



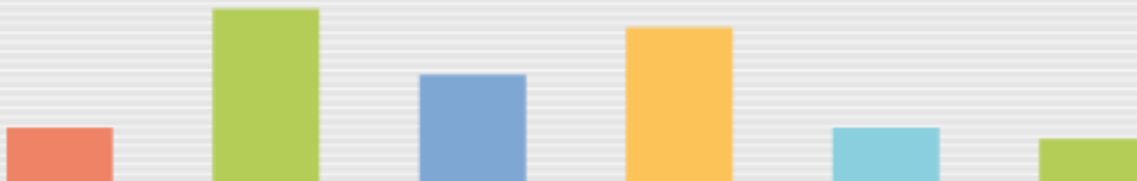
European Monitoring Centre  
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

# Impact of COVID-19 on drug services in the Western Balkans

Kateřina Škařupová

16 July 2020

Social, mental and economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic to the vulnerable populations in SEE



# Series of mini-Trendspotters on Impact of Covid-19

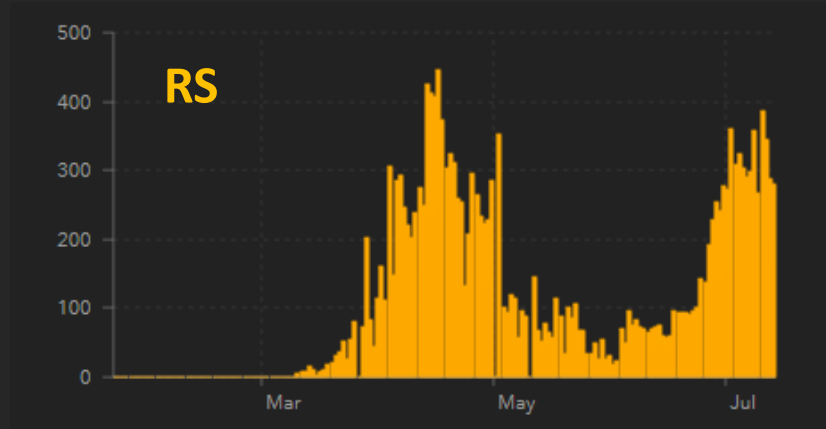
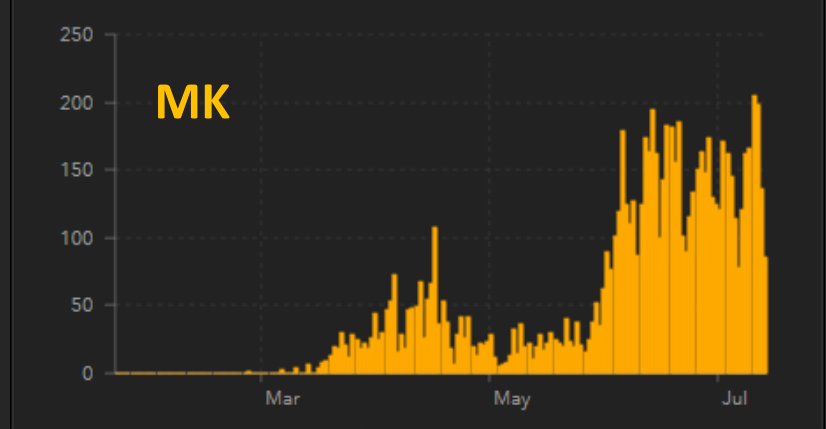
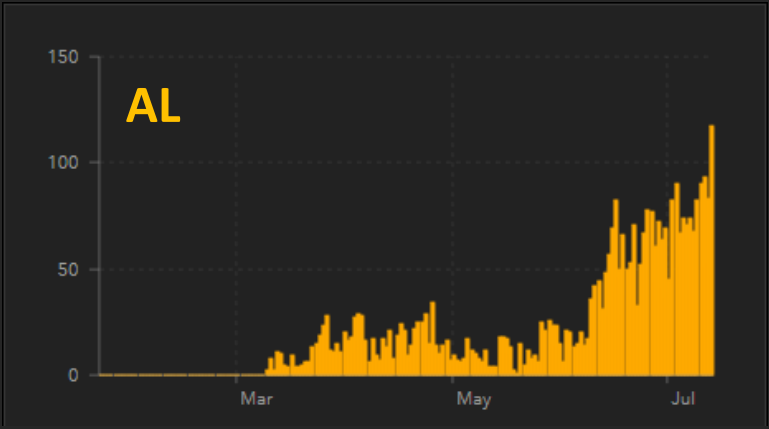
- **Drug services (June+)**
  - **Changes, adaptations, and challenges**
  - **Best practice**
- Drug use and harms (over Summer)
- Supply and security (in September)
  
