Experiences of police contact among young adult recreational drug users: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: While young adults who engage in recreational drug use are at increased risk of contact with police, their experiences of police contact have been largely overlooked. Method: In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 70 young adult amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS; i.e., ecstasy [MDMA] and methamphetamine) users who had experienced intensive alcohol and other drug-related police contact (e.g., being arrested, charged, or raided by police). These interviews focused on perceptions of personal experiences of alcohol and other drug-related police contact and general perceptions of police and policing and were conducted as part of a larger longitudinal study of drug use among a population-based sample of young adults from South-East Queensland, Australia. Results: ATS users’ perceptions of their personal interactions with police and general perceptions of police and policing were influenced by a number of factors, including police behaviour, prior contact with police, friends and family members’ contact with police, and perceptions of their own behaviour leading to their contact with police. While a majority of ATS users reported that their contact with police had either a neutral or negative impact on their general perceptions of police and policing, some ATS users reported that police contact had a positive impact. For 70% of ATS users, police contact was reported to have had an impact on their substance use behaviours, resulting in either modification of their substance use behaviours to avoid further police contact or reduction in their substance use. Conclusions: These findings suggest that police contact among young adult ATS users can impact on both perceptions of police and policing and substance use behaviours, emphasising
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the importance of the quality and nature of police contact and its potential role in harm reduction.

**Key words**

Ecstasy (MDMA); Methamphetamine; Amphetamine-type Stimulants; Alcohol; Young Adult; Police Contact
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Introduction

Due to their engagement in illegal behaviour, people who use drugs have increased levels of police contact. Contact with police, and how police behaviour during that contact is perceived, can have a significant impact on not only the views people form of police and policing but also compliance and cooperation with police (Mazerolle, Bennett, Davis, Sargeant, & Manning, 2013). Police contact and the resulting outcomes of that contact may also influence subsequent substance use behaviour (Shanahan, Hughes, & McSweeney, 2017; Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter, & Spittal, 2006). However, research examining police contact among people who use drugs has predominantly focused on the experiences of people who inject drugs (see Hayashi, Small, Csete, Hattirat, & Kerr, 2013; Miller et al., 2008; Small et al., 2006). Consequently, the experiences of people who engage in recreational drug use have been largely overlooked. This study helps to address this gap in the literature by using qualitative data from a population-based study of Australian young adult amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS; i.e., ecstasy [MDMA] and methamphetamine) users to examine their personal experiences with police related to their own alcohol and other drug use.

Young adults who engage in recreational drug use are an important target group for understanding experiences with and perceptions of police and policing. In Australia, ATS are the second most widely used illicit drugs, following cannabis (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). ATS use is most common among young adults, with 7.0% and 2.8% of Australians aged 20-29 years having used ecstasy and methamphetamine in the last 12 months, respectively (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). ATS are commonly used in public spaces
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(e.g., nightlife entertainment districts, raves, and music festivals; Van Havere, Vanderplasschen, Lammertyn, Broekaert, & Bellis, 2011), settings in which there is often a strong police presence (Hughes, Moxham-Hall, Ritter, Weatherburn, & MacCoun, 2017; Hughes, Anderson, Morleo, & Bellis, 2008). These illicit stimulants are also often combined with alcohol in recreational/social settings in the context of a ‘big night out’ (Barrett, Gross, Garand, & Pihl, 2005; Pennay et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that individuals who combine alcohol and illicit stimulants in these settings consume large quantities of alcohol and are at increased risk of involvement in incidents of aggressive behaviour (Leslie, Smirnov, et al., 2017; McKetin, Chalmers, Sunderland, & Bright, 2014; Miller et al., 2015). Further, as co-use of alcohol and illicit stimulants may mask impairment of psychomotor functioning, their combined use may lead to engagement in risky behaviours, such as drink driving (Pennay et al., 2015). Consequently, young adult recreational drug users’ engagement in illegal behaviour may increase their likelihood of police contact through a number of mechanisms, including intoxication in a public place, possession of illicit drugs and/or utensils, antisocial behaviour, and driving while under the influence (Sutherland & Shepherd, 2001).

Contact with police and perceptions of police and policing

Individuals’ personal interactions with police and interactions they hear about from their family and friends have a significant impact on their perceptions of police and policing (Schuck & Rosenbaum, 2005). Evidence suggests that, in general, people’s perceptions of police behaviour (e.g., whether police act in a fair and respectful manner) have either an equal or more substantial impact on their perceptions of police and policing than their judgements of police performance (e.g., whether police
are good at controlling crime; Hinds & Murphy, 2007). It is argued that the behaviour of police during interactions with citizens is particularly important as it conveys information regarding an individual’s position within society (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Fair treatment (i.e., procedural justice) is proposed to indicate that an individual is valued and respected in society, while unfair treatment indicates disrespect and a marginalised position (Murphy & Cherney, 2011).

A substantial body of literature has shown that procedural justice, which is concerned with fairness of treatment and decision-making during police encounters with citizens, is a key strategy for promoting police legitimacy (Mazerolle et al., 2013). Through increasing police legitimacy, research suggests that procedural justice-based policing can increase citizen cooperation and compliance with both the police and the law more generally (Mazerolle et al., 2013). While the majority of procedural justice research has been conducted with general population samples, a small number of studies have examined the applicability of procedural justice among offender samples (Papachristos, Meares, & Fagan, 2012). This research suggests that the procedural justice model may be applicable among offenders (Baker et al., 2013; Tatar, Kaasa, & Cauffman, 2012; White, Mulvey, & Dario, 2015), including young adult recreational drug users (Leslie, Cherney, et al., 2017).

