



European Monitoring Centre  
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

# EMCDDA national focal points' activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

November 2020



## Table of contents

Summary.....	3
Introduction .....	5
Responses of the national focal points to the COVID-19 crisis .....	6
Monitoring activities.....	6
Participation in EMCDDA projects .....	6
Ad hoc national studies.....	9
Expertise to stakeholders: guidelines and recommendations .....	12
Dissemination of COVID-19-related information .....	14
EMCDDA briefings and other publications .....	14
Dissemination of information and provision of guidance to professionals .....	15
Videos.....	16
National focal points' new activities or changes in regular service provision .....	17
Impact of COVID-19 on the Reitox national focal points .....	17
Consequences on working conditions.....	17
Consequences on drug-related monitoring activities .....	18
Lessons learned.....	19
References.....	22
Annex.....	28
Acknowledgements.....	34

## Summary

European countries have been affected by health but also economic and social challenges during the major crisis caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) reacted quickly to the crisis by assessing, with the support of the Reitox network, the implications of COVID-19 for people who use drugs and for drug services. The Reitox network is composed of 29 national drug observatories (i.e. those of the 27 EU Member States, Norway and Turkey), which also serve as the national focal points (NFPs) to the EMCDDA and the European Commission. Under Member States' responsibility and EMCDDA guidance, Reitox NFPs have been responsible for (1) collecting, harmonising and analysing national information according to EMCDDA standards and providing this information to the EMCDDA; (2) monitoring and analysing national scientific, legal and policy developments; (3) coordinating and animating national drug information network(s); (4) participating actively in the EMCDDA's tasking processes; (5) ensuring the production and dissemination of NFP outputs nationally; (6) cooperating in improving existing EMCDDA working areas; (7) cooperating in the conceptualisation of new key indicators and core datasets; (8) language checking and proofreading of EMCDDA products and publications; and (9) disseminating at the national level EMCDDA and Reitox outputs.

Most of the Reitox NFPs are under the authority of their ministry of health or national public health institute and have been closely associated with COVID-19 crisis management, not only in relation to drug-related issues, but also as regards the wider scope of public health. Despite the fact that the NFPs had to adjust their work to the emerging restrictions, they led or contributed to a wide range of activities, such as carrying out risk assessments and new surveys, monitoring possible COVID-19 outbreaks among risk groups, providing guidance to stakeholders and supporting (new) drug-related services.

People who use drugs are recognised as a vulnerable group and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this group has been at risk of becoming seriously ill if infected because of their health status. Therefore, it is essential to communicate appropriate and timely advice to this group to reduce the risk of infection. In this context, the NFPs contributed to several of the EMCDDA COVID-19 special activities, such as the surveys for the Trendspotter briefings on the impact of COVID-19 on service provision and help-seeking behaviour among people who use drugs and on patterns of drug use and drug-related harms. They also contributed to the translation and dissemination of other ad hoc EMCDDA publications, such as reports on COVID-19 and EU drug markets, drug supply via darknet markets, the implications for people who use drugs, and more.

The NFPs performed many extra activities that were outside their mandate as NFPs to the EMCDDA by providing expertise to different stakeholders and policymakers. They were involved in drafting, creating and providing national guidelines, disseminating information to drug users and the staff of drug services, and providing new services.

The NFPs came across many challenges related to their working conditions, such as a reduction in staff, a shift of human resources to other teams involved in monitoring the pandemic and the transition to teleworking. Most of the tasks undertaken by NFPs could be conducted remotely and, despite some difficulties, such as the lack of availability of technological means, the NFPs adapted rapidly and effectively to the new conditions and did not experience an interruption to their activities. However, given that health-related matters associated with COVID-19 became a public health priority, some of the NFPs' routine data collection, as well some surveys, were postponed from spring to autumn and a few even to 2021. Many countries might also be confronted with data challenges in the coming years, as it is not yet clear how much the COVID-19 pandemic has affected data collection and data reporting among some drug-related service providers.

Despite these challenges, there was no major disruption to the work of the NFPs owing to their significant and long-running experience with systemic drug-related monitoring and reporting activities.

Despite the sudden change in priorities, the sustainability of the NFPs was not at all at stake. Reitox NFPs are used to risk management and are experienced in crisis communication, which were highlighted as important assets of the Reitox network during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the NFPs demonstrated a significant ability to adapt and shift their working mode, despite staff relocations, as already mentioned.

During the lockdown in spring, the NFPs increased their national collaboration with different stakeholders, ensuring that more efficient data collection could be carried out during this time of crisis. The NFPs have organised online meetings and webinars at the national and international levels, involving even more local decision-makers than usual, to allow information flow and communication back and forth.

The existing knowledge within the Reitox network and the opportunity that the network provided to easily exchange experiences and best practices were key during the crisis. With rapid changes in drug use patterns and other challenges, the network provided real added value for the NFPs and their national stakeholders, bringing back the added value at the EU level to the national level. As highlighted in the Reitox Development Framework (EMCDDA, 2017), to achieve a powerful collective impact, the strengthening of horizontal cooperation between NFPs and the exchange of best practices in monitoring the drug situation are key.

The NFPs played a key role in acting as coordinators in this time of crisis, when human resources were scarce at different levels. It was critical that a coherent monitoring approach be maintained, that the possible overlapping of national or local surveys be limited and that the production of appropriate and timely responses be guaranteed. The leadership of the NFPs was essential and they demonstrated that they can achieve a lot, with simplified procedures, under extreme time pressure and sometimes with very scarce resources.

In these times, the Reitox network has shown that it fully shares and contributes to the EMCDDA's vision of a healthier and more secure Europe through better informed drug policies and actions, with each NFP contributing to making its own country healthier and more secure through the data it collects and analyses, and the information it provides.

## Introduction

The major public health crisis caused by the rapid spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has affected European societies. Governments have had to take public health decisions, promoting social distancing, restricting movements and even imposing lockdowns, as well as socioeconomic measures. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) reacted rapidly to the crisis by assessing and publishing, in March 2020, an update on the implications of COVID-19 for people who use drugs and for drug service providers (EMCDDA, 2020a).

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has been collating the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, based on reports from health authorities (ECDC, 2020). The ECDC receives data mainly through the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS), the European Surveillance System (TESSy) and the World Health Organization (WHO). In the EU Member States, ministries of health, public health institutes and other national authorities are at the front line of the crisis.

Reitox is the European information network on drugs and drug addiction and it contributes to the EMCDDA's mission, that is, to create a healthier and more secure Europe through better-informed drug policies and actions. The Reitox national focal points (NFPs) are national bodies designated by each EMCDDA participating country (the EU Member States, Norway and Turkey) to collect, analyse and report data at the national level on drugs and drug addiction to the EMCDDA. Each NFP is the primary source of national information at the EU level. Two thirds of NFPs are located in, or are closely linked to, their ministry of health or national public health institute (Figure 1). Given their institutional affiliation, most NFPs have been closely involved in COVID-19 crisis management at the national level since the beginning of the pandemic, not only as regards drug-related issues, but also in relation to general public health issues. NFPs have led, or contributed to, a wide range of activities such as risk assessment, monitoring the COVID-19 epidemic among vulnerable groups, providing guidance to stakeholders, carrying out surveys on addictive behaviours, and providing funding to reinforce services or create new ones.

Figure 1  
NFPs' parent institutions



Source: Reitox national focal points documentation 2020, internal.

COVID-19 can cause a wide range of harms for people who use drugs. Pre-existing health problems and particular drug use behaviours can increase the risk of becoming seriously ill if people become infected (EMCDDA, 2020b). People who use drugs are an especially vulnerable group and they need to be particularly aware of the relevant advice to reduce their risk of infection.

The NFPs collaborated in many of the EMCDDA's special COVID-19 activities. For instance, they contributed to the gathering of information, resulting in the following publications: in May 2020, a Trendspotter briefing entitled *Impact of COVID-19 on Drug Services and Help-seeking in Europe* (EMCDDA, 2020c), and, in June 2020, a Trendspotter briefing entitled *Impact of COVID-19 on Patterns of Drug Use and Drug-related Harms in Europe* (EMCDDA, 2020b). The NFPs also contributed to the translation and dissemination of ad hoc publications, such as *EU Drug Markets: Impact of COVID-19* (EMCDDA and Europol, 2020) and a special report entitled *COVID-19 and Drugs: Drug Supply via Darknet Markets* (EMCDDA, 2020d).

The NFPs compiled the list of activities that they performed at the national level to address the COVID-19 health crisis, between May and July 2020, for the purpose of this report.

This report highlights the immediate responses taken by NFPs and describes the challenges met by the organisations and the strategies produced to overcome these challenges. In the first section, the focus is on different monitoring activities during the COVID-19 health crisis. The report also describes the responses of the NFPs, such as the provision of scientific expertise for guidelines, reports and policy recommendations, but also the dissemination of COVID-19-related information to their various audiences and the provision of new services. The report also draws attention to the impact of COVID-19 on the NFPs as organisations, namely its consequences on working conditions and on NFPs' monitoring activities. Finally, the last section focuses on the lessons learned so far.

