

# Bonger International Bulletin

## Drug use trends in Amsterdam nightlife, 2013

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### ABSTRACT

The established club scene in Amsterdam is being challenged. Bright young entrepreneurs are organising parties at alternative venues outside the city centre. In 2013, the key word is 'rave'. The mounting numbers of students in the city are also affecting Amsterdam's nightlife. Antenna monitors these developments, as well as the corresponding trends in the field of recreational drug markets. For Antenna 2013 a survey was conducted among 633 visitors of various club nights and raves.

Amsterdam's nightlife is witnessing a moderation in tobacco smoking and a decrease in cannabis use, but alcohol remains the undisputed number one: almost everyone drinks, often considerable quantities. Ecstasy is bigger and stronger than ever. Average MDMA dosage of ecstasy tablets reached a historical high of 148 mg in 2013. Amphetamine is gaining popularity. Among clubbers and ravers the use of ecstasy and amphetamine has increased sharply in the past five years and consumption of laughing gas has escalated explosively. Cocaine on the other hand was quite stable and has receded somewhat into the background. In addition to the 'classic' drugs, there is modest interest to try novel psychoactive substances (NPS).

### Introduction

One of the most conspicuous current trends in Amsterdam involves the mounting numbers of students in the city. Many of them grew up elsewhere and are now living on their own for the first time. Although not all of them actually live in Amsterdam, many go out there at night – some considerably more than others. Students not only augment the nightlife crowds, but they also colour them in. Though most have part-time jobs alongside their studies, their daily and weekly routines are nonetheless different from those of their peers with full-time jobs. Especially in the summer months and other non-exam periods, they have loads of free time, and the city has loads of entertainment venues: pubs, nightclubs and pavement cafés, complemented by park activities and events. Clubs cannot help but notice their patrons' massive preference for outdoor settings, but they hold their own remarkably well through the summer months. For one thing that is because the Amsterdam 'party economy' steadily attracts new groups, including growing numbers of tourists and the yearly influx of first-year students. Some clubs also profit from the summer season by organising or co-organising musical events themselves. The greatest challenge for music events is to set themselves apart from the dozens of other festivals. Young entrepreneurs, some of them still students, organise their own events at 'alternative' locations, a trend that has been visible for some time now. They like to call the parties 'illegal', but that may be more of an advertising ploy, as most events have

in fact obtained permits and carry out entry checks. This phenomenon gained swift momentum in 2013, and 'rave' was again the word. That term was popular in the early years of the house music rage back in the late 1980s. But that doesn't bother the latest generation. To them it is something new.

### Amsterdam Antenna: Monitoring drugs every year since 1993

Antenna has been reporting on trends in the Amsterdam drugs market since 1993. Every year it collects qualitative and quantitative data to document substance use among Amsterdam adolescents and young adults. Antenna is a mixed-method monitoring scheme with three ongoing components: the panel study, the survey and the prevention indicators. Altogether, the information obtained from those components produces a diversified picture of trends and patterns in Amsterdam's world of recreational substances.

Our **panel study** traces the latest developments by conducting individual, semi-annual interviews with a panel of insiders from various scenes. The main focus is on nightlife, and in particular on trendsetters that experiment with new music, venues or drugs. The panel study does not try to obtain exact figures but to shed light on dynamic processes. The **survey**, in turn, delivers quantitative data about substance use in specific groups in the city. For this 2013 Antenna, we visited a diversified palette of raves and club nights, asking the ravers and clubbers we met there to fill in an online questionnaire when they got home. A total of 633 people responded. Predominantly they were in their early twenties (44%), were from ethnic Dutch backgrounds (75%) and were students or secondary school pupils (66%). In the past eighteen years, Antenna has surveyed clubgoers four previous times (in 1995, 1998, 2003 and 2008), enabling us to document longer-term trends.

