more commonly mentioned than responses from non-youth services. They reported that this led to agitation, irritability and arguments within families as well as impacting on mental health. Some reported young people were continuing to use during lockdown to manage mental health symptoms, particularly anxiety. There were few reports of domestic violence or suicidal ideation.

Isolation had a particularly hard impact upon young people with low connectivity

Young people with low access to internet or technology lost the ability to contact services, but more crucially lost their connection with other young people. For those who already had challenges with accommodation or employment, services had noticed lockdown exacerbated those challenges. Services struggled to reach these young people.

Engagement with clients over this period was difficult

In general, most services found it harder to engage with clients, especially as lockdown continued. A few services mentioned being concerned for their clients and that limited access to internet and/or phone credit made challenging engagement even more challenging. They also reported a notable drop in referrals to services. However, they reported positive engagement with young people who had good connection to the internet and felt comfortable where they were living. Overall, this mirrors experience in wider services who were seeing lower volumes of people compared to usual, knowing that some clients were waiting until things returned to 'normal' before re-engaging.

Summary

Based on responses from youth services, substance use largely decreased among young people due to less access and respecting lockdown. Some services that reported seeing an increase in daily use of cannabis. Increased family tensions were reported, especially from young people who experienced withdrawal from their substance use.