## Responses of the national focal points to the COVID-19 crisis

### Monitoring activities

Despite the challenges created by the pandemic, NFPs continued to actively monitor the drug situation. The NFPs have strong national monitoring systems in place and use the EMCDDA's standardised indicator protocols for regular monitoring. In spring 2020, the EMCDDA rapidly developed several specific surveys for the COVID-19 context, to which the NFPs contributed. These were the Mini European Web Survey on Drugs (Mini-EWSD), a series of trendspotter surveys, an EU drug market analysis, a prison survey, a European Syringe Collection and Analysis Project Enterprise (Escape) study and a Trans European Drug Information (TEDI) study. Some countries also participated in different surveys that were coordinated by other international organisations and EU agencies.

During this period, some countries launched special tools designed to monitor the situation during the COVID-19 health emergency. Countries developed new surveys and questionnaires and conducted new analyses based on the routine data from their monitoring systems. A few countries initiated wastewater analysis or began COVID-19 case tracking among drug users.

Table 1, in the annex, includes the list of national studies and projects, with links to documents where available.

### Participation in EMCDDA projects

#### *Mini-EWSD: the impact of COVID-19 on patterns of drug use, harms and drug services in the European Union*

The EMCDDA conducted a special COVID-19 round of the European Web Survey (the Mini-EWSD) (EMCDDA, 2020e) to assess the impact of COVID-19 on people who use drugs. The survey gathered

information on patterns of drug use, access to health services, drug markets and the impact of COVID-19-related restrictions.

Most countries participated in the survey, which was translated into 21 languages and made available between 8 and 25 May 2020. The role of the NFPs was to translate, disseminate and promote the survey among their stakeholders and networks. In addition, some of them published or are planning to publish the national figures and analysis in a chapter of a COVID-19 report or in other specific reports (i.e. Ireland, Greece, Spain (DGPNSD OEDA, 2020a), Latvia, Lithuania <sup>(1)</sup>, Luxembourg and Slovenia). Around 10 600 respondents completed the online questionnaire (with around 30 questions) in one of the languages available. This contributed to the production of a comprehensive, realistic and timely picture of drug use in Europe and to the overall analysis of the situation and of the changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (EMCDDA, 2020b).

### ***Trendspotter studies on the effects and implications of the COVID-19 outbreak on drug services and patterns of drug use***

The series of EMCDDA trendspotter studies investigated the effects and implications of the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak on drug services and help-seeking in Europe (May 2020; EMCDDA, 2020c), and the impact on patterns of drug use and drug-related harms in Europe among people who use drugs (June 2020; EMCDDA, 2020b). The series used a mixed-method approach to investigate the situation. The trendspotter methodology is based on the triangulation of a range of rapid investigative approaches and data collection from multiple quantitative and qualitative sources with a systematic analysis incorporating the use of expert opinion (EMCDDA, 2018a). The methodology used in the COVID-19 briefings had been adapted to suit online investigation, considering the national emergency restrictions. A literature review was performed, online expert surveys were organised, the Mini-EWSD was launched (see previous paragraph) and various virtual facilitated groups were created made up of European drug professionals, researchers and representatives.

In April 2020, an initial online survey was sent to the Reitox network of NFPs. One of the focus groups organised in the trendspotter study involved three NFPs, namely from Belgium, Czechia and France. A number of experts recommended by the NFPs participated in other focus groups. Many NFPs adapted the EMCDDA questionnaire and sent it to their national institutions, authorities, experts and drug-related services to provide the most reliable answers to the survey.

The **Austrian** NFP published the national results of the questionnaire and shared them with all of its provincial networks (Horváth et al., 2020); several other NFPs also translated the trendspotter publication into their national languages and disseminated the results in this way.

This exercise fostered collaboration between different organisations; for example, the **Norwegian** NFP completed the EMCDDA questionnaire in collaboration with the Norwegian Directorate of Health and KORUS Oslo, which have been implementing a weekly survey at municipal level since the start of the lockdown. Moreover, the completion of the questionnaire was informed by the efforts of the Norwegian Centre for Addiction Research (SERAF), which has been focusing on COVID-19 and the treatment of substance use disorders.

The **Polish** NFP expanded on the trendspotter survey and undertook a rapid assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on drug services, drug users and the drug market. The results were published in English (Malczewski et al., 2020) and were also presented in a series of webinars, organised in June and October as a part of a national conference held in Warsaw. Moreover, the results of the survey were published in four Polish scientific journals.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Results were presented to the media on 22 July 2020 (Narkotikų, tabako ir alkoholio kontrolės departamentas, 2020).

Like its Polish counterpart, the **Hungarian** NFP expanded on the trendspotter survey and created a national questionnaire for drug service providers about drug use, health and social risks, and access to treatment and harm reduction services. It also included questions on changes in drug prices and availability. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the Hungarian social system had to face more and different challenges, handle more needs and develop complex responses to food provision, shelter, daily care, asylums in lockdown, etc., while the healthcare system struggled to continue adequately providing care. Referral and admission of new cases in many units was stopped (psychiatry, addiction, HIV/hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatment, etc.) to avoid overload and nosocomial infections due to the pandemic. The NFP produced a detailed report of the results of the questionnaire and a briefing, both of which are currently under assessment by decision-makers and have not yet been published.

Several other NFPs conducted ad hoc monitoring activities, which also contributed to the analysis of the state of drug services, such as a rapid assessment among treatment centres in **Belgium** to assess the impact of the pandemic on this specialised sector and on drug users. The results indicated that there had been changes in the services offered, gave an insight into the demands of the service users, those receiving opioid substitution treatment and COVID-19 patients among the drug users, and highlighted the specific requirements of the services. The results were shared with the authorities and the drug treatment services (in French and Dutch). In **France**, the French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT) undertook qualitative monitoring based on the feedback from its TREND scheme and network in seven large cities (Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Metz, Paris and Rennes). The results of this rapid assessment among harm reduction facilities were published online in French and English (Gérome and Gandilhon, 2020a, 2020b). In **Slovenia**, the NFP also summarised the results of a rapid assessment of the situation in a report published in Slovenian on the website of the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) entitled, in English, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on treatment and provision services for drug users and on the drug market in Slovenia* (Drev, 2020).

In **Cyprus**, an assessment of changes in treatment demand and treatment provision was performed; the results, which provided information on the mode of treatment provision and working hours of services, were published on the website of the Cyprus National Addictions Authority. The **Irish** NFP undertook a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 through the Department of Health and Social Care. During May and June, staff in the National Drug Treatment Reporting System, based at the Irish NFP, telephoned all of the treatment services that were submitting treatment demand data to ascertain the impact of the pandemic on service provision. In **Romania**, in addition to compiling answers to the trendspotter questionnaire, the NFP also processed the available national treatment demand data (based on the treatment demand indicator) from January to March for a special analysis. In addition, in **Italy**, an ad hoc monitoring activity was carried out focusing on changes in treatment requests and the provision of treatment and involving a group of social- and healthcare staff of treatment centres.

Furthermore, in **Finland**, the NFP performed a survey among drug service providers on the changes in service provision and demand. The NFP has conducted this survey every 5 weeks since the beginning of the epidemic, collecting data for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, which is responsible for service monitoring during the crisis. As a result, a blog was published and a publication will possibly be drafted.

### **Drug market survey**

A joint publication of the EMCDDA and Europol analyses the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on EU drug markets, for the main drug types (cannabis, heroin, cocaine, amphetamines and new psychoactive substances), including on demand, production, trafficking and availability (EMCDDA and Europol, 2020). For this publication, the EMCDDA conducted a targeted online survey in April 2020.



The Reitox network supported the data collection by strengthening collaboration with supply reference experts working in different services such as in the police.

### ***Prisons: cooperation on monitoring and reporting***

In settings in which people are gathered in enclosed environments such as in prisons, there is a heightened risk of person-to-person and droplet transmission of pathogens such as coronavirus. People in prisons also have a greater underlying burden of disease and worse health conditions than the general population (WHO, 2020a, 2020b).

The EMCDDA collects data on prison settings to closely monitor this population. Fifteen countries have ensured the participation of prison experts in this survey up to now.

In **Luxembourg**, the NFP ran an adapted version of the European questionnaire on drug use among prisoners, including several COVID-19-related questions, until the end of August 2020 in their national closed prisons among their complete inmate populations. Moreover, the **Hungarian** NFP conducted a national prison facility survey in September, which included COVID-19-related issues. The results of this study are expected to be available in the coming months.

### ***EU research projects***

Other international surveys and ad hoc studies were conducted in which NFPs played an active role in the drafting, piloting and creation, translation, review and dissemination of the surveys and data collection.