A third type of statistics reported in Antenna derives from sources we call **substance use prevention indicators**. These provide quantitative data on the alcohol and drugs markets, obtained from several sources: requests for information or advice, statistics from information stands at dance events operated by a voluntary peer education group called Unity, and results from analyses of voluntarily submitted drug samples at a testing service.

### Virtually everybody drinks

On the **alcohol** front, the special beers continue to proliferate, and vodka and whisky are the most popular spirits. Although the dearer drinks are still ordered, club owners report declining bar turnovers. That is offset to some extent by the tourists, who have more spending money than students.

Virtually all nightlifers drink alcohol: 99% of the clubbers and ravers we surveyed were current (last-month) drinkers, irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity or occupation. Almost one quarter (23%) qualified as hazardous drinkers under the definition used by Antenna (consumption of any amount of alcohol daily or more than 3 or 4 units on several days a week).<sup>1</sup> During a night out, five units per person were consumed on average in entertainment venues alone, with pre-club and after-club drinking pushing the total to an average of eight units per night. Most clubbers and ravers (53%) went home by bicycle at the end of a night out, and 78% of those had consumed over two units, potentially disqualifying them from driving or cycling. The percentage driving a motor vehicle

on more than two units of alcohol was small (4%). The percentage of drinkers in nightlife was already high in 1995, but it has continually increased since. The percentage of hazardous drinkers peaked, however, at 34% in 1998 and has been declining since.

#### Moderation and innovation in tobacco and cannabis smoking

According to the panel study, the numbers of active tobacco and cannabis smokers amongst the nightlife trendsetters have declined in recent years. Price increases and stricter smoking regulations have prompted some tobacco smokers to stop or cut back, and others have begun rolling their own to save money. Electronic cigarettes are a novel development. Much innovation can also be seen in cannabis smoking. Former joint smokers in several panel networks have switched to more advanced pipes or vaporisers.

Almost three quarters (72%) of the clubbers and ravers we surveyed in 2013 were current (last-month) **tobacco** smokers and nearly half (48%) were current **cannabis** smokers – rates little changed over the years. But some major changes can be observed nevertheless. The percentage of daily tobacco smokers has shrunk by more than half since 1995: from 57% to 24%. Hence, though smokers are not fewer in number, they smoke considerably less. Cannabis smoking in nightlife has also diminished by half (from 31% to 16%), while the percentage of hazardous cannabis users (those smoking daily or having more than one joint on several days a week) has dropped from 18% to 8%.

#### Ecstasy is bigger and stronger than ever

There were abundant media reports about **ecstasy** in 2013. Some of these looked back on the advent of ecstasy and house music 25 years ago, which turned Amsterdam nightlife upside down. Other reports focused on high-dose ecstasy tablets and on several fatal accidents attributed to the drug. Health incidents like these have failed to dent the positive image that ecstasy has for its users in our panel networks. Although many users still obtain their ecstasy via home-based dealers, the number of mobile dealers that deliver ecstasy (and sometimes other drugs too) is growing. The availability of ecstasy is unwaveringly high, as is the purity of the tablets. Dosage has reached a historic high, averaging **148 mg of MDMA per tab**. In 84% of the 907 ecstasy samples submitted to the testing service, MDMA was the sole or primary active ingredient. That by no means made ecstasy 'safe', however. Large fluctuations in dosages were seen, and nearly two thirds (64%) of the tablets tested were classified as high-dosage (>140 mg of MDMA). Price, which was commonly €5 to €6 per tab, was a poor indicator of potency, as strongly dosed tablets were seldom any more expensive.

Ecstasy has been seen to appeal to successive generations of youth who attend the summer festivals and dance events in and around Amsterdam. Consumption tends to be relatively high amongst beginning nightlifers in their early 20s. In our previous clubbing surveys, ecstasy use peaked in 1998, subsequently declined and then stabilised until 2008. In 2013, however, consumption has peaked anew, even exceeding that of 1998. In the month preceding the 2013 survey, 55% of the clubbers and ravers had taken ecstasy, more than doubling the rate five years before. A similar increase was evident in ecstasy consumption during a night out. Although the average number of pills reportedly taken on a night out declined slightly, the total intake of MDMA per occasion is probably higher than ever due to the increased potency of the tablets.

