

Young people and Addictions: an overview

*This summary covers the main contributions from a collective OFDT publication entitled **Jeunes et addictions** on the changes in addictive practices among 11-25 year-olds.*



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Over the past twenty years, numerous undertakings by the French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT) have focused on juvenile behaviours. Indeed this study of substance use throughout adolescence and early adulthood is essential as this is when certain addictive behaviours begin and can sometimes become established, based on initiation and experiences. The collective publication on young people and addictions (*Jeunes et addictions*) provides an analysis of psychoactive substance use and its impact according to a continuum covering nearly 15 years of life: from 11 to 25 years, i.e. approximately 12 million individuals in France.

Various resources are mobilised in order to embrace the diverse youth population: in terms of age, gender, living context and profile. On a delicate and complex subject such as addictions, it is essential to have multiple monitoring sources to offer a comprehensive overview of the issue. The quantitative approach is vital in order to objectively identify the true importance of these phenomena in the population. The qualitative approach enables these to be understood in terms of the various stakeholders, but also highlights less common practices. Comparing their respective findings offers a general overview, allowing us to step back and put into perspective any excesses or sensationalism. For the OFDT, this means adopting a scientific and educational process, notably making a distinction, for the various substances, between behaviours that tend to become established or, indeed, lead to problematic situations, and those that could subside or disappear.

■ "Traditional" substances and new products

Among young people, as is the case in the overall population, the three main substances used are alcohol, tobacco and cannabis, to such an extent that only 8% of French 17 year-olds have never used any of these substances. However, these uses do not start simultaneously and do not necessarily develop according to the same dynamics (Figure 1).

As regards tobacco, continuously increasing use is observed from early adolescence reaching high levels among young adults, which will then persist in numerous cases. Introduction to this substance is not based on a single experience; this involves genuine initiation

(Figure 1a). At the same time, for other substances and for most young people, the end of adolescence represents the peak (at least in terms of regular use). Hence, although some only discover cannabis once young adult, this substance is used less widely by young adults compared to "older" adolescents (see below and Figure 1c). This also applies to heavy episodic drinking (HED) which culminates before adulthood and first responsibilities (Figure 1b). For the large majority of young people, these behaviours are transient and fairly symbolic of this stage in life.

As an example, surveys evidence that most lifetime users of cannabis give it up in the short term because they find no particular interest in it or distance themselves from it spontaneously when entering adulthood (end of studies, entering a steady relationship, first job, birth of the first child...). Upon turning thirty, 72% of those having tried cannabis during adolescence claim to have not used it in the past year. Over the age of 25, the proportion of last year users declines sharply, sometimes in favour of more frequent alcohol use.

In terms of the main underlying trends, the following are observed: widespread diffusion of cannabis (uniformly present in France and more widely used compared to the rest of Europe), limited presence of most other illegal drugs, persistent high levels of tobacco smoking, and the higher incidence of HED in recent years.

Lifetime use of other substances starts later, mainly increasing between 17 and 25 years. The most noteworthy finding is the almost twofold increase (and even higher for boys) in the lifetime use of MDMA/ecstasy, cocaine and poppers between 17 year-old adolescents and young adults. These three substances, the first two of which are stimulants, are closely linked to the party scene. Despite their diverse nature (electro, alternative, club, private party scene, etc.), these settings are preferred contexts for substance use among young people. Hence MDMA/ecstasy, which were almost believed to have disappeared in the 2000s, have resurfaced in all these social scenes since 2010 in new forms: powder, crystals or larger and stronger tablets.

Analysis of the age of onset puts into perspective the generally accepted idea that there has been a marked rejuvenation of this population (Figure 2). Although certain types of

substance use have increased, the relatively stable or, indeed, later initiation to substances is emerging from surveys among adolescents and young adults.

In addition to these "traditional" substances, new products or patterns of use have emerged in recent years, revolutionising the supply of substances available to young people. For instance, this concerns vaporising devices (particularly e-cigarettes as an alternative to cigarettes): more than one in two 17-year-old adolescents have already tried these (56% of boys and 50% of girls); however, only 2% use them daily. Shisha or hookah use also appears to have been growing among adolescents over the past few years. Nearly two in three young people have already tried this (65%) and a quarter have tried it at least 10 times in their lives. As regards new psychoactive substances (NPS), substances which imitate the effects of a drug and are often sold online, only 1.7% of 17-year-olds claim to have tried them, mainly synthetic cannabinoids.

Concomitant use of several substances, or polydrug use, is often evidenced by situations involving risk practices or vulnerability. In 2014, at the age of 17 years, 13% of adolescents displayed regular cumulative use of at least two substances, among alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. This overlapping regular substance use does not make it easier to manage each behaviour: it is not unusual for adolescents, attempting to limit their cannabis use, to "compensate" by smoking more cigarettes (and vice versa).

