

Standing In a Field Naked¹: Improving Harm Reduction at Manitoba Festivals

It's 4 am and the sun is about to rise. An epic night just passed, full of adventure, music, and mushrooms. You're carrying a trumpet you do not own. You feel happy and accomplished in this brief moment of alone. It was such a good night. You made it over the hill, past the echoes of drum beats and dancing feet. You know your friends are just there, waiting for you. You're standing in a prairie field, smiling to yourself, as the sun crests over the horizon. A cool breeze informs you, you are also totally naked.

Background

The MHRN is a provincial network working towards ensuring harm reduction is universally practiced, by individuals, organizations and systems. The mission of the MHRN is to coordinate efforts and support harm reduction within and across jurisdictions. MHRN strives to provide services in a way that is **kind** and **respectful**, while reflecting the **passion** people have for their communities.

Staff at the MHRN have personal experience with festival drug use, and extensive knowledge of harm reduction. Our passion for our community is the catalyst to this project.

Substance use at Manitoba festivals is not a new phenomenon, but the rise of adulterated substances and increasing potency has increased safety hazards and demands action. Winnipeg's drug use landscape is rapidly shifting with the emergence of bootleg fentanyl analogues increasing fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose (MHSAL, 2018), growing prevalence in the use of crystal methamphetamine (MHSAL, 2018), and a 4-fold increase in the demand for sterile injection drug use supplies since 2013 (Ross, 2017). In response to these changes and the demands of festival attendees and volunteers, many local festivals have added naloxone to sites, and in some cases created areas for people to recover from drug use. Festivals and their attendees have identified the need for further action in this area to create safer spaces, reduce drug related harms and ensure a safe festival for everyone.

Manitoba has more than 100 annual festivals attended by hundreds of thousands of people. Of particular concern are overnight festivals, further from hospitals and services. The Winnipeg Folk Festival alone hosts over 80 000 visitors over 5 days each year. Research specific to drug use at Manitoba festivals has not been completed to date. Relevant research has been completed globally that highlights the need for local research. In Australia researchers interviewed 642 festival

¹ "Standing in a Field Naked" is the title of a song by The Borrowman, a Winnipeg band in the early 2000's. The song is about a psychedelic substance use experience a Manitoba festival and is being used with permission.

attendees from age 18-30 at music festivals and found that nearly three-quarters (73.4%) of participants reported that they had used illicit drugs in the past 12 months (Day et al. 2018). This project is the first to consult people who use drugs at festivals in Manitoba about their harm reduction needs.

This project is a combined effort to support festivals in providing harm reduction services and also support attendees in personal harm reduction measures. This two-fold approach to influence the festival environment and educate the attendees is essential to the overall improvement of harm reduction provisions and reduce the harms associated with festival drug use.

Part 1 of this project creates a set of recommendations for local Manitoba festivals based on the feedback of attendees that use drugs. This project demonstrates the principle of “Nothing About Us, Without Us”, a key philosophy of harm reduction that ensures the involvement of an impacted population in any policies, programs or projects intended to serve them. Recommendations include best practices for meeting the needs of the population of people that use drugs to reduce harms, prevent overdose, and promote a positive festival experience for everyone. Part 2 of this project will include a resource by and for people who use drugs at Manitoba festivals.

Part 1

In November 2019 the MHRN created and distributed a survey to people who use drugs at Manitoba festivals. The questions were created by the MHRN staff coordinating this project and reviewed by partners at Project Safe Audience. Project Safe Audience is a volunteer run harm reduction organization that serves the rave and festival population in Winnipeg. The survey was distributed mainly through social media and was shared by MHRN, Project Safe Audience and Red Tent WPG pages. One hundred and fifty (n: 150) people completed the survey which included 9 questions with multiple choice, open ended, and matrix style questions.