For instance, the **French** NFP is piloting the Escape project (EMCDDA, 2019). An analysis of the substances injected using syringes during the lockdown period was done in Czechia with the participation of the **Czech** NFP. The **Lithuanian**, **Latvian** and **Finnish** NFPs are also collaborating in the project jointly with other partners from other countries.

The TEDI (EMCDDA, undated) survey in **Luxembourg** fostered collaboration between partners of harm reduction, health education and drug checking services on the implementation of a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on recreational drug user habits. The NFP participated in testing the pilot, promoting the survey at the national level and reviewing the report.

In addition to data collection for the EMCDDA, several NFPs have also completed the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) special survey on a global initiative to improve knowledge on COVID-19's impact on crime and drugs in June 2020.

## **Ad hoc national studies**

In addition to data collection for the EMCDDA, and their usual monitoring activities as part of their mandates, NFPs also performed specific national studies or contributed to surveys initiated by other partners during spring 2020. One of the four strategic objectives of the Reitox Development Framework, a document that defines the main priorities of the Reitox network in fulfilling its roles and functions in the future, is to strengthen the role of the NFPs in supporting decision-making and action at the national level (EMCDDA, 2018b). This national work may also support horizontal cooperation between NFPs by giving them an opportunity to exchange best practices, to increase collaboration with each other and to support each other in having a powerful collective impact. In addition, it helps to increase the external visibility of the Reitox network as a whole by developing new products.

### ***Focus on services***

In **Luxembourg**, the NFP published, in collaboration with the National Statistics Institute (STATEC Luxembourg) and the national drug coordinator, a so-called 'Flash COVID-19' report on the impact of COVID-19 on drug users and national drug treatment and harm reduction service providers. It is a six-

page factsheet/report. Another study has been conducted by the Luxembourg NFP in collaboration with the national drug coordinator and directors of drug treatment and harm reduction services, focusing on the evaluation of low-threshold services and their newly implemented low-threshold opioid substitution treatment offer. The study aims to assess the impact of COVID-19 and the national measures implemented on high-risk drug use clients attending national harm reduction and supervised drug consumption facilities. A short written questionnaire was distributed to participants between July and September 2020. Results should be published by the end of 2020.

In **Lithuania**, between March and May 2020, the NFP monitored alcohol and drug-related non-fatal overdoses by comparing 2019 data with the situation during the quarantine period and also compared changes in treatment demands (NTAKD, 2020a).

The **Greek** NFP is assisting the national coordinator in the creation and dissemination of a questionnaire targeting drug professionals, focusing on their experience during the COVID-19 health emergency. The data collection is still ongoing.

In **Estonia**, the NFP is very closely monitoring the effects of COVID-19 by collecting data from harm reduction services, treatment centres and other services.

In March 2020, the **Dutch NFP** conducted an initial rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 measures on harm reduction facilities and their target groups. This rapid assessment was then repeated twice (in April and June). The study was done in collaboration with Mainline (a harm reduction service provider) and MDHG (a medical social service for drug users) (Van der Gouwe et al., 2020). The results were discussed with the Ministry of Health, and best practices were distributed to stakeholders in various ways. In October 2020, a fourth rapid assessment was conducted.

In **Czechia**, the NFP has been actively monitoring the changes in treatment and harm reduction provision and has issued and published two rapid assessment reports (National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, 2020a,b); a third rapid assessment report is in preparation. The rapid assessment reports aimed to inform national stakeholders of the impact of COVID-19 on the drug scene and on drug-related services. They were presented and endorsed in a session of the Government Council for Drug Policy Coordination on 25 June 2020. In addition, the Czech NFP monitored the interventions carried out by addiction services providers through an online facility survey, with COVID-19-related questions added to the routine questions.

### ***Focus on web surveys***

A new study on the impact of COVID-19 on addictive behaviours was conducted in **Portugal**. The Portuguese NFP launched three online surveys: the first related to alcohol and medication use, the second to the use of the internet and video games, and the third to the use of cannabis. The results of the surveys are available on the website of the General Directorate for Intervention on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies (SICAD) and were disseminated through social networks.

In the **Netherlands**, there are several national studies under way. The first survey investigated if cannabis users in the country changed their consumption patterns after the introduction of the coronavirus measures in mid-March and, if so, the reasons for change. A total of 1 563 participants were included in this study (Vercoulen et al., 2020). The (preliminary) findings received a lot of media attention, as these findings showed that 4 in 10 cannabis users increased their cannabis use as a result of the pandemic, mainly because of boredom, but stress and loneliness also played a role. In addition, the National Big Nightlife Survey 2020 was adapted to include COVID-19-related questions in the survey. The data collection phase lasted until the end of May (Van Miltenburg et al., 2020). The survey focused on the consequences of the measures in the first period of the lockdown in terms of the use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco among partygoers and young adults. The survey was repeated in September/October 2020. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the monitoring of internet and online apps

was intensified, such as the monitoring of users' forums and Telegram Messenger, to investigate the effects of the crisis on drug markets.

In **Belgium**, the NFP is undertaking a national web survey to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on drug users by evaluating both drug-related and health-related issues relevant to health professionals, prevention services and decision-makers. The objective of the study is to support decision-making and professionals during the current pandemic and to determine its long- and medium-term consequences. Consequently, this web survey is being conducted in several waves and is still ongoing. The results of the first two waves of the study have been published in French and Dutch (Sciensano, 2020a, 2020b).

In **Italy**, the NFP supported an online survey of a sample of Italian students. The survey aimed to evaluate changes in drug use during the lockdown, and it was conducted by the Institute of Clinical Physiology of the National Research Council of Italy.

The **Spanish** NFP actively participated in monitoring the situation in Spain through several new studies. In July 2020, the NFP published a report on the impact of COVID-19 on the use of psychoactive substances and other addictions (DGPNSD OEDA, 2020b). The report combines multiple information sources, including regular drug-related monitoring databases (based on the treatment demand indicator, the drug-related death indicator and the drug-related emergencies indicator), the results of the Spanish Mini-EWDS on COVID-19, a web survey on betting, video games and gaming, and other studies on tobacco use and confinement, COVID-19 and cannabis, and alcohol, benzodiazepine and opioid use.

In **Czechia**, the NFP carried out a national survey on substance use. This online survey, which is conducted every 4 years, was adapted and included a special module on the changes in substance use and addictive behaviours, such as gaming, gambling and social media use, during the COVID-19 health emergency.

The **French** NFP published a report on the impact of COVID-19 on the use of psychoactive substances, which also integrates the results of an online survey on cannabis use performed during July and August (OFDT, 2020).

### **Focus on seroprevalence studies**

The **Polish** NFP and the National Institute of Public Health are planning to launch a new study entitled 'Health conditions of people receiving injections in the field of infectious diseases — seroprevalence study on HIV, HCV, SARS-CoV-2 and bacteria *Treponema pallidum*'.

The **Hungarian** NFP is also conducting a bio-behavioural survey on HIV/HCV and COVID-19 among high-risk drug users (including people who inject drugs) in Budapest. Biological samples are tested for HIV/HCV, with participants completing a questionnaire that includes COVID-19-related questions. The NFP also conducted interviews among key informants about changes in the drug market and seizures of drugs by authorities, emergency care and acute intoxications, and forensic medicine.

The **Czech** NFP and the national drug policy coordination office also conducted a new serobehavioural study entitled 'ADI-COVID-19'. The study aimed to determine the seroprevalence of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection and to identify suspected cases of infection among clients and staff of addiction rehabilitation programmes. The study included rapid testing and a questionnaire distributed among clients and workers of drug services. Tests and personal protective equipment were provided to the services.

### ***Focus on wastewater studies***

For about a decade, wastewater analysis has been used to monitor and estimate illicit drug consumption at the city level. In 2019, 23 countries in Europe (68 cities) participated in the latest wastewater monitoring project (EMCDDA, 2020f).

In 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, in three countries — Cyprus, Portugal and Slovakia — the NFPs supported the implementation of additional wastewater studies to identify drug use (EMCDDA, 2020f). In Cyprus, there were two collections of wastewater, namely during and after the lockdown. In Slovakia, the ongoing wastewater analysis focuses mainly on the following substances: methamphetamine, fentanyl, ketamine, amphetamine, cocaine, benzoylecgonine, MDMA, THC-COOH, tramadol, methadone, mephedrone and heroin. Portugal also coordinated with the waste water based expert on the collection of samples in three different time periods to assess the possible impact of the COVID-19 measures on drug use.