Gender and geography: new similarities

From a more structural perspective, two types of parallels can be underlined. Firstly, regarding behaviours in terms of gender, girls are tending to adopt practices closer to those observed among boys, particularly for tobacco smoking, but also regarding drinking habits. Nevertheless, the difference between males and females is more apparent for frequent and/or problem use. This alignment in substance use behaviours is explained by the blurring boundaries in gender-related social roles, but also by the marketing strategies employed by the tobacco and alcoholic beverage industry. These specifically target young women, with product packaging designed in a fashion aesthetic, or with "alco-pops" (fizzy drinks containing spirits, highly sweetened to mask the taste of alcohol).

The second parallel, on a European scale, is the blurred differences between countries over the past fifteen years or so, with distinctive characteristics becoming less apparent. This Europeanisation of addictive practices is fairly visible in terms of HED the prevalence of which is declining in

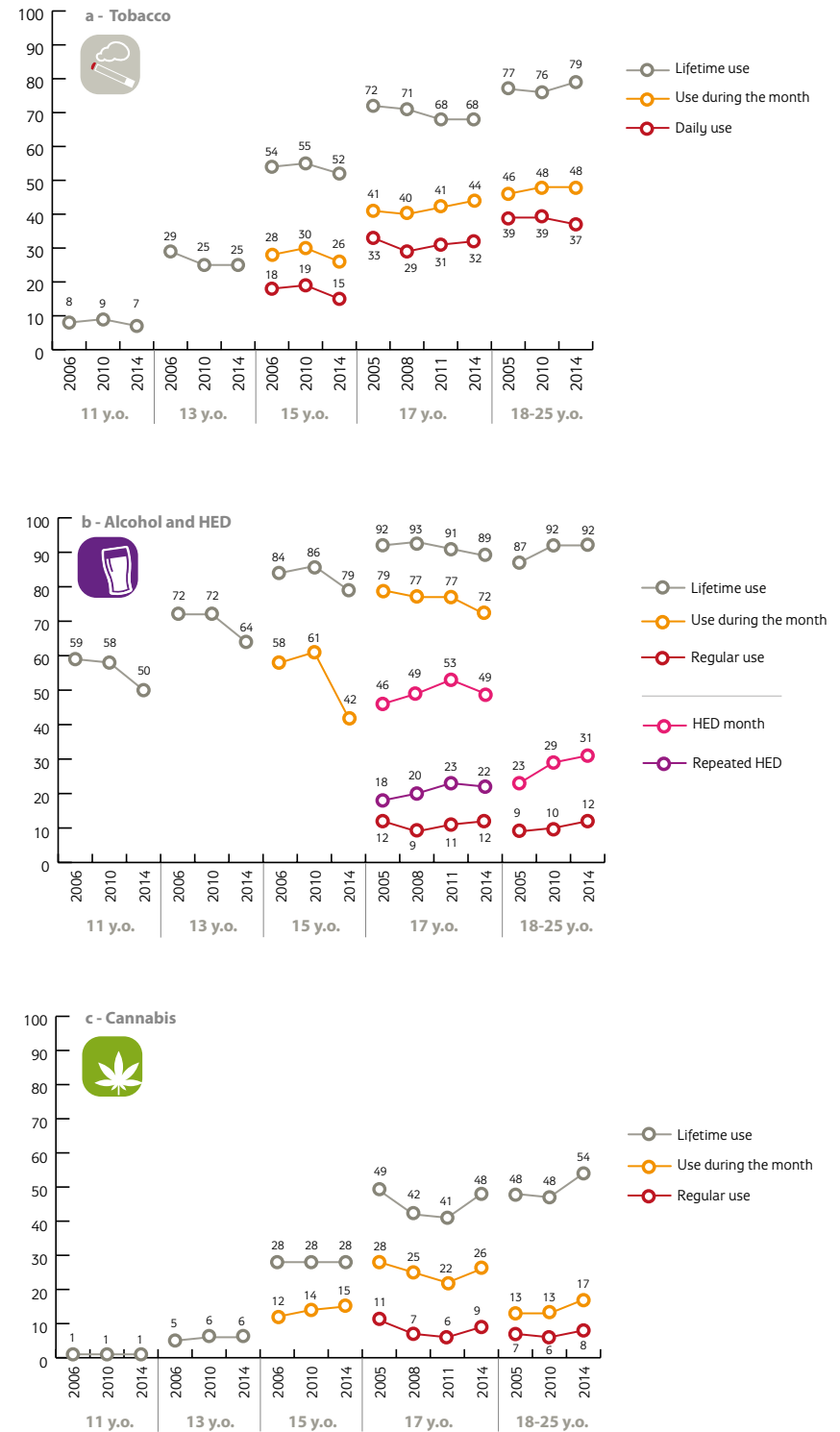
Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, while on the rise in Latin Europe.

