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# Alcohol, tobacco and cannabis use among ninth grade students (14-15-year-olds) in 2021

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In the first quarter of 2021, 1 972 ninth grade students ("troisième" or grade 3 in France would be the equivalent of secondary school in the UK or grade 9 of Junior High School in the United States) responded to a specific issue of the national adolescent health and substance use survey (EnCLASS) in middle and high schools. This exercise, delayed by one year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was initially intended to provide information on the 'perceived quality of life of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students' a part of programme 230 entitled "Student Life" of the "Annual Performance Project of the Ministry of National Education". Adolescents were surveyed on their initiation to tobacco, alcohol and cannabis [1] and, using new questions, about heavy episodic drinking, problematic cannabis use, methods of acquiring tobacco and alcohol, introduction to nitrous oxide and gambling practices.

## ■ Alcohol remains the substance most frequently used by adolescents

In 2021, 64.1% of students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade had already drunk alcohol in their lifetime. This figure is the lowest ever recorded at this age since 2010 (-19 points), with a differential of -11 points between 2018 and 2021 accounting for almost 60% of the total decrease. In other words, the number of students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade who have never drunk alcohol has doubled from 16.8% to 35.9%. Use in the last 30 days prior to the survey is also at its lowest level, with 31.8%

**First results of the EnCLASS survey among 2 000 ninth grade students.**



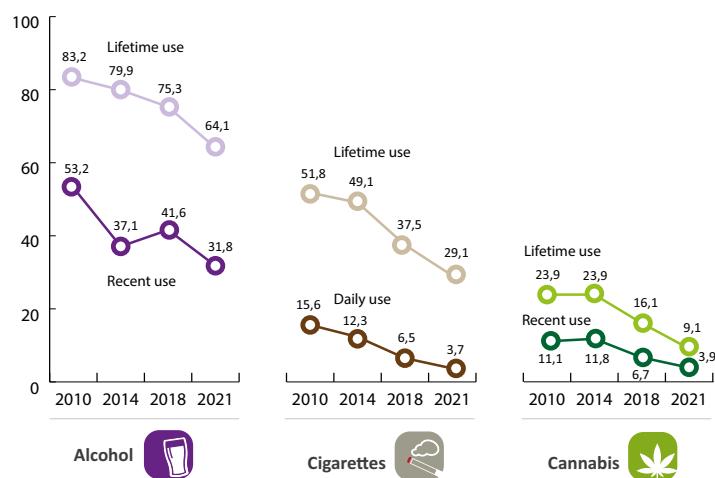
of fourth years reporting recent use, down 10 points from 2018 and 21 points from 2010 (53.2%). However, 1 in 6 students (16.4%) still report having experienced drunkenness in their lifetime, a similar figure to 2018 (see Table 1). Furthermore, 10.4% said that they had been drunk at least once in the past year; a minority had been drunk more than twice (3.1%), while regular drunkenness was reported by less than 1 in 100 students (0.6%). A small proportion of respondents report regular alcohol use (3.2%), but almost 1 in 5 have experienced a heavy episodic drinking in the month preceding the survey (18.4%).

## ■ Tobacco products: a decline that has accelerated

Lifetime use of cigarettes (manufactured or rolled) now affects 29.1% of teenagers during the fourth year of secondary school, compared to 37.5% three years earlier, and 51.8% in 2010 (a relative drop of 44% in eleven years). At the same time, the percentage of daily cigarette smokers has decreased fourfold, from 15.6% in 2010 to 3.7% today.

The use of shisha (see methodology on page 4) also shows a clear decline between 2018 and 2021: its use decreased from 26.2% to 20.0%, its annual use from 19.1% to 11.9% and its monthly use from 8.3% to 5.5%. While the

Figure 1. Levels of alcoholic beverage, tobacco (cigarettes) and cannabis use among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students from 2010 to 2021 (%)



Source: EnCLASS 3<sup>e</sup> - processed by OFDT

levels of cigarette smoking are similar among boys and girls, the levels of shisha smoking are higher among boys (23.0% vs 16.9%).

