

## Patterns of Cocaine Use and Drug Driving of Socially Established Long-Term Users

Dr. Steffen Zdun\*

*Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence / Scientists, University of Bielefeld, Germany*

**\*Corresponding Author:** *Dr. Steffen Zdun* Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence / Scientists, University of Bielefeld, Germany, **E-mail:** [steffen.zdun@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:steffen.zdun@uni-bielefeld.de)

**Abstract;** *This empirical exploratory study addresses the impact of cocaine use on the driving performance and behaviour of middle-aged, socially established long-term users in Germany who habitually drive under the influence of cocaine. For this purpose, addicted users were compared with social/recreational users. 30 qualitative focused interviews were conducted with cocaine users aged 30–67 from two major, two big, and two small cities. Cocaine was largely perceived a performance-enhancement when it comes to driving, although some negative impact on one's own attentiveness was noticed among social/recreational users. Addicted users did not admit any negative impact of cocaine on driving and were rather unable to drive without the drug. A major concern of all interviewees was losing one's driver's license, which motivated the use of certain coping strategies in respect of improved DUID controls and a reduction in DUID among social/recreational users. However, among all interviewees this did stimulate neither the final avoidance of drug consumption nor DUID. The basic concern of losing the driver's licence suggests that it might be worthwhile continuing and even extending current efforts of law enforcement in this respect.*

**Keywords:** *DUID, cocaine use, performance-enhancement, coping strategies*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Even if there is a relatively large body of research on the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol and cannabis (e.g., As bridge et al., 2005; Bedard et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2010), the effects of cocaine on driving performance and the behavior of drug drivers have been rather neglected. Furthermore, the few empirical studies on cocaine particularly examine young partygoers or participants in therapies and victims of traffic accidents (e.g., Albery et al., 1998; Kelly et al., 2004; Macdonald et al., 2004). Thus there is scarce knowledge of middle-aged, socially established long-term cocaine users who habitually drive under the influence of this drug (for an exception see Kemmesies, 2004<sup>1</sup>; Zdun, 2014<sup>2</sup>), although this might be the biggest group of cocaine users apart from young partygoers.

Davey et al. (2005) suggest that many drivers perceive the effect of cocaine on their driving performance rather positively, which reduces the awareness of the dangers of DUID. Neale

(2003) suggests that this might also refer to techniques of neutralization, for instance, by claiming situation-dependent impacts of drugs on driving and drugs having different individual influence on driving. While such techniques require further empirical scrutiny, it is especially under-examined whether the awareness of danger changes through the years among long-term users.

Moreover, drug driving cannot be understood by neglecting the chance of getting caught in DUID controls. It can rather be assumed that drug driving is particularly affected by the individual fear of losing the driver's license, especially in the milieu of socially established long-term users that require one for their jobs (Kemmesies, 2004; Zdun, 2014). The perception of this risk seems to relate largely to developments of the equipment for easy roadside tests by the police and the training for detecting DUID (Davey et al., 2005). However, relatively little is known about the coping strategies of experienced drug drivers regarding such improvements of the police in the past decade. It appears particularly worthwhile to explore developments of drug driving among these cocaine users because they experienced these changes and might have altered their consumption and driving patterns due to them.

<sup>1</sup> Note that this study is just secondarily interested in drug driving and rather addresses consumption patterns in this milieu.

<sup>2</sup> This paper provided a first impression of our results and is extended by this paper.

The empirical data presented in this paper explore the drivers' awareness of the danger of drug driving over time, as well as changes in DUID controls and driving behavior in Germany. This includes a comparison of addicted cocaine users, for whom the drug has become a priority in their lives, and social/recreational type users.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Participants

30 cocaine users (23 males, seven females) participated in qualitative focused interviews. The participants mean age was 41 years (range 30–67 years). Participants had been consuming cocaine for 13 years on average (range one–27 years) and consumed the drug at least for a while on a weekly basis. 16 currently consumed cocaine at least several times a year; nine consumed cocaine even still on a weekly or daily basis. 19 had been holding their driver's license without any interruption, four have at least lost it once due to cocaine, four due to cannabis and three due to alcohol; two were still without it at the time of the interview and did not assume to get it back. Selection criteria included the use of cocaine for more than ten years and the repeated experience of driving under the influence of cocaine.