**Contact with police and changes in substance use behaviour**

Contact with police may lead to changes in substance use behaviour; however, it is unclear whether these changes are associated with police contact per se or the resulting consequences of that contact (e.g., confiscation of substances or equipment, arrest, or diversion programs). Several studies have shown that street-level drug law enforcement (e.g., confiscating injecting equipment) often results in
people who inject drugs avoiding carrying injecting equipment and engaging in
sharing of equipment, which increases the risk of transmission of blood borne
viruses (e.g., HIV and hepatitis C; Kerr, Small, & Wood, 2005; Small et al., 2006).
While these particular issues are less relevant for recreational users, there is some
evidence to suggest that police contact may negatively impact on substance use
behaviours in this group. One example is the controversial issue of the presence of
police sniffer dogs at music festivals. In Australia, public health advocates have
argued that the presence of police and sniffer dogs at music festivals adds to the risk
of overdose and death, as attendees carrying drugs may resort to consuming their
entire quantity at once to avoid detection (Hughes et al., 2017). While research
examining this issue is scarce, an Australian study found that 8% of regular ecstasy
users who had seen a sniffer dog while carrying drugs in the last 6 months reported
this behaviour (Hickey, McIlwraith, Bruno, Matthews, & Alati, 2012). Further,
research also indicates that police presence at music festivals may encourage
people to purchase drugs within the festival to avoid detection by police, who often
search attendees as they enter the festival (Hughes et al., 2017). This has important
public health implications, as attendees may purchase drugs from unknown suppliers
and may be at increased risk of purchasing adulterated or mislabelled drugs
(Hughes et al., 2017).

These behaviours described above align with a small body of research that
indicates that police contact may result in restrictive deterrence among recreational
drug users. Restrictive deterrence refers to changes in offending behaviour aimed at
reducing the likelihood of police contact, such as reducing offending behaviour,
changing to lower-level offences (e.g., switching from using heroin to cannabis), and
employing situational strategies around offending to reduce risk of apprehension
Police contact among young adult recreational drug users (Jacobs, 2010). This behaviour has been observed among cannabis users, with users avoiding public use and carrying only small amounts of cannabis (Erickson, van der Maas, & Hathaway, 2013; Ream, Johnson, Dunlap, & Benoit, 2010). However, it is unclear whether the effects of restrictive deterrence lead to reductions in frequency or quantity of drug use.

Method

The current study draws on interview data collected as part of 4.5-year follow-up of the Natural History Study of Drug Use (NHSDU) conducted in 2013-14. The NHSDU is a prospective study of drug use in a population-based sample of young adult ATS users in South-East Queensland, Australia. To recruit participants, a one page drug use screening questionnaire was mailed to 12,079 young adults (aged 19-23 years) randomly selected from the Brisbane and Gold Coast electoral rolls, with a response rate of 49.9%. A sampling frame was developed from this screening data, from which an ATS-user group (young adults who had used ecstasy or methamphetamine ≥3 times within the last 12 months; n=352) was recruited. This method is described in more detail elsewhere (Smirnov, Kemp, Wells, Legosz, & Najman, 2014). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Queensland’s Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee.

The semi-structured interviews conducted at the 4.5-year follow-up focused on (a) experiences with and outcomes of police contact and (b) perceptions of police and policing. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants by trained interviewing staff from the NHSDU as part of a larger interviewer-administered questionnaire, which typically took between 1.5 and 2 hours to complete. The
Qualitative interviews lasted for between 4 and 30 minutes, with an average of 11 minutes.

An objective of these interviews was to explore young adult ATS users’ perceptions of police behaviour and the impact of police contact on both their general perceptions of police and policing and their substance use behaviours. The interview schedule included topics such as: personal contact with police related to the participants’ own alcohol and/or other drug use (including the circumstances of the contact, the behaviour of the police officer[s], the participants’ own response to the police officer[s], the outcome[s] of the contact, and the impact of the contact on the participants’ relationships with family and friends, attitudes towards police, and substance use behaviour); family and friends’ experience with police related to alcohol and/or other drug use; and general attitudes regarding police and policing (e.g., the best and worst things about police and attitudes towards drug and alcohol laws). Participants were asked to think about police contact over their lifetime. Participants who had experienced more than one police contact related to their own alcohol and/or drug use were asked to think about either their most recent or most significant experience. However, throughout the course of the interviews, many of these participants discussed or referred to multiple interactions with police.

**Participants**

Of the 272 ATS users who completed the 4.5-year follow-up (77.3% retention rate), 205 (75.4%) took part in the qualitative interview. Among these ATS users, 70 (34.1%) discussed intensive episodes of police contact related to their own alcohol and/or other drug use. We defined intensive episodes as police contact involving being arrested or charged for an alcohol or other drug-related offence (e.g., driving
while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, possession of illicit drugs or utensils, selling illicit drugs) or being raided by police in relation to drug use. These 70 ATS users comprise the sample for the current study. This subset of ATS users were selected as their contact with police was often longer and involved more interaction with police than non-intensive substance-related contacts (e.g., Random Breath Tests and being checked by sniffer dogs).

