



Impact of Covid19 on mental health and drug use: main findings from the EMCDDA trendspotter study

LX Addiction Meeting
23 November 2022

Franca Beccaria, Sara Rolando*, Linda Montanari**, Liesbeth Vandam***

** Eclectica+ Research and Training, Torino (IT)*

*** EMCDDA*

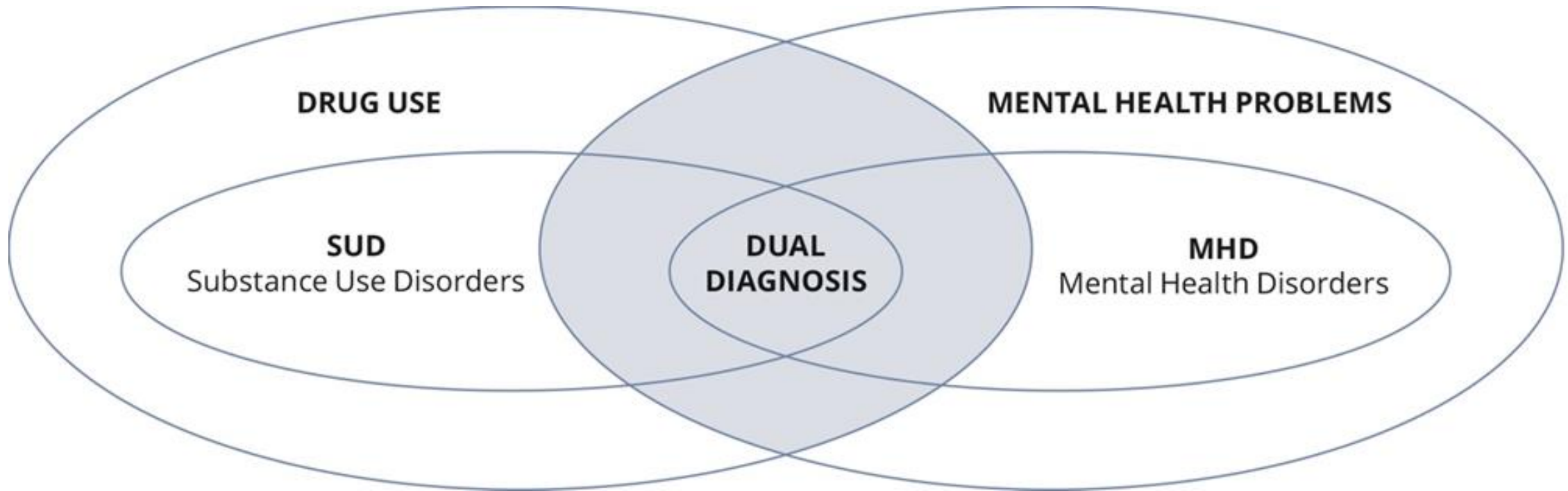
Declaration of interests: none

Rationale

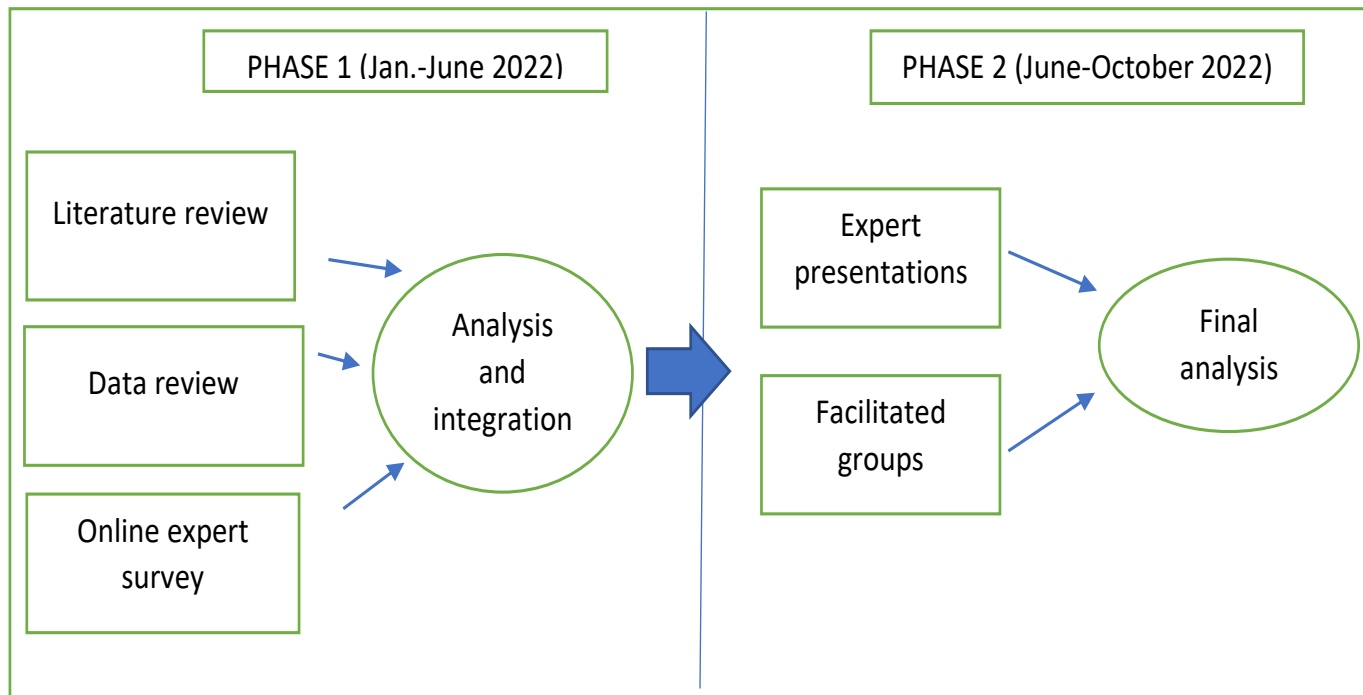
- **Close interlink between mental health and substance use:**
 - PWUD disproportionately affected by mental health problems
 - Mental health problems = a risk factor for high-risk drug use
 - Accentuated since the COVID-19 pandemic
 - Covid-19 specific Trendspotter studies flagged mental health issues
 - Signals that mental health problems increased in people attending drug services and PWUD
- **Data sources are scarce and patchy**

The **main aim** of this study is to increase our understanding of the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on mental health problems among PWUD and consequences and implications for health and social services

Area of the study and terminology



Methodological process: trendspotter



- Literature review: google scholar, pubmed, EMCDDA Bulletin; 84 scientific articles
- EMCDDA data sources: TDI, EWSD, Workbooks, DRD, EuroDEN, GPS
- Online-survey with drug and mental health services – 106 respondents from 24 countries, ¼ mental health services, ¾ addictions services
From 1 to 11 responses per country
- Expert meeting and F2F facilitated groups

Preliminary results

Did the PWUD's mental health problems increase?