The interviews identified two general types of users. First, nine addicted users who resemble the general DSM IV criteria of drug dependency, where drug use becomes the main priority in their lives. Those were cocaine users that maintained an almost daily consumption of the drug; some admitted that they required short breaks at times in order to come down from the drug after being awake for too many hours or when being short of money at times for a day or two to afford the drug. The constant use of the drug was rather based on avoiding the depressive mood that cocaine users admit in the period of coming down than on a specific kick or fun. In addition, they could barely imagine driving without "being high" and partly still performed poly-drug use including amphetamines, speed, cannabis, and alcohol.

The second group, typically consisting rather of 21 social or recreational users, ranged from weekly cocaine consumption on weekends to occasional consumption a few times a month or year. However, even the latter had been at least engaged in weekly cocaine use in former times. Moreover, some social/recreational type users also had taken cocaine and other drugs on an

almost daily basis in former times but had been able to minimize their drug consumption due to certain life events (e.g., parenthood). On the whole, not only cocaine consumption declined in general among these users, but also DUID. Their drug consumption—partly including alcohol and cannabis—and drug driving was, however, still related to personal relaxation and social events.

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited through the use of a snowballing technique. This approach is based on the use of peer networks and referrals. Initial contact was informally made with individuals who were known to the research team or with local bouncers in different German cities. Referrals were made by respondents who admitted to know further users that might participate in the study. Those were then asked by these respondents about being interested in participating in an interview and in making contact with the research team, without any obligation to get involved in the study. Furthermore, all interviewees received a financial incentive to increase individual motivation for participation. On the whole, the sample cannot be considered to be representative. However, it provides exploratory data on a largely neglected topic of research.

Interviews were conducted in two major, two big, and two rather small cities in Germany, i.e. providing, for instance, different "necessities" to go to parties and music events on weekends by car. Participants were given the chance to decide whether to conduct the interview at their homes or at neutral places; they were informed that it was just important to avoid disturbance during the interview and that they should feel comfortable at the chosen location. The latter mattered because they might feel rather afraid to be identified by others or that third parties would listen to their stories. Thus, it was most important to ensure highest standards of anonymity that were explained to each respondent before the interview started.

The interviews, lasting between 45–90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Open coding was performed to identify units of meaning and content categories. Subsequently, cross-case analysis was performed to identify themes that cut across interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). An additional questionnaire served for collecting demographic data, more exact details about drug consumption,

perceptions of drug driving and personality traits.

### 3. RESULTS

The data demonstrates various similarities but also several differences between both types of users. For instance, both perceived little impact of cocaine on their capacity of reaction, but social/recreational users rather admitted deteriorating effects on driver's attentiveness in comparison to addicted users. Probably due to a lack of serious motor-vehicle accidents, all participants, however, mainly interpreted cocaine as a performance-enhancing drug when it comes to driving. They uniformly agreed on driving much better on the sole influence of cocaine than in case of poly-drug use or the sole influence of other drugs, such as alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy, and LSD. Thus it even became a common theme that cocaine was functionally used—at least in the (early) period of heavy drug consumption on party weekends—as a means to drive home in a better shape. Although most social/recreational users are at least nowadays aware that this kind of “fitness” cannot be compared with driving sober, some still considered it an option of getting home quickly on “short distances”.<sup>3</sup> As it will be further elaborated in the following, addicted users worried less about this issue. They rather perceived cocaine consumption a necessity for driving “safely” because they get in a state of extreme nervousness when being without the drug for too long.

#### 3.1. Awareness of the Danger of Drug Driving

As already indicated, most users underestimated the impact of cocaine on driving performance, although social/recreational users appeared to develop at least some awareness of effects of lack of attentiveness on driving performance over time. This is, for instance, indicated by the fact that they used less neutralization in respect of their driving behavior but rather admitted challenges for driving while being intoxicated. Addicted users, in contrast, strongly denied difficulties of DUID and at times even reacted aggressively on corresponding questions, suggesting some sort of awareness of danger but demonstrating no change of mind.

Nevertheless, altered risk perception among social/recreational users did not necessarily change their driving behavior on party weekends. Actual reductions of DUID rather

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<sup>3</sup> Note that most interviewees perceived distances of up to 100km or one hour as tolerable.

seem to be due to a general decline in consumption, i.e. opportunities for DUID.

I23: Well, it can still happen that I drive on such occasions. I might think afterwards that it was wrong but you are a different person when you are on cocaine. You may do a lot of things that you wouldn't do without drugs.