Furthermore, despite the close proximity between shisha and cigarette use (69.3% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who have tried shisha have also smoked a cigarette), in 2018, 6.2% of students were found to be only shisha smokers (Figure 2). In 2021, the percentage of students introduced to tobacco products, including cigarettes or shisha, is 35.1% compared to 43.6% in 2018. This combined lifetime use does not affect the reduction of smoking among adolescents. However, the exclusive use of shisha, which seems to have a more positive image than cigarettes among young people [2], is a point of concern.

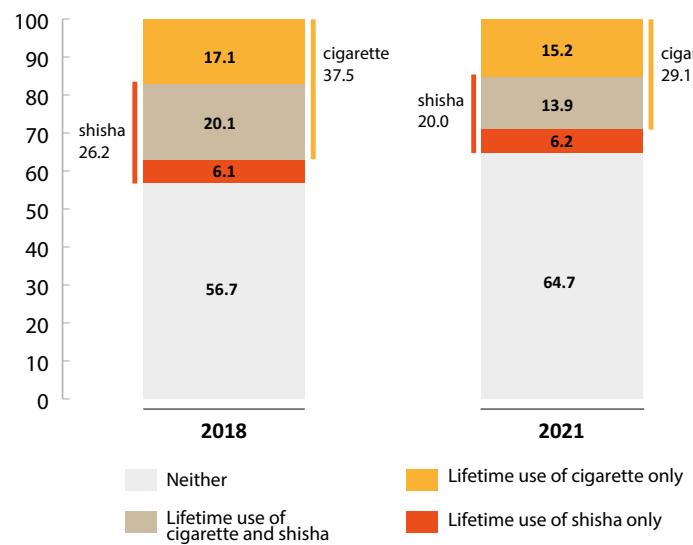
### ■ Electronic cigarette craze?

In contrast to tobacco, e-cigarette use levels have remained stable between 2018 and 2021 and, for the first time in the adolescent population, are now higher than those of tobacco cigarettes, both in terms of lifetime use (34.2%) and recent use (13.9%). However, daily use of electronic cigarettes (2.8%) remains less widespread than that of tobacco cigarettes. As with shisha use, there is a significant gender gap, with boys experimenting more than girls (37.7% versus 30.6%). Furthermore, while the connection between e-cigarettes and tobacco use, whether cigarette or shisha, remains significant (nearly 1 in 4 students have already smoked a tobacco product and “vaped” an e-cigarette), its exclusive lifetime use is increasing significantly, from 5.1% in 2018 to 8.0% today (see Figure 3).

### ■ Cannabis use in sharp decline

Like tobacco and alcohol, cannabis use is declining rapidly: 9.1% of students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade experimented with it in 2021, almost three times less than in 2010 (23.9%). At the same time, its use in the month prior to the survey has decreased threefold, from 11.1% in 2010 to 3.9% in 2021. Although a very small minority, 1.0% of students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade seem to be already using regularly, while 1.4% are potentially dependent on cannabis, according to their score on the Cannabis Abuse Screening Test (CAST/[www.ofdt.fr](http://www.ofdt.fr)). This lower use of cannabis can be compared with that of tobacco. Cannabis is almost exclusively mixed with tobacco (in more than 90% of use) and this use remains a predominantly male practice: 11.7% of boys have experimented with it and 1.9% use it regularly, compared with 6.4% and 0.2% of girls respectively.

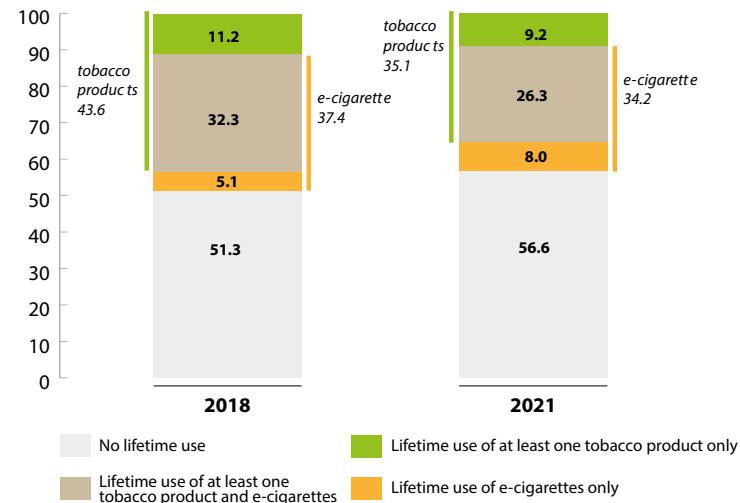
Figure 2. Lifetime use of cigarette and shisha among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2018 and 2021 (%)



