



# HARM REDUCTION INTERNATIONAL

## Drug-checking services

### *Global State of Harm Reduction 2018 briefing*

Drug-checking (or pill-testing) services aim to reduce drug-related harm by better informing individuals about the contents of the drugs they intend to use.

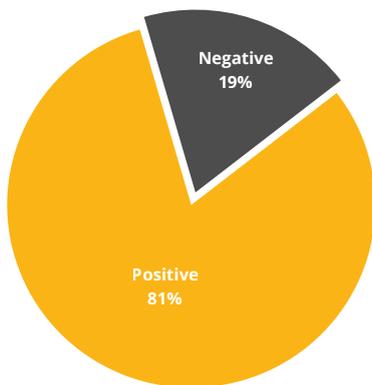
The service can also help to link people who use drugs with wider harm reduction services and inform public health agencies about the potency and quality of drugs in circulation. Many services include compulsory harm reduction counselling sessions, where people can be given advice on safer use strategies.

Drug checking services operate in at least five regions (Eurasia, Latin America, North America, Oceania and Western Europe). They include on-site services at parties and festivals, fixed-site laboratories accessible by post, and walk-in services. Home testing with reagent kits is also possible; however, this method lacks the precision and accuracy provided by more advanced technology available through professional services.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF DRUG-CHECKING SERVICES

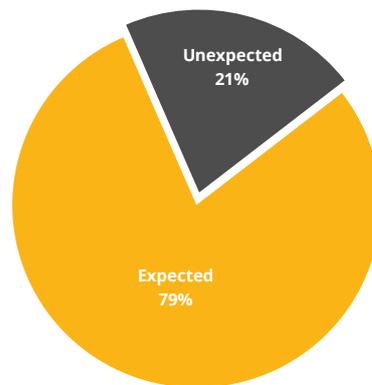
The specific potential harms addressed by drug-checking services vary according to local, national or regional drug scenes. For example, in Latin America the primary area of concern is the adulteration of substances, whereas in Western Europe, extremely high-purity drugs are more prevalent.

Chart 1: 1 in 5 samples tested in Colombia in 2017 contained no trace of what was expected.



*Data from Échele Cabeza*

Chart 2: 1 in 5 samples tested in New Zealand in 2017/2018 contained unexpected ingredients.



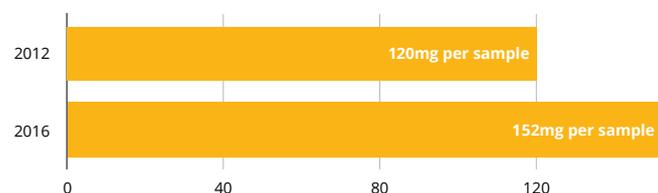
*Data from KnowYourStuffNZ*





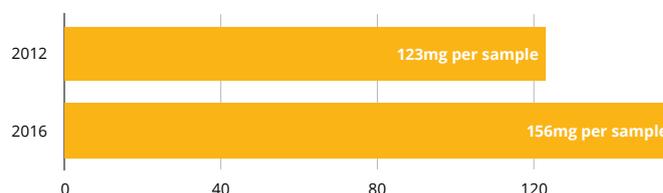
The purity of MDMA has increased in Western Europe over recent years. The strongest pill checked in the Netherlands in 2016 contained 266mg of MDMA, more than twice the maximum recommended dose.

Chart 3: From 2012 to 2016, the strength of MDMA samples in the Netherlands increased by 27%



Data from the Drugs Information and Monitoring System

Chart 4: In just one year from 2015 to 2016, the strength of MDMA samples in Zurich, Switzerland increased by 27%



Data from saferparty

Around the world, new psychoactive substances (NPS) are particularly variable in content. In Poland, substances sold as synthetic cannabinoids have often been found to contain synthetic opioids, while in Italy, BAONPS found that one third of NPS samples do not contain the substance expected.

## ON-SITE SERVICES

On-site services operate at festivals, parties, city centres and nightclubs. Examples include services provided by The Loop in the United Kingdom, KnowYourStuffNZ in New Zealand and Verter AC in Mexico. This form of service is particularly beneficial to those who use it thanks to the direct personal interaction it provides in environments where drugs are being used.

Survey data collected by drug-checking service providers consistently show that the majority of people who use drug-checking services are happy to discard drugs if they are found to contain unknown or potentially dangerous substances.

Demand for on-site services is high in many countries. In Australia, for example, 90% of people who use stimulants at public events say they would use such a service. Notably, 90% said they would not use the service if there was a risk of arrest.

A lack of funding and the legal complications of working with illicit substances are reported worldwide as a major barrier to carrying out or expanding on-site drug-checking projects.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Governments must ensure that drug-checking programmes are funded and supported with a legal framework.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Drug-checking services must provide legal amnesty, anonymity and confidentiality to the people using them.

## FIXED-SITE SERVICES

Fixed-site services can be accessible either by post (as in the case of EcstasyData.org in the United States) or as walk-in facilities (such as in Basel and Zurich, Switzerland). Evidence from Switzerland demonstrates that walk-in services are able to provide services to a different population, notably those more likely to live in vulnerable conditions or be unemployed.

Some countries that have on-site testing forbid fixed-site services with restrictive legislation (for example, New Zealand and Portugal).

The presence of fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic opioid found to be present in the North American opioid supply, has led to a new frontier for drug-checking services serving people who use opioids. Testing for fentanyl now takes place in drug consumption rooms in Canada, and harm reduction activists in the United States have distributed fentanyl-testing strips in many cities since 2016.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Governments must ensure that drug-checking services is not limited to stimulants and party contexts, but that all people who would benefit from the service are able to do so.

## EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AND MONITORING

By bringing together the results of drug-checking processes from service providers nationally and internationally, public health agencies can gain a birds-eye view of the substances in circulation.

These results allow drug-checking organisations in some countries to publish warnings when high purity or heavily adulterated substances are identified. Such systems operate in the Netherlands and Poland, among other countries. EcstasyData.org compiles testing results on a range of substances from around the world into one database.

### RECOMMENDATION:

Governments and service providers should establish integrated early warning systems to warn people when high risk substances are identified.