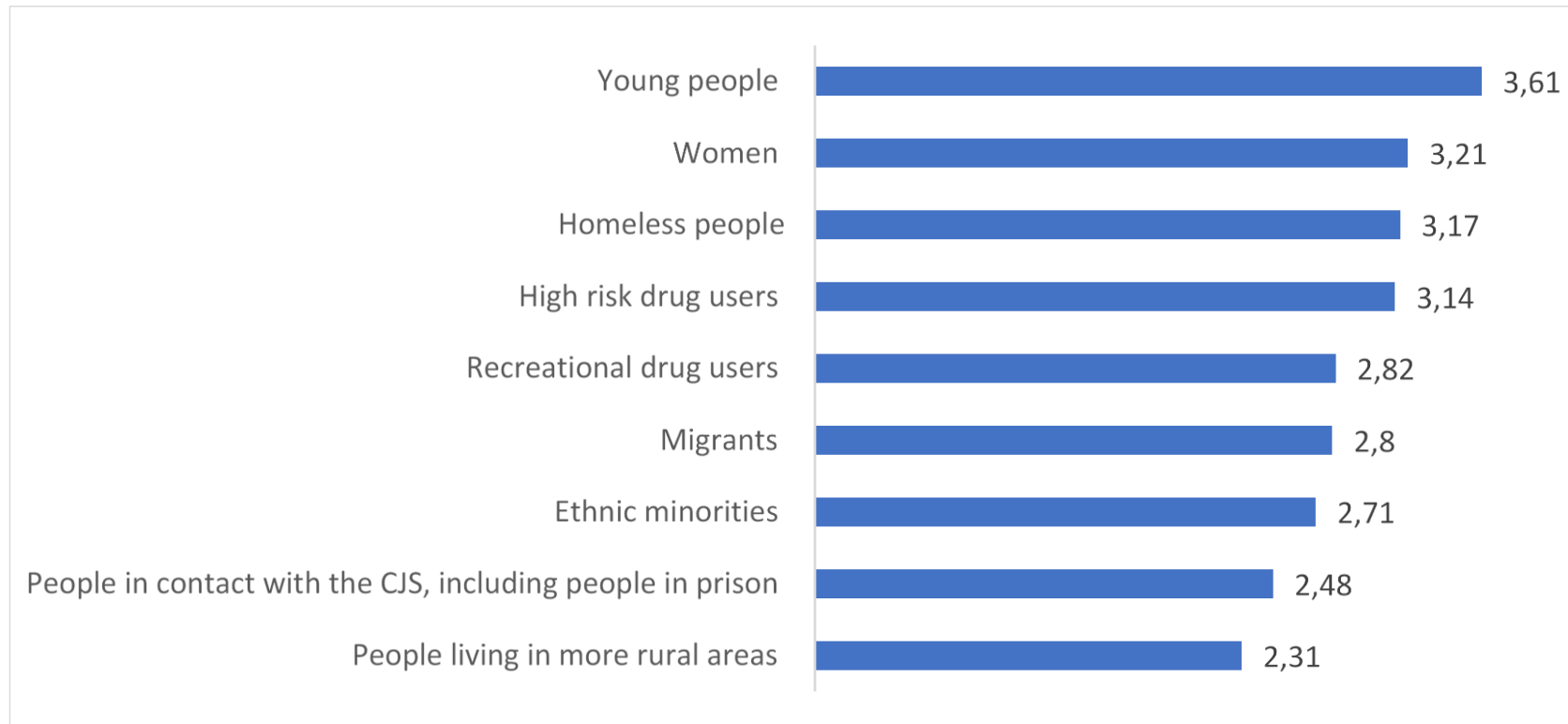
- Comparison between “recreational users” to non-PWUD: while prevalence of perceived anxiety and depression were similar at the first wave, significantly increased among “recreational users” at the second wave (April and November 2020 - Van Baelen et al. 2021)
- Data updated to March 2022, collected through the same instruments, showed a decrease of both anxiety and depression for both targets, with level comparable to pre-pandemic ones (Sciensano data base, 2022)
- Women and unemployed as more at-risk targets (ibidem)
- One study, conducted in Italy on PWUDs in treatment during the first wave, observed depressive and anxiety symptoms in line with those perceived by general population (Martinotti et al. 2020).
- In Sweden, a significant decrease in anxiety-related disorders and affective disorders was even reported, but not in psychotic or substance use disorders (SUDs) (Håkansson & Grudet, 2021).

A greater impact of the pandemic on PWUDs compared to general population are not to be taken for granted.
There is not a unique conclusive answer.

Most affected targets

Survey

Fig. 1 Professionals' view on most affected targets in terms of mental health problems since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic? (mean scores 1-5)



Impact of Covid-19 on recreational users' mental health

- **young people** were the most affected target in terms of mental health problems: difficult to deal with isolation and uncertainty (survey)
- **party settings:** massive return to party settings where signs of anxiety triggered by the use of alcohol and/or other drugs (typically cannabis or MDMA), the crowding, lights and noise (experts working in the harm reduction)
- **gender pattern:** an increased risk of psychological crises (such as acute social anxiety events, e.g. fear to be spiked) and emotional discomfort linked to affectivity and intimate relationships among women (experts working in the harm reduction)
- **LGBTQ+ community:** during the lockdowns affected by fear and scapegoating effect. In this context, throughout 2020 and 2021, methamphetamine and sexualized stimulant injection (slamming) became more popular (Pires et al. 2022).