In other words, the awareness of danger might be severely deteriorated by the use of cocaine.

Furthermore, it is a common theme that no one admitted any serious danger for him/herself or others of getting involved in a car accident. This does at least relativize the perception of danger of DUID among social/recreational users. However, the data do not allow for predicting whether this was rather due to indifference or just another kind of neutralization strategy to avoid questioning one's own behavior.

Nevertheless, this fits to the picture that all participants appeared to be more concerned about the risk of losing their driver's license than about anything else.<sup>4</sup> Although most interviewees did not at all act paranoid in respect of this danger, at least they acknowledged that they had become used to drive as cautiously as possible to avoid DUID controls and accidents. As it will be further elaborated in the following, this was strongly related to more rigid and better controls for illegal drugs by the police. Note that the relevance of the driver's license among those interviewees was especially based on its necessity for their jobs and for maintaining their lifestyle.

I14: I can't do my job without the license. If I would lose it, I lose my job, and if I lose my job I cannot afford the drugs anymore. A weekend costs up to 250 Euros. We are not such good friends that one would pay for the other if he cannot afford it anymore. So it would be impossible to go on like that without a job. Thus I have to take care about the license.

However, the quotation above cannot be adequately understood merely by neutralization strategies, indifference, and/or egoism. The very

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<sup>4</sup> However, the data do not provide sufficient information to finally verify whether the concern in respect of one's attentiveness and driving performance might also mainly be due to being afraid of getting caught by the police.

effects of long-term cocaine consumption, such as overestimating one's own capabilities and feelings of invulnerability, also matter, even though those seem to be—as expected—more predominant among addicted users than among social/recreational users.<sup>5</sup> Especially phenomena such as drivers offering the steering wheel to the co-driver on a highway when they feel tired instead of stopping the car and changing the driver or drivers closing their eyes on a highway for a while just to verify the sudden impression that nothing can happen might probably only be explained by such effects of cocaine. Furthermore, accounts on perceiving oneself a much better driver than one's mates under the influence of drugs may at least partly also refer to personality changes.

Despite all these narrations of feelings of total control, it appears to occur especially in case of constant, daily cocaine consumption that one gets used to the also common impression that one is no longer able to drive safely—and to perform other everyday chores as well—without being intoxicated.<sup>6</sup> The common theme of those accounts is extreme nervousness which is described as a mixture of the generally negative feeling of coming down from cocaine and of becoming rather paranoid.

I6: It's difficult to explain, but I can't help myself getting tense. I am not able to concentrate on anything and get distracted by everything. Sometimes I have to drive in this state, but I try to avoid it and to never be without drugs at home, so that I may not have to go to a dealer like this. [...] When I am like this, I have the constant feeling that the police is after me.

Although those cocaine users are aware of being unfit for driving a car, they merely perceive this a personal challenge and rather in terms of

feeling uncomfortable. The danger of driving is rather neglected.

This matches perfectly with the lack of awareness in respect of the following issue. It appears to be rather common among addicted cocaine users to be awake for several days until they feel so exhausted that their body needs a break. These periods, which could last up to 170 hours in extreme cases, were described as partly highly productive but partly also as rather lethargic, most of the time just thinking about life and not doing anything productive. However, it was not questioned at all whether one is fit for driving then; it is more likely interpreted as a condition in which one would do most things automatically without doing any mistakes, including driving.

Also social/recreational users still had some party weekends when they stayed awake from Friday to Sunday. But they made sure to take the last dose of cocaine early enough to feel fit for the job and for driving on Monday. Thus it can be argued that both types of users primarily showed different strategies of coping with the difficulties of coming down from cocaine. While one group tries to avoid the condition of coming down altogether, the other one functionally decides about the moment of coming down and tries to avoid negative effects of cocaine on their everyday lives. However, although most social/recreational users did not consume the drug on a weekly basis anymore, several users ignored that it takes more than a day until the drug is completely processed by the body and that it might still affect their behavior.

Moreover, it appears that DUID to a party was perceived problematic neither in former times nor in the present by all interviewees. Due to the fact that being afraid of losing the driver's license seems to be the main concern in respect of DUID and the experience that police controls are barely conducted at the time when people go to parties in Germany, it is still no exception that cocaine is used among friends before leaving and also while driving.

I9: The others put a line on a jewel case and you just take a nose. This can happen more than once on longer distances.

