

TRENDS AND ATTITUDES ON DRUG ISSUES IN HIGH SCHOOL TEENAGERS

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REZUMAT

Obiectiv: Aducerea în atenție a unui nou fenomen social, susținut de procentul în creștere al adolescenților care declară că au consumat droguri ilegale și a consecințelor ineficienței programelor de prevenție, precum și a lipsei de personal specializat în acest domeniu de sănătate publică de mare actualitate. **Material și metodă:** Între 1997 și aprilie 2005 mai multe studii au fost întreprinse în țara noastră: 1999 și 2003 ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs), 2001 și 2004 – studii întreprinse de organizația Salvați Copiii, 2002 și 2004 RHRN (Romanian Harm Reduction Network) studii calitative și cantitative, 2003-2004 și 2004-2005 studii de evaluare a Agenției Naționale Antidrog. Lucrarea de față prezintă date obținute în studiul CAST 3, efectuat în liceele județului Timiș între 2003-2004, pe care le analizează în contextul rezultatelor deja obținute în studiile menționate anterior. Populația țintă a fost reprezentată de un lot omogen și reprezentativ de 1056 de adolescenți cu vârste cuprinse între 14-19 ani. Studiul a fost bazat pe răspunsul anonim la chestionare. **Rezultate:** Datele obținute atrag atenția asupra unui număr în creștere de adolescenți care au consumat droguri. Drogul preferat de adolescenții din Timiș este cannabis. Patru din 100 de liceeni din Timiș au consumat cannabis, aceste date fiind sub media raportată pentru Europa (21%); ele sunt peste media raportată în România (3%). Prevalența consumului de droguri ilegale în 2003 a fost de 6,5% (5,4% în 2001), în timp ce datele raportate la nivel național indică o cifră de 4,5%. În cele mai multe cazuri liceenii se rezumă la consumul experimental (62% în 2003 și 70% în 2001) sau ocazional (19%). Totuși, proporția liceenilor care consumă droguri ilegale frecvent a crescut de la 11% în 2001 la 19% în 2003. **Concluzii:** România se află pe ruta balcanică a traficului de droguri ilegale, județul Timiș fiind unul din județele cu cel mai ridicat procent de consumatori de droguri din țară, după București și Constanța. Lipsa unei finanțări adecvate se reflectă în lipsa rețelelor specializate de diagnostic și tratament, precum și în lipsa personalului calificat în asistență și reintegrare socială. Adolescenții și tinerii adulți care consumă droguri își asumă riscuri care pun în pericol viața lor și a celor din jurul lor. Campaniile regionale antidrog ar trebui să fie orientate spre prevenție și abordarea holistică a consumatorilor, contribuind astfel la reintegrarea lor socială.

Cuvinte cheie: droguri, dependență, toxicitate, liceu, adolescent

ABSTRACT

Objective: Drawing attention to a new social phenomenon of increasing illicit drug use among teenagers and consequences of inefficient prevention programs, as well as lack of specialised personnel for this important public health issue. **Material and methods:** Several major studies were undertaken in our country during 1997-april 2005: 1999 and 2003 ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs), 2001 and 2004 Save the Children Organization studies, performed in Bucharest; 2002 and 2004 RHRN (Romanian Harm Reduction Network) qualitative and quantitative studies, 2003-2004 and 2004 – 2005 National Antidrug Agency evaluations and projects. This paper reports the data gathered in the recent CAST 3 study performed in high schools from Timis County (2003-2004) and analyses it in the setting of the obtained results from the above mentioned studies. The target population is a representative, homogenous cohort of 1056 high school teenagers, 14-19 years old. The study is based on anonymous questionnaires. **Results:** Our data shows that increasing numbers of teenagers have already used drugs or will do so at the first opportunity. Cannabis is the most preferred drug by high school teenagers in Timis. The proportion of high school teenagers who have used cannabis in Timis County is 4%, less than reported figures for Europe (21%), but higher than the reported values for Romania (3%). The prevalence of use of any illicit drugs, in 2003 was 6.5% (5.4% in 2001), while the nation-wide figures raise to 4.5%. In most cases they are experimental (62% in 2003 and 70% in 2001) and occasional users (19%). The proportion of systematic users rose from 11% in 2001 up to 19% in 2003. **Conclusions:** Romania is on the Balkan route for illicit drug traffic, Timis County being one of the counties with the highest reported figures for drug consumption, after Bucharest and Constanta. Lack of funding is reflected into lack of professional diagnostic and therapeutic networks, as well as specialized personnel for assistance and social reinsertion. Adolescents and other young adults who use drugs often take risks that endanger their health and the health of others. Anti-drug regional campaigns should be especially oriented towards prevention and influencing social approaches to consumers, thus contributing to their social reintegration.