Impact of Covid-19 on people in treatment for substance disorders' and other vulnerable targets

- Most studied target
- Persons suffering from SUDs were disproportionately affected by Covid-19 due to the collision of different risks factors (literature).
- Increase in the clients' mental health (> stress, anxiety and depression, but also panic attacks and psychiatric disorders) (survey)
- **Risk factors:** previous trauma-exposure, female gender, distress and isolation, income reduction and alcohol use (Blithikioti et al. 2021).
- **Perceived drivers:** measures introduced to limit the virus diffusion, which also determined economic hardship to many people and a reduced accessibility to treatment services.
- **Increase of violence and of aggressions** - towards partners, other people, or professionals
- **Homelessness:** social disruption put them at further risk of poverty and isolation, with amplification of pre-existing mental health problems, in this target typically co-existing with substance use disorders (Marel et al. 2021).

The service responsiveness, and especially the availability to HR services, made the difference for the PWUDs' mental health

How did the increase in mental health problems affected drug use?

The pandemic differently impacted on drug use, mostly according to the previous patterns, and especially to use values and settings (EMCDDA 2020)

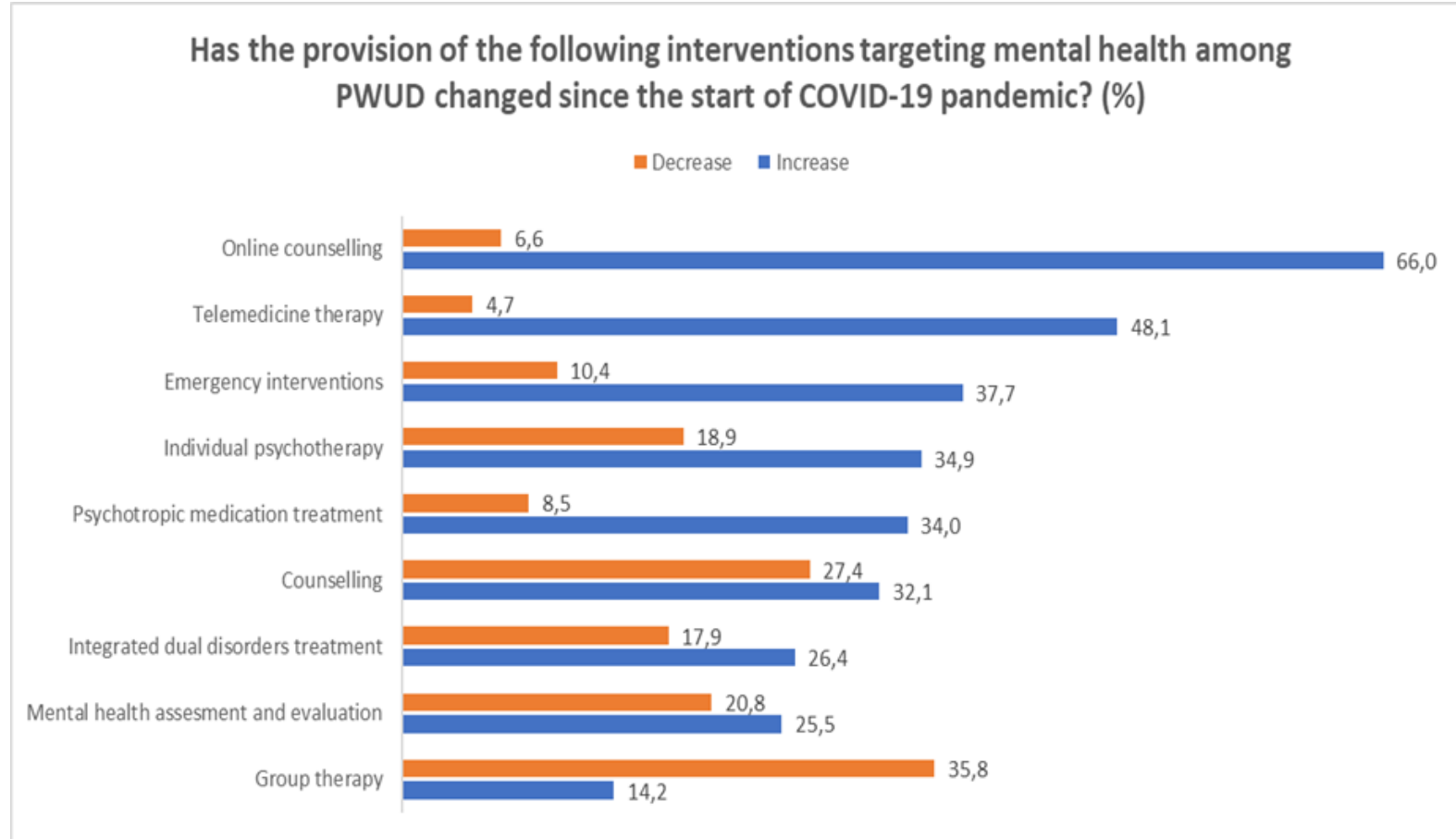
- **Changes in drug use patterns:** increased frequency and dosages of legal and illegal drug use, but also misuse in substitution therapy and other prescribed medicines (> benzodiazepines) (Survey)
- Increase in the consumption of **benzodiazepine** during the pandemic but a decrease in the prescription of benzodiazepine, which may result from gaps in mental health care access and indicate an increased diverted and not-licensed use (Sarangi et al. 2021)
- Users with SUD started using or increased the use of **self-medications substances** – above all alcohol and medications – after the pandemic (Ozan Torun et al. 2020)
- Pregabalin, benzodiazepines, cannabis, cocaine and nitrous oxide were the most significant substances in terms of prevalence and seriousness in the lockdown context (Lapeyre-Mestre et al. 2020)
- **Women and elderly** are more at risk also due to frequent prescription by general practitioners and easier access of benzodiazepines on the web (Expert)