### ***Focus on COVID-19 case tracking***

One of the new monitoring activities that has been embedded into some of the NFPs' practices is COVID-19 case tracking among drug users. For instance, the **Luxembourg** NFP, in collaboration with the National Laboratory on Health, collects data on COVID-19 infections among cases of drug-related deaths. This is an ongoing activity, with (co-)infections of COVID-19 having been assessed since May 2020 among drug-related death cases in the population in Luxembourg. Similarly, in **Greece**, with the use of data from agencies, the number of drug users infected by or deceased as a result of COVID-19 is being monitored. In **Italy**, a working group has published a report on infection prevention and control for COVID-19 (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2020). The group mainly focuses on the areas of prevention and management of any suspected, probable or confirmed cases of COVID-19. The general measures highlighted by the group are related to strengthening the prevention and control of infections related to healthcare assistance, including by adequately training healthcare staff. The actions taken must ensure that there is robust management to prevent the entry of COVID-19 cases into the country and to manage any suspected, probable or confirmed cases that occur among residents in healthcare settings. This document highlights the importance of active surveillance of the interactions between residents in healthcare settings and staff as regards the early identification of cases. Facilities must be able to temporarily isolate suspected cases and, if effective isolation is impossible for the clinical management of the confirmed case, transfer those with confirmed cases to a hospital or other appropriate facility for isolation, further clinical evaluation and the necessary care, such as a facility dedicated to COVID-19 patients.

## **Expertise to stakeholders: guidelines and recommendations**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many new clinical and public health recommendations and guidelines were issued for different stakeholders, such as professionals working in drug coordination services, staff of treatment and harm reduction centres, and policymakers and decision-makers, as well as drug users themselves. This ensured that evidence-based information was available and that it was meeting stakeholders' different needs.

The NFPs have played an important role in the process of creating, drafting and revising these documents, either through expertise given in the working groups or by themselves producing guidelines or recommendations (see section on dissemination of COVID-19-related information for more details).

As the EMCDDA Trendspotter briefing (2020c) on the impact of COVID-19 on drug services and help-seeking in Europe shows, 23 European countries reported on the availability of specific guidelines for drug services on responding to the COVID-19 emergency in May 2020. Of these, 11 countries rapidly developed specific guidance addressing drug services or drug-related problems. Many countries

translated guidelines or briefings published by international organisations such as WHO and the ECDC (including the EMCDDA COVID update, which is described in detail in section on dissemination of COVID-19-related information). Among the countries reporting that targeted guidelines were available, a proportion of them reported having published national-level guidelines and others reported that specific guidelines had been created by non-governmental organisations.

Table 2, in the annex, lists the national guidelines and recommendations with NFPs involvement, with links to documents where available.

The **Spanish** NFP responded to national parliamentary requests. The NFP also provided data for international reports (produced by the UNODC, the EMCDDA, other countries, etc.) related to the situation/experience of drug users in Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the Spanish NFP supported drug-related services by disseminating national and international recommendations and actively participating in the development of protocols and new guidelines for facilities for helping drug users.

In **Czechia**, the national drug policy coordination office issued national guidelines in April 2020 and, in March 2020, a set of 14 formal recommendations were published for employees of addiction treatment and harm reduction centres, with the collaboration of the NFP. Moreover, the NFP collaborated in the provision of practical advice for drug users during the pandemic. Moreover, the Czech NFP contributed substantially to guidelines also developed by the national drug policy coordination office, for addiction services for the so-called second wave of COVID-19 in autumn 2020. These guidelines contain a set of recommendations structured according to three different epidemic regimens.

Similarly, in **Cyprus**, the NFP participated in the process of reviewing, translating and disseminating guidelines for both the staff of treatment centres and drug users during the pandemic.

In both **Estonia** and **Latvia**, the NFPs adapted available COVID-19 materials to local needs and translated the information available from the EMCDDA to create COVID-19 guidelines and recommendations for service providers, namely harm reduction and/or treatment centres.

The **Lithuanian** NFP actively participated in the creation and dissemination of recommendations for high-risk drug users, which were created using information from the EMCDDA, WHO and the Harm Reduction Coalition; this information was shared with national harm reduction services. The NFP also disseminated recommendations to city mayors for service providers, based on the EMCDDA update on the implications of COVID-19 (EMCDDA, 2020a), suggesting that they keep harm reduction services open despite the lockdown.

The **Slovenian** NFP cooperated with the NIJZ and social protection programmes in the fields of drugs, addiction and homelessness to create hygiene recommendations for drug service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, they were part of a working group that issued recommendations for working with vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations concerned broader groups of vulnerable people, such as homeless people, addicts, refugees, migrants, prisoners and more, and they were created in collaboration with several experts at the NIJZ.

In **Portugal**, the NFP also coordinated a national working group that included the Intervention Division in Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies (DICAD) and the Social Security Institute. This group prepared guidelines for services working with homeless people with alcohol use disorders in shelters during the COVID-19 state of emergency. There were also specific recommendations issued for drug-related treatment centres. Both recommendations were disseminated at the national level by the NFP.

Finally, the NFP in **Italy** contributed to guidelines for reorganising the activities that were deferred owing to the COVID-19 emergency (Ministero della Salute, 2020) and guidelines for the progressive

reinstatement of activities that had been considered deferrable in light of the COVID-19 emergency. These guidelines set out all of the recommendations to be followed in the care and treatment pathways, and how to reinstate previously deferred activities; they were issued in partnership with the Superior Institute of Health. In addition, the Department for Drug Policies of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Superior Institute of Health signed an interinstitutional agreement related to the prevention and control of COVID-19 infection among drug service providers. This document set out the framework for a project that aimed to develop guidelines for the prevention and control of SARS-CoV-2 infections in public and private drug services, to provide distance training to the staff of these services, to monitor the implementation of any guidelines updating the framework, to disseminate evidence among both the users and the staff of these drug services, and to provide training and information to public and private drug addiction services through channels other than documentation (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri Dipartimento per le Politiche Antidroga, 2020).

## Dissemination of COVID-19-related information

All Reitox NFPs have actively disseminated information regarding the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on drug users, drug use patterns and drug services. In line with their mandate or the mandates of their institutions, a majority of NFPs have disseminated national and international guidelines, recommendations, articles, etc.

In **Czechia**, the NFP disseminated, via its website, the WHO guidance for the prevention and control of COVID-19 in prisons (WHO, 2020a, 2020b), which was translated by a non-governmental organisation. The **Croatian** NFP disseminated the recommendations of the Croatian Psychiatric Community on the possible consequences for drug users (Hrvatski Liječnički Zbor, 2020) and the recommendations for preventing COVID-19 in the prison system (HZJZ, 2020a). The **Maltese** NFP provided guidance and assistance to prisons in setting up a system of control for COVID-19. The prison authorities have received support for the introduction of the system if needed. The NFP played an active role in sharing guidelines on telemedicine with treatment centres. The NFP supported centres in the use of an online portal and gave instructions for these interventions to be recorded in the national treatment monitoring system. These data will be further used in policy outlines on alternative service provision. In other countries, such as **Cyprus**, the NFP provided support and official documents to drug users for COVID-19 testing. The **Lithuanian** NFP prepared an overview of the impact of COVID-19, which will be published in an annual report. Moreover, the NFPs have set up websites and portals that provide general information about the COVID-19 situation.

## EMCDDA briefings and other publications

Half of the NFPs translated, reviewed and disseminated the *EMCDDA Update on the Implications of COVID-19 for People Who Use Drugs and Drug Service Providers* (EMCDDA, 2020a). The briefing is available in 10 languages on the EMCDDA website (EMCDDA, 2020g). This ad hoc publication describes the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in the European Union and its consequences for drug users and drug services. Moreover, it outlines important considerations for ensuring effective functioning of drug services during the health crisis. The content of the update was integrated into or used for the development of national recommendations by the NFPs; a few NFPs also disseminated a printed version of this update. Table 3, in the annex, lists the NFP websites where the translation of this update can be found.

As already mentioned earlier in this report, some NFPs have also translated and disseminated other COVID-19-related publications of the EMCDDA, such as Trendspotter briefings (EMCDDA, 2020b,c) and the report on the impact of COVID-19 on EU drug markets (EMCDDA and Europol, 2020), and are preparing or have produced national factsheets displaying the results of the Mini-EWSD.

The **Spanish** NFP has developed a communication strategy on COVID-19 to disseminate and share information and updates through different channels. It is based on three strategic pillars of the vision of the Government Delegation: (1) to be a benchmark for citizens in the matter of addictions, (2) to disseminate the results of the research, so they can contribute to finding solutions to social challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) to improve the website<sup>(2)</sup> and the Twitter channel (@PNSDgob) of the Government Delegation by publishing updated evidence-based information on COVID-19 and addictions (publications, recommendations of international organisations, guides and scientific articles). The NFP disseminates this information through different channels (its website, Twitter, other social networks, etc.). The NFP actively disseminates various COVID-related surveys (designed by the Spanish Observatory on Drugs and Addictions, by the EMCDDA, by European research groups, etc.) and COVID-19- and addictions-related prevention materials (Plan Nacional sobre Drogas, 2020a).