- **More questions than answers, still...**
- **Conflicting details**



# Key messages

- **Restrictions, rather than virus**
- **Reduced availability/access to services during the shock phase; not yet back to normal**
- **Enormous efforts to adapt**
- **Fragility of the some aspects of care**



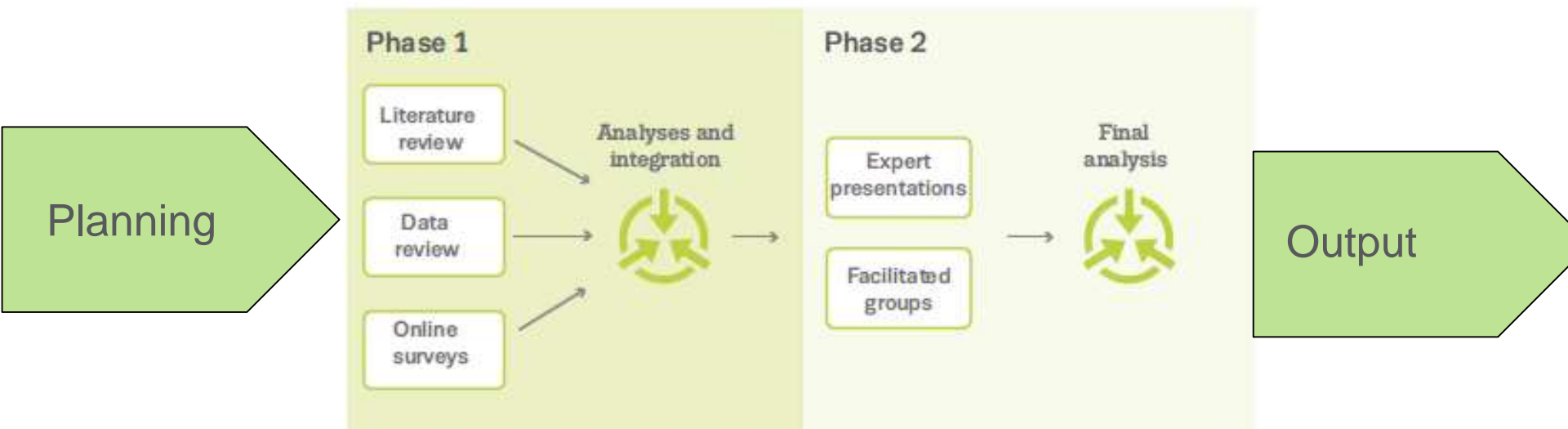


# About the method

# Trendspotter study process

[https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/manuals/trendspotter-manual\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/manuals/trendspotter-manual_en)

Two phases of data collection and analysis



# What are the key characteristics?

- **Rapidity**
- **Multidisciplinary engagement**
- **Multi-level analysis – local, national, regional**
- **Mixed Methods – qualitative and quantitative**
- **Triangulation – completeness and confirmation**
- **Adds a qualitative, human component**



# Core methods

DPNSEE

- Desk/lit review
- Routine data

- Online surveys
- Facilitated Groups

NDOs

Experts & specialists

KI networks



# Trendspotter methodology in the Western Balkan region

1. **Series of Trendspotters on Impact of Covid-19**
2. **Online Trendspotter Methodology training**
3. **Broad network of expert from various fields**
4. **Virtual Trendspotter Research Team**
5. **Rapid Investigations**

Sustained focus on the region, capacity to provide rapid insights, action oriented approach.





## EMCDDA trendspotter briefing

May 2020

### Impact of COVID-19 on drug services and help-seeking in Europe

The situation regarding public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly evolving. Up-to-date information can be found in the guidelines prepared by national public health sources and the regular updates from the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) and the [World Health Organization](#). The EMCDDA has created a [COVID-19 resource hub](#) for people who use drugs and drug service providers.

#### Summary

Since the start of 2020, European countries have been experiencing an unprecedented public health threat with the emergence of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). In order to investigate the effects and implications of this pandemic for drug services in Europe, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction instigated a mixed-method trendspotter study to provide a snapshot of the current situation. This exercise provides a rapid assessment of the state of play in respect to the impact of COVID-19 on service provision and help-seeking behaviour among people who use drugs.