**Analysis**

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and imported into NVivo 11 for organisation and coding. A combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to identify themes shared across the data. Initially, all interview transcripts were read and free-coded. The first stage of free-coding involved chunking of interview data based on broad concepts (examples include impact of police contact on perceptions of policing and policing and impact of police contact on substance use behaviour). These concepts reflected key themes underpinning the research. Data that was allocated to these concepts was then divided into subcategories or dimensional properties of a particular concept (i.e., key concepts were then divided into sub-concepts), which is referred to as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Once concepts and sub-concepts were identified, all transcripts were re-read and additional coding was completed focusing on the identified concepts. For example, one key concept identified in the data was ‘impact of police contact on substance use behaviour’, which was then divided into sub-concepts comprising ‘modified substance use behaviours’ and ‘reduced substance use’. The concepts and sub-concepts were then revised and refined by examining the coded extracts within each
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concept. This follows recognised best practice in thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

All coding was completed by the lead author and inter-coder reliability was not tested. This does present a limitation; however, only common recurrent themes are reported. For this analysis, we focused on four main themes: participants’ perceptions of police behaviour during personal contact; participants’ perceptions of their compliance with police; impact of police contact on perceptions of police and policing; and impact of police contact on substance use behaviour.

Results

Description of the sample

Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Our sample was aged between 23 and 27 years at the time of interview and just under three quarters (72.9%) were male, which likely reflects the higher rates of offending among men (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012). A majority (78.6%) were employed in either full- or part-time work at the time of the interview.

Approximately two thirds (65.7%) of the sample reported having experienced multiple occasions of police contact related to their own alcohol and/or other drug use and just under half (44.3%) had been charged with an alcohol or other-drug related offence. In their interviews, ATS users discussed a range of types of police contact, including contact relating to incidents of drink-driving (34.3%), illicit drug use (50.0%), inappropriate alcohol consumption (e.g., public drinking and underage drinking; 15.7%), and public nuisance while under the influence of alcohol and other drugs (10.0%). It is important to note that the percentages listed describe the number
of ATS users who discussed a particular type of police contact. As ATS users who had experienced multiple intensive alcohol and/or other drug-related contacts may not have discussed all their experiences within the interview, these percentages do not represent the prevalence of different types of police contact among these ATS users.

Hazardous alcohol consumption was common among the sample, with 82.9% of participants having consumed 5 or more standard drinks in the last month. Lifetime use of ecstasy (98.6%), methamphetamine (87.1%), cannabis (100%), and cocaine (82.9%) was also high. At the time of interview, the majority of the sample reported either less than monthly use or no use of ecstasy, cannabis, and cocaine in the last 12 months. Cannabis use was more common, with 42.8% of the sample reporting monthly or more frequent use in the last 12 months. It is important to note that frequency of ecstasy and methamphetamine use has declined across the study period for a majority of participants in the NHSDU (Leslie, Smirnov, et al., 2017; Smirnov et al., 2013). As participants were asked to discuss police contact across their lifetime, the frequency of ATS and other drug use reported here may not reflect their patterns of use at the time of their police contact.
Table 1. Sample characteristics (n=70)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age at time of interview</strong></td>
<td>Mean (Standard Deviation) 25.1 years (1.4 years) Range 23-27 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Male 72.9% Female 27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment status at time of interview</strong></td>
<td>Unemployed 21.4% Part-time work 24.3% Full-time work 54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of substance-related police contacts</strong></td>
<td>Median 2 contacts Range 1-48 contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ever been charged with an alcohol or drug-related offence</strong></td>
<td>44.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alcohol use</strong></td>
<td>Consumed ≥5 standard drinks on a single occasion in the last month 82.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History of ATS use</strong></td>
<td>Lifetime use of ecstasy 98.6% Lifetime use of methamphetamine 87.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of ecstasy use in the last 12 months</strong></td>
<td>Weekly 0% Monthly 8.6% Less than monthly 41.4% No use in the last 12 months 50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of methamphetamine use in the last 12 months</strong></td>
<td>Weekly 5.7% Monthly 2.9% Less than monthly 31.4% No use in the last 12 months 60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History of other drug use</strong></td>
<td>Lifetime use of cannabis 100.0% Lifetime use of cocaine 82.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of cannabis use in the last 12 months</strong></td>
<td>Daily 10.0% Weekly 27.1% Monthly 5.7% Less than monthly 25.7% No use in the last 12 months 31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of cocaine use in the last 12 months</strong></td>
<td>Weekly 0% Monthly 2.9% Less than monthly 22.9% No use in the last 12 months 74.3%</td>
</tr>
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Notes:  
- a Refers to the number of times participants reported that the police had made contact with them in response to their own alcohol or other drug use. Participants were told to think about occasions that included being searched by police or checked by sniffer dogs or being charged or arrested for a drug- or alcohol-related offence (including driving while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs);  
- b Median is reported as data are skewed;  
- c Measured at the 4.5 year follow-up.
Perceptions of police behaviour