## Dissemination of information and provision of guidance to professionals

The **Maltese** NFP has distributed information and guidance on those receiving opioid substitution treatment in quarantine. The NFP was approached by the contact tracing team about the difficulties of some patients accessing opioid substitution treatment, namely if they were in obligatory quarantine. The NFP sent out-patient clinics instructions on how these situations were to be dealt with. These patients had to contact relatives or acquaintances to pick up a week's supply of medication, which was to be taken according to the instructions. This information was passed to the relevant authorities. Furthermore, the NFP has provided guidance to the Health Superintendent and contact tracing team on matters of drug users 'trapped' in COVID-19 confinement. The NFP provided guidance on how to assist a person in need and provided relevant telephone numbers and guidance on how to manage first contact with a drug user in a crisis (e.g. if they are feeling bad, depressed or in need of medical attention). The information was passed, via a key person, to the entire team, and the NFP stayed in contact in case further assistance was needed.

The **Danish** NFP prepared various files and provided guidance and recommendations related to COVID-19 to professionals and drug users of consumption rooms, as well as to vulnerable groups in shelters and other low-threshold services. Moreover, the NFP delivered guidance on handling overdoses among opioid addicts, recommendations for treatment centres on opioid substitution treatment and take-home doses, and recommendations for cases of intoxication and withdrawal during the COVID-19 crisis. All information was also made available on the NFP's website.

In **Portugal**, there was an adjustment to opioid substitution treatment regulation to allow an increase in take-home dosages. The Portuguese NFP disseminated this information to treatment and harm reduction centres. It has also disseminated, on SICAD's website and through social networks, information about extending the hours of the telephone helpline and information on increasing non-face-to-face clinical activity, namely by carrying out appointments via telephone and the internet, at the national level. The **Latvian** NFP disseminated information on COVID-19-related issues to low-threshold centres.

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(<sup>2</sup>) <http://www.pnsd.mscbs.gob.es>

The **Irish** NFP produced an evidence brief on the impact of COVID-19 in four areas: Scotland (United Kingdom), New South Wales (Australia), British Columbia (Canada) and New York State (United States). In April, the Irish Department of Health and Social Care (DOH) established a rapid assessment group to look at the impact of the pandemic in Ireland. As part of this rapid assessment, the DOH asked the Irish NFP to prepare an evidence brief examining the situation in a number of comparable jurisdictions. This rapid evidence brief helped the DOH put the Irish response to the COVID-19 crisis within an international context (Mongan et al., 2020). The findings enabled a comparison to be made with the situation in other countries and helped in identifying initiatives that could be relevant to the drugs situation in Ireland. The evidence brief included an analysis of Irish data from the EMCDDA's Mini-EWSD.

Many of the NFPs have also created websites, web pages and web services for providing information, guidance and support related to COVID-19 and drug use. For instance, a web-based information service for drug services was created in **Czechia**. In **Finland**, the dissemination of information on COVID-19 and people who use drugs was done through a special website and a PDF document. The **Irish** NFP compiled a special COVID-19 portal on its website, which contained details on guidelines and new and updated information. The **Swedish** NFP is involved in monitoring developments and analysing the consequences of the pandemic from a broad public health perspective. Dissemination at the national level is done continuously through the Swedish Public Health Agency's website. The **Portuguese** NFP created a section on its website on COVID-19 for both professionals and citizens, namely on the SICAD web page. In **Norway**, information was disseminated at the national level on the websites of the Norwegian Centre for Addiction Research and the Directorate of Health, with a note included on the consequences of COVID-19 for vulnerable populations, including people who use drugs. The **Netherlands** has produced a synthesis of knowledge on the impact of COVID-19 on the drug situation, which presents data on (1) the effects of COVID-19 on drug use, (2) the risks of drug use and COVID-19, (3) the assistance available to drug users during the crisis, (4) the situation and best practices in harm reduction and (5) the impact of COVID-19 on drug markets. The information is presented on the website of the Trimbos institute (Trimbos institute, 2020).

The **Polish** NFP, the National Bureau for Drug Prevention, prepared information about COVID-19 for treatment and harm reduction centres. In addition, this NFP has organised a series of webinars to present and discuss the results of the Polish NFP study about COVID-19 and new working methods for treatment centres and harm reduction programmes. Moreover, the Polish NFP summarised the COVID-19 situation in Poland at the World Drug Day event on 26 June, organised by the UNODC as part of the launch of the Drug Report webinar.

## Videos

The NFP in **Cyprus** produced and promoted a short video <sup>(3)</sup> regarding the potential consequences of COVID-19 on mental health and drug use, and mentioning the relevant helpline. This video demonstrates and encourages healthy ways of working at home and alternatives to the development of risky behaviours.

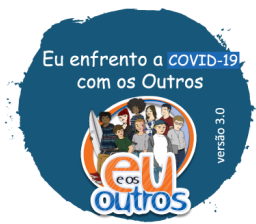


The **Portuguese** NFP created a new prevention web page on the SICAD website (SICAD, 2020). It is a freely accessible web page and addresses confinement and the risks associated with addictive behaviour. It was created to share health information, disseminate resources and support people in dealing with the current situation.

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<sup>(3)</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNfqr\\_kySQA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNfqr_kySQA)





SICAD is raising awareness of the risk of addictive behaviours worsening as a way for people to deal with the situation of confinement. It is intended to appeal to different audiences, for example to families, and it demonstrates different perceptions of the pandemic from different points of view. It is part of the universal prevention programme 'Me and the others', and there is an associated video (4).

## National focal points' new activities or changes in regular service provision

Several countries have initiated new activities or adapted previous activities during the COVID-19 pandemic to support both the staff of drug services and drug users. For instance, the **Croatian** NFP created a telephone line for psychological help (HZJZ, 2020b), whereas **Czechia** has been providing a daily information service providing news related to the coronavirus situation. It is an email service that provides links to all services listed in the 'Map of Aid' (National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, undated). Moreover, a telephone and email service was created to provide practical advice for the staff of addiction treatment and harm reduction centres during the pandemic. The support included providing information on personal protective equipment usage, service provision recommendations, etc. The weekly online support and information exchanges with members of umbrella associations and main service providers was organised through videoconferences. Finally, the Czech NFP has assisted strengthening the collaboration between different services, such as food providers and drug services, in Prague.

In **Cyprus**, the NFP provided funding for additional services during the pandemic. It increased funding to reinforce new and existing services, such as a new helpline, increased coupon provision and increased naloxone provision to drug treatment centres without prescription. In **Portugal**, the NFP also provided additional funding to harm reduction centres, reinforced by a contribution from the private sector (Gulbenkian Foundation), and increased the provision of naloxone to treatment centres. **Italy** published a ministerial decree to allow electronic prescriptions of medicines containing narcotic or psychotropic substances.

## Impact of COVID-19 on the Reitox national focal points

### Consequences on working conditions

In the European Union, over a third (37 %) of those currently working began to telework as a result of the pandemic. The largest proportions of workers who switched to working from home were found in the Nordic and Benelux countries (close to 60 % in Finland and above 50 % in Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, and 40 % or more in Ireland, Italy, Austria and Sweden; Eurofound, 2020).

Many of the NFPs' tasks can be done remotely and most of the staff of NFPs followed their national guidelines and switched to teleworking or alternated between their workplace and teleworking. Some NFPs reported greater or fewer difficulties in adapting compared with their previous experience of telework, but also as a result of the availability of technological means of teleworking.

None of the NFPs had an interruption of activities. As two thirds of the NFPs are located in or closely linked to their ministry of health, early on, most NFPs were closely associated with COVID-19 crisis management at the national level, not only in terms of drug-related issues, but also as regards public

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(4) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8hs9VFf96M>

health issues generally. As a consequence, few NFPs reported a shift of human resources to reinforce other teams involved in monitoring the evolution of the COVID-19 situation.

In Luxembourg, there was a staff reduction of 50 % at the NFP from mid-May onwards, as additional support was requested by the Directorate of Health for COVID-19 epidemiological monitoring purposes. The NFP staff was reallocated to the COVID-19 monitoring team, which is responsible for trend analysis and the reporting of positive COVID-19 cases in nursing care and retirement homes for the elderly. As the Luxembourg NFP is located within the Department of Epidemiology and Statistics at the Directorate of Health, which is the executive body under the Ministry of Health, no additional recruitment for the NFP was undertaken as a result of this reallocation of staff. As the duration of the COVID-19 crisis is currently unknown, it is not yet clear when these staff will be reintegrated into the NFP. Therefore, since the beginning of the crisis, the sustainability of the NFP has been put at risk. Communication with key stakeholders has nonetheless continued and various dialogues have taken place to gain an understanding of their needs at this challenging time. However, the majority of the NFP's other ongoing activities have been put aside, and these will be fully resumed only once the COVID-19 situation has further calmed.