Key Words: drugs, addiction, toxicity, high school, teenager

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INTRODUCTION

A drug is any chemical that produces a therapeutic or non-therapeutic effect in the body.

Teenagers may be involved with alcohol and legal or illegal drugs in various ways and experimenting with such substances during adolescence has become a common issue. Unfortunately, teenagers often do not see the link between their actions today and the

consequences tomorrow, while having a tendency to feel indestructible and immune to the problems that others experience. Using alcohol and tobacco at a young age increases the risk of using other drugs later in life.

Adolescence is by definition a time for experimenting. There are multiple reasons teens tend to feel attracted to using alcohol and other drugs, including, but not limited to curiosity, a sense of well-being, stress reduction, feeling grown up or desire to fit in.

The ever increasing drug traffic and consumption in the general population, supplied by relentless international networks of organized crime, have imposed new approaches and more rapid reactions from all institutions involved in fighting this phenomenon.^{1,2} In 1993 the European Union created the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) that gathers data from all member countries. Every country conducts a general population study once in minimum 3 years, reporting back to the EMCDDA, which comparatively analyses the information obtained on cohorts with different populations regarding age structure, ethnic background and number of individuals.

The ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs) collects data on young people's alcohol and drug habits. Three surveys have been done so far: in 1995 (26 countries), 1999 (30 countries) and 2003 (35 countries). Romania was included in the 1999 and 2003 surveys.³

In our country although several other studies have been performed, the whole picture of drug request, market and usage in the general population was incomplete and founded on different types of questionnaires.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The CAST 3 is the third of a series studies performed in Timis County designed to assess alcohol, tobacco and drug use in high school teenagers. It was

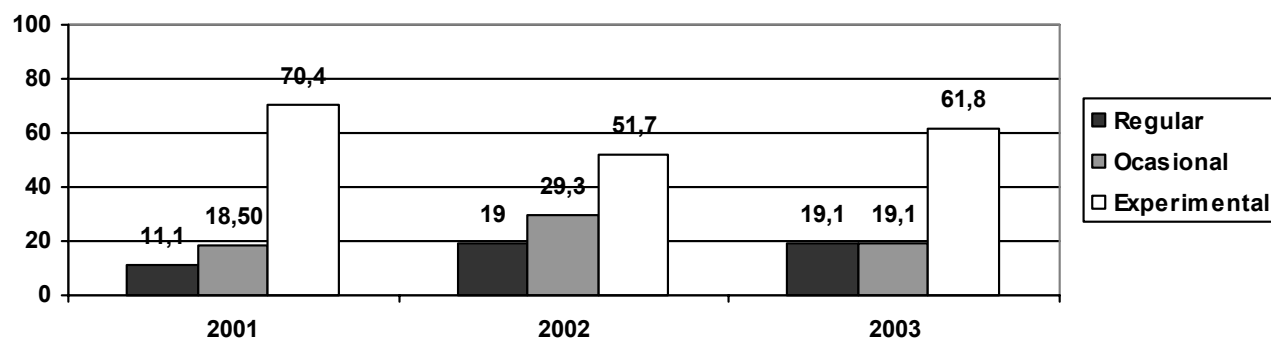


Figure 2. Drug use pattern among self reported users

performed by professionals from the Public Health Department in 2003-2004 and involved a representative and homogenous cohort of 1056 randomly selected teenagers from theoretical and industrial school groups, aged 14-19. The methodology was represented by anonymous questionnaires, which the teenagers were asked to complete in a classroom, under written examination conditions.