Participants were asked about the best and worst aspects of police behaviour during their contact with police. The key positive and negative behaviours identified included: having a good attitude (e.g., being friendly, kind, or understanding) vs. having a bad attitude (e.g., being rude, arrogant, or hostile); acting professionally vs. not acting professionally (e.g., being aggressive or acting outside of proper protocol); and treating individuals like a person vs. treating people like criminals. These findings align with the procedural justice literature, which emphasises the importance of fair treatment by police during interactions with citizens (Mazerolle et al., 2013). In particular, the binary of being treated like a person vs. being treated like a criminal by police, which was discussed by 18 participants, indicates that unfair treatment by police may be particularly confronting for young adults ATS users. This is illustrated by the experience of the ATS user below:

“… I was pulled over – [for] no reason to my knowledge. And, um, I was asked a lot of questions by a male police officer … It was really forceful and he said, ‘we’re about to conduct a, you know, drug and alcohol test, a drink test, and a search of your vehicle’ … I knew I didn’t have any drugs or anything. Um, but he said, he said, um, ‘I’m going to ask – have you got any paraphernalia in the car? Have you got any needles? Have you got any…’. And then he asked me about marijuana again. He just kept going on and on about drugs, and drugs … [Afterwards] I rang my friend, and I’m just like, ‘buddy, where are you? ‘Cause I’m just, I’m shaking. I’m just going to pull over and stay here for a bit,
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because I’m just freaked out’. I really felt, I really felt like a criminal” (female, aged 27 – pulled over and questioned by police).

While recreational drugs are illegal in Australia, their use is arguably normalised among some groups of young adults (Duff, 2005; Fitzgerald, Mazerolle, & Mazerolle, 2013). Consequently, it is possible that being treated like a criminal by police is perceived as being at odds with their substance use behaviour, which recreational users may not judge as deviant.

**Influence of previous police contact and perceptions of own behaviour**

The qualitative data also highlighted that perceptions of police behaviour during specific incidents are influenced by a number of factors, including previous experience with police and participants’ perceptions of their own behaviour. As described below, previous negative experiences have the potential to put a negative spin on future interactions with police, regardless of the behaviour or actions of the police:

“[Interviewer: It’s hard for you to see some positive things that they’re doing] Yeah. Because unfortunately, like, the glasses that I look through are tainted, so I’m not going to look at what [the police] do” (male, aged 25 – arrested for engaging in fraud to support his drug use).

Similarly, whether a participant perceived that their own behaviour leading to their contact with police was either wrong or ‘really not that bad’ appeared to influence their perception of police behaviour. Participants who acknowledged that

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1 While the police contact discussed in this quote did not lead to an arrest or charge, this participant had been charged with drink driving on a different occasion (meeting criteria for inclusion in the study).
they were ‘in the wrong’ often described having a more positive or neutral view of police behaviour during the interaction and being more accepting of their contact with police and the subsequent outcomes. These participants often referred to the fact that ‘police were just doing their job’, as stated by the participant below:

“[Interviewer: And was there a worst aspect of that contact from the police officer?] Yeah, that he was there [laughs]. But no, apart from that, it was… it was all my own fault, he was just doing his job” (male, aged 23 – arrested for drink driving).

Some individuals who perceive their behaviour to be wrong may even extend leniency towards police in regard to negative behaviour, such as physical roughness, as discussed by one participant:

“Like, they were… I guess they were forceful, like, pretty badly! Had, like, I don’t know, the handcuff marks on my arms for like a month. But that’s fair enough, ‘cause yeah, what I did was pretty bad, so” (male, aged 24 – arrested for drink driving).

In contrast, participants who perceived that they had not done anything wrong or that their behaviour was ‘really not that bad’ generally judged the actions of police towards them to be unfair or over the top:

“… It was really stupid. ‘Cause I was, like, I was not, I was a tiny, tiny bit over [the legal alcohol limit to drive]. It was just, ugh, the whole thing was stupid. [Interviewer: And you’d just gone around the corner?] Yeah, like, I was just going to go ‘round the corner to go home and… oh. Yeah, it was the biggest drama over nothing, really” (female, aged 25 – arrested for drink driving).
While these participants were engaging in illegal behaviour, they commonly voiced that they did not believe their behaviour was hurting themselves or others. A number of these participants also questioned the validity of the laws around what they judged as ‘victimless’ crimes:

“Um, well I guess I just don’t see [police] as working for me, as now they’re working against me, just because I like to smoke weed. It’s like, now I’m, you know, public enemy number one. And it just seems pretty unfair, considering I’m not hurting anyone. And it doesn’t hurt anyone. Perfectly happy. And it doesn’t, yeah, affect my family too much, so. And, you know, it’s just such a strange thing to police” (male, aged 26 – arrested for possession of cannabis and drug utensils).

In summary, the positive and negative elements of police behaviour identified by participants predominantly focused on the presence or absence of fair, professional, and respectful treatment. However, our data indicate that the wider context of police contact plays a role in how police behaviour is perceived. Two potential moderating factors include prior contact with the police and participants’ perceptions of their own behaviour. Prior contact with police may build expectations of police behaviour that then influence perceptions of behaviour in subsequent contact. Existing research suggests that this relationship is likely to be stronger for negative encounters (see Skogan, 2006). Participants’ perceptions of their own behaviour also appear to influence how police behaviour is perceived, with those who believed they were not doing anything wrong often having a more negative perception of police behaviour. This is supported by research that suggests that youth who engage in delinquent behaviour are more likely to question the legitimacy
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of the law (Nivette, Eisner, Malti, & Ribeaud, 2015; Piquero, Fagan, Mulvey, Steinberg, & Odgers, 2005), which may result in a reduced moral obligation to follow the law and defer to police (Murphy, Tyler, & Curtis, 2009).