Other NFPs experienced changes to their working conditions, such as the **Swedish** NFP, which is located within the Swedish Public Health Agency, the main institution responsible for coordinating measures against COVID-19 nationally to prevent the spread of infection. Some resources were shifted from the NFP to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on overall public health. The **Latvian** NFP is located in the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control of Latvia, which is the main institution responsible for monitoring the spread of COVID-19 in the country. As the situation has become more and more complicated, and owing to a lack of human resources in the infection department, staff from other units have been moved to areas dealing with COVID-19 issues, such as working on the COVID-19 hotline, calling people to inform them about test results, supervised social media, etc. The **Romanian** and **Slovenian** NFPs also experienced a reduction in staff due to COVID-19, with a temporary reallocation of staff to other activities to support other departments of their host institution.

## Consequences on drug-related monitoring activities

The challenges faced by NFPs during the COVID-19 health crisis did not solely affect the working conditions within NFPs and the way the service was provided. In some cases, as a result of the reduction in NFP staff and the transfer of NFP staff to other units, there is expected to be a significant effect on drug-related reporting activities. Several countries reported issues and are expecting to see an impact on data collection in the coming year.

In **Finland**, the NFP is located in the National Public Health Institute, where all COVID-19-related issues are prioritised over other work programmes, such as drug-related monitoring. In practice, this means that, for instance, other data collections are being postponed to enable the data providers to concentrate on collecting, recording and submitting data on COVID-19-related issues.

In **Portugal**, the COVID-19 situation might affect the capacity of the NFP to collect data in 2021.

The COVID-19 situation is affecting the **Norwegian** NFP's work capacity primarily through access to data. Some data collections may be delayed and, on top of this, there are likely to be potential methodological implications, such as implications for response rates and changing patterns of substance use during the crisis.

The **French** school survey planned for spring 2020 was postponed to November 2020, creating a medium-term effect on data collection. In addition, it was decided that the **Lithuanian** general population survey, which was planned for 2020 to 2021, would be postponed because of the risks of using a face-to-face data collection method. Moreover, in **Italy**, it was also decided that the general population survey planned for 2020 to 2021 would be postponed.

In **Belgium**, the NFP lost the possibility for data collection, for instance data on drugs or syringes, as some services are no longer open (needle exchange programmes, low-threshold centres, etc.). Laboratories are also understaffed, which will have an impact on the available data collections in the coming years. A nightlife survey was planned for May 2020, but was postponed until 2021.

In **Greece**, the crisis will have an impact on treatment demands, as some services have been closed. In 2020, data are still being collected, but they will be very limited because the opioid substitution treatment programme, which accounts for approximately 80 % of the treatment demand indicator and drug-related infectious diseases data in Greece, stopped taking on new clients at the beginning of March because of COVID-19.

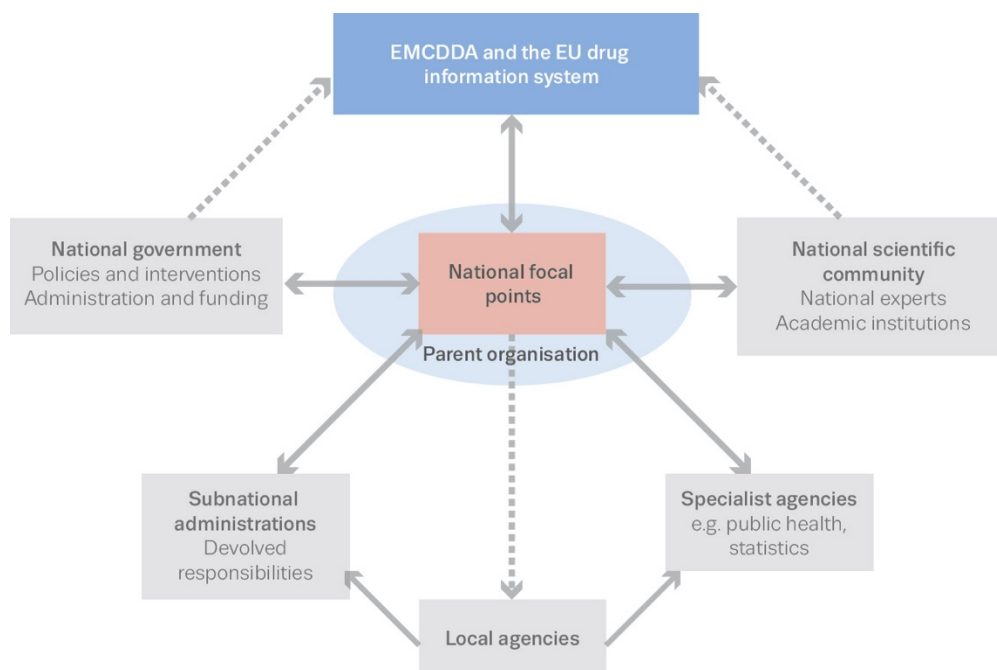
## Lessons learned

Because of NFPs' significant and long-running experience with data collection, systematic drug-related monitoring and reporting activities, there has been no major disruption in their work. However, there are some concerns resulting from the postponing of some surveys, such as general population surveys and regular monitoring activities in treatment centres or in other services, and from the understaffing of drug services and the relocation of staff from NFPs to other departments due to the COVID-19 crisis. Drug user populations are vulnerable groups, and it is very important to be vigilant and continue to monitor the evolution of trends. The sustainability of the activities of NFPs is not really at stake, despite the sudden changes in priorities as described in this report.

Several lessons have been learned from this crisis and from the challenges faced by the NFPs. First, NFPs' culture of preparedness to handle risk management and their experience in crisis communication have played an important role over recent months. The NFPs showed an ability and the flexibility to shift and relocate staff to be able both to manage monitoring of the COVID-19 health crisis and to continue the usual monitoring of vulnerable groups and their rapidly changing drug use patterns. NFPs managed to adapt their working processes, such as switching to teleworking and/or online services. This crisis demonstrates the need to have reliable communication systems and procedures for business continuity. Crisis communication plans should be available for all types of services.

Second, the capacity to innovate in terms of systems, communication and data collection is very important. In some cases, it was necessary to make changes to NFPs' regular activities, especially by introducing new methods, ideas or products. For instance, it was important to implement rapid assessments, to adapt routine tools and to publish frequent updates of the situation regarding drug-related matters during this health crisis. The COVID-19 crisis also helped to increase the collaboration at the national level with other national networks, not only with those related to illicit and licit drugs, but also with those related to the overall (public) health system and to law enforcement (Figure 2).

Figure 2  
**NFPs: at the heart of the network**



Source: EMCDDA (2017).

Third, when it comes to the dissemination and sharing of expertise, practices and experience, collaboration between diverse networks and stakeholders plays a key role.

Collaboration is also one of the main functions and roles of the Reitox network, as it is the information interface between the EMCDDA and national-level stakeholders. The Reitox Development Framework defines the main priorities of the network in fulfilling its roles and functions in the future (EMCDDA, 2018b). One of its objectives is to strengthen horizontal cooperation between NFPs and the exchange of best practices in monitoring the drug situation.

Several NFPs have also collaborated with the EMCDDA and the Reitox network to share best practices during the COVID-19 crisis. The NFPs collaborated nationally with harm reduction networks, for instance through online meetings and webinars, at the national and international levels, to allow the flow of information and communication (back and forth). Others communicated with mayors of cities and involved the decision-makers, fostering collaboration between networks at the local level. The knowledge and experience exchange among the Reitox network has been significant during the crisis, with there having been rapid changes in drug use patterns and other challenges. This was an added value for the NFPs and their national stakeholders, as this knowledge and experience exchange allowed helpful information to be gathered in a very timely manner and activities at the national level to be strengthened and to benefit from European experience and added value.

Finally, one of the key roles of each NFP is to act as a coordinator of the national drugs information system, at all levels (local, regional, national and international), and in times of crisis this role is essential. NFPs have initiated or participated in various meetings with national stakeholders in the context of the public health emergency and owing to the need for data. This was key to maintaining a coherent monitoring approach, limiting the profusion of overlapping national or local surveys and giving appropriate and timely responses.

NFPs play a key role in leadership and coordination. Working together with stakeholders in the creation and evaluation of reports and immediately responding to current needs are vital in times of crisis. The NFPs provided timely overviews of the situation and demonstrated their capacity to adapt to the crisis and to be flexible. It was an opportunity for the network to demonstrate its ability to cope with new and challenging situations and to produce quick and useful responses. In the future, it is highly likely that virtual communication tools, such as online meetings and webinars, will continue to be used as powerful tools of communication and for connecting different stakeholders, and to improve service provision to drug users.

The NFPs learned that they can achieve a lot, sometimes with simplified procedures, even under extreme time pressure and with scarce human resources. Finally, new practices were adopted that could improve the availability of drug services to those in need, and this will hopefully remain true in the long run.

