

Snow season: The normalisation of cocaine

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The drug trends among young adults immersed in the party scenes of major cities in countries like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom often indicate the direction of drug use in the rest of Europe. Based on recent research in the normalisation of drug use, it is predominantly the consumption of MDMA/Ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamine that has become normalised within these urban areas (Murray, 2023; van den Bos et al., 2023). The increase in cocaine use is evident in wastewater in the Nordic region, especially in the metropolitan areas. Although the amounts of cocaine use are lower than the European average, the proportion of cocaine is significant (THL, 2024).

The global cocaine market remains a global challenge, involving complex networks of production, trafficking and distribution. The South American Andean region is a major producer. A recent estimation of the magnitude and development of the global cocaine market still indicates that the effectiveness in disrupting the illicit cocaine market has improved. A key factor seems to be dealing with money laundering risks (Le et al., 2024).

Cocaine is now the second most common illicit drug in Europe, and 21% of those who for the first time seek help for their drug use do so due to cocaine (EMCDA, 2023). In addition to the expanding markets and availability, a general normalisation can be attributed to media portrayal, cultural influences and societal attitudes. Pop culture often glamorises drug use, contributing to a perception of it as a symbol of status or excitement. Social attitudes and policies have also shown to impact the perception of drug use and influencing whether it is viewed as acceptable.

Drug use normalisation processes are difficult to unfold; a recent ethnographic study from Hong Kong highlights the cultural codes and status distinctions – as well as negotiating “bag politics” – that provide access to the cocaine and the contexts in which it is available. The research shows that within social supply networks the development of “street social capital” provides opportunities for social and economic benefits both within and beyond the subculture. The desire to forge and develop such capital is entangled with the use: accessing such capital is a motivating factor to use and socially supply cocaine (Lowe & Laidler, 2024).

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The harm of cocaine pertains to its stimulant properties, which can lead to increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure and potential cardiovascular issues. It also affects the central nervous system, leading to addiction, mental health problems and long-term damage to organs. The method of ingestion, often through snorting or injecting, poses additional health risks (see e.g., EMCDDA, 2023).

In light of an impending rapid normalisation of cocaine, it now appears a bit confusing that population survey protocols, such as that ESPAD school survey, lump together cocaine with “cocaine/crack” or in the category of “amphetamines, methamphetamines, cocaine and crack” (ESPAD, 2020). Is it time to establish that cocaine has now been normalised out of the category of hard chemical stimulants and is to be grouped, at least socioculturally speaking, beside alcohol, tobacco and cannabis?

In this issue

Self-assessments of state authenticity – i.e., the experience of being true to oneself in a particular moment – collected from microdosers in the Netherlands indicate that feeling and behaving authentically play a central role in explaining the positive effects of microdosing on health and wellbeing that are reported by current research (Pop & Dinkelacker, 2024). Koponen and colleagues (2024) investigate cumulative risk factors for injuries and poisoning requiring hospital care in youth with prenatal substance exposure. Ruisniemi and colleagues (2024) discuss relational parenthood in addiction recovery and Balbuena and colleagues (2024) bring forth evidence on parental factors predicting social deviance and psychological outcomes in offspring from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC).

Prami and colleagues (2024) are trying to grasp why an untreated high-risk opioid user population in Finland do not enter treatment. Their study points out limited treatment and that the high-risk opioid users tend to

think that the treatment is too binding. The researchers recognise a need for an increase in general information about accessibility to and individualisation of opioid agonist therapy (OAT). Two overview texts round up the issue: the dichotomy between health and drug abuse in bodybuilding is discussed by Horn (2024), and the value of insight in how a migrant population perceive gambling is discussed by Marionneau and Järvinen-Tassopoulos (2024).


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