

Conceptualising 'non-participation' in drug policy.

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Introduction: Youth participation in drug policy is widely promoted as beneficial. Yet, critiques of exclusion and tokenism persist. This research examines what happens when young people don't engage in drug policy or find participation unsatisfying, treating 'non-participation' as worthy of analysis in its own right.

Methods: I conducted 21 interviews with people who had participated in drug policy in Australia as 'young people'. A sociomaterial analysis attended to two forms of non-participation: 'overlooked participation' (practices assumed unimportant compared to 'real' or 'formal' participation) and 'dissatisfied participation' (where participation did not meet expectations).

Key Findings: 'Overlooked participation' included: limited imagination for how participation was possible due to dominance of formalised or organised modes of participation; deferred participation contingent on future qualifications; and refusal to engage in institutional or academic pathways. Narrow conceptions of 'participation' obscured other ways young people engaged with drug policy issues, meaning that interlocutors sometimes participated without recognising themselves as participants. 'Dissatisfied participation' included: being excluded from participating in certain engagements due to eligibility criteria; attending events but not actively engaging; and selectively choosing to engage in certain spaces which were more aligned with their goals. While these experiences were characterised by strong emotions (disgust, frustration), they ultimately led to the interlocutors engaging in different practices that they found to be more generative.

Discussions and Conclusions: Narrow conceptualisations of legitimate participation can inadvertently exclude and devalue diverse forms of youth engagement with drug policy, and formal participation mechanisms do not always deliver on promises of meaningful voice.

Implications: Opportunities for youth participation should be accessible and satisfying for young people who are typically marginalised or excluded. A more expansive notion of participation should centre practices that young people already actively engage with and should avoid characterising those that choose not to formally participate as disengaged.

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