



Research paper

Do police arrestees substitute legal highs for other drugs?



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ABSTRACT

Background: Some commentators have suggested legal highs (LH) might reduce existing illegal drug use and contribute to lower drug-related harm. However, no studies have specifically investigated substitution between LH and other drugs.

Aims: To explore the extent to which police detainees substitute LH for illegal drugs.

Method: A total of 848 detainees at four central police stations were interviewed about their drug and LH use. Detainees were asked what impact their LH use had on their other drug use (i.e., 'no change', 'more', 'less' or 'stopped'). The detainees were placed into four groups: (i) no LH use; (ii) LH use and 'no change' in drug use; (iii) LH use and 'more' drug use; (iv) LH use and 'less' or 'stopped' drug use. Demographics and levels of drug use in the past month were compared between groups.

Results: Ninety-six percent of the LH using detainees had used synthetic cannabinoids (SC), and, of those who reported substituting a drug, 94% had substituted (natural) cannabis. Overall, 54% of the detainee sample had not used SC, 34% had used SC but not changed their cannabis use, 9% had used SC and used 'less' or 'stopped' cannabis use, and 3% had used SC and used 'more' cannabis. The SC users were more likely to have recently been in drug treatment. All those who used SC had higher cannabis consumption regardless of substitution behaviour. The SC users who used 'more' cannabis also used more methamphetamine and ecstasy.

Conclusion: Twenty percent of those who used SC and cannabis reported reducing or stopping their cannabis use while 6% increased their cannabis use, suggesting a modest overall reduction in cannabis use. Further research is required to quantify the magnitude of substitution changes, the impact on drug-related harm, and extent to which substitution occurs for other LH and other populations.

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Introduction

Over the past five years or so, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of new psychoactive substances (NPS) identified in Europe and worldwide (EMCDDA, 2015a, 2015b; UNODC, 2015). Many of these NPS have been sold as so called 'legal highs', as their active compounds are not included in existing United Nations drug control treaties (UNODC, 2013). However, they are increasingly restricted and prohibited in a number of countries under domestic laws (EMCDDA, 2015b). Given that many legal high products are marketed as 'legal alternatives' to traditional illegal drugs, a key question is, are drug users using these products as replacements for illegal drugs, or are they merely combining them with their existing drug use?

This question is important from a harm minimisation perspective. If drug users choose to use legal high products instead of illegal drugs, and the legal high products they use are responsible for lower levels of drug-related harm than the illegal drugs they previously used, then the provision of low risk legal highs might legitimately be described as a harm minimisation strategy. The possibility that legal highs might displace existing illegal drugs has been considered in a number of discussions about policy approaches to legal highs in the United Kingdom (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Drug Policy Reform, 2013; Birdwell, Chapman, & Singleton, 2011; Meacher, 2013; New Psychoactive Substances Review Expert Panel, 2014). A leading legal high manufacturer in New Zealand has, for many years, claimed he developed legal high products to provide a safer replacement substance for those wanting to stop their use of methamphetamine (Laurence, 2012). The New Zealand Ministry of Health has also entertained the possibility that allowing approved 'low risk' legal high products to be legally sold might displace the use of more harmful existing illegal drugs (Gray, 2012).

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No empirical studies have specifically examined the extent of substitution between legal highs and other drugs. A number of studies have investigated reasons for using legal highs, and found legal status and the convenience of legal availability to be the two leading motivations for use (Barratt et al., 2013; Carhart-Harris, 2011; Wersé & Morgenstern, 2012; Wilkins & Sweetsur, 2013). Because legal highs are often not detectable by standard drug tests, they are attractive to groups subject to frequent testing, such as parolees, military personnel, those in drug treatment, mental health patients, and those employed in high risk manual labouring work, including construction, mining and forestry (Perrone, Helgesen, & Fischer, 2013). The use of legal highs in these contexts may pose additional risks. For example, the use of legal highs by mental health patients has been associated with psychotic relapse and inducing new psychosis (Every-Palmer, 2010, 2011).