#### Amphetamine now fully rehabilitated

In recent years, amphetamine (speed) has been firmly in the ascendant. Its rehabilitation is remarkable, after it had been

scorned for years by the nightlife trendsetters. The negative image attached to amphetamine has turned to enthusiasm, with users in the panel now calling it (in addition to ecstasy) the ideal party fuel to fire people up at festivals, raves and afterparties. Market scarcity is also no problem any longer, and users report that more amphetamine dealers are active. Prices are stable at €10 to €15 per gram, and quality appears to have improved. Barely half of the speed samples (54%) submitted to the testing service in 2013 contained amphetamine as their primary ingredient, but that was up from 35% one year previously. Average purity increased from 49% to 58%, but many powders sold as speed still consist largely of caffeine.

Like ecstasy, amphetamine consumption also peaked in our 1998 club survey, then declined until 2008, and rose to score higher than ever in 2013. Rates of amphetamine use are lower than those for ecstasy. About one quarter (23%) of the clubbers and ravers we questioned in 2013 had taken amphetamine in the past month, quadrupling the 2008 figure. Rates during nights out are also higher. Almost one in three people (29%) who visited Unity stands at music and dance events in 2013 reported having taken speed that night.

#### Cocaine lags behind

Among the trendsetters in our panel study, **cocaine** has receded somewhat into the background, probably due to rejuvenation in the panel, economic malaise and the spread of amphetamine. But its popularity remains undiminished in the older group (above age 25). More cocaine users reported receiving unsolicited messages or even phone calls from their coke couriers. Although price ranges (€40 to €70 per gram) have broadened due to quality variations, most informants paid €50 to €60. Many of the cocaine samples submitted to the testing service (71%) contained cocaine as their primary ingredient, but adulterants were also detected, chiefly levamisole. Average purity was 65%, the same as the previous year.

The trend pattern for cocaine that emerges from our club surveys rather parallels the patterns for ecstasy and amphetamine, with a peak in 1998, a gradual decline in the subsequent decade, and an upturn in 2013. Current cocaine use (19%), however, remained below the 1998 level, as well as below the current rate for amphetamine. The rate of cocaine use in nightlife settings remained unchanged in comparison to 5 years previously and was surpassed by amphetamine. Higher levels of amphetamine use were also recorded at Unity stands.

#### Stimulant drug use clubbers 2008 and clubbers & ravers 2013

		2008		2013	
		CLUB	CLUB	RAVE	TOTAL
ECSTASY	last month	21%	43%	69%	55%
	while going out	9%	17%	42%	29%
AMPHETAMINE	last month	6%	14%	34%	23%
	while going out	4%	7%	21%	13%
COCAINE	last month	14%	14%	26%	19%
	while going out	5%	6%	5%	6%

#### Laughing gas explodes

Many users of laughing gas consider the brief high they get from the substance to be a harmless buzz. The availability of laughing gas via whipped cream canisters, chargers or balloons has soared, and the use of the substance has spread steadily across a number of different panel networks as well as through more mainstream settings. Queen's Day forms the crowning apex every year, so to speak, with wide-scale public consumption revealed by the sheer thousands of empty laughing gas canisters strewn over the streets. But amongst nightlifers there is growing criticism of the dispirited

atmosphere that arises from the heavy use of laughing gas.

The peaks in consumption in the 1998 club survey were not only apparent for stimulant drugs. Laughing gas was also popular that year. Its popularity subsided in the decade that followed, but between 2008 and 2013 the use of laughing gas escalated explosively, with rates of current use soaring from 3% to 33%. Consumption was particularly high amongst younger clubbers and ravers (around age 20). The high rates of laughing gas use were already evidenced in our 2012 Antenna survey, which focused on adolescents aged 14 to 17 in youth services.<sup>2</sup> It even scored higher than ecstasy in that group.

