

# Database of drug-related festival deaths needed to save lives, researchers say

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A study led by the University of Liverpool has called for the

introduction of a national database of drug-related medical incidents at U.K. music festivals to evaluate support services, improve safety and reduce the risk of drug-related deaths (DRDs).

The exact number of DRDs at U.K. music festivals in recent years is unknown as there are currently no standard processes for reporting or accessing data on medical incidents at these events.

This lack of a centralized, publicly accessible system for festivals to report [drug](#)-related medical incidents hinders [festival](#) organizers and [support services](#) when monitoring trends in drug-related harm and assessing the effectiveness of interventions.

Without a [real-time](#) reporting system for drug-related harm during festivals, potential opportunities are missed for preventing harm to others, such as warnings to drug-using communities about adulterated illicit drug markets.

Given that inquests often take months or even years to determine the cause of death, [new research](#) published in *Drug Science, Politics and Law* calls for a transparent database to compare drug-related harm within and across festivals in real-time to increase opportunities for intervention which could prevent death.

Through cross-referencing media and [social media](#) with a [national database](#) provided by coroners and communications with bereaved families and associated organizations, this research identified that, between 2017 and 2023, there were 32 potential DRDs at festivals, with 18 confirmed. Three of these deaths were of individuals under the age of 18. On average, there are five or six festival DRDs each year in the U.K.

Sixteen-year-old David Celino died at Leeds Festival in August 2022 after taking high-strength ecstasy tablets. While reported at the time as

an "isolated incident," there was another DRD the same weekend and an alert was issued for similar high-strength tablets by a drug testing service at a different festival.

At David's inquest, the coroner called for greater oversight of drug-related harm at U.K. festivals which the introduction of a festival-specific database would ensure.

It is estimated that up to 87% of festival attendees have tried [illegal drugs](#) in their lifetime, more than twice the prevalence rate (36%) of young adults in the general population. This means that, as drug consumption is more likely at festivals, adequate oversight is necessary to prevent drug-related harm.

Professor Fiona Measham, Chair of Criminology at the University of Liverpool said, "Our research has shown that there is a small but significant number of drug-related deaths at U.K. music festivals each year. It is clear that more needs to be done to reduce drug-related harm, to ensure that everyone can enjoy festivals safely and to prevent any other parents hearing the heartbreaking news that their child won't be coming home.

"While our research has shed light on the issue, currently we're in a situation where we don't know the definite number of drug-related deaths at festivals. This makes it extremely difficult for everyone to understand whether the situation is getting better or worse and whether festival health initiatives such as drug-checking services, amnesty bins and [medical services](#) are effective.

"What we do know is that people are more likely to take drugs at festivals than elsewhere and drug markets are especially unpredictable at the moment, with risk of overdose or poisoning from synthetics. Introducing a transparent, real-time publicly accessible database of drug-

related harm across festivals would provide a comprehensive picture of the extent of the issue and whether or not on-site festival support services are effective.

"If we can warn people about dangerous substances in circulation and prevent overdoses and poisoning happening in the first place, not only do we reduce DRDs and parents avoid the heartbreak of bereavement, it eases the pressures on the NHS and health services around these events."

**More information:** Tom Cooney et al, Counting and accounting for drug-related deaths at UK music festivals 2017–2023: A commentary, *Drug Science, Policy and Law* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/20503245231211444](https://doi.org/10.1177/20503245231211444)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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