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Research Paper

Drug detection dogs at Australian outdoor music festivals: Deterrent, detection and iatrogenic effects

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ABSTRACT

Background: Recent drug-related deaths at Australian music festivals have led to increasing concern about the risk of future harm, but contention about how to effectively respond. One hotly debated strategy has been the use of drug detection dogs which currently operate at festivals across Australia, despite claims they are ineffective and contribute to risky drug use practices. This paper aims to investigate responses to the expected presence, and sightings, of drug dogs at the last festival attended.

Methods: An anonymous online survey was completed by almost 2000 Australian festival-goers. The largest subsample used in the analyses for this paper ($n = 647$) was 59% male and had a median age of 20 (IQR = 18–22).

Results: Of those who expected dogs to be present at their last festival ($n = 647$), only 4% reported that this threat led them to decide not to take drugs. Other responses included: concealing their drugs well (48%), getting someone else to carry their drugs (15%), buying their drugs inside (11%), taking less easily detected drugs (10%) and taking drugs before entering (7%). Of those who carried drugs in ($n = 418$), 10% concealed them internally and 1% swallowed them to retrieve inside. Of those who had drugs on their person when seeing a dog ($n = 189$), 10% reported consuming drugs in response. No respondents reported being detected with drugs due to a positive identification.

Conclusion: Almost all festival-goers surveyed did not report being deterred from drug usage by the expected presence of drug dogs. Instead, a variety of alternative responses to avoid detection were reported, many of which could place festival-goers at greater risk of experiencing drug-related harms. In the face of mounting evidence of both ineffectiveness and iatrogenic effects, the use of drug detection dogs at Australian music festivals should be urgently reconsidered.

Introduction

According to media reports there have been at least 10 drug-related deaths linked to Australian outdoor music festivals in the past five years (Begley & Arlington, 2015; Choahan, 2012; Johnson, Addie, & Huffadine, 2017; McVeigh, 2017; Moskovitch, 2014; Partridge & Ralston, 2013; Tonedeaf, 2015). These deaths have led to increasing concern about the risk of future drug-related harm and contention about how to effectively respond. One hotly debated strategy has been the use of drug detection dogs which currently operate at festivals around Australia, despite claims they are ineffective and increase the risk of drug-related deaths.

The role of drug detection dogs

In Australia, the use of specially trained drug detection dogs as a policing strategy emerged in the early 2000s in New South Wales (NSW) (Lancaster, Hughes, & Ritter, 2016). The primary objective was to detect and prosecute persons involved in the sale of prohibited drugs (NSW Ombudsman, 2006). Since then, despite legal ambiguities (Meagher, 2009) and evidence of ineffectiveness (NSW Ombudsman, 2006), the strategy has been adopted and expanded across the country. The continued use of drug detection dogs has raised questions about existing approaches to illicit drugs policing in Australia, which one might have assumed to be evidence-based (Lancaster et al., 2016). To justify ongoing use of this strategy in the face of mounting evidence of ineffectiveness, a shifting rhetoric from 'detection' to the 'deterrent'

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effects of drug detection dogs has been identified (Lancaster et al., 2016). However, this justification is also problematic given limited evidence exists to prove they act as an effective deterrent (Hughes, Moxham-Hall, Ritter, Weatherburn, & MacCoun, 2017), while growing evidence suggests they contribute to negative public health outcomes in settings such as outdoor music festivals (Dunn & Degenhardt, 2009; Hickey, McIlwraith, Bruno, Matthews, & Alati, 2012; Hughes et al., 2017; NSW Ombudsman, 2006).

Evidence of effectiveness

One of the first major sources of evidence in Australia undermining the use of drug detection dogs and fuelling ongoing debate was a review conducted by the NSW Ombudsman (NSW Ombudsman, 2006). The main conclusions provided following two years of monitoring were that drug detection dogs were ineffective at addressing the primary objective of detecting and prosecuting illicit drug suppliers, evident by a 74% false positive rate and less than 1% of positive indications resulting in successful prosecution. They also concluded there was no evidence to suggest this policing strategy had a deterrent effect, decreased drug-related crime or provided any other positive public health outcomes. However, they did identify negative public health outcomes, such as panic consumption, internal concealment, switching to less detectable but potentially more harmful drugs, opting to purchase inside from unknown sources and binging beforehand instead, concluding that this strategy may inadvertently cause harm by increasing risky drug use practices. This review therefore cast doubt on whether drug detection dogs were consistent with a harm minimisation approach, which has formed the basis of Australia's National Drug Strategy since 1985 (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, 2011).