Preliminary findings suggest there has been a decline in the availability of European drug services during the first two months of the pandemic, both those providing treatment and those providing harm reduction interventions. Drug services have largely been affected in similar ways to other frontline health services, with some providers forced to close down or restrict access. Services still working directly with clients need to implement new hygiene and social distancing measures which can be especially challenging in some of the settings in which drug services operate. It is also reported that services are increasingly using mobile or online platforms to mitigate for the current difficulties in providing face-to-face care.

While they are trying to keep operations running efficiently, service providers have identified a number of specific new COVID-19-related challenges. These include: accessing sufficient personal protective equipment for staff; informing and educating clients about COVID-19 risks; managing infected clients and concerns about staff vulnerability to infection; helping more marginalised clients to access essential hygiene-related services; challenges linked to the use of remote technology (phone and video); staffing shortages; problems enrolling new clients and managing the demand for substitution



## EMCDDA trendspotter briefing

June 2020

### Impact of COVID-19 on patterns of drug use and drug-related harms in Europe

The situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it continues to evolve rapidly. Regular updates are provided by the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#) and the [World Health Organization](#), and in most countries national public health guidelines are available. The EMCDDA has created a [COVID-19 resource hub](#) that provides access to up-to-date materials on drugs and COVID-19-related issues.

#### Summary

Since the start of 2020, European countries have been experiencing an unprecedented public health threat with the emergence of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). In order to investigate the effects and implications of this pandemic for people who use drugs in Europe, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) instigated a mixed-method trendspotter study to investigate the current situation. This briefing provides a snapshot of the state of play with respect to the impact of COVID-19 on drug consumption patterns and drug-related harms during the early stages of the pandemic.

- Preliminary findings suggest an overall decline in drug use, or some forms of drug use, in Europe during the first 3 months of the pandemic.
- A combination of factors could explain this, notably national confinement measures, which have reduced opportunities to use drugs within social environments, and the disruption of street drug markets, resulting in a decline in the availability of some substances.
- The use of cocaine and MDMA appears to have been most affected, largely linked to the closure of the night-time economy and the implementation of stay-at-home measures. Decreases in the use of these drugs have been confirmed by wastewater studies in a number of European cities.

# Impact on Services in WB

# Changes & challenges: service provision

- **Some types of services discontinued**
  - Outpatient counselling/psychosocial treatment (AL, ME, MK, RS)
  - Primary health care settings / GP (RS)
  - Hospital based treatment (AL, MK)
  - Drop-in centres (BH, MK, RS), outreach (XK)
- **No new clients, unless emergency (AL, ME)**
- **Restricted regimen**
  - Reduced hours
  - Limited services, i.e. no HIV/HEP testing
  - Moving outdoors and virtual



# Changes & challenges: new issues

- **Security and safety measures**
  - Expensive/inaccessible protective equipment for staff & clients (and now?)
  - Lack of awareness, down-playing the problem
  - Client education & adherence (distance, masks, hygiene)
- **New clients & clients with new problems**
  - New substances (benzodiazepines, alcohol, OST and other medicines)
  - Basic needs not covered (food, hygiene, shelter)
  - Over-boarder workers
  - Released prisoners
- **Stigmatization & access to care**