At the users' level, the consumption of **GHB** among trendsetters in the panel study appears to have passed its peak. As a result of criticisms within circles of nightlifers, as well as stricter entry checks, incidents where GHB users pass out have become less frequent in nightlife settings. Following television reports on the problem use of GHB, wider groups of nightlifers have begun to realise how addictive GHB can be. All such factors help explain the steady decline of GHB use in club and party settings, although it has remained a constant feature of afterparties. **Ketamine** is markedly less mediagenic. By virtue of its mild psychedelic effects, it tends to be taken more at afterparties, at raves or in private settings than in the average club setting. Some evidence surfaced in the panel study that frequent ketamine use is becoming a problem within some groups of users.

Very few clubbers and ravers queried in our 1998 survey had reported taking GHB or ketamine. Consumption increased little by little until 2008, but the 2013 survey reveals a strong upsurge. The percentage of current GHB users doubled from 5% to 10% in that five-year period, and the percentage of current ketamine users jumped from 2% to 12%. In contrast to laughing gas, these two drugs tend to be consumed more by people in their late 20s.

#### Anaesthetics use clubbers 2008 and clubbers & ravers 2013

		2008		2013	
		CLUB	CLUB	RAVE	TOTAL
LAUGHING GAS	last month	3%	20%	48%	33%
GHB	last month	5%	8%	12%	10%
KETAMINE	last month	2%	6%	19%	12%

#### Modest interest in novel psychoactive substances

NPS is the collective name for novel psychoactive substances that arrive on the market, often procured via the Internet. Many are synthesised chemical variants of classical drugs. Terms like 'designer drugs', 'research chemicals' and 'legal highs' are also used. The word 'novel' does not always fit the bill. The drug 2-CB, for example, has been drifting about in the Dutch market since the 1990s and has been a scheduled substance since 1997. In recent years, however, and especially since the 'ecstasy crisis' of 2009, the market for NPS has expanded tumultuously. Consumption still remains lower than that of classical drugs. Some observers attribute this to the restored 'purity' of the ecstasy market. All the same, dispersed through nearly half of our panel networks are small clusters of people with a curiosity for novel psychoactive substances. Most such subgroups are well educated, white and trend-setting; quite often they exhibit a keen interest in new substances in general. One current object of enthusiasm is **4-fluoroamphetamine**, also known as 4-FA, 4-fluo or flux, a drug that is spreading to more and more networks. Samples of 4-FA brought to the testing service increased sixfold from 2012 to 2013. A market for 2-CB also remains, judging from the increase in submitted samples. The phenylethylamines 5-APB and 6-APB are less widely known. In the category of synthetic cathinones, **mephedrone (4-MMC)** is best known. In some

other European countries, mephedrone rapidly gained popularity in nightlife circles starting in 2009. Studies of particular groups of nightlifers, including patrons of gay-friendly clubs in London, found that more than half had taken mephedrone.<sup>3</sup> In Amsterdam, in contrast, mephedrone has never much caught on; currently it is taken in very few panel networks and it has completely disappeared from the testing service radar. The variants 3-MMC, 2-FMC and 4-FMC are spotted sporadically. **Methylone** has virtually disappeared. Distribution of **MXE**, akin to ketamine, has stabilised at a low level. A genuinely new product is the restful **etizolam**, taken in a few panel networks.

In our survey of clubbers and ravers, we likewise found people who had tried novel psychoactive drugs at some time in their lives: 2-CB (19%), 4-FA (15%), mephedrone (9%), 6-APB (5%), methylone (4%) and MXE (3%). Current use of 2-CB increased from 1% to 6% in the 2008-2013 period. Other NPS showed more modest numbers of current users (1% or fewer). Five years previously those drugs were rarely if ever on the market, so they were not included in the questionnaire for our preceding club survey.

