

## Understanding drug harm through Māori lived experience and knowledge

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**Background:** In Aotearoa New Zealand, the state actively produces drug-related inequities through systems that criminalise and marginalise Māori (Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa) while medicalising similar behaviours in settler populations. This reflects a wider pattern of colonial systems that continue to produce and reinforce inequities. Drug policies rely on approaches that exclude Māori perspectives and ways of knowing. As a result, such policies often pathologize people while ignoring the deeper causes rooted in colonisation. To disrupt these systems and develop more effective responses to drug harm, we must first understand how these harms are experienced and understood by our people.

**Methods:** Through community wānanga, we sought to understand Māori perspectives and experiences of drug harms. Employing kaupapa Māori methodology, we conducted wānanga with Māori community members who have lived experience and expertise. This Indigenous research approach privileged relational knowledge-making and collective analysis over extractive research practices.

**Findings:** Wānanga participants reframed drug harm from individual pathology to colonial wound. Themes from the wānanga centred on drug harms as manifestations of colonisation; intergenerational trauma as a living pathway of harms; systemic stigmatisation reproducing harms; institutional violence disguised as "care"; and relational ruptures severing whānau, wairua, and identity. Participants positioned drugs as paradoxical, as drugs offered temporary relief while creating vulnerability to criminalisation and deeper disconnection. Systems ostensibly designed to help instead perpetuate harm through cultural violence and the severance of Indigenous practices.

**Conclusions:** These findings disrupt the status quo by exposing how drug policy functions as contemporary colonisation perpetuating ongoing harms. Māori knowledge shows that addressing drug harm requires dismantling colonial systems and restoring tino rangatiratanga, and ultimately revitalising rongoā and tikanga-based healing to heal collective wounds.

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