Results

1. What festivals do you attend?

An overwhelming 70% of respondents attend Winnipeg Folk Festival (n: 105). Other commonly attended festivals included Winnipeg Jazz Festival (n: 53), Summer of Sound (n:51), Harvest Moon (n:49) and Rainbow Trout (n: 44). Other festivals mentioned included Manitoba Electronic Music Exhibition, Real Love Summer Festival, Seance Metal Festival, Dauphin Country Festival, Harvest Sun, Brandon Folk, Art and Music Festival, Trappers Festival, Bring Your Love, Emotion Art and Music Festival, Hoot Owl/Shine On, Soupstock and Festival du Voyager.

2. What recreational drugs do you use?

The most commonly used substance was cannabis: 86% of respondents reported using cannabis at festivals (n: 126). The second most commonly used substance was alcohol at 81.3% (n: 122). **79% of respondents reported using Ecstasy/MDMA (n:119), making ecstasy use almost as common as drinking alcohol.** Hallucinogens were the next most commonly used substances with

mushrooms being used by 75% of respondents (n: 112) and acid (LSD) being used by 57% of respondents (n: 86). Other commonly used drugs included powder cocaine (n:49) , nitrous (n:40), and ketamine (n:39). Other substances mentioned included amphetamine/speed, benzodiazepines and GHB, and to a lesser extent methamphetamine, opiates, crack cocaine, whippets, and research chemicals.

3. What methods do you use to do your drugs?

Most respondents (93%) use their drugs by eating them (n: 140), while 77% use smoking/vaping to take their drugs (n: 116). Inhalation and snorting had comparable rates of 73%. Few people used comparably riskier methods such as bumping (n:6, 4%) and injecting (n: 5, 3.3%) but the inclusion of any reported injection is important to harm reduction measures.

4. What harm reduction services have you accessed at Manitoba Festivals?

Respondents reported using services provided by Project Safe Audience, Red Tent, and MHRN, or that there were none at the events they attended.

“Harm Reduction is really lacking at Manitoba Festivals, there’s barely anything. BC knows what’s up, they are so far advanced: drug testing and dissemination of information of what is found in the drugs, drug counselling, chill zone and safe spaces - that you actually want to hang out in.”

- Survey respondent

5. How have existing harm reduction services been helpful?

Participants generally reported that when services existed they were helpful. There were no respondents that indicated they had not been helpful.

“I knew the harm reduction spaces were safe places to go when I was feeling overwhelmed and not functioning well, the volunteers have mostly been knowledgeable, non-judgemental and great at creating a calm non-stimulating space to rest. Having folks who are knowledgeable about drug interactions providing information has been very helpful. The drug information sharing boards have been great for sharing information on the supply / accessing safe supply. Safer sex and safer drug use supplies have been helpful.”

- Survey respondent

6. What supplies and resources would help you party safer at Manitoba festivals?

Respondents requested drug checking and free accessible water. Other supplies and resources requested were a drug info board, Gatorade, condoms, safer use supplies, Narcan (naloxone), pipes and papers, ear plugs, straws, vitamins.

7. What services and support would help you party safer at Manitoba festivals?

Respondents most often requested drug checking, and drug information boards. Other requests included workshops on overdose and safer use, and cool spaces in warm weather. Notably people requested safer spaces for drug use (chill zones) and safer spaces for people with other intersecting oppressions (Red Tent) and specified that these should be separate to better meet people's needs.

“Red tent: counseling, quiet place to get away from over stimulation, psa: info on which drugs to mix or not, drug testing (more pro-use vibe which can be great but not right beside red tent where sometimes sober people or people trying to calm down need something more neutral)”

-Survey Respondent

8. Would you use this service?

Most respondents reported they would access drug checking (n:129), food and water distribution (n: 124), a drug information board (n: 108), overdose response workshops (n: 99). People also reported they would access resources such as information (n:72) and naloxone distribution (n: 70). Participants were offered a choice between types of chill zones (monitored, unmonitored, and consumption) and most would access a chill zone monitored by health volunteers (n:105). The need for safer spaces was reinforced with n:71 respondents indicating they would access a safer space for women, non-binary, and trans folks, and n:39 reporting they would access a safer space for people of colour.