The investigators set as purposes the identification of the following: age at first alcohol drink, tobacco and alcohol use, type of alcoholic beverages and drugs, place, entourage and reasons for consuming drugs and alcohol, frequency and quantity of alcohol, tobacco and drug use, acceptance levels of alcohol, tobacco and drug use, methods of drug administration. Only data related to illegal drugs is object of this present paper. Distribution of students by type of high school: 51.0% vocational high schools; 34.3% regular high schools; 7.5% economy studies profiled high schools; 8.2% religious.

Male to female ratio of students was 1.13:1.

RESULTS

The prevalence of use of any illicit drugs, in 2003 was 6.5% (5.4% in 2001), most of them experimental (62% in 2003 and 70% in 2001) and occasional users (19%), for high-school students. (Fig. 1) The

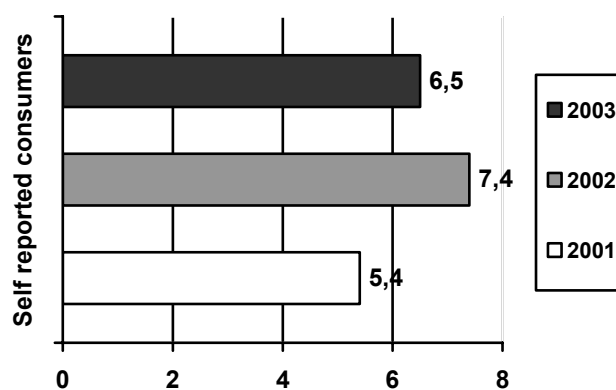


Figure 1. Proportion of self reported drug users in Timis

proportion of systematic users rose from 11% in 2001 up to 19% in 2003. (Fig. 2)

Girls are less tempted to try illegal drugs than their male colleagues. This may come from cultural and religious background, still acting very demanding on young women's social behavior. (Fig. 3)

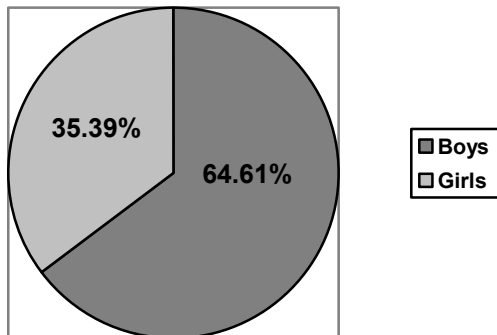


Figure 3. Gender distribution of self reported drug users

Family background as reported by teenagers who admitted to using illicit drugs:

- 39% - parents are fighting all the time, violent behavior of adults and almost daily drinking habits;
- 28% - parents neglect their children due to their jobs;
- 19% - parents treat their children with disrespect and neglect their opinions;
- 14% - parents treat their children with respect and care.

The preferred drugs by high-school students, in 1999, were cannabis, followed by cocaine, heroin and ecstasy. In 2003, the preferred drugs were cannabis, followed by ecstasy, cocaine and heroin. Figure 4 presents the distribution of self reported illegal drug use by frequency.

Out of the positive responders, 50.6% were multiple drug users, with experimental or regular use of at least two illicit drugs.

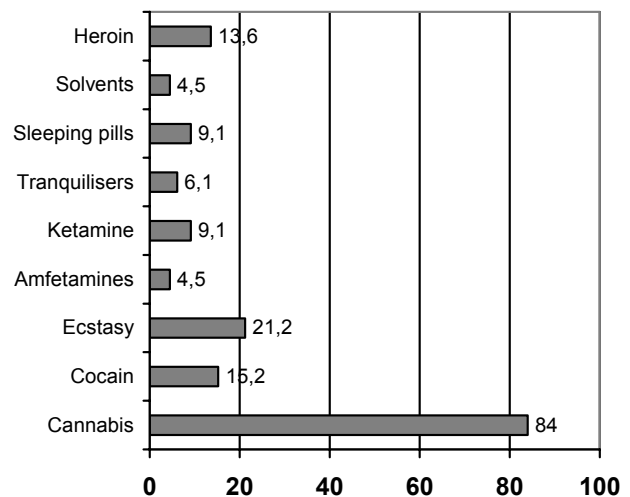


Figure 4. Distribution of self reported illegal drug use by frequency

The proportion of high-school students who have used cannabis (4%) is lower than the European average (21%), but higher than the values for Romania (3%).³

The general attitude of the interviewed teenagers towards cannabis use is described in Figure 5.

