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Extent and patterns of drug use by students at a Spanish university

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ABSTRACT

A drug-use survey of 1,010 randomly chosen students at the University of Oviedo in Spain was carried out in 1986. The survey instrument used was a self-administered questionnaire.

During the 12 months before the survey, 91 per cent of the students had used alcohol, 57 per cent tobacco, 17 per cent cannabis, 9 per cent tranquillizers, 5 per cent amphetamines, 2 per cent cocaine, 2 per cent hallucinogens, 1 per cent opiates and 0.6 per cent volatile solvents. At some time in their lives, 96 per cent of the students had used alcohol, 70 per cent tobacco, 31 per cent cannabis, 19 per cent tranquillizers, 15 per cent amphetamines, 5.5 per cent hallucinogens, 5 per cent cocaine, 3 per cent opiates and 3 per cent volatile solvents. Both male and female students had begun using volatile solvents early in life. The age of first cannabis use for the majority of users was between 16 and 18. The users of other illicit drugs covered by the study had not begun using them until they were 18 or older.

Introduction

In 1986, a study was undertaken at the University of Oviedo in Spain to determine the extent and patterns of student drug use in order to facilitate appropriate planning of preventive measures. Due account was taken of the methodology used and the findings documented in several similar studies [1-4].

Method

The student sample was obtained by randomly selecting names from a register of the 23,320 students enrolled at the university.

A self-administered questionnaire developed by the World Health Organization [5] served as the survey instrument. The questionnaire included items on the use of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines, hallucinogens, volatile solvents, tranquillizers and opiates, as well as personal characteristics

of the respondents, such as age, sex and the number of years of study completed. Respondents were also requested to indicate any drug use during their lives, the age of first use of drugs, as well as drug use in the 12 months and in the month prior to the survey.

Results

Survey data obtained from 1,010 completed questionnaires revealed that 59 per cent of the respondents were female and 41 per cent were male; the average age of the students was 21.5. The average number of years of completed study was 16. Seventy-eight per cent were enrolled at the university as full-time students when the study was conducted.

The table below shows that nearly all of the respondents (96 per cent) had used alcohol at some time in their lives. Tobacco ranked as the next most commonly used substance (70 per cent), followed by cannabis (31 per cent), tranquillizers (19 per cent), amphetamines (15 per cent), hallucinogens (5.5 per cent), cocaine (5 per cent), opiates (3 per cent) and volatile solvents (3 per cent). The order of ranking remained the same for all three of the periods examined.

Drug use by students at the University of Oviedo, 1986

(N = 1 010)

Substance	Used at some time in the student's life		Used during the 12 months prior to the survey		Used during the month prior to the survey	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Alcohol	965	96	916	91	752	75
Tobacco	709	70	572	57	495	49
Cannabis	314	31	174	17	73	7
Tranquillizers	161	19	84	9	33	3
Amphetamines	151	15	54	5	22	2
Hallucinogens	56	5.5	19	2	2	0.2
Cocaine	46	5	23	2	5	0.5
Opiates	34	3	10	1	1	0.1
Volatile solvents	28	3	6	0.6	1	0.1

During the 12 months prior to the survey, alcohol had been used by 91 per cent of the respondents, tobacco by 57 per cent, cannabis by 17 per cent, tranquillizers by 9 per cent, amphetamines by 5 per cent, hallucinogens by 2 per cent, cocaine by 2 per cent, opiates by 1 per cent and volatile solvents by 0.6 per cent.

During the month preceding the survey, alcohol had been used by 75 per cent of the respondents, tobacco by 49 per cent, cannabis by 7 per cent, tranquillizers by 3 per cent, amphetamines by 2 per cent, cocaine by 0.5 per cent, hallucinogens by 0.2 per cent, opiates by 0.9 per cent and volatile solvents by 0.1 per cent.

Significant sex differences in tranquillizer users were not observed. The use of other substances was more frequent among male than among female students.

In most cases, age was not significantly related to the frequency of drug usage. With regard to cocaine and amphetamines, however, the frequency of usage increased with age.

With regard to tobacco, most boys had begun using it earlier, between the ages of 13 and 16, whereas most girls had first started smoking at 16. First use of alcohol peaked for males at the age of 13-14 and for females at the age of 15-16.

Among cannabis users, 8 per cent of the males and 4 per cent of the females had begun using it at the age of 14, while the majority, 76 per cent of the males and 71 per cent of the females, had tried it for the first time when they were 16-18 years old.

The distribution patterns of first cocaine use were similar for both sexes, with 25 per cent of the respondents beginning such use at the age of 18 and most others beginning when they were 19 years old or older.

A small proportion of the users of amphetamines, hallucinogens, tranquilizers and opiates had begun using those drugs before the age of 14, while the vast majority had begun when they were 18 or older.

The first use of volatile solvents peaked for both sexes at 12-14 years of age.

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