Source: EnCLASS 3<sup>e</sup> - processed by OFDT

Note: due to missing data for both indicators (cigarette and shisha), the sums of the cross-lifetime uses do not fully correspond to the values reported in the margin.

Figure 3. Lifetime use of tobacco products and e-cigarettes among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2018 and 2021 (%)



Source: EnCLASS 3<sup>e</sup> - processed by OFDT

Note: due to missing data for both indicators (tobacco product and e-cigarette), the sums of the cross-lifetime uses do not fully correspond to the values mentioned in the margin.

### ■ Accessibility of tobacco and alcohol remains high

Despite encouraging developments, the frequency of use remains high in the adolescent population, particularly in light of the bans on the sale of tobacco, electronic cigarettes and alcoholic beverages to minors, and the illegal nature of cannabis use. The 2021 survey was the first time that students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade were asked about their purchasing habits. For cigarettes, third party handouts and street purchases or purchases from friends are the most common methods of supply. However, 49.2% of young smokers say they have already bought a pack of cigarettes from a tobacconist (5.0% of students in the fourth year). These results are in line with those of a “mystery shopper”

survey conducted in 2019 by the National Tobacco Control Committee (CNCT/[www.cnct.fr](http://www.cnct.fr)) which showed, among other things, that around 10% of tobacconists agree to sell to 12-year-olds.

The purchase of alcoholic beverages in a shop is somewhat less frequent than the purchase of cigarettes: one in five 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who drank in the last month said they had already bought it in a shop during that month (29.2%), which represents 9.3% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders. Unlike the question on cigarettes, the question did not specify other modes of accessibility. Although the percentage of buyers is high, purchasing does not appear to be the most common method of access: the figures suggest that there are other supply channels.

Table I. Levels of psychoactive substance use by gender among 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2021 and trends since 2018 (%)

	9 <sup>th</sup> graders in 2018	9 <sup>th</sup> graders in 2021	Trends	Girls in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade in 2021	Boys in 9 <sup>th</sup> grade in 2021
ALCOHOL	Lifetime use of alcohol	75.3	64.1	↘	63.5
	Alcohol use in the past 12 months		50.7		51.5
	Alcohol use in the past 30 days	41.6	31.8	↘	32.3
	Regular use of alcohol (at least 10 times in the past 30 days)		3.2		3.1
	Heavy episodic drinking (HED) in the past 30 days		18.4		18.8
	Repeated HED (at least 3 times) in the past 30 days		6.4		6.7
	Regular HED (at least 10 times) in the past 30 days		1.5		1.8
	Drunkenness in the lifetime	18.8	16.4	-	17.8
	Drunkenness in the past 12 months		10.4		12.3
	Repeated drunkenness (at least 3 times) in the year		3.1		4.0
	Regular drunkenness (at least 10 times) in the year		0.6		0.9
TOBACCO	Lifetime use of cigarettes	37.5	29.1	↘	27.1
	Tobacco use in the past 30 days (at least 1 cigarette in the past 30 days)	13.6	10.2	↘	10.0
	Daily tobacco (at least 1 cigarette per day)	6.5	3.7	↘	2.9
	Daily tobacco of at least 10 cigarettes per day	1.3	0.9	-	0.6
	Lifetime use of shisha	26.2	20.0	↘	16.9
E-CIGARETTE	Shisha use in the past 12 months	19.1	11.9	↘	9.8
	Shisha use in the past 30 days	8.3	5.5	↘	4.5
	Lifetime use of e-cigarette	37.4	34.2	-	30.6
	E-cigarette use in the past 12 months	27.1	23.8	-	21.7
CANNABIS	E-cigarette use in the past 30 days	13.1	13.9	-	12.3
	Daily use of e-cigarette		2.8		2.7
	Lifetime use of cannabis	16.1	9.1	↘	6.4
	Cannabis use in the past 12 months		6.6		5.5
	Cannabis use in the past 30 days	6.7	3.9	↘	3.3
	Regular use of cannabis (at least 10 times in the past 30 days)		1.0		0.2
					1.9*