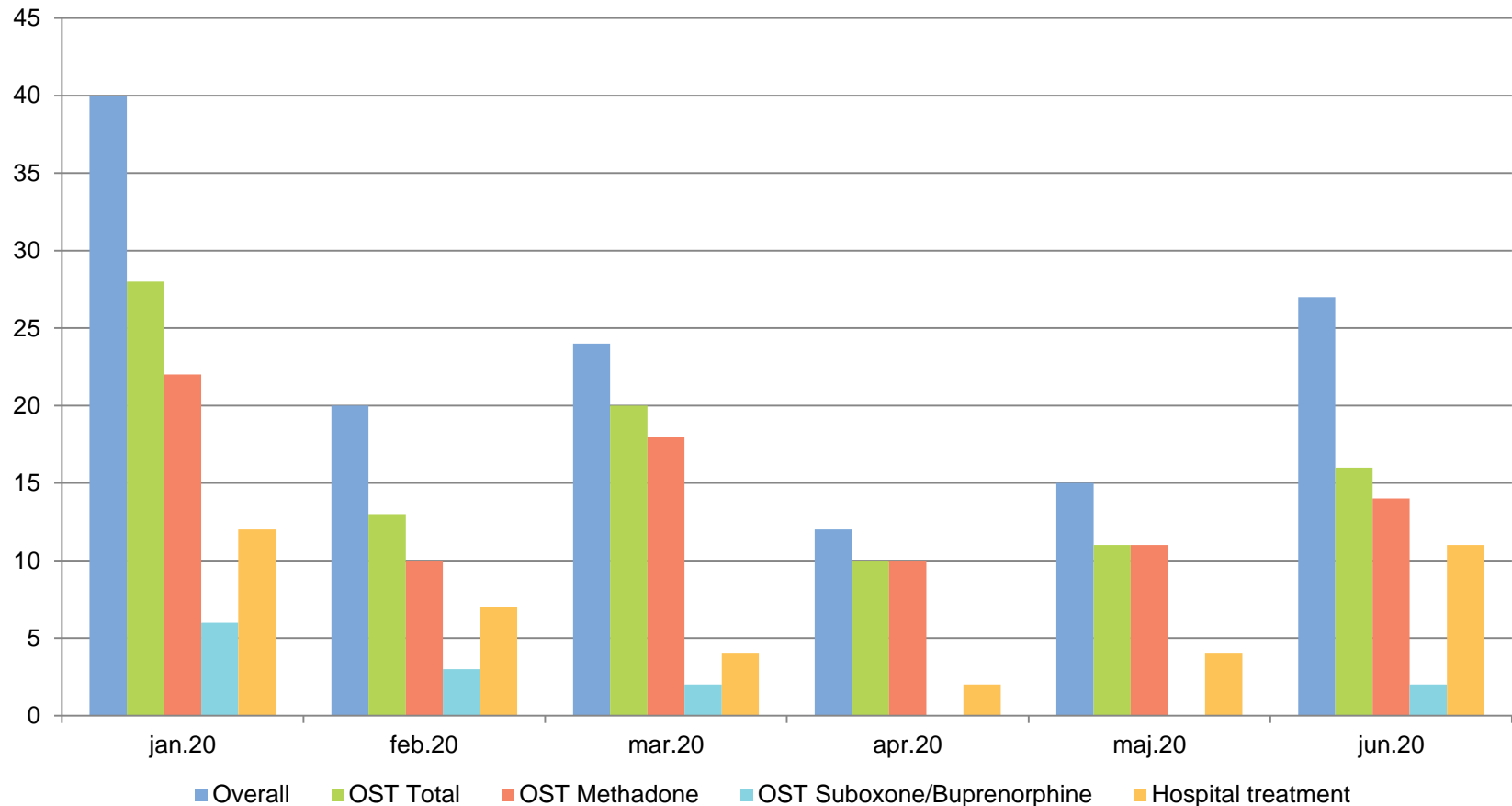
# Treatment seeking and access to care

- **Decrease in help seeking (AL, RS, ME)**
  - Availability
  - Self-isolation and quarantine
  - Travel to treatment limited / not possible (all)
  
- **Increase in OST patients**
  - Released prisoners, returnees from abroad (MK)
  - Or: worsened access to street heroin?

