

Harm Reduction and Drug Checking; A wrap-around service for festivals.

Case Study: Shambhala Music Festival /ANKORS Drug Checking Harm Reduction Service data 2015

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This report is a summary of 2015 data collected by ANKORS at the Drug Checking booth at Shambhala Music Festival. Three important findings are presented in this paper.

- The high uptake in a harm reduction service that includes drug checking is proof of its value to the population of people who use drugs.
- People who use the drug checking service are more likely to dispose of a substance when given a test result they were not expecting.
- Even more importantly they are more likely to dispose of their substance when they are given a result that shows the substance is “excessively dangerous” and likely to result in serious clinical consequences.

Shambhala Music Festival is located near the small town of Salmo BC. The festival takes place over five days with 67,000 cumulative attendees over seven days and a peak daily attendance of 15,380. Guests are camping out at the festival for the entire event. The age range for most festival attendees is 20-30 years (all must be 19+).¹

Services

The integrated Harm Reduction service includes Medical services, Security, Outreach team, Sanctuary Trip Sit, Women’s Safe Space, Camp Clean Beats sober camp, ANKORS Harm Reduction and Options for Sexual Health.

¹ “Start Small, Take it Easy”: ANKORS Survey 2013. Warren Michelow, Cheryl Dowden

ANKORS

At Shambhala ANKORS offers party safe and harm reduction services, Drug Checking, sexual health info and supplies. ANKORS also participates in research.

It is important to note that on average between 2003 and 2014 a quarter of the visits to the ANKORS tent were for drug checking.¹ The rest of the individuals were looking for the other services or resources that ANKORS offers.

In 2015 ANKORS had 7099 contacts and did 3224 pill and powder tests. The service is continually evolving to meet the needs of the population served. For example, through a new program introduced in summer of 2015, ANKORS gave out 4500 straws for safer snorting.



Drug Checking

Our goals are in line with the NEWIP standards of practice²:

To use “Drug Checking” programs as an educational and harm/risk reduction tool by getting in touch with consumers and providing them with individual and personalized information about the substance they may consume.

To use “Drug Checking” programs to help make contact with drug consumers that would not normally approach drug programs by providing peer focused interventions that suit the needs of the party scene and work well within the locations that drug use is focused.

The Testing Procedure

Service users start with reading a disclaimer about what the tests can and cannot do. They also fill out a short survey. We use this survey to collect data on drug test results, gender, source of substance, use of service and disposals. Using a variety of reagents, mainly seven different ones, we test for fifteen of the most commonly seen drugs that would be expected at these types of events.

Testers follow strict legal protocols. They never touch the substance and do not give advice, only encourage people to make informed decisions. Each interaction with a service user is a chance to have a harm reduction conversation. Testers will have frank and open discussions about risk, dosage, mixing drugs and alcohol and inform them of all the other services on site. Security and Medical also submit substances for testing. At the end of every

² NEWIP (Nightlife Empowerment and Wellbeing Implementation Project) Drug Checking Standards of Practice. <http://safenightlife.org>

night Security comes and collects the disposals and hands them over to RCMP.

We are well aware of the limitations of the tests and are always looking for new tests and new technologies to give us more information.

Drug Checking is sought after by festival goers

There is high uptake of ANKORS drug checking service. Since 2010 there has been a steady increase of about 25% per year of new service users. Since 2003 ANKORS has performed over 17,107 tests. This demonstrates that the service is desirable, visible and accessible to festival goers.

2015 Data Collected at Shambhala

Comparison of belief versus actual

Individuals are asked what they believe their substance is prior to testing and this is linked to the results of the substance test. In about 4 out of 5 tests the test confirmed the client’s belief of their substance. Just over 5% of the time individuals did not know what they had when they came into the tent. Overall, 16% of the time the client’s belief is not confirmed by the test. This is a relatively high rate, and allows the tester to provide education and harm reduction messaging.



Disposals

Was the substance discarded at the table after testing?

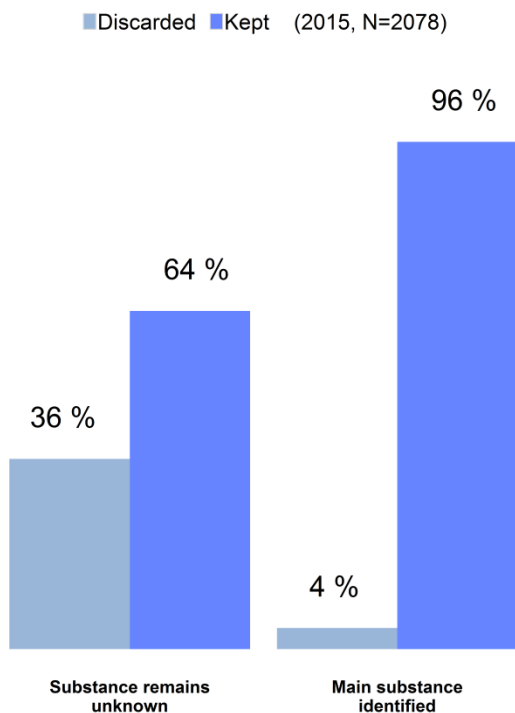
Overall only 4% of substances that were tested were discarded at the testing table, however this tends to hide the true picture. Some substances are discarded at other locations, some are returned to the dealer.

