

# Link found between taking illegal drugs and non-traditional sex

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People who take multiple illicit drugs are significantly more likely to engage in non-traditional sexual activities such as sex with a friend or stranger, anal sex and BDSM, according to a UK study by academics

from the University of Roehampton, The University of Liverpool and Bournemouth University.

The new research, published in *Contemporary Drug Problems*, drew on a survey of 2,631 UK adults interviewed at [music festivals](#) in 2016 and 2019 who were asked about their recent experiences of taking drugs and having sex. It found that over two thirds (68%) of adults had taken an [illicit drug](#), and over half (54%) had taken two or more illicit drugs and drank alcohol.

Among a sub-sample of nearly 1,000 participants, four in ten (40%) had engaged in non-traditional sexual activities. Sex with a friend was found to be the most common behavior, with over a quarter of respondents taking part in the activity (28% on average). This was followed by sex with a stranger with an average of 19% and anal sex with over a tenth on respondents (11% on average).

Less than 10% of respondents had engaged in BDSM, suggesting it is still a minority activity despite significant cultural attention on the topic following the popularity of the 50 Shades of Grey franchise. Monetary exchange for sex and chemsexiv were also reported by only a small number of participants (under 5%).

Mark McCormack, lead author of the research and Professor of Sociology at the University of Roehampton, said: "Our study revisited the well-worn phrase of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' and has proven that both recreational [drug](#) use and non-traditional sexual activities are linked and have also become the norm. Indeed, adults who report taking at least two illicit drugs are more likely to engage in non-traditional sexual behaviors. The music is no longer rock 'n' roll and the sex has changed as well.

"About 40% of the adults in our study had some kind of sex outside of

the traditional heterosexual monogamous norm. Behaviors such as having sex with a friend or stranger, engaging in anal sex or BDSM have become normalized in a similar way as smoking cannabis or taking party drugs have for many young adults."

Professor Fiona Measham, chair in criminology in the University of Liverpool's Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, added: "Music festivals make excellent sites for research on sex and drugs because there are 10,000s of adults crowded into a small space with spare time on their hands, waiting to be entertained. It takes a degree of tact and courage to approach strangers and ask them whether they have had [anal sex](#), with someone other than their partner, or for money. Some readers might be surprised that people would disclose something so personal but so long as they believe it's genuinely anonymous, they are quite candid when asked. The fact that we were able to complete this survey at all shows just how much attitudes to sex are changing."

Dr. Liam Wignall, lecturer in psychology at Bournemouth University, said: "These are not necessarily simply youth-oriented or drug-prolific events—we visited more family-friendly festivals as well. The average age of survey respondents was 27. Our findings are not about teenage experimentation but speak to a growing normalization of drug use and diverse forms of sex, with both considered to be increasingly acceptable leisure activities for a large minority of adults."

**More information:** Mark McCormack et al. The Normalization of Leisure Sex and Recreational Drugs: Exploring Associations Between Polydrug Use and Sexual Practices by English Festival-Goers, *Contemporary Drug Problems* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00914509211009901](https://doi.org/10.1177/00914509211009901)

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