



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

Prepared by the National Monitoring Center for Drugs and Addictions

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Drug scene - first changes

- The emergency situation, especially the closure of borders, is changing the drug market.
- Prague and Brno report a decrease in heroin level, locally disappearing from the street market.
- Closing the borders reduces the availability of precursors for the methamphetamine production; a lack of methamphetamine in the market can be expected.
- There are concerns about rising drug prices. In Prague, drug prices are rising and the quality of methamphetamine decreases.
- Concerns about market changes leading to a higher use of risk substances such as fentanyl and its derivatives, to domestic production of risk substances or the use of hazardous combinations of substances such as alcohol and benzodiazepines (in the Czech Republic there was a one case of fatal overdose of fentanyl (obtained from a patch) at the beginning of April 2020, but its association with the current situation is unclear). Approximately 20 cases of fatal opioid overdose occur in the Czech Republic annually; in recent years these have mainly been opioid analgesics including fentanyl (patches).
- According to information from the Police of the Czech Republic, the composition and purity of seized drugs have not changed significantly. The only exception is that new psychoactive substances do not currently seized. Generally, a lower number of seizures have been report, which may be due to a change in the Police regime due to the emergency. In the future, it is possible to anticipate an increase in drug prices due to the closure of borders and thus a reduction of drug trafficking and precursors availability for production. Increased pressure on domestic pharmacies and increased interest in certain types of medicines can also be expected. Demand for synthetic drugs used in nightlife settings has significantly decreased in the context of the measures taken.
- The demand for methamphetamine is secured from domestic production, but it is also smuggled from Poland. Customs authorities report increased levels of smuggling of methamphetamine and drugs containing pseudoephedrine intended for methamphetamine production in the Czech-Polish border area.

Specifics of people who use drugs in addictological services

- People who use drugs are a part of groups 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 and its impact on society, nervousness due to fears of infection with COVID-19 and lack of addictive substances. In the current situation, they have difficulty accessing information, sanitation, and protective equipment.
- Labor market changes have a big impact on people who use drugs - they have often lost their jobs, sources of funding, lost shelter.
- Changes related to the decline in tourism - for some people who use drugs, the source of earnings (begging, shoplifting, pickpocketing, etc.) disappeared with the drop in tourists. The possibilities of selling stolen items have also been reduced; pawnshops and raw material purchase are closed. There are also changing ways of providing money for drugs (eg sex for drugs more often compared to the pre-emergency period). The police have not yet seen an increase in secondary drug crime in the form of economically motivated property or violent crime.



Current state of availability of services

- Most addictological services seek to maintain operations at least partially and continue to provide basic interventions. Consultations of outpatient services are partially realized on-line.
- The capacity of bed detoxes has decreased significantly.
- Dependency department of Mental Hospital Kosmonosy (detox and 3months inpatient treatment) is temporarily completely closed.
- The capacity of substitution treatment was low before the emergency and is now even lower. Controlled daily dispensing of preparations was limited, more substances for substitution treatment are dispensed over a longer period of time, and the substances could eventually appear on the drug market.
- Services have limited operations, including restrictions on hygiene and food services not only in addictological services, but in social services in general.
- Concerns arise mainly from the limitation of substitution treatment capacities due to quarantine measures and related lack of staff.
- Attendance at low-threshold services is average or even higher. Needle and syringe exchange programs is providing, mainly needle distribution, the level of the exchanged material or the level of the exchange material in one contact with low-threshold services increases.
- In response to the limited availability of the hygiene and food service, some addictological and social services newly provide food dispensing and try to restore the hygiene service.
- Services themselves and through donations secure mandatory masks for service workers as well as for people who use drugs and their decontamination. Services are getting protective equipments (eg. masks) from state sources gradually; the quantity is still rather insufficient.
- the Prague's Municipality, in cooperation with the NGO Naděje ("Hope"), provides temporary accommodation for homeless people in the camp town on Císařská louka (60 tents), in Troja or in hostels / hotels. The NGO SANANIM cooperates with the Prague City Hall to distribute tents and strengthen the program to minimize the movement of people in the city. Addictological services (SANANIM, DROP IN, Progressive) offer addictological consultation to the staff of these services and also for people who use drugs. SANANIM offered to provide substitution treatment with buprenorphine to people who use drugs of these addictological services who would be quarantined.
- In Brno, 3 centers for homeless people, which are very often intensive alcohol users, will be opened in response to the situation among homeless people.
- Basic medical care for homeless people in Prague is provided through the initiative where people are helped by medical students.
- Some regions and municipalities are considering changes in the allocation of funds to various areas, including addictological programs and also in terms of support, or have already decided on some changes (eg the Municipality of Olomouc decided on allocation of funds to other for purposes other than prevention). These measures may have a negative impact on the availability of addictological services in the near future.

Websites:

Ministry of Health website on COVID-19:

<https://koronavirus.mzcr.cz/>

<https://koronavirus.mzcr.cz/en/>

<https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19>

Drug Policy Department of the Government Office (National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction) – information and recommendations for addictological services:

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



National Monitoring
Centre for Drugs
and Addiction

<https://www.drogy-info.cz/article/koronavirus/doporuceni-adiktologickym-sluzbam-v-obdobi-karantennich-opatreni-v-souvislosti-s-covid-19/>

Government Office website – information on COVID-19:

<http://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/aktualni-informace-ke-koronaviru-2019-ncov-179250/>

Ministry of Interior website - information on COVID-19:

<https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/coronavirus-informace-mv.aspx>

<https://www.mvcr.cz/mvcren/article/coronavirus-information-of-moi.aspx>

And many other websites.

Sources

https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/drogy-v-dobe-koronavirove-pandemie_2004011957_ada?fbclid=IwAR3y-xg0BiDPcVs7307445FHCV44Mlze4GYIbvLCLGHHIZ9-ed03Fd8qqQc

https://www.idnes.cz/brno/zpravy/drogy-nedostatek-bezdomovci-brno-nahrada-koronavirus.A200330_132109_brno-zpravy_mls

<https://1url.cz/OziTh>

https://www.nadeje.cz/archiv_zpravodajstvi?open=11526#article-11526

<https://wave.rozhlas.cz/lidem-bez-domova-se-venuujeme-dlouhodobe-ted-je-potreba-o-vic-rikaji-medici-na-8165941>

<https://a2larm.cz/2020/04/na-uplnem-okraji-i-na-drogove-zavisle-dolehla-pandemie-koronaviru-dochazeji-totiz-drogy/>

<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3070542-mesta-resi-jak-zajistit-karantenu-pro-bezdomovce-stavi-stany-a-hledaji-nevyuzite>

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