

UNDERSTANDING THE YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT PERSPECTIVE OF RAVING IN ALBERTA

December, 2004

In the fall of 2002, the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) initiated a qualitative research project to answer the broad question, “What is the youth experience of the rave scene in Alberta?” The information gathered in the study would help practitioners to refine services to youth. The data for the project was collected from January to September 2003 in the form of 48 participant observation reports from 16 rave events in the province, and 21 in-depth interviews with insiders to the rave scene. Qualitative analysis of this data was conducted, as well as analysis of survey data collected by Rave Safe, a volunteer harm reduction group in Alberta, and a document analysis of relevant newspaper articles.

People have often asked me what drew me into the rave culture. In the beginning, it was curiosity. I wanted to know what they were like, what went on. It was like a strange secret society that I wanted to experience. What kept me going back was the sense of community. There was so much talent to watch and learn from at raves.... Everyone was always so open and eager to share his or her knowledge. Every party was a huge celebration, an event to look forward to. (Alberta raver)

What is a rave?

The rave scene in Alberta has evolved from the classic notion of raves as large, all-night parties where drug use is common and where youth dance to electronic music and subscribe to ideals of peace, love, unity and respect (PLUR). As the Alberta rave scene grew in popularity and later became regulated by city bylaws, rave events have spilled into the regular and after-hours club settings, and attracted corporate sponsorship, sometimes losing the ideals of PLUR in the process.

Who raves?

Raves attract mainly middle-class people, in their mid-teens to late-twenties. The average age of people at most events attended for this study was 18 to 25 years. The average age of ravers is said to be increasing now that the scene is past its peak of popularity and younger teens are being drawn to other entertainment venues.

Why rave?

The most important aspects of the rave scene to participants in this study were the music and the vibe. Participants described raving as an intense physical experience, largely because of the music experience. As well, participants described raves as a unique social space of acceptance and connection that had a positive impact on their lives. Raves were seen as an attractive alternative to the regular bar and club scene because of the absence of alcohol, which participants said resulted in the absence of fights and sexual tension.

What about substance use and raves?

The rave scene is a setting where drug use is generally accepted. While no participants in this study said taking drugs was necessary to enjoy rave events—and some ravers never use substances—several participants said that use of drugs like ecstasy (MDMA) can enhance one’s experience of the music and the sense of connection one feels at a rave.

Most rave attendees who responded to the Rave Safe survey had tried numerous drugs at least once, most commonly alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and ecstasy.¹ Responses to the survey also show that marijuana and tobacco were used on a daily basis, speed/crystal meth was used on a weekly basis, and alcohol, ecstasy, ketamine and mushrooms were used on an occasional basis (less than monthly but more than once) by a substantial number of respondents.

As the rave scene boundaries become blurred with those of the bar and club scene, the use of alcohol appears to be becoming more prevalent. Tobacco use also appears to be high at some rave events, particularly those whose sponsors are linked to tobacco companies.

Prevention and harm reduction in the rave scene

Many ravers appear to be taking active steps to reduce the harm of their drug use. Some of the general harm reduction guidelines they follow are

- using drugs in moderation, but not abusing them
- researching substances before trying them
- knowing the source and origin of their drug
- planning their drug use rather than making spontaneous decisions

Ravers are dismissive of “biased” drug information that only talks about the negative effects of drugs, or that uses “scare tactics.” Ravers were critical of abstinence messages that did not provide information on safer ways to use drugs for those who are going to choose to use them anyway. Participants viewed harm reduction as the best approach for this population, as they felt that abstinence messages would be ineffective.

Conclusions

This study will help youth service providers understand the attractions to the rave scene from a youth perspective, as well as substance use attitudes and behaviours in the scene. From the perspective of participants in this study, raves are a positive space where youth can develop their identities, relationships, and skills, much as other youth do in more traditional settings like youth groups or sports teams. While concerns about drug use at raves are not unfounded, they should be tempered with the realization that raving has been a positive experience for many youth. Prevention and harm reduction strategies for youth that rave will be most effective if they balance addressing concerns about drug use in the rave scene with acknowledging and building on the positive aspects of this youth phenomenon.

For more information or to obtain a copy of the report, “Understanding the Youth and Young Adult Perspective of Raving in Alberta,” contact AADAC Research Services at 427-0116

¹ Survey results are based on a small, convenience sample of ravers, and may not be representative of the entire population of ravers at the event or elsewhere in the province.