

Understanding the youth and young adult perspective of raving in Alberta

Summary report

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Understanding the youth and young adult perspective of raving in Alberta

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)

Purpose of study

The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) conducted this qualitative study to answer the broad research question, “What is the youth experience of the rave scene in Alberta?”¹ Researchers sought to gain an understanding of the rave scene in Alberta from the perspective of the youth who attend raves. The insights obtained in the study would help practitioners to refine services to youth.

Methods

AADAC used a qualitative research approach to learn about the culture of the rave scene in Alberta from a youth perspective. Data was collected for this research primarily through participant observations (48 reports from 16 events), and in-depth interviews (21 interviews). The transcriptions from the participant observations and interviews were analyzed to identify major themes. As well, this study draws on survey data collected by Rave Safe, a harm reduction group in Edmonton, and document analysis of relevant newspaper articles.

What is a rave?

One common definition is that raves are all-night dance parties attended by youth who dance to repetitive electronic music played by celebrated DJs (disc jockeys) on mobile sound systems at clandestine venues, often involving the liberal use of drugs but usually no alcohol use. Raves are distinct from regular bars and clubs in the type of music played (techno or dance music), and in the atmosphere or “vibe” of parties.

This study found that the rave scene in Alberta has evolved and no longer includes only the classic notion of raves set out in the above definition. As the scene grew in popularity and later became regulated by city bylaws, rave events spilled into the regular and after-hours club settings, and

¹ We are using the term “youth” in a generic sense in this report to refer to people in their early teens to mid-20s.

attracted corporate sponsorship. Some rave events feature the music but lack the culture's philosophical ideals of peace, love, unity and respect (PLUR), while other events include both.

Who raves?

Raves attract mainly middle-class people, in their mid-teens to late-twenties. The average age of people at most of the rave 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 power of the music. Rave music—with the heavy bass pounding at anywhere from 130 to 220 beats per minute, played at top volume for hours on end—has an undeniable physical impact on the dancers.

You're not hearing the music; you're not processing it through your ears as much as your body...When you're touching the ground, you're feeling it [the wavelengths] coming through the ground, you're feeling it in your shoes, you're feeling your feet, you're feeling your legs, it's up in your bowels, and it's actually...manipulating your body. (Interviewee, insider)

In addition to the physical intensity of the experience, participants described raves as a unique social space of acceptance and connection that positively affected their life.

It probably changed my life for the better, actually. Before I got into the whole rave scene, I can honestly say I was probably a much more bitter person...It opened my mind up a lot and [I] met a lot of new people and it changed the way I look at things, and...it just changed my entire life pretty much. (Interviewee, insider)

Participants saw the rave scene as an alternative to the regular bar and club scene, and felt that the absence of alcohol at most rave events accounted for the different atmosphere in the two settings. In particular, participants said that raves lacked the sexual tension, and fights or aggression generally witnessed in bars or clubs.

I was attracted to it [raves] for the community that was created. People who were interested in Peace, Love, Unity and Respect, not aggressiveness and power, and it was an alternative to alcohol and the bar scene and all the nasty, angry, out-of-control things that go along with that environment. (Participant observer, insider)

Substance use and raves

The raves 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, several participants said that use of certain drugs, like ecstasy, can enhance or intensify the exhilaration one feels when listening to music at a rave and the sense of connection one feels to other ravers. Some ravers party sober (that is, without using any substances); others have the attitude that responsible drug use in moderation is OK, but drug abuse is not. For a third group of ravers, drug use moves beyond moderation to harmful use and dependency.

Most participants in this study reported having used drugs before entering the rave scene, although raves may have provided them access to “harder” drugs, that is, drugs other than marijuana and mushrooms. As well, most participants spoke of using drugs in settings other than raves.

Most rave attendees who responded to the Rave Safe survey had tried numerous drugs at least once. Alcohol and marijuana were the drugs most respondents had ever tried (98%, 94% respectively), followed by tobacco (88%) and ecstasy (88%).² Responses to the survey also show that a substantial number of respondents used marijuana (44%) and tobacco (77%) on a *daily* basis, speed/crystal meth (29%) on a *weekly* basis, and alcohol (44%), ecstasy (35%), ketamine³ (25%) and mushrooms (56%) on an *occasional* basis (less than monthly but more than once).

Respondents of the Rave Safe survey were much more likely to have ever tried various drugs than were the students participating in The Alberta Youth Experience Survey 2002. However, rates of use from the Rave Safe survey are comparable to data on substance use of ravers in Quebec (Gross, Barrett, Shestowsky, & Pihl, 2002), and one study found no significant difference between substance use of rave attendees and bush party attendees (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2002).

Ravers viewed heroin, crack cocaine, and speed/crystal meth as the most harmful drugs. Heroin and crack cocaine were also considered “dirty” and “unattractive” drugs by interviewees. Marijuana and mushrooms were considered the least harmful substances, even rated as less harmful than alcohol and tobacco by Rave Safe survey respondents.

Generally speaking, fewer respondents of the Rave Safe survey had tried the drugs that were viewed as most harmful. However, two drugs did not match up in terms of their risk rating and level of usage: speed/crystal meth and cocaine/crack. Respondents rated both drugs as quite harmful and yet almost half the respondents had tried these substances at least once.

² 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.

³ Ketamine is a general anesthetic used on animals and humans.

Participants in AADAC's study and respondents in the Rave Safe survey reported on various *perceived positive effects of their drug use*, including

- being more tolerant/open-minded
- being more outgoing and sociable
- being more relaxed or at ease
- letting go of their inhibitions and fears

Participants also reported on various *perceived negative effects of their drug use*, including

- low motivation/lethargy
- weight loss and/or loss of appetite
- tiredness/fatigue
- decrease in physical health
- emotional instability
- lowered immune system

Participants in AADAC's study spoke of various *factors that they felt led to increased drug use*, including

- belonging to a peer group that uses
- hanging out in settings where drugs are accessible (like raves)
- starting to experiment with drugs at an early age
- having independence from one's parents at an early age, such as owning one's own car or moving out on one's own

Participants also spoke of *factors they felt limited their drug use*:

- belonging to a peer group of non-users
- having interests outside the rave scene

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

This study provides information about the actions ravers take to keep themselves and others safe while using drugs, including the work of volunteer-run harm reduction groups in the scene. Most 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 they try them

- knowing the source and origin of their drug
- planning their drug use rather than making spontaneous decisions

Participants also said it was important for youth to know that “you don’t have to do drugs to rave.” Participants also suggested that prevention and harm reduction workers should place the decision of whether to use or not in the hands of the youth, and work to be non-judgmental about the youth’s decision to use or not.

Volunteer-run harm reduction groups have been active in Alberta, as in most other rave locations across Canada and throughout the world. These groups provide information on how to use drugs more safely, as well as on safer sex. They appear to be viewed favorably by ravers, who see the information they provide as more balanced than information that only promotes abstinence.

This study gives important insight into how this population views various harm reduction or prevention approaches. Ravers are dismissive of information that they perceive as biased, that is, information that only talks about the negative effects of drugs, or that uses “scare tactics.” Similarly, participants in this study thought there was a significant gap in information as some information sources suggest abstinence as the only way to avoid harm, without providing any 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.

Conclusion

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. Drug use is common at rave events, but at the same time, being part of the rave scene has been a profoundly positive experience for many participants in this study. 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.

References

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