Only few participants explained this by a specific kick or fun, rather by getting to the same level as the others while going to a party. This was perceived so normal that it was not

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<sup>5</sup> Some addicted users even showed narcissistic personality traits which seemed to contribute to these feelings. The data do not, however, allow for clarifying whether such a personality had been developed already before the start of cocaine consumption, only occurred due to the drug, or rather exists in close comorbidity to drug consumption (see, Deutsche Hauptstelle für Suchtfragen, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Note that current social/recreational users that took cocaine almost every day in the past shared this impression but got rid of it by reduced drug consumption.

questioned by any participant. Some interviewees just admitted that the first dose of cocaine might have such a strong and sudden impact on their concentrativeness that they prefer waiting at least for half an hour before starting to drive or taking more cocaine in order to “refocus”.

On the other hand, over time the incidents of DUID declined in general among most social/recreational users, which appears mainly to be related to improvements of DUID controls. First, while some participants maintained prior consumption patterns, they switched to public transport or taxi. Second, others still go to parties by car but use alternative means for the way back home. Third, most participants went together with friends to certain events, such as festivals, and stayed at the location for at least one more day after the last dose of cocaine. Fourth, some respondents reported that in recent years it has become—even in their environment—more common avoiding driving as long as drugs might be detected through blood, sweat, or urine tests. In these cases cocaine consumption is restricted to vacations or long holidays. Only a few participants had a family, but those with children especially showed this fourth behavioral change and argued that the responsibility of being a parent had contributed to this development.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2. Changes in DUID Controls and Reactions

While all interviewees agreed that the 90’s were a safe haven in terms of DUID controls in Germany if one did not drink alcohol or appeared so wasted that a blood test was done, they got to learn that the police were finally able to detect various kinds of substances through easy roadside tests but also to recognize illegal drug use in many cases simply by one’s eyes or certain reflexes, due to better training. Interestingly, the long-term users of our sample had almost no personal experiences with such controls. Some had never been controlled by the police, some had just been controlled in the 90’s and the police had let them pass without a blood test, some had lost their driver’s license due to alcohol or cannabis, and only a minority had got caught under the influence of cocaine.<sup>8</sup> The low

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<sup>7</sup> But note that not even those were able to completely give up on cocaine consumption; even female participants just had a break during pregnancy and for two–twelve months thereafter.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the interviewees also claimed very few corresponding experiences in their environment, so that a still relatively high dark figure can be assumed.

level of personal experience in turn even further emphasizes the strong impact of these improvements on drug driving.

Moreover, the data indicate that this low level also relates to coping strategies of long-term cocaine users that are particularly interested in avoiding losing their driver’s license. While most interviewees had at least one friend that had already lost his/her driver’s license, they seem to have got even more cautious. On the one hand, in particular social/recreational users rather used other means of transportation or increased the span of time before driving after consumption. On the other hand, all interviewees improved their strategies to outwit the police. While it appears to have been sufficient to make detours in the 90’s to avoid police controls, especially social/recreational users decided to try taking advantage of their increased age and appearance.

I13: Well, I don’t look like a regular partygoer anymore. The cops don’t pay so much attention on older guys if you have a decent car and decent clothes. I just don’t fit in the pattern.

I27: It really makes a difference what you look like. If you’ve got a baby seat in the car, the right stickers on the back, the right clothes and if you don’t look completely wasted, chances are low that they ask you whether you have taken drugs. It also depends on how you talk to them. You have to act confidently.

Some interviewees even claimed that these measures were just taken for misleading the police. Infant equipment, appropriate stickers on cars, specific kinds of cars and decent clothes for driving back home from parties were merely employed as a kind of masquerade. Furthermore, certain excuses for driving at night were just trained for the case of a DUID control. Based on the few corresponding accounts, indeed these strategies seem to work at times; at least they serve as a means of allowing those users to still neglect the dangers of DUID.

More important, these and further strategies are also used by addicted users that for job reasons go by car on a daily basis. On the one hand, they particularly count on an outward appearance as business men with appropriate clothes and cars; on the other hand, they count on self-assuredness in conversations which is essential for their jobs but probably even increased by the effects of cocaine. Due to their way of driving,

they might be controlled for speeding at times<sup>9</sup> but do not really perceive a danger that they might be controlled for taking drugs.