Since the Ombudsman review, a growing body of academic literature has sought to investigate the deterrent, detection and other unintended iatrogenic effects of drug detection dogs in Australia. In 2009, a study of regular ecstasy users (REU) found the majority were not dissuaded from using drugs when made aware drug dogs would be operating at an event (Dunn & Degenhardt, 2009). Rather, various precautions were taken in an attempt to avoid detection. Concerningly, there were also reports of hasty drug consumption when sighting dogs to avoid detection. While this study was limited by a small sample size, in 2012 researchers presented findings from a larger REU sample ($N = 2127$) over a three-year period which they claimed supported initial evidence (Hickey et al., 2012). This study noted that despite increasing visibility of drug dogs over the period, REU continued to be in possession of illicit drugs in public, purportedly demonstrating a limited deterrent effect. They also found that despite two-thirds having drugs on their person, less than 7% were positively identified. There were also more reports of hasty drug consumption when sighting drug dogs. More recently in 2017 a study investigated the impacts of different policing strategies on different types of drug offending among festival-goers using hypothetical policing vignettes (Hughes et al., 2017). These findings suggested drug detection dogs were more effective than other policing strategies when it came to deterring drug use and possession, reducing use by 10.2% and possession by 15.7%. However, the strategy was found to have a negligible impact on drug supply and actually increased buying of drugs inside festival grounds. Hughes et al. (2017) noted that this unintended consequence could have various deleterious effects, such as increasing risk to consumers who opt to obtain drugs inside the festival, and displacing criminal activity by increasing supply and demand for drugs inside events. While hypothetical vignettes have been proven as valid predictors of offending behaviour (as cited in Hughes et al., 2017; Pogarsky, 2009), the limitation remains that this study investigated intended, rather than actual, behaviour. Overall, however, these studies suggest that any deterrent effect on drug use should be considered in conjunction with its numerous other impacts (e.g. impacts on supply and demand and risky drug use practices) when determining whether it is an appropriate and effective policing strategy at outdoor music festivals.

The policy setting

The debate about this policing strategy continues to play out in Australia with input from various different sectors, including public health/policy advocates (Barklay, 2016; Cowdery & Wodak, 2014; Tregoning, 2015), politicians (Barklay, 2016; Di Natale, 2016; Shoebridge, 2017), police (Hansen, 2017; Mullaney, 2015), legal experts (Malins, 2017; The Law Society of New South Wales, 2016), musicians (Baroni, 2014; Murphy, 2015) and the mainstream and alternative media (Harris, 2016; McVeigh, 2015; The Music, 2016; Triple j, 2016). The primary argument is focused on the effectiveness and iatrogenic effects of drug detection dogs in settings such as music festivals. While public health advocates claim drug detection dogs are ineffective at deterring drug use and can lead to risky practices like 'panic consumption', which has already been linked to two drug-related deaths in Australia (Jarvis, 2014; Mulligan, 2013; Pedestrian, 2013; Whitehead, 2013), police have maintained that "drug dogs are saving lives" (Mullaney, 2015), "are an extremely effective deterrent" (Simmons, 2011) and the "[the strategy] is about minimising harm" (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2015). Another argument relates to cost-effectiveness, with opposing political parties seeking to uncover the cost of this strategy, which has been found to be in excess of 9 million dollars per year in NSW alone (Parliament of NSW, 2016; Triple j, 2016). There are also civil and human right arguments, with various legal groups advising that drug dog searches represent an unfair and unnecessary intrusion into people's privacy (NSW Ombudsman, 2006; The Law Society of New South Wales, 2016). Various targeted campaigns have also emerged, such as the Greens 'Sniff Off' campaign (Shoebridge, 2017) and Unharm's 'Ditch the Dogs' campaign (Tregoning, 2015). This ongoing debate may have helped illuminate potential inconsistencies between this policy and the available evidence, yet these divergent positions seem to have "culminated in a policy impasse" (Hughes et al., 2017).

In response to the shifting rhetoric regarding the deterrent effect of this policing strategy, further evidence is needed on actual behavioural responses to the expected presence of drug dogs at festivals (e.g. have festival-goers actually been deterred from using illicit drugs?). A greater understanding of the nature and extent of unintended iatrogenic effects is also critical for allowing a balanced evaluation of this policing strategy. While the strategy has already been found to be ineffective at addressing the primary aim (detecting drugs), further data on detection ability could help extend the evidence-base. Overall, the authors believe all sources of evidence on deterrence, detection and iatrogenic effects should be considered when evaluating the efficacy of this strategy.

Aims

Using data from a larger doctoral study of Australian festival-goers (Grigg, in preparation), this paper investigates:

1 Responses to the expected presence of drug detection dogs at the last festival attended (among those who had intended to take illicit drugs); and
2 Responses to seeing drug detection dogs at the last festival attended (among those who had illicit drugs on their person); and
3 The proportion detected with illicit drugs due to a positive identification (among those who saw drug detection dogs at the last festival attended and had illicit drugs on their person).

Methods

A large cross-sectional survey was conducted which investigated a range of drug-related issues in association with the last festival