



## **Drug scene, people who use drugs and addictological services during the COVID-19 emergency in the Czech Republic**

### **Rapid assessment of the current situation in the Czech Republic, No. 2 (1<sup>st</sup> update)**

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#### Substance use and its effects, availability of addictive substances

- Prague and Brno report a decrease in heroin, locally its disappearance from the street market. An increase in alcohol and benzodiazepine use has been reported in Prague. In South Bohemia region, there was a reduced availability of methamphetamine and an increase in the alcohol and cannabis use.
- Locally, an increase in drug prices was reported (up to 20%). In Prague, there was an increase in drug prices and at the same time a decrease in the quality of methamphetamine.
- Concerns about changes in the market leading to a higher level of risk substances use (e.g. fentanyl and its derivatives), concerns from domestic production of potentially risky substances, etc. have not yet been fulfilled.
- According to the Police of the Czech Republic, there have been no major changes in drug markets over the past month regarding the major drug shortages or significant changes in preferences of people who use drugs. The composition and purity of seized drugs did not change significantly. A lower number of seizures are reported. In connection with the measures taken, the demand for synthetic drugs used in nightlife settings probably continues to decrease.
- The demand for methamphetamine continues to be secured from domestic production, but it is also smuggled from Poland. Customs authorities report an increased level of smuggling of methamphetamine and medicines containing pseudoephedrine intended for its production in the Czech-Polish border area, including illegal activities.
- Information on changes in patterns and rates of substance use or online gambling and use of new technologies in the general population is limited for the time being. From the available information, it seems that there may have been an increase in the frequency of alcohol use, but at the same time a decrease in average doses and a reduction in the rate of sudden alcohol consumption - there is no clear effect on alcohol use in the Czech Republic. It also appears that the intensity of cannabis use has increased among regular cannabis users. Also (logically) there has been an increase in the use of the Internet for activities of various kinds, including news, gambling, computer games, social media, shopping, including excessive forms.

#### Studies on substance use in the emergency situation

- On April 27, the ADI-COVID-19 study was launched. This study is focusing on mapping the occurrence of COVID-19 among clients (people who use drugs) and employees of addictological services in the Czech Republic through rapid tests (produced by company Livzon). As of May 10, a total of 1,071 tests were performed, of which 591 tests for clients (1 of them positive), 480 tests for employees (1 of them positive).
- In Brno, testing of employees and clients of social services by the PCR method takes place, testing is performed by the NGO Podane ruce in cooperation with the Masaryk University in Brno. Of the 800 tests, only one was positive.
- The EMCDDA has launched a study to identify changes in habits of people who use drugs and market changes from the people who use drugs' point of view during a pandemic. The questionnaire is also available in Czech: <https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Mini-EWSD-COVID-19>
- A Europe-wide *SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION* study takes place to find out how measures taken in European countries during the SARS-CoV-2 (i.e. coronavirus)



epidemic affect alcohol consumption: <https://bildungsportal.sachsen.de/umfragen/limesurvey/index.php/684654?lang=cs>

- Within the subject “*Methodology in Addictology*” of the 2nd year of the bachelor's study of Addictology at the 1st Medical Faculty of Charles University in Prague, a series of student surveys takes place. These surveys are focused on the substances use and addictive behavior in an emergency situation.
- National Monitoring Center for Drugs and Addictions plans to launch an online part of the regular population-wide study *National Research on Substance Use*, which is carried out at 4-year intervals. The questionnaire will also focus on changes in the pattern and rate of substance use in an emergency situation.

#### Specifics of clients of addictological services

- People who use drugs are a part of group at greater risk of COVID-19 infections - this is a population with immunosuppressed, respiratory diseases, respiratory depression (opioid users), and no quarantine measures. Psychiatric co-morbidity in people who use drugs is accentuated by the emergency situation and its impact on society, nervousness due to fears of infection with SARS-CoV-2 (a so-called new coronavirus) and lack of addictive substances.
- Labor market changes have a big impact on people who use drugs - they have often lost their jobs, sources of funding, lost shelter. Currently, with the gradual release of measures, the offer of job opportunities for clients of addictological services is expanding, e.g. in the form of various ancillary works.
- In larger cities, the deterioration of the socio-economic situation of people who use drugs is related to the absence of tourism - the source of earnings disappeared with the drop in tourists.
- The possibilities of selling stolen items have also been reduced; pawnshops and raw material purchase are closed.
- Regarding the form of economically motivated property or violent crime, the Police have not yet seen an increase. Addictological services inform clients about increased penalty rates for crime during an emergency situation.