**Compliance with police**

A majority of participants (72.9%) reported complying with police and discussed a number of reasons and motivating factors. Most commonly, participants complied with police in order to avoid getting into further trouble, to potentially reduce the amount of trouble they were in, and because they were ‘in the wrong’. The attitude of the police officer(s) also played a role, with a number of participants reporting that they were compliant because police had been respectful towards them. While participants generally only mentioned one or two reasons for their compliant behaviour, a variety of factors were likely at play in any given context, as described below:

“[Interviewer: So, how would you describe the way in which you responded to the police officers during this contact?] Yeah, I was fine. I was, I wasn’t aggressive or anything. Like I said, I knew I’d done the wrong thing, so.
[Interviewer: Ok. So, you, you tended to be compliant and cooperated with them?] Yeah. Yep. [Interviewer: Yeah. Ok. So, why do you think you behaved that way?] Just ‘cause I knew that I had no leg to stand on. I, I knew that I was doing the wrong thing and they pulled me up on it. So, I didn’t really have anything to fight against. They didn’t treat me unfairly or anything, so. They didn’t even handcuff me, which I think was a pretty good idea. So, I didn’t… I wasn’t going to make a bad situation worse” (male, aged 25 – arrested for drink driving).
For a small number of participants, fear was a key motivator for compliant behaviour. In some occasions, this fear related to the consequences of the police contact (e.g., being arrested or charged with an offence), while in others fear was related to intimidating or threatening police behaviour: “Um, I was cooperative after the police officer threatened me” (male, aged 23 – arrested for possession of cannabis).

Among participants who reported acting in a non-compliant manner to some degree (15.7%), three main explanations were put forward. Firstly, participants described that their non-compliance was a reaction to police acting in a disrespectful or inappropriate manner. As one participant stated:

“[Interviewer: And could you describe, um, how you responded to the police interaction in this instance?] Oh, [I] became a bit aggressive. But, um, my mate, he’s a psychology student and he’s good with all his words and crap like that. And, um, yeah, they chucked him in handcuffs and were swearing at him and calling him all sorts of abusives and clicking his handcuffs tighter, telling him to speak more and all that sort of just… yeah. Egging him on, pretty much. Yep. [Interviewer: And, so, what made you, why do you think that you responded in that way to the police?] Ah, just because they were trying to intimidate us. [Interviewer: So, you were reacting to how they were being towards you?] Pretty much. Yeah. A reaction thing, yeah, that’s perfect” (male, aged 27 – arrested for drink driving).

Secondly, two participants reported that they were non-compliant with police in order to avoid getting into further trouble. This was surprising, considering that non-compliance is arguably more likely to lead to more trouble rather than less.
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However, it is important to note that non-compliance for these participants appeared to relate to refusing to answer police questions, as opposed to being aggressive or attempting to evade arrest. For these participants, speaking with police was perceived as increasing the risk that they would reveal information that could be used against them:

“As usual, I just shut up and don’t say nothing… Oh yeah, you have to, otherwise you just get more in trouble, and more in trouble, and more in trouble… Once they find out what you’re in – more in trouble, yeah.

[Interviewer: Ok. Um, is that why you chose to behave in that way?] That’s right, you got it. Um, anything you say can be used against you, of course, as well. You know what I mean? Little things like that, yeah. Definitely” (male, aged 26 – arrested for possession of heroin).

Lastly, a small number of participants described engaging in non-compliant behaviour out of anger or unhappiness that they had been caught by police:

“[Interviewer: Alright, so, how would you describe the way in which you responded to the police officers during that contact?] Not positively. [Interviewer: So, um – when you say not positively –] Well, no one wants to be arrested, you know. [Interviewer: Was it quite, quite resistant?] Well, only verbally, I could never – well, I was already in, like, you’re already wearing handcuffs so there’s not much you can really do about the situation anyway… It was fairly rare to actually fight with police. It was either run away or lie down” (male, aged 25 – arrested for public nuisance).
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“[Police are] meant to set the standard of behaviour. And, yeah, for people like that acting out, um, paints a negative picture. And that’s kind of why, like, people don’t respect them, ‘cause they’ve had these poor experiences with them” (male, aged 23 – arrested for public nuisance).

The qualitative data suggest that contact with police had varied impacts on participants’ general perceptions of police and policing. The most common response among our participants was that their contact with police had no impact on their perceptions (42.9%), often stating that nothing had really changed. However, this is difficult to interpret, as many of these participants did not describe what their prior perceptions of police and policing were. In these cases, it is possible that their interaction with police may have reinforced their existing opinion. A handful of participants who had had negative encounters with police described how this contact reinforced their existing opinion: “It would’ve sort of reinforced an already negative sort of stereotype of police” (male, aged 26 – arrested for drink driving).