9. Is there anything you want Manitoba Festivals to know about drug use in those venues?

Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they want the people who organize festivals to know and acknowledge that many people use drugs. Several respondents indicated that increasing in policing and security was a harmful response they noticed happening.

“Drug use is happening at your festivals, regardless of policy and enforcement. Harm reduction is the best way to keep your guests safe. HR doesn't encourage drug use, it promotes a culture of healthy choices and facilitates a safe party for all”

“Women are often victimized by cishetmen in these spaces, and we also like to use drugs, but when both happen at the same time, we may not feel safe to seek help for fear of judgement/police arresting us for drug use/possession.”

“- People use drugs! Drugs are fun!

- Create policies that are informed by drug users, that keep festival goers safe and destigmatize drug use.

- Expand harm reduction & safer spaces crews, and advertise these services adequately!

- Without drug testing, people will continue to have medical emergencies and overdose on poisoned supplies.

- get rid of the police! An overwhelming police presence does not make people feel safer. Police heighten anxiety, tension, and escalate situations that harm reduction and crisis volunteers are trained to manage.”

“Many people at festivals seem to be using drugs unsafely (ie. combining drugs, taking too many, etc.), which has negatively effected my experience on drugs at festivals. It can make the environment more difficult knowing that others are overdosing, unsupported, or just generally having an awful time. If

people had more services, supports, resources and education, it would be easier for everyone to enjoy their time, whether using drugs or not.”

Recommendations

Destigmatizing

Acknowledge that people use drugs at your festival! By acknowledging that people use drugs at your festival you will be making it safer for them to seek help, access services and have a safe and fun festival.

Drug Checking

Provide drug checking at your festival! Partner with a volunteer organization like Project Safe Audience or train volunteers knowledgeable in drug use to provide testing.

Drug Info Board

Facilitate the use of an info board people can use to share information about drugs they buy at the festival.

Supplies

Provide supplies to help keep people safe. Harm reduction supplies, information, and free and accessible water and shelter are all important.

Chill Zones/Recovery Areas

Provide a comprehensive safe space for people recovering from drug use monitored by health volunteers and people with experience in drug use. At the minimum this space should be comfortable, beautiful, calm, and have access to basic resources.

Support Safer Spaces

Support safer spaces for other marginalized groups such as women, non-binary, and trans people and people of colour. Connect with orgs doing this kind of work and people who belong to these groups to design and run the space.

Workshops

Provide workshops on overdose, safer drug use and harm reduction to staff and volunteers. Additionally, arrange to offer these workshops to attendees at your harm reduction area!

Budget to provide these lifesaving services and create a better and safer party for the people who attend your festival.

Conclusion

People who use drugs have reasonable, useful, and evidence based ideas on how to make festivals safer for everyone. In a time when many festivals promote and encourage alcohol use and provide safer spaces for alcohol consumption (beer tents), our survey found that as many people are using

MDMA as alcohol. The social stigma surrounding drug use at festivals needs to be addressed to increase safety. When festivals acknowledge that people use drugs and provide the services and supplies people who use drugs have requested they will create safer experiences for everyone, including organizers, staff, and festival attendees who do not use substances.

The MHRN intends to distribute this report, and a list of summarized recommendations to all the festivals noted by survey respondents. Festivals will be invited to meet with MHRN to strategize the enactment of the recommendations.

Personal Disclosure:

As the coordinator of this project I would like to disclose several personal affiliations that are connected to this work.

1. I attend and have volunteered at many local Manitoba Festivals.
2. I am a co-director of Red Tent Winnipeg that collaborates with festivals to offer safer spaces and anti-oppression training for volunteers.
3. I use drugs at festivals and have been adversely affected by lack of services, something I am happy to discuss in person if you have questions.

These personal affiliations inform and drive the work and are considered by my employer The Manitoba Harm Reduction Network to be primarily of benefit and not a sufficient conflict of interest to preclude my involvement.

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References

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