Source: EnCLASS 3<sup>e</sup> - processed by OFDT

Note: « ↘ » indicates a statistically significant decrease at 5% risk for changes between 2018 and 2018 et 2021; « - » indicates the absence of a statistically significant change.

\* indicates a statistically significant difference at 5% risk between girls and boys.

## New insights

### ① Nitrous oxide

Nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas, is a chemical compound used in medicine for its anaesthetic properties. It is found in many food utensils in the form of cartridges (whipped cream siphon), or in bottles sold in convenience stores or on the Internet. In recreational use, it is inhaled for its fleeting, euphoric effects and the sensory distortions experienced. Faced with an increase in its use, which in recent years has led to several cases of intoxication of various degrees of seriousness, particularly among teenagers [3], on 25 May 2021 Parliament passed a law prohibiting its sale to minors (art. L. 3611-2) and providing for a fine of 15 000 euros to be imposed on "the act of inducing a minor to make improper use of a commonly consumed product in order to obtain psychoactive effects" (art. L. 3611-1).

In this context, it seemed appropriate to ask a specific question in the surveys conducted among the adolescent population, given that until now only a generic question on inhalants was asked of older adolescents (high school students), without providing information on the substance used.

In 2021, 5.5 % of French 9<sup>th</sup> grade students said they had already used it in their lifetime, with boys twice as likely as girls to have done so (7.3 % vs 3.7 %).

### ② Gambling

In 2017, the ESCAPAD survey revealed that more than a third (38.9%) of young people aged 17 had gambled at least once in the past year [4] despite the law prohibiting minors from gambling (art. 5 of the law n° 2010-476 of 12 May 2010). The survey also showed a significant increase in online sports betting. In light of these findings, which suggest a significant increase of gambling among minors, the OFDT, which took over the duties of the Monitoring Centre for Gambling on 1 July 2020, has included gambling among minors in its ongoing monitoring system for the adolescent population. In order to assess whether this practice also affected younger adolescents, a simple question on the frequency of practice without specifying the types of game was therefore asked of secondary school students in 2021 ("How often do you engage in the following activities? Gambling (sports betting, scratch cards, etc.)? Never; Few times a year; Once or twice a month; At least once a week; Almost every day").

In 2021, 1 in 4 secondary school students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade admitted to gambling in the last year (31% of boys compared to 20% of girls), with 9% declaring that they do so every month and 3% every week.

The ESCAPAD 2017 survey showed, among other things, that while the last occasion for drinking was mostly with friends, almost a third was in the presence of parents [4].

For tobacco and cannabis, an additional question looked at students' perceptions of accessibility: "How difficult would it be to get cigarettes (in packs or to roll)/cannabis if you wanted to?"

Regarding cigarettes, a quarter of the students said it would be impossible (26.7%), 1 in 6 said it would be somewhat or very difficult (16.4%) and almost a third somewhat or very easy

(31.5%), with a quarter being unsure. This perception varies greatly depending on the smoking status of the students: 62.5% of lifetime users say they can get cigarettes fairly or very easily, compared to only 18.7% of those who have never tried smoking tobacco.

For cannabis, more than 4 out of 10 (42.5%) consider that it would be impossible for them to obtain it, while 1 out of 5 think that they would not have any difficulty in obtaining it (19.5%). As with tobacco, there is a clear distinction between students who have already smoked cannabis and those who have not. Only 14.0% of cannabis users believe that they can obtain cannabis fairly or very easily, compared to 73.5% of cannabis users who say otherwise.

## Conclusion

These results are positive in several respects, due to:

- the acceleration of the downward trend in the use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis among young people;
- the very significant decrease in daily smoking, which has been decreasing fivefold in ten years, echoing the anti-smoking plans of recent years;
- the doubling of the percentage of students who have never drunk alcohol in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, confirming that lifetime use of alcoholic beverages is less precocious;
- lifetime use of cannabis now concerns less than 1 in 10 students, down from 16.1% in 2018 to 9.1% today.