Participants also reported positive and negative influences of police contact on broader perceptions of police and policing; however, negative impacts (32.4%) appeared to be more common than positive impacts (15.7%). Participants often linked development or reinforcement of a negative perception with both negative police behaviour during the specific contact they discussed and previous contact with police, including direct personal contact and contact experienced by friends and family. This process was described by one of the participants:

“Um, I wasn’t, like, a fan of the police before. But I just thought, you know, if they’ve got to do a job, they’ve got to do a job. But the way they handled me...
was completely inappropriate. Um, since then I’ve heard so many stories. Of either people having similar or worse treatment. Um, and now I just think they wear that badge and abuse it. They’re not really there to really – they don’t help the way they make out they do” (female, aged 27 – arrested for public nuisance).

Among the participants who reported that their police contact positively influenced their general perceptions of police and policing (15.7%), many linked this to how they were treated by police and police behaviour (e.g., being friendly, kind, understanding, professional): “… I think the more positive, um, contact that you have with [police] … it makes you feel better towards them” (male, aged 24 – arrested for drink driving). A number of participants also described that their positive interaction with police had demonstrated to them that, rather than police being out to get people, police were out there doing their job:

“I don’t know if it was just me being older and having contact with [police]. Because the last time I was probably 17 or something, yeah. So, I think it made it more positive. Yeah, they weren’t, like, you know, jerks. Yeah. Considering I was doing the wrong thing, yeah … Yeah, probably made me realise a lot more, probably because I was a lot more mature, it made me realise they are just out there doing their job … It changed my attitude for the better in the sense that I saw them doing their job and protecting, rather than out to get people” (female, aged 26 – arrested for drink driving).

It is important to note that, as the above quote suggests, age or maturity may play a role in how interactions with police impact on perceptions of police and policing. Further, while the realisation that police are ‘just doing their job’ appeared to improve
perceptions of police and policing among some of our participants, it may do little to improve other young adults’ perceptions.

**Impact of police contact on substance use behaviours**

Approximately 70% of participants reported that their contact with police impacted on their substance use behaviours in some way. The most common impact related to modifying their substance use behaviour to avoid further interactions with police, which was discussed by 40 participants. Modified behaviour included changes such as no longer driving when intoxicated, no longer using illicit substances in public settings, and being more cautious with storing and carrying illicit substances:

> “Just more so that, like, you know, they can’t, a male police officer can’t search your person. So, carrying [pills] in your bra, or something like that, was the alternative from there. [Interviewer: Alright, so it wasn’t a case of not carrying, but just carrying different?] Yeah, yeah” (female, aged 25 – arrested for possession of illicit substance).

In many of these instances, participants reported that there were no or minimal changes in the frequency or quantity of their substance use. However, for three participants, this did lead to an indirect reduction in substance use. This was illustrated by one participant who was arrested with his girlfriend for possession of illicit substances during a night out. After being arrested, the participant stopped going out and using drugs in nightlife entertainment districts for a period of time, which resulted in a slight reduction in his substance use. He continued to use illicit drugs ‘every now and then’ at home, as this was less risky than using in public settings. As described by the participant, he perceived that his police contact had had a relatively minor impact on his substance use behaviours:
“Oh, the risk was always there, you know, when you carry [drugs] with you. But it, um, kept getting worse and worse, where there were just more cops and sniffer dogs walking around at one stage – even inside clubs … Where when I first started taking drugs, it was, you could just walk around with it in your pocket, you just take pills out in the middle of clubs and stuff. No one would care, like, everyone was having a good time, no one was hurting anyone … So, after that, after that, like, when we got [arrested] it, um, yeah, it changed our habits, I suppose … it had an effect, but it didn’t have an enormous effect, you know, life changing, really, or devastating, or whatever” (male, aged 27 – arrested for possession of illicit substance).

Although less commonly reported, two participants discussed changing the substances they used in order to reduce the risk of further contact with police. One participant reported that he stopped using ATS and switched to predominantly using cannabis and pharmaceutical drugs, as pharmaceutical drugs are not illegal and he believed this reduced his likelihood of further police contact. The second participant switched the substances she used in order to avoid failing a drug test:

“Oh, it did affect my drug use, yeah. Because I was put on probation, I stopped smoking weed for a year. But it increased my amphetamine use, ‘cause I knew that wouldn’t show up on the test” (female, aged 27 – arrested for possession of illicit substances and production of a dangerous drug).

In contrast to participants who reported modifying their behaviour predominantly to avoid further contact with police, 12 participants stated that their contact with police lead to an intentional reduction in their substance use. These participants often observed that their police contact had caused them to reflect on
the potential consequences of their behaviour, which lead to their reduction in substance use. This change was described by the following participant:

“[Interviewer: And has there been any impact on the frequency of your alcohol or other drug use, after this?] It’s, it’s cut back a lot. And yeah, it’s definitely made me more aware that my actions do have consequences, and I can’t do something without there being detriment. And just, yeah. I’m not 19 anymore, I’m 23, and I have to take responsibility for my actions. And I did something wrong, and I paid for it, and now it’s just made me more aware that I can’t do anything like that anymore. So, it’s just made me grow up a bit more, if that makes sense” (female, aged 23 – arrested for grievous bodily harm).