For illicit drugs other than marijuana, the prevalence in Timis County (1.7%) is lower than national values (3%) and than Europe reported figures (6.6%).

Self reported reasons for illegal drug use were:

- 39.87 % - peer pressure;
- 29.25 % - curiosity;
- 26.92 % - boredom, his/her lover are users;
- 24.4 % - to calm down physical or psychological pain;
- 23.4 % - to protest against adults' attitude toward them.

Self reported sources of illegal drugs:

- 74.2 % - friends and colleagues;
- 11.05 % - dealers acting near their high schools;
- 7.52% - bars and discotheques;
- 7.13% - cafes, small restaurants, clubs.

The characteristics of potential drug users can be described by:

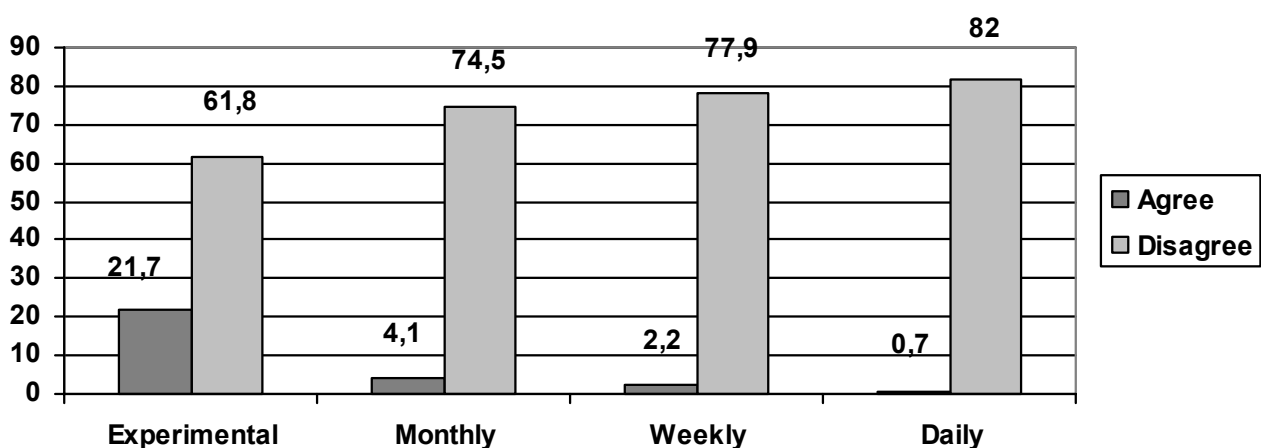


Figure 5. Attitude towards cannabis use among teenagers

- self reported cases of teenagers claiming they are willing to try an illegal drug at first chance they might have - 9.12%;

- temptation of trying increases with the age: from 3.12% (14-16 years old) to 6% (17-19 years old).

The 3 main reasons to refuse drugs are: fear of brain damage, of addiction and of death. Law enforcement, religion and access to drugs have less importance in resisting to drug abuse.

Testing the student's knowledge on effects of drugs showed that only 47% were aware that using drugs is associated with psychological and/or physical addiction; only 44% are aware that using drugs affects their thinking and can cause long term brain damage; 8% are still thinking that only heroine and cocaine are dangerous drugs, but cannabis, ecstasy and speed are not perceived as dangerous, while 1% consider that recreational usage of drugs is safe and does not lead to addiction.