I2: Of course I can't avoid getting stopped by the police at times because I like driving fast and I drive a lot. But they never noticed anything. Do I look like a drug user? The police believe in authority and I know how to talk to them to get what I want.

Even though such impressions of invulnerability might prove wrong one day, they demonstrate not just the effectiveness of this strategy but also that drug consumption seems to be still rather perceived a behavior pattern of partygoers on weekends by the police. If one acts not especially carelessly, it seems to be quite easy to avoid drug detection by driving at specific times of the day. Thus, experienced cocaine users even claimed, for instance, that it might occur more conspicuous if one regularly goes by taxi to a supermarket or for conducting other everyday chores in one's own city at daytime than to go by car. Due to such impressions and a common rejection of public transport it can become a regular pattern that almost everything is done DUID. This even matches with the problem of no longer perceiving cocaine consumption a social event but just a normal and functional aspect of one's everyday lives.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study provides findings on the effects of cocaine on DUID of middle-aged, socially established long-term users who habitually drive under the influence of this drug in Germany. The data indicate some important insights in respect of cocaine consumption and drug driving, distinguishing social/recreational users and addicted users. Firstly, all interviewees rather ignored the dangers of DUID, in particular in regard of others. But while addicted users completely avoided admitting problems of this behavior, social/recreational users appeared at least to be aware of some difficulties in attentiveness. However, this also seemed to have little impact on individual DUID which was rather decreased due to concern of losing one's driver's license and major changes in personal circumstances (e.g., parenthood).

Secondly, especially the driving behavior of addicted users has to be understood not just in terms of indifference and egoism but also to be based on drug-induced overestimations of one's capabilities and the very impression of being unable to perform even everyday tasks, such as driving, without being intoxicated. This state of mind massively restricts one's options for avoiding DUID which social/recreational users can at least control on workdays.

Thirdly, the data show that all users worried little about DUID to parties because they do not expect police controls in the early evening. However, due to improved DUID controls, social/recreational users partly alter their driving behavior, for instance by using alternative means of transportation or by letting more time pass between consumption and driving especially on the way home. The data of the addicted users indicate no such change, due to the above mentioned perceived necessity of DUID.

Fourthly, all interviewees noticed large improvements of DUID controls and police detection techniques to trace down cocaine consumption in the past decade, even though only few had personal experiences. In particular, social/recreational users seemed rather impressed by this development and drove more seldom under the influence of drugs. Moreover, they improved their strategies to outwit the police in case of getting in a DUID control. Singular affirmative accounts of such strategies that seem to circulate in this milieu appear to reduce the perceived danger of DUID controls to a certain extent, so that the intended impact of these controls is still limited. Furthermore, addicted users act particularly unaffected by these improvements, having the impression that they can still outwit the police by their appearance, talking skills, and the times at which they regularly go to work or perform everyday tasks.

On the whole, the data indicate that especially social/recreational users rather alter their consumption and driving behavior, due to internal and external factors that might harm their general lifestyle. While they maintain at least occasional cocaine consumption for the sake of pleasure, questions of the risks of this behavior and especially of drug driving are largely ignored. On the other hand, addicted users can hardly imagine changing their consumption and driving patterns which are strongly interrelated, so that DUID is not questioned but rather perceived normal.

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<sup>9</sup> Note, however, that they still largely seem to worry about traffic rules, due to the necessity of keeping their driver's license.

Conventional education and prevention strategies appear to be rather obsolete for both long-term users that seem more likely to respond at least to negative experiences and fear. A closer look at the data even demonstrates that most participants—as expected especially for the addicted ones—vigorously reject therapies and other kinds of intervention that are meant to change their mind about drugs. In general, it seems that further improvements and extensions of DUID controls might be one of the only tools to minimize DUID among them. Specifically, it appears, firstly, worthwhile conducting more DUID controls in the vicinities of big party events upon arrival and not just at the end. Secondly, it seems necessary to conduct more DUID controls aiming at addicted users and considering their strategies of avoiding controls.

These findings have, however, several limitations. The major shortcoming is the lack of representativeness of this explorative study, although the results appear to be promising, confirming some findings of current research and adding insights on issues that have as yet been neglected. Furthermore, it is questionable in how far these findings might be telling for young partygoers. It can, for instance, be assumed that long distances to events, the regularity of partying, and relatively high costs of alternative means of transportation, as well as the danger of getting caught in DUID controls have other effects on them than on socially established long-term users.

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