Nevertheless, several points of concern remain:

- there is an already high percentage of students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade who report heavy episodic drinking (18.4%);
- drunkenness within the last year, which affects 1 in 10 adolescents;
- the use of shisha which could, for a significant proportion of young people, become a substitute for the use of tobacco cigarettes;
- the use of electronic cigarettes is becoming increasingly popular among teenagers and is breaking away from "traditional" tobacco use;
- the accessibility of tobacco and alcohol products, which remains high even for the youngest adolescents;
- lifetime use of cannabis still at an early age despite a strong decline;

■ lifetime use of nitrous oxide, which concerns 5.5% of students.

If the current situation is the result of the dynamics at work over the last ten years, marked by the continuous decline in the use of tobacco and alcohol among young people [5], the accentuation of the declines observed today is also the result of the unprecedented health crisis experienced during the year 2020. The repeated lockdowns put in place to stem the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the one in March-May 2020, have greatly reduced adolescent sociability. The limitation of opportunities to meet and party with peers has resulted in lost opportunities for initiation and use [6-8].

Furthermore, it cannot be entirely ruled out that the timing of the survey may also have contributed to the observed declines, as the 2021 data was collected 2 to 3 months earlier than usual. In addition to this difference in age and maturity of participants, which is likely to influence levels of lifetime use, there is also the seasonality of behaviour, with fewer people going out in winter, which reduces the opportunities for drinking and smoking away from the eyes of adults, particularly in a festive context.

The next part of the EnCLASS survey, which will take place in the spring of 2022 and will interview a sample of more than 15 000 students from the first to final year of secondary school, should make it possible to confirm or refute the singular nature of the decreases observed, part of which seems reasonable to think can be explained by the circumstances of the year 2020. If these circumstances have indeed temporarily delayed the introduction of substances in adolescence, a slight rebound in lifetime use among the next generation can be expected. Several forthcoming publications will address the situation of substance use among adolescents in Martinique, French Guiana and Reunion Island, which were also included in the survey study in 2021, and will deal with developments concerning the other health issues addressed in the survey.

## Methodology

The data used come from a representative random sample of 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes in metropolitan France and were collected between January 14 and April 2, 2021 in 51 public or private secondary schools, i.e. 102 classes in which all the students present on the day of the survey were questioned. These students were asked to fill in an anonymous questionnaire on the Internet during an ordinary class period. The previous national surveys (HBSC 2010, HBSC 2014 and EnCLASS 2018) followed the same methodology with the exception of the method of collection: in 2010 and 2014, the questionnaires were in paper format, with a switch to online collection in 2018 [1]. School participation was 82% (the survey fieldwork was interrupted prematurely due to the government closure of schools). The response rate in the participating classes was 90% (percentage of respondents out of the number of students enrolled in the class), mainly due to absences on the day of the survey.

The 2021 sample consists of 1 972 students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, with an average age of 14 years and 9 months. There were 1 963 respondents in 2010, 1 624 in 2014 and 3 826 in 2018.

This survey was financially supported by the Ministry of Education and the OFDT.

### Main indicators used

- Lifetime use: use of the substance at least once in a lifetime.
- Use in the last year (or current use): use at least once in the 12 months prior to the survey.
- Use in the last month (or recent use): use at least once in the 30 days prior to the survey.
- Regular use: use at least 10 times in the last 30 days prior to the survey (term also used for daily smoking which corresponds to at least one cigarette per day during the last 30 days prior to the survey).

For heavy episodic drinking (HED i.e. stated having consumed at least 5 glasses on a single occasion), the main indicators are:

- HED in the last month: at least once in the month prior to the survey.
- repeated HED: at least 3 times in the month prior to the survey.
- regular HED: at least 10 times in the month prior to the survey.

### Definition

Shisha is a water pipe used to smoke mainly "tabacel", a traditionally made product that is a mixture of tobacco, sugar or honey and fruit flavours in the form of a paste.

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