At the far end of the spectrum, three of these 12 participants reported completely ceasing substance use. These participants appeared to have had more serious contact with police (e.g., being raided or receiving a conviction) and/or reported a number of prior alcohol and other drug-related contacts with police. For these participants, their contact with police was viewed as a ‘wake-up call’ regarding their behaviour, as described by a participant who ceased all alcohol and other drug use:

“So, that was my, like, big wake up call, really. Eighteen was my first [conviction for dangerous operation of a motor vehicle while adversely affected by intoxicating substance]. I sort of forgave myself for it ’cause, you know, I was young and dumb. But I was 24 this time around. I should, should have known better … You know, I had to get my criminal history recently for my insurance and I’ve got, like, 11 convictions. Every one of them I was drunk … It was the realisation that my main, you know, thing – I’m not that person
until I have about 10, 12 beers, then I turn into a bit of a, you know, bit of an animal, really … So, yeah, just woke up to the fact that I was aware of that and I already knew what I can do to better in my life is stop the drinking and then everything else will flow from that” (male, aged 26 – arrested for dangerous operation of a motor vehicle while adversely affected by intoxicating substance).

Once again, age appears to be an important factor in whether police contact influences perceptions and behaviours. At ages 18 and 19, both of these last participants appeared to view their contact with police as less serious and perhaps more generally acceptable than similar behaviour in their mid-twenties.

Discussion

This research provides an exploration of recreational drug users’ experiences with police, which to date have been largely overlooked. The purpose of the current study was to examine recreational drug users’ perceptions of their personal alcohol and other drug-related contact with police, using a population-based sample of young adult ATS users. Specifically, we explored ATS users’ perceptions of police behaviour and their own compliance with police and how these interactions with police impacted on both their general views of police and policing and substance use behaviours. Our study highlights that police contact may impact not only on ATS users’ perceptions of police and policing but also their substance use behaviours. In particular, our findings suggest that the nature of the impact on substance use behaviours may not always align with the aims of drug law enforcement or public health policy.
Police contact among young adult recreational drug users

Police contact was more likely to have a neutral or negative – rather than positive – impact on general perceptions of police and policing among these young adult ATS users. This is not surprising, especially considering that contact with police in which an individual is apprehended for an offence is likely to be perceived negatively. Further, research suggests that negative encounters with police have a stronger impact on perceptions of police and policing than positive encounters (Skogan, 2006). Our data suggest, however, that police contact among some young adult recreational drug users can have a positive impact on perceptions of police and policing, particularly when police are perceived to act in a positive manner (e.g., being friendly, respectful, and professional). This extends previous research from this cohort (see Leslie, Cherney, et al., 2017) and adds support to the importance of fair and respectful treatment (e.g., procedural justice; see Mazerolle et al., 2013) in police encounters with people who use drugs.

While police officers’ behaviour during an encounter played a key role in perceptions of police and policing, it is important to note that there were a number of other factors also at play. Research has shown that friends and family members’ contact with police can influence how individuals perceive their own encounters with police (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Warren, 2011), which was reflected in our findings. Additionally, our data indicate that pre-existing perceptions of police and policing, previous police contact, and ATS users’ perceptions of their own behaviour impact on perceptions of specific police interactions and general perceptions of police and policing. This included ATS users’ views regarding their own alcohol and other drug use. It appears that young adults who perceived their own drug use as a relatively minor or harmless issue (e.g., not hurting themselves or others) felt that they were unfairly policed due to their engagement in recreational drug use. These participants
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also appeared to question the validity and legitimacy of drug laws, which may reduce willingness to cooperate with police (Murphy et al., 2009). This suggests that the potential for fair police behaviour to improve perceptions of police and policing may differ according to whether young adults perceive their behaviour as inherently wrong or dangerous (e.g., drink driving, which may cause harm to themselves and others) or whether they believe they are engaging in a ‘victimless crime’ (e.g., recreational cannabis or ecstasy use).

Our data also suggest that age or social maturity may play a role in how the behaviour and actions of police are perceived. A number of ATS users commented that their perceptions of police and policing had become less negative since they had ‘grown up’. This is supported by previous research, which has shown that age is a strong determinate of perceptions of police and policing, with adolescents and young adults generally holding more negative views of police compared to older age groups (Brown & Benedict, 2002; Skogan, 2006). More broadly, the finding is congruent with the concept of ‘maturing out’ of drug use (Labouvie, 1996) and the reduction in drug-related harm associated with this. The factors that contribute to maturing out of drug use may also contribute to changes in attitudes toward police. Regular use of illicit stimulants is generally a transient phenomenon during early adulthood (Smirnov et al., 2013), which underscores the importance of interventions appropriately targeted for this age group.

Our findings add to the small body of literature that suggests that police contact and the resulting outcomes of police contact may lead to changes in substance use behaviours. Approximately 70% of ATS users in this study reported that their intensive contact with police had some impact on their substance use.
behaviours. It is important to note that, unlike perceptions of police and policing, police behaviour (e.g., procedural justice) did not appear to be associated with changes in substance use behaviour. In contrast, outcomes of contact with police (e.g., receiving a fine or being arrested), including potential outcomes of further police contact, were commonly linked with substance use behaviour changes.

The most common impact described by ATS users was restrictive deterrence – that is, modifying substance use behaviour in order to avoid further contact with police (e.g., no longer using illicit substances in public places, switching substances used, or no longer driving when intoxicated). Some of these behaviours (e.g., no longer driving while intoxicated) are positive from both a law enforcement and public health perspective. However, there appeared to be minimal impact among these young adults in terms of their frequency or quantity of substance use. Consequently, our findings suggest that, for a majority of young adult ATS users, intensive alcohol and other drug-related police contact appears to do little to reduce substance use and leads to changes in substance use behaviour that make it harder for police to detect this behaviour. This has important implications for this group of young adults.