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More resources on the Reitox network of national focal points:

<https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/about/partners/reitox>

## Annex

**Table 1. National surveys and ad hoc studies performed by NFPs during the COVID-19 health crisis**

Country	Study	Description	Status	Output
<i>Belgium</i>	A national web survey to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 crisis among drug users by evaluating both drug-related and health-related issues relevant to health professionals, prevention services and decision-makers	A study to support the work of health professionals, prevention services and decision-makers during the pandemic and determine its long- and medium-term consequences	Ongoing	The results of the first two waves are published in <i>Sciensano</i> (2020a, 2020b)
<i>Belgium</i>	Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 in treatment and harm reduction services, 27-31 March 2020	A study to assess the first impacts of the government's measures related to the COVID-19 crisis (the so-called lockdown of 13 March 2020), namely the impacts within 15 days after the entry into force of these measures	Finished	Unpublished
<i>Czechia</i>	Active monitoring of the changes in treatment and harm reduction provision and the issuing of three rapid assessment reports	A rapid assessment report for national stakeholders on the impact of COVID-19 and the adaptations and responses to the crisis	Finished	Rapid assessment reports (National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, 2020a, 2020b)
<i>Czechia</i>	Serobehavioural study entitled ADI-COVID-19	The study aimed to determine the seroprevalence of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection and identify suspected cases of infection among clients and staff of addiction programmes. It included rapid testing and questionnaires among clients and workers of drug services	Finished	The study is available at National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction (2020c)
<i>Czechia</i>	National survey on substance use	An online survey conducted every four years that was adapted to the COVID-19 situation. A special module was inserted on changes in substance use and addictive behaviours, such as gaming, gambling and social media use, during the COVID-19 health emergency	Ongoing	
<i>Czechia</i>	Monitoring of the interventions carried out by non-governmental organisations	An online facility survey with COVID-19-related questions added and interim reports of the projects	Ongoing	
<i>Estonia</i>	Monitoring effects of COVID-19 in harm reduction services, treatment centres and other services	Data collection	Ongoing	
<i>Greece</i>	Drug professionals on their experience of the COVID-19 health emergency	The NFP supported the national coordinator in the creation and dissemination of a questionnaire	Ongoing	
<i>Spain</i>	Drug use and other addictions during COVID-19	An analysis of the changes registered based on the routine information system (including Key	Finished	The report is available at Plan Nacional sobre Drogas

Country	Study	Description	Status	Output
		Indicators) and also results of questionnaires and online surveys conducted ad hoc. The report contains information related to illicit drugs, alcohol, tobacco and behavioural addictions		DGPNSD OEDA (2020)
<i>Spain</i>	Mini-EWSD: impact of COVID-19 on illegal drug use in Spain	An analysis of the Mini-EWSD (European Web Survey on Drugs) data in Spain	Finished	DGPNSD OEDA (2020)
<i>France</i>	Compilation of a survey report with data on the effects of COVID-19		Finished	OFDT (2020; in French)
<i>Italy</i>	Evaluation of the changes in drug use among students during the lockdown	Online survey among a sample of Italian students, conducted by the Institute of Clinical Physiology of the National Research Council	Ongoing	
<i>Lithuania</i>	Monitoring of alcohol and drug-related non-fatal overdoses	Comparing 2019 data with the situation during the quarantine period	Finished	NTAKD (2020a)
<i>Luxembourg</i>	Evaluation among low-threshold services to assess the impact of COVID-19 and the related measures among high-risk drug use clients at harm reduction and supervised drug consumption facilities at the national level	Developed with the collaboration of the national drug coordinator and directors of services. Data collected by a written questionnaire	Ongoing	
<i>Luxembourg</i>	Flash-COVID No 2: L'impact de la crise COVID-19 sur les usagers de drogues et les services d'encadrement spécialisés Flash COVID-19: Impact of the COVID-19 public health sanitary crisis on drug users and drug service providers	Collaboration between the NFP with the national statistics agency (STATEC Luxembourg) and the national drug coordinator	Finished	Ministère de la Santé et al. (2020)
<i>Luxembourg</i>	Survey in prison	Interviews carried out in August 2020	Ongoing	
<i>Hungary</i>	Drug use and access to harm reduction and treatment services during the COVID-19 crisis	National survey among service providers by the NFP	Finished	Publication in preparation
<i>Hungary</i>	HIV/HCV/COVID-19 biobehavioural survey among high-risk drug users (including people who inject drugs) in Budapest	Survey by the NFP and a Budapest-based non-governmental organisation	Ongoing	
<i>Hungary</i>	Changes in the drug market and seizures of drugs by authorities, emergency care and acute intoxications and forensic medicine	Interviews	Finished	
<i>Hungary</i>	National prison facility survey with a specific module on COVID-19	Survey by the Prison Service Headquarters and the NFP	Ongoing	
<i>Netherlands</i>	Mini cannabis and COVID-19 survey	Four in ten cannabis users increased their use due to boredom but also stress and loneliness	Finished	Vercoulen et al. (2020)

Country	Study	Description	Status	Output
Netherlands	National Big Nightlife Survey 2020 adapted to COVID-19, covering the first phase of the lockdown; a second survey covered the period from June to September	A new question has been included in the survey, and a follow-up and new round is planned in September/October	Until May 2020	The results of the first round are available at Van Miltenburg et al. (2020)
Netherlands	Inventory of the impact of COVID-19 on harm reduction services	A study (three inventories) conducted and put together with Mainline and MDHG; the results were discussed at the Ministry of Health and distributed to stakeholders	Finished; fourth round will be held in October	Trimbos institute (undated)
Poland	National study (April-May) entitled 'The impact of COVID-19 on drug services, drug users and drug market in Poland' Four publications in Polish journals to present the findings: (1) <i>Świat Problemów</i> , (2) <i>Serwis informacyjny UZALEŻNIENIA</i> , (3) <i>Remedium</i> and (4) <i>Terapia Uzależnienia i Współuzależnienia</i>	National-level questionnaire among treatment centres, harm reduction programmes, regional experts on drugs, non-governmental organisations and the police	Finished	Malczewski et al. (2020; in English) (1) <a href="http://www.swiatproblemow.pl/">http://www.swiatproblemow.pl/</a> (2) <a href="https://siu.praesterno.pl/">https://siu.praesterno.pl/</a> (3) <a href="http://www.remedium-psychologia.pl/">http://www.remedium-psychologia.pl/</a> (4) <a href="http://www.tuiw.pl/">http://www.tuiw.pl/</a>
Poland	Health conditions of people receiving injections in the field of infectious diseases — seroprevalence study on HIV, HCV, SARS-CoV-2 and the bacteria <i>Treponema pallidum</i>	In collaboration with the national drug-related infectious diseases expert	Ongoing	
Portugal	Study on the impact of COVID-19 on addictive behaviours	Three online surveys: (1) alcohol and medication use, (2) internet and video games and (3) cannabis use	Finished	The report is available at SICAD (2020)
Slovenia	The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on treatment and provision services for drug users and on the drug market in Slovenia	Rapid assessment report for national and regional stakeholders on the impact of COVID-19	Finished	Drev (2020)
Finland	Survey among drug services about changes in services provision and demand	Qualitative survey repeated approximately every 5 weeks (excl. July) since the beginning of the epidemic. Data is collected for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health which is responsible for service monitoring during the crisis.	Ongoing	Results are available at Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2020a)
Cyprus	Additional wastewater analysis	Two collections during and after the lockdown	Finished	
Slovakia	Additional wastewater analysis	Collections focused on methamphetamine, fentanyl, ketamine, amphetamine, cocaine, benzoylecgonine, MDMA, THC-COOH, tramadol, methadone, mephedrone and heroin and on the occurrence of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)	Ongoing	

Country	Study	Description	Status	Output
<i>Greece</i>	COVID-19 case tracking	With the use of data from agencies, the NFP is monitoring the number of users infected by or deceased as a result of COVID-19	Ongoing	
<i>Italy</i>	COVID-19 case tracking	Working group on infection prevention and control of COVID-19, mainly prevention and preparation of the management of any suspected, probable and confirmed cases	Ongoing	
<i>Luxembourg</i>	COVID-19 case tracking	Detecting infections of COVID-19 among drug-related death cases, in collaboration with the National Laboratory on Health	Ongoing	