#### Renewed interest in LSD?

Psychedelic drugs such as LSD, magic mushrooms, magic truffles, DMT and ayahuasca play marginal roles in Amsterdam nightlife. According to the panel study, interest in LSD appears to be increasing slightly, now that the drug is popping up at outdoor festivals outside the original niches where it was taken. The testing service received twice as many LSD samples in 2013 than in previous years. NBOMe substances were encountered in some of them.

#### Variations in drug use

Drug use is not evenly dispersed throughout the nightlife scenes. The use of stimulants, anaesthetics and novel psychoactive substances has traditionally been rather lower in urban than in dance music scenes. And within the diversified dance music segment there are also niches within the festival circuit and the established club scenes where nightlifers have more experience with drugs and where drugs are more likely to be taken in combinations. Some predictors of wilder and more reckless drug use are young age (early 20s), slacker entry checks and grubbier music styles. Other factors are the organisers' reputation, the location and the time of day. One doesn't need much fantasy to imagine that drug taking on an ordinary night of clubbing is less extreme than that in outdoor dance festivals, which also go on much longer. Nearly two thirds of the ravers we questioned in our survey (62%) reported taking stimulants when they went out, as opposed to one quarter (25%) of the clubbers.

Also leaving aside the nights out, ravers were more likely than clubbers to be current users of all the substances we polled. Nearly all the respondents we contacted at raves also went to clubs, but that did not apply vice versa. This means that one segment of the club crowd went to dance events in addition to clubs, especially in the summer. Their average age was slightly higher, a somewhat higher percentage were male, and above all they were more likely to indicate an interest in recreational drugs than were clubgoers that did not attend raves. Substance use is generally rather higher than average, of course, during the summer festival season, but ravers also scored higher than clubbers in terms of the lifetime use of various drugs. The addition of ravers to the 2013 survey partly explains the upsurges in drug use that were seen in comparison to 2008 (when we did not hold surveys at raves because they were not all that common at the time). But even if we omit ravers from the analysis, the clubbers' substance use scored higher on many items than in 2008. This may partly be

explained by changes in the nightclub crowd. More and more students in their early 20s are encountered, a group with generally fewer obligations and more free time than the working people in their late 20s and 30s who predominated in the clubs in earlier years.

#### **Increased substance use and experimentation with NPS across the board**

Although a slightly diminishing trend in drug use seemed discernible from 2012 to 2013 amongst the trendsetters interviewed in our yearly panel studies, it is too early to speak of a downturn. In comparison to five years before, clubgoers, and particularly those that also attended raves, were taking more drugs right across the spectrum. That pertained both to stimulant drugs (ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamine) and to anaesthetics (GHB, laughing gas and ketamine).

Experimentation with novel psychoactive substances (NPS) was also seen. Though many of the latter are ecstasy-like drugs, these do not seem poised to supersede the classical ecstasy tablets. Earlier research in London similarly concluded that drug users simply add NPS to their repertoire rather than considering it a replacement for other drugs.<sup>4</sup> Neither does the growing use of amphetamine have an impact on cocaine consumption.

#### **References**

- 1 A limit of 3 units of 10 grams of ethanol applies to persons under 19, and 4 units to those 19 or older, a definition employed in Antenna since 1995.
- 2 **Benschop A, Nabben T & Korf DJ (2013)** *Antenne 2012. Trends in alcohol, tabak en drugs bij jonge Amsterdammers*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers (Jellinekreeks nr. 24).
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- 4 **Moore K, Dargan PI, Wood DM & Measham F (2013)** Do novel psychoactive substances displace established club drugs, supplement them or act as drugs of initiation? The relationship between mephedrone, ecstasy and cocaine. *European Addiction Research* 19(5): 276-282.



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