People who use drugs, particularly recreational users who are not engaged with treatment services, are a largely hidden population. Research suggests that police contact among people who inject drugs may interrupt or reduce access to harm reduction and health services (Kerr et al., 2005). It is possible that intensive police contact may lead to feelings of marginalisation among recreational drug users, particularly if police are perceived to behave in a disrespectful manner, and may further decrease their likelihood of contact with harm reduction and treatment services due to fear or anxiety regarding disclosing their substance use.
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The impact of restrictive deterrence among people who use drugs and how long the effects of restrictive deterrence may persist are largely unknown. Further research is needed regarding the impact of police contact on changes in substance use behaviour. In particular, this research should focus on examining the longer-term effects of police contact and restrictive deterrence on substance use behaviours, including any impact on frequency and quantity of drug use and engagement with alcohol and other drug services.

While less common, our data indicate that contact with police may reduce substance use among some recreational users. However, it is important to note that the context of police contact appeared to be particularly important in these cases. The young adults who reduced or even ceased use appeared to have had more serious contact with police (e.g., being convicted of an offence rather than receiving a fine or warning) and/or had a number of prior police contacts or convictions. Additionally, it appears that reductions in substance use, particularly significant reductions or cessation of use, may be more likely to occur when young adults view their substance use behaviour as inherently wrong or dangerous to others. Consequently, this suggests that police contact may have a greater impact on reducing behaviours such as drink driving, in comparison to recreational drug use. Lastly, these participants also tended to be older, which may reflect perceptions regarding age-appropriate behaviour. A number of ATS users voiced the notion that certain behaviours (e.g., recreational drug use, heavy drinking, making mistakes) became less acceptable, or less readily forgiven, once participants were entering their mid-twenties.
**Implications**

Our findings indicate that intensive substance-related police contact with young adult recreational drug users may lead to changes in substance use behaviours. However, as noted above, it appears that for a majority of these young adults, this contact has little impact on reducing or ceasing substance use and leads to young adults modifying their substance use behaviours in order to make it harder for police to detect. In light of this, the ways in which police interact with young adult recreational drug users in Australia should be reconsidered. Police contact with these young adults could be an important opportunity for harm reduction. Identifying opportunities to engage with young adult recreational drug users is important as recreational drug users, particularly ecstasy users, have low levels of engagement with treatment services in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Police engagement in harm reduction could include referral of young adults to relevant drug and alcohol services, providing educational resources, and diverting recreational drug users out of the criminal justice system through cautions and diversion programs, such as those offered to cannabis users in Australia (see Shanahan et al., 2017).

The quality of these interactions is important in encounters between police and these young adults. While police behaviour did not appear to directly influence changes in substance use behaviour, it did influence perceptions of police and policing for many of the young adult ATS users in our study. As the procedural justice literature supports, perceptions of police and policing can influence behaviour, particularly compliance and cooperation with police (Mazerolle et al., 2013). Arguably, encounters in which police are perceived to act in a fair and respectful
manner will provide a better opportunity for engaging with these young adults. Consequently, fair and respectful treatment (i.e., procedural justice-based policing) should be encouraged in police interactions with individuals engaged in illegal behaviour, such as recreational drug use.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the accuracy of self-report regarding substance use can be impacted by concerns around stigma and illegality of behaviour. However, as these interviews were conducted as part of a longitudinal study with high participant retention, this is likely mitigated. Secondly, we were unable to examine the temporal relationship between police contact and changes in substance use, as we collected data about police contact retrospectively at the 4.5-year follow-up. Additionally, as participants were asked to think about police encounters over their lifetime, participants' accounts may be impacted by issues of memory recall. Thirdly, our interviews focused on self-reported intensive alcohol and other drug-related police contact and, consequently, do not capture other types of contact these ATS users may have had with police (e.g., reporting a crime, being searched by sniffer dogs at a music festival when not carrying drugs). Fourthly, as the majority of our sample were male, it is possible that our findings may be more reflective of young adult men's experiences of alcohol and other drug-related contact with police than women's experiences. Lastly, as with other qualitative studies, it is important to acknowledge that participants' accounts of their interactions with police represent their own memories and perceptions, so are subject to inherent biases. This limitation was raised by one of the study participants: “Well, obviously, I don’t
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like police, so I felt that he was aggressive. But he probably wasn’t” (male, aged 26 – arrested for possession of heroin).

Conclusions

Young adult recreational drug users’ engagement in illegal behaviour in public settings increases their risk of police contact through a variety of mechanisms, including public intoxication, possession of illicit substances and utensils, antisocial and aggressive behaviour, and driving under the influence. Our study has shown that substance-related police contact among these young adults may impact on both perceptions of police and policing and substance use behaviours. For a majority of participants, changes in substance use behaviours related to modifying their behaviour in order to avoid further contact with police. These findings reinforce the importance of the quality of police behaviour in interactions between police and all citizens, including offenders. Further, our findings highlight that positive police encounters with young adult recreational drug users may present an opportunity for engaging in harm reduction.
References


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