

Measham, F. (2019). Drug Safety Testing, Disposals and Dealing in an English Field: Exploring the Operational and Behavioural Outcomes of the UK's First Onsite 'Drug Checking' Service. *Journal of Drug Policy*, 67: 102–107.



Chapter 9

TRANSGRESSIONS

In Chapter 9 we looked at rule breaking. We didn't just focus on who breaks rule and what happens to them when they do but, instead, we asked more sociological questions about why certain rules exist in the first place and why some groups are understood as being more likely to break the rules than others.

In this chapter, we focused on the consumption of illegal drugs as an example of some of the complexity in debates about how society should deal with transgression. To get at this complexity, let's assume that people always have, and always will, take drugs because the immediate chemical effects of drugs are often a positive experience. But we know too that long-term effects of drugs can be devastating. The question is, then, how should society deal with people taking drugs? As we outlined in Chapter 9, legalizing drugs isn't widely supported and isn't appropriate for more dangerous and addictive substances like heroin. But criminalizing drugs doesn't work either because it drives the market underground and doesn't actually stop people taking drugs. A third option, then, is harm reduction which Wodak and Saunders define as 'the employment of any means to reduce the harm resulting from illicit drugs' (1995: 269).

One approach to harm reduction is drug testing where samples of drugs are tested to determine what's in them and, by extension, how harmful they might be. Fiona Measham talks in the Vox Pop about her harm reduction charity The Loop which tests illegal drugs at UK Music festivals. Alongside this testing, The Loop offers consultations to those bringing drugs for testing which provided 'a general warning about all drug use carrying risks', general harm reduction advice, guidance on risky behaviours like bingeing and using multiple drugs at the same time (page 104). On top of this, festival-goers are able to dispose of drugs through The Loop.

Measham's article is a quantitative exploration of The Loop's pilot work at a 'boutique' music festival in July 2016 (page 103). This festival was the first time that a drug safety testing service has been offered directly to the public in the UK and so, understandably, several agencies (like festival organisers, the police and other academics researching drug use) were keen to know how it went! To explore this, during the consultations, Measham and colleagues collected data about the festival-goers who brought their drugs for testing in order to map who was opting to use the service, how they were using the test results, and what impacts drug testing had more widely, such as hospital admissions. Measham's article uses descriptive statistics to

answer these questions. Descriptive statistics are used to summarise large amounts of data to get a sense of patterns within the social world (Hanneman et al. 2013). They are used when researchers want to give an overview of a phenomenon rather than delving deeply into the relationships between different variables (Kaur et al. 2018). One example of using descriptive statistics that you might be familiar with is mapping the height of people within a population. By measuring each person in a class, for example, a researcher would be able to see what the average height is, what the frequency of each height is, and what the distribution of heights is. The researcher wouldn't be making any inferences from this such as whether height is correlated with ethnicity or sex, but is using statistics (everyone's height) to describe that population.

So descriptive statistics can be used to '*explore* a set of observations and make effective summaries' by starting with data and moving towards a generalisation (Hanneman et al. 2013: 7, emphasis added). This is how Measham used descriptive statistics in her article. Her data reveal that most people who brought drugs to be tested were White (87%), male (66%) and were bringing what they believed to be MDMA (37% of samples tested were thought to be MDMA). 19.5% of substances that were tested were 'at variance with what they were sold as' (page 104), which means that one in five substances weren't the drugs the festival-goers thought they were and had paid for! Drugs that were bought in the festival, rather than smuggled in from the outside, were twice as likely to differ from what festival-goers thought they were. Armed with this information, two thirds (66%) of festival-goers whose drugs were not entirely what they thought chose to dispose of these dubious drugs and all others in their possession.

But descriptive statistics can also be used in a *confirmatory* way in hypothesis testing. This is where researchers start off with a statement or speculation about the social world and then use descriptive statistics to prove or disprove this hypothesis. Measham might, for example, have started from the assumption or hypothesis that most festival-goers looking to get drugs tested would be male. And her descriptive statistics would have proven that hypothesis absolutely right.

Given that descriptive statistics give a 'picture' of what is happening in the social world (Maravelakis 2019), they are useful for evaluating pilot work like Measham's where there isn't a huge amount of existing information. Because Measham's testing service was the first to be available to the public in the UK, it wasn't known how many people would use it, what it would find, and what the impact would be. Before these kinds of interventions can be optimised, it's important to have basic information like what Measham present her article. But descriptive statistics in pilot projects can go beyond this and also identify areas which might prove significant in a larger study. As just one example, Measham shows that 48.3% of service-users acquired their drugs from within the festival itself but that the drugs acquired at the festival were more than twice as likely to vary from what service-users thought they had bought. Because the statistics are *descriptive*, Measham doesn't make inferences about what this might mean more broadly (i.e. she doesn't conclude that most drugs bought at most festivals are mis-sold), but instead flags to the reader that its an area worth

thinking about; in particular, she questions whether rigorous surveillance and policing with things like drug dogs is actually that beneficial.

But while descriptive statistics can give us a good picture of what's happening in one part of the social world, we need to ask how far they contribute to sociological understandings of the social world as whole. Without delving into inferential analysis (which assess whether data is applicable to broader populations to allow us to make inferences), descriptive statistics don't tell us anything about the quality of the data, how likely it is that the observations are reliable or happened by chance, or whether those findings can be used to make inferences about other populations or settings. Researchers have to move beyond simple descriptive statistics to understand how confident they can be in the conclusions that they draw from data. For example, Measham's use of descriptive statistics which found that 19.5% of substances were not what service-users expected doesn't allow us to make conclusions about mis-selling or quality of illicit drugs outside of this specific festival or outside of festivals more generally. How confident could we be, for example, that nearly 20% of illicit drugs at Measham's festival were not what they were sold as? And, then, how confident could we be that nearly 20% of illicit drugs at all festivals are not what they are sold as?

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