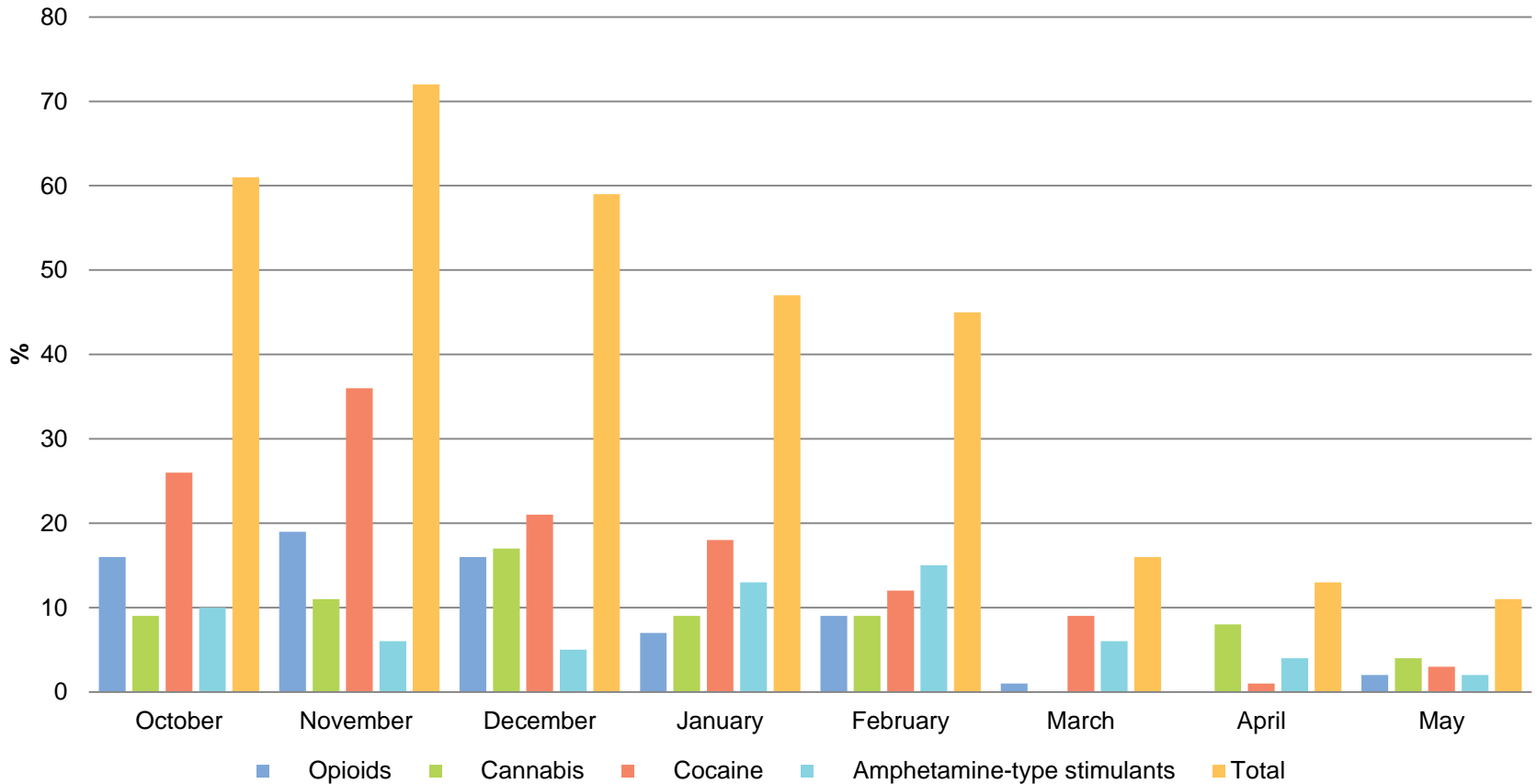


# Bosnia and Herzegovina – Republika Srpska

## People starting drug treatment in 2020 – total and by treatment type



# People receiving drug treatment at the Toxicology and drug use treatment Clinic (MTUHC, Albania)





# Aksion Plus (Albania)

## Total number of patients in OST therapy

Jan- June 2020	No. of patients in OST
January	855
February	881
March	885
April	884
May	890
June	882

