

A survey exploration of psilocybin mushroom use in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction: Each year in New Zealand, 108,000 people consume illicit ‘hallucinogens’, with psilocybin mushroom use being the most common. People who use psilocybin mushrooms (PWUPM) report the use of diverse species and preparations, for recreational, therapeutic, and spiritual purposes. Reported harms include toxicity from poisonous lookalike species, challenging experiences (‘bad trips’), and acute paralysis. Research is limited on how mushrooms are acquired, prepared, and consumed in New Zealand, and little data exists on the prevalence of associated harm. As use increases, pulling back the veil on this drug type is essential to reducing harm.

Method / Approach: Data was collected over 13 months through an anonymous online survey of PWUPM. Questions were developed based on online reports of mushroom use and through reading the scientific literature. Community engagement was prioritised through the inclusion of PWUPM on the research team, and consultation with a PWUPM advisory group.

Key findings: Respondents highlighted diverse species and preparation methods used at the population level; however, typical use among individuals was less diverse. While psychedelics are generally considered less harmful than other illicit drugs, around a quarter of respondents had experienced drug poisoning or acute paralysis from mushrooms, suggesting that psilocybin mushrooms may cause distinct physiological harm. Almost half of the respondents use psilocybin mushrooms for therapeutic or spiritual purposes; however, consuming alongside a therapist, or spiritual practitioner was rare. Instead, a third of respondents used alone, suggesting that use is typically self-guided.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Findings highlight a population that is not adequately served by conventional harm-reduction approaches. Around half of the respondents used mushrooms for non-recreational purposes without adequate support and often alone. Such use highlights the need for harm-reduction approaches that support solo consumers and offer access to professional support.

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