

“It felt like they were doing everything they could to find something”: Policing experiences of people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction: Law enforcement measures used to deter and punish breaches of public health orders during the COVID-19 pandemic produced significant collateral damage for disadvantaged populations, including culturally and ethnically diverse minorities, Indigenous peoples, sex workers, and people residing in low socio-economic neighborhoods. Despite that people who use drugs are more likely to experience interactions with police due to the criminalisation of drug use, we are unaware of studies examining their experiences of COVID-19 policing. Our study addresses this gap.

Methods: We conducted a mixed methods study about the effects of the pandemic and associated restrictions on participants of two prospective cohort studies of people who use drugs (n=2,156) in Victoria, Australia. We descriptively analysed quantitative responses (n=1,130) to pandemic-related questions added to survey instruments between 2020-2022. We also conducted qualitative interviews with 89 cohort participants; data was analysed thematically and integrated with quantitative results.

Key Findings: Interactions with police related to COVID-19 restrictions were reported by 11% (n=125) of survey respondents. Thirty-eight participants received COVID-19-related penalty notices, including A\$1,652 fines for breaching stay-at home orders; some were fined while homeless or travelling to/from harm reduction services. Lacking the financial means to pay fines was commonplace, sometimes resulting in additional penalties, including court orders and incarceration. Increased policing in street-based drug markets and local neighbourhoods was observed by many interview participants. A view that policing practices were targeted and discriminatory was also commonplace.

Conclusions: Findings highlight how law enforcement measures used during the pandemic intensified longstanding criminalisation processes for people who use drugs, with adverse impacts on their health and wellbeing and socio-economic circumstances.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Results provide insights for future public health emergencies, including highlighting the need for responses that protect, rather than abrogate the health and safety needs of people who use drugs.

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