#### Current state of availability of services

- The services still have limited group activities, but gradually returning to normal, individual personal contacts with clients are increasing. There is still an increase in the online and phone contacts. The employees are still divided into smaller teams due to the reduction of contacts in the case of an infection in the team, but gradually the work returns to normal condition.
- Protective equipment for employees is available in most services; the lack of protective equipment is currently reported locally and exceptionally. In the first days and weeks of the state of emergency, the situation was worse: the supply was largely self-help and in cooperation with cities and regions.
- Due to the obligation to wear masks in public, the services distribute masks to clients, as well as disinfections, vitamins and information leaflets. Some services provided food delivery. Currently, the food and hygiene service is being renewed in its standard form.
- Low-threshold services usually maintain limited services (e.g. exchange program only through the window, limited number of people in the contact center / contact room, individual consultations), but services gradually return to the regime before the state of emergency and in some services it already cancels separate teams of employees and starts working again with clients through personal contact while adhering to increased hygienic measures. The pace at which services return to normal situation is different - in some cases only exchange program is provided, elsewhere also testing or treatment are provided, some low-threshold programs distribute injection material only after previous agreement, some works in a normal mode with protective measures and equipment. Low-threshold services in larger cities report an increase in contacts with clients. Even in low-threshold services, online tools are used to maintain contact with clients.



The services also provided supplies to clients who were locked in quarantine zones of cities (e.g. Uničov in Olomouc Region).

- In Brno, 3 new daily centers were opened for the homeless, who are very often intensive alcohol users.
- The situation is also different in other services. E.g. aftercare centers operate somewhere only in inpatient form and the renewal of the outpatient services is in preparation. Elsewhere, services are already provided in both outpatient and inpatient form. However, group activities are still limited in all types of services and individual activities are strengthened. In some services, group activities are provided online.
- Therapeutic communities usually maintain a relatively standard operation with limited opportunities for clients to leave the community (only in necessary cases). New clients are accepted limited (e.g. only from medical facilities). Visits are prohibited.
- In Prague, clients gather and this is related to the creation of an open drug scene (both at the NGO SANANIM Contact Center in Prague 5 and at a private outpatient medical facility in Prague 5, which provides substitution treatment to a large number of clients). There are growing negative reactions and initiatives against addictological services in the neighborhood. Providers of addictological services are trying to solve the situation in cooperation with state and local government bodies.
- The operating hours of substitution treatment programs are currently limited. However, the capacity of substitution treatment in Prague has been unsatisfactory for a long time.
- During the first month of the emergency situation, the capacity of inpatient detoxes decreased significantly. From the end of April 2020, the offer of inpatient psychiatric care in the field of addictology returns to normal.
- Other non-specialized (non-addictological) health and social services are also gradually renewing their activities, which contributes to improving the overall situation of clients of addictological services. In some large cities (Prague, Brno, Pilsen), temporary accommodation capacities were created for homeless people (tent towns, buildings). Addictological service providers are involved in providing addictological care and other services in these newly created collective accommodation capacities (food service, clothing, blankets, sleeping bags, other services).
- The prevention programs in schools has been suspended, however, some organizations offer the possibility of preventive activities for parts of class groups via the Internet, they also organize seminars for teachers. The Drug Policy Department of the Government Office of the Czech Republic, in cooperation with providers of prevention programs, prepared a “*Summary of Current Practice of Prevention Programs in the Period of Quarantine Measures in Connection with COVID-19*”.
- A number of addictological service providers participated in the ADI-COVID-19 study, which focused on the rate and dynamics of the spread of infection caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 among clients and employees of addictological services in the Czech Republic (over 60 programs).
- Some regions (e.g. Central and South Bohemia) and municipalities are considering changes in the allocation of funds to various areas, including addictological programs, as well as in the conditions of support, eventually have already decided on some changes, e.g. the City of Olomouc has decided on the allocation of funds for purposes other than prevention; on the other hand, the subsidy program of the Olomouc Region remains unchanged, including support for prevention. The allocation of the subsidy program of the South Bohemian Region has been reduced; however, they are finding the possibilities of co-funding from other regional subsidy programs. These measures may worsen the availability of addictological services in the near future.
- On April 9, 2020, the second round of the subsidy procedure of the Government Office of the Czech Republic in the area of drug policy was announced, which responds primarily to the COVID-19 situation.



- On May 7, 2020, the Government of the Czech Republic approved a subsidy procedure for extraordinary financial reward of employees of social services in connection with COVID-19, which is also intended for addictological social services.
- The Society for Addictive Diseases of the Czech Medical Association of J. E. Purkyně has issued a recommendation for pharmacologically assisted treatment of methamphetamine addiction, which summarizes the recommendations for the off-label use of central stimulants in methamphetamine addictions: <https://snncls.cz/2020/04/15/farmakologicky-asistovana-lecba-zavislosti-na-pervitinu/>.

### Sources

Personal communication with representatives of addictological services, regional drug coordinators and representatives of institutions cooperating within the Early Warning System on New Drugs.

<https://www.drogy-info.cz/article/koronavirus/>

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