

Using 'Drug Checking' legislation to facilitate illicit drug research and expand harm reduction recommendations

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Introduction: Investigating illicit drug consumption poses significant challenges, with legal controls posing one of the most significant barriers. Typically, the only people authorised to possess and work with illicit drug materials are those working in law enforcement or the criminal justice system. Researchers investigating risks or harms need to work within the law, and in many jurisdictions, this inhibits access to drugs for laboratory analysis for research. Furthermore, drug samples obtained from legal sources (police or customs) may not be representative of drugs or drug forms available on the illicit market. This work sought to facilitate laboratory research with drug samples sourced directly from consumers.

Approach: Legislation was passed in New Zealand in 2022 to enable 'drug checking' by licensed providers. To enable the collection and analysis of illicit drug samples, the use of this legislation was proposed.

Results: The application process was thorough and time-intensive. The legislation requires that all University of Auckland Council members were subject to criminal record checks. The legislation also requires that all clients must receive results outlining the drugs contained in their drug samples with tailored harm reduction advice; this required the development of advice and researcher training. A licence was issued following a twelve-month application process.

Discussions and Conclusions: The ability to use this legislation to enable research into illicit drugs in New Zealand has enabled this project and future research into illicit drug material.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Analysis of drug samples paired with individualised advice is now a gold standard in harm reduction. This research builds on existing drug checking systems to include dosage analysis and associated advice.

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