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Why drug dealing and drug use will increase after Covid-19

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Ireland is likely to enter a severe economic recession. A relatively small body of international research shows that drug consumption and dealing have previously increased during recessions and economic downturns, although there are important variations across national and local markets. Separate studies in Greece, Italy and Spain during the last recession found: increased problematic drug use (Greece), increase cannabis consumption (Spain), and, reduced heroin and cocaine consumption coupled with increased cannabis and amphetamine consumption (Italy). Whereas, Ireland witnessed a decline in net drug consumption, partly because of the large numbers who emigrated for work (that is, some may have consumed more drugs, but they did so in London and Toronto rather than Dublin and Cork). We also witnessed increases in cannabis cultivation and, heroin and Xanax consumption in some areas.

Drug dealing

During recessions people may sell drugs as a means of augmenting lowered incomes or social welfare payments, at a time when the risk of drug dealing may be reduced by austerity measures applied to Gardaí resources. That is, the relative risk of drug dealing is lessened while rewards are heightened. For example, a British ethnography found the 2008 recession was one reason 'prompting' young people to drift into drug dealing. That recessions will increase drug dealing is a reasonable argument, supported by criminological theories which suggest that crime results from a disjunction between culturally prescribed goals (i.e. making money, having fun) and means of achieving them (i.e. well-paying and meaningful jobs). In Ireland, consumer desires were augmented by the expectations of the Celtic Tiger, yet the means of achieving these goals were blocked during the last recession by reduced employment and wages.

Recession and Covid-19 could speed up the move towards online drug sales, and the sale of some new psychoactive substances, notably synthetic opioids such as fentanyl (as there is an

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ever expanding range of new psychoactive substances, the remainder of this paper will focus on synthetic opioids). Journalists reported that some drug dealers in Ireland quickly moved to online sales, through crypto-markets and social media, because open selling was too difficult and risky during the lockdown – having less people on the street made dealers more visible to the Gardaí. The EMCCDA reported similar dynamics across Europe. Also, the slowdown in people and goods moving across borders may have forced some traffickers to change their routes and trafficking techniques. Some may have switched to drugs which are easier to conceal: for example, as fentanyl is more potent than heroin it's easier to conceal and therefore smuggle. If traffickers became conformable with this new supply model they could continue the online buying and selling of synthetic opioids, which would increase their availability in Ireland.

Covid-19 may have accelerated a predictable move towards synthetic opioids and other new psychoactive substances. Some traffickers are already switching from heroin to synthetic opioids at the source and many countries have witnessed increased synthetic opioid consumption, replacing heroin in some areas. This is most apparent in the US, which has been gripped by a fentanyl epidemic since 2013 (although other synthetic opioids, such as carfentanil, are also prevalent in some US states).

Synthetic opioids, and other new psychoactive substances, are a challenge to treatment, harm reduction and drug market policing. Not only must state organisations constantly monitor for the emergence of new drugs and the risks they pose to consumers, but the distribution chain differentiates them from other drugs: traditionally drugs are warehoused in hub countries, such as Holland, before being smuggled to national wholesalers. Many synthetic opioids are, however, sent in small packages through the post, sometimes direct from the manufacturer. The rise in postal trafficking parallels the more general rise in online shopping - the increased volume of legitimate parcels has made it more difficult to check for packages containing drugs entering countries through the post.

Prediction is a dangerous game, and synthetic opioids may not gain market share in Ireland, and most drug dealers may continue to use traditional methods. However, scanning for future market trends can ensure we are prepared for future challenges whilst avoiding outdated and rigid responses. Treatment and harm reduction providers should prepare for synthetic opioids,

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postal security needs improving and, the Gardaí and customs should upskill their awareness of crypto-markets.

Drug use

Increased unemployment, or reduced working hours, can result in people having more free time to search for, and use, drugs. Drug use can also present an escape from, or medication for, the boredom, hopelessness and depression of joblessness, working in jobs that have little meaning to the person and/or the general strain of uncertainty in the labour market. Heroin consumption has often risen during recessions because some people use it to blank out pain: a short-term and extremely harmful means of coping with increasing exclusion. Indeed, one of the authors recently interviewed a person who had used drugs problematically:

> Drug use around here became really bad around the end of the Celtic Tiger. The recession and heroin hit Cork around the same time. We didn't have any opportunities, the work was gone, for those of us who didn't have the money to emigrate, all we had was heroin and tablets.

Long-term Impact of Social Stresses of Recession, Austerity and COVID-19

The largest effects of recessions may, however, surface in 10 to 20 years' time, when children born and reared during the recession mature into young adults. Recessions can intensify a host of risk factors associated with drug use (i.e. parental divorce and unemployment, disruption to education). There is also a growing body of evidence that experiencing cumulative adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is a risk factor for various physical and mental health issues across the life-course, including an increased likelihood of problematic and habitual drug use.

We may see an increase in children who experience adverse childhood experiences as a result of the recession, including: more inconsistent and erratic care from parents with worsening mental health issues, emotional abuse and physical and/or sexual assault and/or witnessing more domestic abuse. Even outside of these extremes, many children will (and already have due to Covid-19) also experience a more subtle form of consistent stress that comes from a combination of missing their usual, safe routines (school and friends), while experiencing a form of unintentional emotional absence from parents who are themselves fraught with

worries about sickness, poverty and the stress that comes from being 'locked-down' into their homes without their usual social resources to keep them well. Experiencing prolonged periods of toxic stress, especially during critical periods of development such as childhood, can hinder otherwise healthy development and leave children vulnerable to a whole host of social, emotional and physical problems later in life.

Against Austerity

Ireland cannot enter into another round of austerity measures if we experience another recession. Covid-19 has been traumatic for many children and adults and the stress of recession would add to an already stressful environment – social work, mental health and other services for families and youths will need additional funding, not less, to ensure these trauma's do not manifest in harmful drug use. Of course, ensuring that parents have affordable housing and meaningful jobs will go some way to preventing the need for such services later in the child's life.

Ireland's drug treatment services are under resourced, so the state needs to invest in drug addiction services – not cut back as they did with the last round of austerity measures. Drug treatment requires more than counselling, and the transition from addiction requires access to education, employment and housing. The government cannot again use austerity as an excuse for cutting the state back further, and allow the further widening of the gap between the richest and the poorest. Mitigating some of the long-term impact of the forthcoming recession will depend on a stronger central state with welfare at its core, not austerity.

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