DISCUSSION

The use of illegal drugs in Europe is increasing, especially among young teens. First time marijuana use occurs in middle school, and alcohol use can start before the age of 12. The use of marijuana and alcohol in high schools has become common.³

The first study about drug abuse in Romanian teenagers was done in 1997, in 30 high schools and the result showed that 4.5% of students were using illegal drugs. The ESPAD - Romania, in August 1999 showed an increase of self reported cases to 10% of high school students while the 2003 study, performed by the same organization showed a further increase, by an alarming 50% of teenagers who admitted to having consumed illegal drugs.³

CAST 3 data showed that teenagers from Timis county are more prone to use cannabis than their Romanian peers. However the retrieved data is more than 5 times lower than similar figures in Europe. On the overall, Timis county is among the counties with the highest levels of drug abuse among teenagers, while the 1st and 2nd place in this respect are claimed by Bucharest and Constanta.⁴

Risk factors associated with drug abuse among adolescent students were assessed in a study from South America. High-risk areas associated with drug abuse were family and mental health, while recreation, behavior and school are considered moderate risks. Peers, social abilities and drug use were identified as low-risk factors.⁵ This data is different from all studies reported in Romania. One conclusion after the

second study of the Save the Children Organization in Romania was that the first steps in illegal drug use are done together with close friends. This was also a finding of our study, which yielded a 74.2% of teenagers which declared to have obtained their drugs from friends and colleagues.

The general attitude towards drug consumption and consumers showed the following: the majority understands the difference between "drug consumption" and "drug consumer". Half of all interviewed subjects, in Romania, (ESPAD 2 and 3, CAST 1, 2, 3) consider the "drug consumer" to be an ill person (50.2%) rather than felons (5.3%), while consumption is incriminated by 49.9% interviewees. Only 19.2% of the interviewed subjects consider that drug consumers should be accepted as any other member of society.^{3,4,6}

Association of data that refers to experimenting and consumption of different illicit drugs (cannabis, heroine, ecstasy) for precise purposes and age is extremely significant from the statistical point of view. It is clear that tolerance towards consumption decreases with age, the probability of 15-24 years respondents to approve such illegal substance being markedly higher. Our study showed that one third of the interviewed teenagers agreed to experimental cannabis use.^{3,4,6}

The third most commonly abused drug is marijuana (after tobacco and alcohol). Abuse rates for marijuana in 2004 range from slightly over 15% in 8th grade to 45.7% in 12th grade in US.⁷ The same pattern of use was found in our study, cannabis being the favorite illicit drug for teenagers in Timis County.

In a Turkish study the prevalence of tobacco use at least once in life time was 55.9%, for alcohol use it was 45.0%, for cannabis use 4.0%, for inhalant use 5.1%, and for heroin and ecstasy use 2.5% among secondary school students.⁸ Another study, undertaken in Brazil showed that heavy use of legal and illegal drugs was found as follows: alcohol (11.9%), tobacco (11.7%), marijuana (4.4%), solvents (1.8%), cocaine (1.4%), medications (1.1%) and ecstasy (0.7%).⁹ The findings of the 2 studies were similar to ours.

CONCLUSIONS

Although declared public health issue since 1990, there is still insufficient focus and funding dedicated to this important cause in Romania. Data from studies all over the world shows that the population most at risk for drug abuse and addiction is represented by teenagers and young adults. Illicit drugs are

predominantly consumed by teenagers and young adults, reason for which prevention programs should be primarily oriented towards younger population (as young as 15 years) in order to postpone as much as possible the start of consumption.

Our data from the CAST 3 as well as data from all other studies undertaken in Romania showed that our teenagers tend to follow in the footsteps of their European peers, showing increasing percentages of drug abuse. This occurs despite several national drug prevention programs, which authorities admit have failed until now.

Some teens will experiment and stop, or continue to use occasionally, without significant problems. Others will develop a dependency, moving on to more dangerous drugs and causing significant harm to themselves and possibly others.

Importance of surveillance of peer pressure and entourage of teenagers by parents and teachers should not be underestimated.

As a recommendation, informational-educational-communication programs for illicit drugs, addressed to the community should be based on scientific evidences and should have a high degree of specificity for drug type, individual and social context.

Social support for drug consumers should be

strengthened through awareness programs that bring into focus the bio-psycho-social dimensions of this phenomenon.

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