Signs of resilience

- Despite the expected increase in the clients' mental issues, signals of resilience can be found, which suggest not to take such consequences for granted, not even for more problematic users
- Low rates of craving despite the psychological burden related to the pandemic situation (Martinotti et al. 2020)
- A resilience ability higher than expected among AOD services as well as a higher compliance with rules (Lindqvist et al. 2021)
- Increase in help-seeking, meditation and sport activities (Survey)

Successful coping mechanisms and self-regulation strategies used by PWUDs during the pandemic are unfortunately understudied and seldom taken into consideration together with risk factors. They would deserve more attention!

What were the implications for health and social services?



The **responsiveness of services** emerges as a key mediating factor of the impact of Covid-19 on PWUDs mental health from all the data sources, in some cases resulting in unexpected improvement in the clients' well-being:

- improvement in treatment access (online services and counselling)
- take home/home delivery therapy

Other unexpected, key positive consequence: collaboration btw services, rapid assessment, psychological support in nightlife setting, focus on self-care

Learned lessons

- The pandemic as an occasion for learning and renewal
- The importance of flexible, client-centred and solution-oriented treatment in service system
- The need to introduce regular assessment of mental health of AOD treatment services' clients
- Online counselling and telemedicine to be maintained after the pandemic.
- Efficacy of HR
- Holistic approach: material and concrete help to improve the quality of life, i.e. addressing drivers of mental suffering
- Active engagement of patients, families and communities as well as cooperation with other institutions and civil society

The study underpinned the relevance of different public responses in mediating the impact of pandemic, and the importance of addressing first social determinants of mental health

(NOT)conclusive reflections

Not possible to affirm what drivers of and mental health issues are specific for PWUDs

Warning to the long-term impact of Covid-19 – especially of its economic impact – on different targets, provided that PWUDs are anything but a homogenous population

Pre-existing social inequalities made the difference in determining the impact of the Covid-19 on different sub-targets

Women and young people and people with low income: a major burden of negative effects

Coping use of drugs before pandemic increased during COVID-19

Topics of concern: psychological crisis in big events, misuse of benzodiazepines and GABA analogues

Responsiveness of services: shortage of health professionals



Franca Beccaria

President Eclectica+ Research and Training

Deputy director European Masters in Alcohol and Drugs Studies (www.emdas-to.it) University of Torino

beccaria@eclecticapiu.it

www.eclectica.it