Police detainees are a useful population in which to explore substitution between legal highs and illegal drugs as detainees tend to have both high levels of illegal drug use and legal high use, as well as high incidence of mental illness and drug treatment (Wilkins et al., 2015). New Zealand has a long history of 'legal high' use. An open commercial market for BZP 'party pills' operated in the mid-2000s (Sheridan, Butler, Wilkins, & Russell, 2007) until BZP was prohibited in 2008 (Wilkins & Sweetsur, 2013; Wilkins, Sweetsur, & Parker, 2014), and, more recently, there have been retail markets for a range of synthetic cannabinoid (SC) products, non-BZP party pills and plant extracts like salvia divinorum (Wilkins, 2014b). Since 2009, the legal high market in New Zealand has been dominated by successive generations of SC products, which have been marketed as 'legal' alternatives to natural cannabis (Wilkins, 2014b). These products were initially legally available as their psychoactive compounds were not specifically scheduled in the country's Misuse of Drugs Act (New Zealand Law Commission, 2010, 2011). Up until the passage of the *Psychoactive Substances Act* (PSA) in July 2013, SC and other legal high products were largely unregulated in New Zealand and widely available from a range of convenience retail outlets (Wilkins, 2014a; Wilkins et al., 2013).

The overall aim of this paper is therefore to explore the extent of any substitution between legal high and illegal drug use among police detainees. The specific aims of the paper are to investigate:

- (i) the patterns of legal high use among police detainees;
- (ii) the proportion of detainees using legal highs who are in treatment for mental illness or drug problems, or employed in manual/labouring work;
- (iii) the influence of legal high use on levels of use of other drugs;
- (iv) the levels of alcohol and other drug use among those who indicated they had changed their other drug use as a result of their legal high use

Method

The analysis utilises data from the New Zealand Arrestee Drug Use Monitoring (NZ-ADUM) study which surveys approximately 800 police detainees each year at four central city police stations in New Zealand (i.e. Whangarei, Auckland Central, Wellington Central and Christchurch Central). Details of the NZ-ADUM methodology have been described elsewhere (Wilkins & Sweetsur, 2011). Briefly, detainees who had been held at a police station for less than 48 h were interviewed about their alcohol and other drug use. Interviews were conducted by a civilian university researcher at the police watch house, in a private room. Intoxicated, aggressive or emotionally distressed detainees could not be interviewed for ethical and practical reasons.

The interviewer explained that the interview was confidential, the detainee's name or contact details were not required, and individual interviews would not be shared with anyone, including police. Two interview shifts were completed each day, seven-days-a-week, at each watch house. A total of 848 police detainees were interviewed for the 2013 NZ-ADUM study from mid-April to mid-July 2013.

Measures

Demographics

Standard demographic measures were collected. Employed detainees were asked what type of work they did and were provided with 11 broad employment categories, including 'manual worker/labourer'. The detainees were also asked if they had been in an alcohol and drug treatment programme in the previous 12 months, and if they had received treatment for a mental illness in the previous 12 months.

Legal high and other drug use

The detainees were asked whether they had used any of a list of 13 drug types, including (natural) cannabis and three common types of legal high in New Zealand (i.e., 'synthetic cannabis', 'party pills' and 'salvia divinorum'). They were asked if they had used any of the listed substances in the past 12 months and the past 30 days. If they had used a substance in the previous 30 days, they were asked on how many days they had used it. They were also asked how much of that substance they used on a typical occasion.

Impact of legal high use on other drugs

Those who had used legal highs in the past year were asked if their legal high use had 'any influence on their other drug use'. Those who indicated their legal high use had influenced their other drug use, were first asked what drug type(s) were involved and then, how their level of use of each drug type had changed as a result of their of the legal high, using a four point ordinal scale (i.e. 'using more', 'using the same', 'using less' or 'stopped').

Analysis

The detainees were categorised into four groups based on their use of legal highs in the past 12 months, and their answer to the legal high substitution question. The response options were: (i) no use of legal highs; (ii) legal high use but no change in other drug use; (iii) legal high use and using 'more' of other drugs; or (iv) legal high use and using 'less' or 'stopped' use of other drugs. Demographic characteristics, prevalence of drug use in the past month, number of days of use of each drug in the past month, and quantity of drug used on a typical occasion were compared between the four groups using chi-square and ANOVA tests. Logistic regression was used to investigate whether mental illness and employment as a manual labourer were related to SC use, while controlling for a range of demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, education, etc.). Odds ratios were calculated to show the level of association between the variables of interest and SC use. Quantities of alcohol and other drugs consumed were log transformed before testing due to their highly skewed distributions.

Results

Forty-six percent of the police detainees had used a legal high in the previous 12 months. Ninety-six percent of the detainees who

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