Also, each discard is counted as one, so if someone discards a baggie holding ten capsules, it only counts as one. So the discard count is an under-estimation.

When people received a result that was unexpected 13% discarded compared to 2% of expected results.

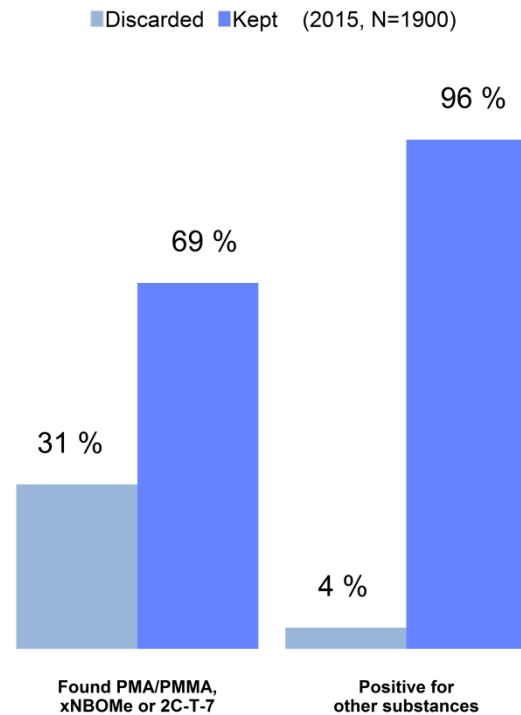
Digging deeper, tests of “unknown” substances where no main substance was identified give us a different picture. Here we see 36% of these “unknowns” are disposed.

Much higher proportion of tested substances are discarded when testing an 'unknown' substance does not identify main ingredients



PMMA/PMA, NBOME and 2C-T-7 are potent psychedelics that are often misrepresented to consumers potentially resulting in greater morbidity.

Much higher proportion of tested substances are discarded when samples test positive for high hazard substances



These 3 substances were discarded at a significantly higher rate than the other substances which are viewed as less dangerous. This is a very important finding demonstrating individuals are taking responsibility for their health.

The identification of substances of particular concern is important as testers are able to modify messages when substances of particular concern are seen. As dangerous new substances are identified, messages can be adjusted.

Taken together these significant differences all indicate there is public health benefit to substance testing by allowing people to make more informed choices.

Conclusion

Drug checking should be part of any integrated harm reduction service for people who use drugs, especially in festival environments where recreational drug use is common. Individuals want to take responsibility for their own safety, and they engage in harm reduction strategies. These include, moderation, pacing themselves, knowing their limits, taking small doses, resisting peer pressure, using a buddy system and using substance testing booths.

Individuals stated they would like to see expanded substance testing, including adulterants. They would also like to see increased numbers of festivals where substance testing occurs.³ Expanding drug checking services would allow for early warning systems to operate, alerting the population of new drugs coming on to the market.

Drug checking is an invaluable service alongside other harm reduction programs and can be utilized in a festival setting or community setting alongside other services such as needle exchange, safe injection site.

Data Limitations

Data are limited by the realities of substance testing. Sometimes a test will react with a color not on the color chart. A more experienced tester will be able to get more information out of a test than a less experienced tester. Interpretation of the results can be subjective. With the constant flow of new psychoactive substances on the market we continuously faced with the need for more advanced testing techniques.

In 2015 about 30% of survey's did not have the discard field completed, which likely resulted in under-estimates of discard rates. Data quality also impacted the survey response, 6% of surveys were disqualified because there was not a belief and result completed.

Resources and References

“Start Small, Take it Easy“: ANKORS Survey 2013 by Warren Michelow and Cheryl Dowden

Drug Checking at Music Festivals: A How-to Guide by Chloe Sage and Warren Michelow

Both of the above reports are on our website as is much more information on drug checking and harm reduction.

<http://www.ankorsvolunteer.com>

NEWIP Good Practice Standards
<http://newip.safernightlife.org/standards>

Please email Chloe Sage/ANKORS
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³ “Start Small, Take it Easy“: ANKORS Survey 2013. Warren Michelow, Cheryl Dowden