**Table 2. NFPs that contributed to the creation of the national recommendations and guidelines**

Country	Guidelines and recommendations	Description	Output
<i>Czechia</i>	Fourteen formal recommendations for employees of addiction treatment and harm reduction centres, plus comprehensive guidelines for the second wave of COVID-19 in autumn	Issued by the Drug policy coordination office (NFP is part of it); collaboration on the provision of practical advice for drug users	National Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction (2020d)
<i>Denmark</i>	Guideline on the medical treatment of acute drug poisonings with opioids	Guidelines for acute withdrawal and poisoning cases due to expected changes in the illegal drug scene	Sundhedsstyrelson (2020a)
<i>Denmark</i>	Guideline on the treatment of cocaine abuse and abuse of other psychostimulants	Guidelines concern the treatment of withdrawal symptoms related to the use of stimulants and benzodiazepines	Sundhedsstyrelson (2020b, 2020c)
<i>Denmark</i>	Information for employees and volunteers in drug consumption rooms	Covid-19 management guidelines	Sundhedsstyrelson (2020d)
	Guideline for substitutions treatment centres	Separate guidelines for Danish drug and alcohol treatment centres regarding the management of COVID-19	Sundhedsstyrelson (2020e)
<i>Estonia</i>	COVID-19 guidelines and recommendations for service providers, and harm reduction and treatment centres	The available materials were adapted to local needs, and a translation was provided of the EMCDDA information	<a href="https://www.narko.ee/">https://www.narko.ee/</a>
<i>Spain</i>	Guidelines and recommendations: guidelines and recommendations related to COVID-19 and drug users	Include main documents at international, national and regional (Comunidades Autonomas) level in the context of drug use during COVID-19	Plan Nacional sobre Drogas (2020)
<i>Italy</i>	Guidelines for reorganising the activities that were deferred owing to the COVID-19 emergency	The NFP contributed to these revised guidelines	Ministero della Salute (2020)
<i>Italy</i>	Guidelines for the progressive reinstatement of activities that had been considered deferrable in the light of the COVID-19 emergency	Issued in partnership with the Istituto Superiore di Sanita	

Country	Guidelines and recommendations	Description	Output
<i>Cyprus</i>	Guidelines for (1) the staff of treatment centres and (2) drug users during the pandemic	The NFP participated in the process of reviewing, translating and disseminating the guidelines	Cyprus National Addictions Authority (2020a, 2020b)
<i>Lithuania</i>	Recommendations for high-risk drug users	Created with materials from the EMCDDA, WHO and the Harm Reduction Coalition	NTAKD (2020b)
<i>Lithuania</i>	Recommendations for service providers	Created using EMCDDA information on social services and drug treatment providers	NTAKD (2020c)
<i>Malta</i>	Guidelines for treatment centres on telemedicine	The NFP played an active role in issuing the guidelines	
<i>Portugal</i>	Guidelines for interventions related to homeless people with alcohol use disorders placed in shelters during the COVID-19 state of emergency	The NFP produced these guidelines together with SICAD and national working groups, including DICAD	República Portuguesa Saúde et al. (2020a)
<i>Portugal</i>	Recommendations for the care of users in therapeutic communities	Issued by the NFP	República Portuguesa Saúde et al. (2020b)
<i>Slovenia</i>	Hygiene recommendations for drug service providers during COVID-19 epidemics	These recommendations were produced with the cooperation of the NIJZ and social protection programmes in the field of drugs, addiction and homelessness	NIJZ (2020a)
<i>Slovenia</i>	Recommendations for work with vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic	The NFP was part of the working group	NIJZ (2020b)
<i>Finland</i>	Information on COVID-19 and advices to people who use drugs	Compilation of resources	Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2020b)

**Table 3. Links to national websites providing a translated version of the EMCDDA update on the implications of COVID-19 for people who use drugs and drug service providers**

Country	EMCDDA briefing
<i>Bulgaria</i>	<a href="http://nfp-drugs.bg/bg/?&amp;itype=168&amp;info=2834">http://nfp-drugs.bg/bg/?&amp;itype=168&amp;info=2834</a>
<i>Czechia</i>	<a href="https://www.drogy-info.cz/publikace/zaostreno-na-drogy/2020-zaostreno/s1-20-dopady-onemocneni-covid-19-na-uzivatele-drog-a-poskytovatele-adiktologickych-sluzeb">https://www.drogy-info.cz/publikace/zaostreno-na-drogy/2020-zaostreno/s1-20-dopady-onemocneni-covid-19-na-uzivatele-drog-a-poskytovatele-adiktologickych-sluzeb</a>
<i>Germany</i>	<a href="https://www.dbdd.de/publikationen/publikationen-der-emcdda">https://www.dbdd.de/publikationen/publikationen-der-emcdda</a>
<i>Spain</i>	<a href="https://pnsd.sanidad.gob.es/noticiasEventos/actualidad/2020_Coronavirus/home.htm">https://pnsd.sanidad.gob.es/noticiasEventos/actualidad/2020_Coronavirus/home.htm</a>
<i>France</i>	<a href="https://www.ofdt.fr/europe-et-international/actualites-europeennes">https://www.ofdt.fr/europe-et-international/actualites-europeennes</a>
<i>Croatia</i>	<a href="https://www.hzjz.hr/aktualnosti/novosti-emcdda-a-o-implikacijama-virusa-covid-19-za-osobe-koji-koriste-drogu-i-pruzatelje-usluga-za-suzbijanje-droga/">https://www.hzjz.hr/aktualnosti/novosti-emcdda-a-o-implikacijama-virusa-covid-19-za-osobe-koji-koriste-drogu-i-pruzatelje-usluga-za-suzbijanje-droga/</a>



Country	EMCDDA briefing
<i>Latvia</i>	<a href="http://ntakd.lrv.lt/uploads/ntakd/documents/files/Rekomendacijas%20paslaug%C5%B3%2C%20narkotikus%20vartojantiems%20asmenims%2C%20teik%C4%97jams.pdf">http://ntakd.lrv.lt/uploads/ntakd/documents/files/Rekomendacijas%20paslaug%C5%B3%2C%20narkotikus%20vartojantiems%20asmenims%2C%20teik%C4%97jams.pdf</a>
<i>Lithuania</i>	<a href="https://ntakd.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/covid-19-poveikis-narkotiku-vartojimo-iprociams-europos-salyse">https://ntakd.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/covid-19-poveikis-narkotiku-vartojimo-iprociams-europos-salyse</a> ; <a href="https://ntakd.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/covid-19-poveikis-su-narkotikais-susijusiu-paslaugu-teikimui-europoje">https://ntakd.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/covid-19-poveikis-su-narkotikais-susijusiu-paslaugu-teikimui-europoje</a> ; <a href="https://ntakd.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/covid-19-kanapes-darknet-internetas-prekyba">https://ntakd.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/covid-19-kanapes-darknet-internetas-prekyba</a>
<i>Hungary</i>	<a href="http://drogfokuszpont.hu/emcdda-osszeallitas-a-koronavirus-jarvany-droghaszalokat-es-kabitoszerugyi-szolgalatokat-erinto-hatasairol/">http://drogfokuszpont.hu/emcdda-osszeallitas-a-koronavirus-jarvany-droghaszalokat-es-kabitoszerugyi-szolgalatokat-erinto-hatasairol/</a>
<i>Netherlands</i>	<a href="https://www.trimbos.nl/kennis/corona/drugs-en-corona">https://www.trimbos.nl/kennis/corona/drugs-en-corona</a>
<i>Poland</i>	<a href="https://cinn.gov.pl/portal?id=1623559">https://cinn.gov.pl/portal?id=1623559</a> ; <a href="https://siu.praesterno.pl/arttykul/678">https://siu.praesterno.pl/arttykul/678</a>
<i>Portugal</i>	<a href="http://www.sicad.pt/BK/COVID19/Lists/profissionais/Attachments/12/EMCDDA%20Covid-19%20update_PT.pdf">http://www.sicad.pt/BK/COVID19/Lists/profissionais/Attachments/12/EMCDDA%20Covid-19%20update_PT.pdf</a>
<i>Romania</i>	<a href="http://ana.gov.ro/recomandari-europene-privind-implicatiile-pandemiei-covid-19-in-randul-persoanelor-consumatoare-de-droguri/">http://ana.gov.ro/recomandari-europene-privind-implicatiile-pandemiei-covid-19-in-randul-persoanelor-consumatoare-de-droguri/</a>
<i>Slovenia</i>	<a href="https://nijz.si/sites/www.nijz.si/files/publikacije-datoteke/emcdda_prevod_koncna_230420.pdf">https://nijz.si/sites/www.nijz.si/files/publikacije-datoteke/emcdda_prevod_koncna_230420.pdf</a>
<i>Slovakia</i>	<a href="https://www.infodrogy.sk/novinka/4580">https://www.infodrogy.sk/novinka/4580</a>
<i>Finland</i>	<a href="https://www.julkari.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/139552/Koronavirus%20_COVID_19_ja_p%c3%a4ihetet.pdf?sequence=5&amp;isAllowed=y">https://www.julkari.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/139552/Koronavirus%20_COVID_19_ja_p%c3%a4ihetet.pdf?sequence=5&amp;isAllowed=y</a>

## **Acknowledgements**

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) would like to thank Klaudia Kepa (contract code CT.20.RTX.0066.1.0).

The Reitox network of national focal points for their contribution and review of the report.

EMCDDA project group: Gonçalo Felgueiras e Sousa, Sofia Feteira and Sandrine Sleiman.