## Number of NEW patients entry in OST therapy

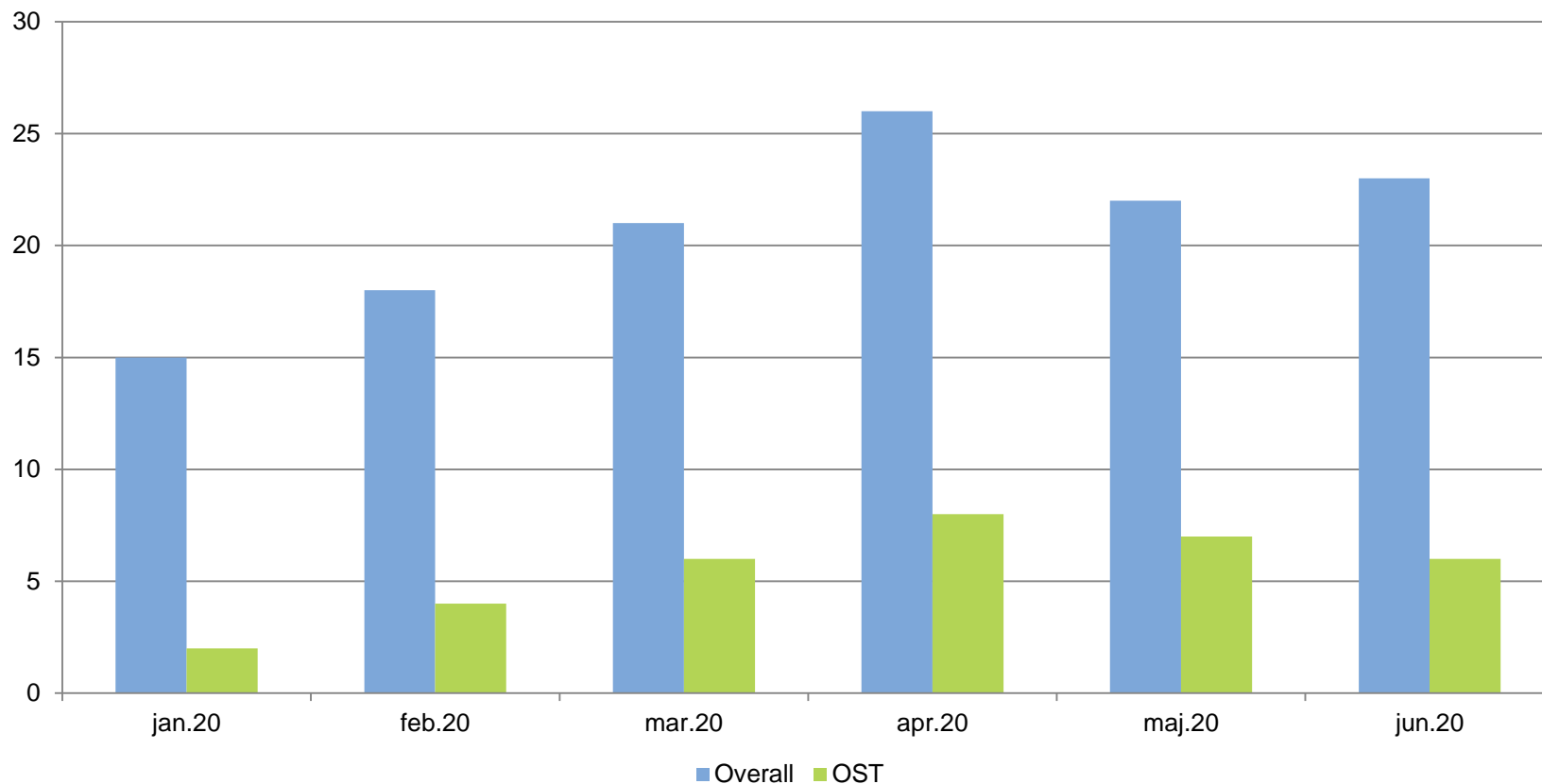
Jan- June 2020	No. of NEW patients in OST
January	1
February	0
March	2
April	9
May	2
June	0

- **Methadone not available in Albania for three weeks now (June/July).**
- **Clients transition to Buprenorphine, or to withdrawal management.**



# Labyrinth (Kosovo\*)

## People starting drug treatment in 2020 – all three cities



\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

# Adaptations and innovations

- **Safety and security measures (all)**
  - Protective materials and education
- **Online services and telemedicine (all)**
  - Clients offline and/or not digitally savvy
- **Take home OST (up to 2 weeks); OST delivery and decentralisation (all)**
  - But no relaxation on new admissions; somewhere the contrary
  - Only temporary adaptations
- **Peer-workers in HR (BH)**
- **New or increased provision of food and hygienic services**
- **Covid-19 testing and medications**
- **New guidelines (international, national, organization-level)**



# Regional specifics

- **Roma community/minority**
- **More challenging institutional context**
- **Reliance on international support/donors**
- **Fragility of some services (HR and OST)**
- **Crisis as an opportunity to grow? (Signs from RS, MK.)**



# Next steps

- **Briefing on services (case-studies needed)**
- **Impact on drug use and patterns and drug-related harms (July/August)**
  - Expert survey: <https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Covid-19-IPA7-health>
  - Facilitated Groups (29/7-7/8)
- **Impact on drug markets and crime (September)**
- **Trendspotter Network and regular updates**
- **European Web Survey on Drugs (2021)**





European Monitoring Centre  
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

**Thank you very much for all the efforts and dedication.**

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<https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/Covid-19-IPA7-health>

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