Contexts of substance use and vulnerability

It appears crucial to distinguish between the different circumstances in which subs-

tance use takes place. This involves occasional and recreational use, together with substance use highlighting more critical situations, which need to be identified. Populations who are vulnerable from a psychological, social or economic perspective are predominantly affected by problem use. Although young people from more affluent circles tend to experiment

Figure 1 - a, b, c - Changes in substance use over the past 10 years among 11, 13, 15, 17 and 18-25 year-olds (%)



Sources: HBSC 2006-2014 (Board of education of Toulouse), ESCAPAD 2005-2014 (OFDT), Baromètre santé 2005-2014 (Santé publique France)

more readily than those from more modest circles, frequent or at-risk substance use is more common, however, in difficult socioeconomic contexts. This apparent paradox illustrates the fact that young people in a comfortable situation tend to perceive their practices in terms of substance use as occasional, hedonistic and as something that will naturally come to an end upon reaching adulthood and taking on responsibilities.

Legal and illegal psychoactive substance use also seems to be linked to the school context. Adolescents in the general school system show lower levels of use compared to those in the vocational school system. Substance use among young people having left the school system is often higher than their counterparts of the same age. In addition to factors of economic and social vulnerability which lead certain young people to live on the street, the risks specific to this age group, especially health risks, should be highlighted. Psychotropic agents may, in fact, have an impact on brain maturation (especially when used at a very young age) and certain behaviours (mixing substances or driving under the influence) give rise to immediate or deferred dangers.

■ Behavioural addictions: a crucial question

In addition to the phenomenon surrounding the use of psychoactive substances, behavioural addictions are now a central issue, particularly the impact of variations due to the emergence of the Internet. Internet use has significantly increased in the past 15 years. Screen use is now firmly rooted in the daily lives of the younger generations who switch from one screen to another throughout the day. The proportion of 16 year-olds who use the Internet daily (Figure 3) has increased in 12 years, from 23% in 2003 to 83% in 2015, with a fairly marked social gradient (87% among school attendees and 73% among those not attending school).

At the same time, the proportion of those who claim not to read books increased (from 53% to 61%); however, screen use does not appear to have had an impact on sports activities, which remained stable over the period. Lastly, a population of young people with gaming problems is emerging, which still represents a minority, although these individuals may still seek help to manage their screen time more efficiently. Visits to Youth Addiction Out-patient Clinics (CJC) for gaming addiction problems, although in the minority compared to substance use, nonetheless concerned 7% of clients in 2015, whereas this phenomenon was practically non-existent in 2007.

In view of these elements, the hypothesis for a possible impact of this use on the delayed introduction to regular tobacco

or alcohol use, observed among *collège* pupils* and *lycée* students** in recent years (Figures 1a and b) cannot be ruled out. Although there are complex links between substance use and behavioural addictions, as both phenomena may coincide, this delay could be partly explained by a change in the sociability of young people (fewer opportunities for substance use away from the gaze of responsible adults). Despite the difficulties arising from somewhat invasive screen use, this trend is encouraging as the early introduction to substance use appears to be strongly linked to the subsequent occurrence of health, educational and other problems.

■ Motives, incentives and public response

The reasons for use appear to be extremely varied. The substances have a different function and purpose, according to the contexts and individuals, age, gender, and social circle. Cannabis, for instance,

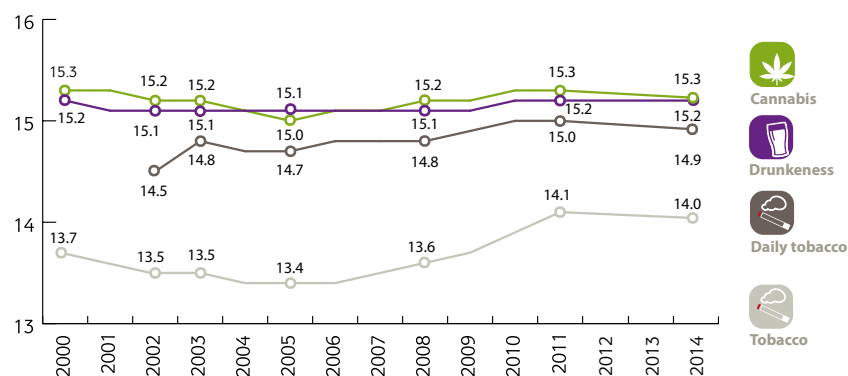
can fulfil sometimes very different expectations (when used in turn for partying, day-to-day socialising, stress management, self-medication, to ease sleep, etc.). This observation is not limited to illegal substances and also applies to substances such as diverted psychoactive medicines.

Furthermore, the important role of social circles cannot be ignored. Thus the recent decline in alcohol and tobacco use among under 16s (Figures 1a and b) can be compared with the lower levels of regular use of these substances observed in the adult population over several decades. The parental model of substance use has changed, which is not without an effect on the mindset among the young, and thus their behaviour. In short, parental influence is

* "Collège years", would be the equivalent of Secondary school in the UK or grade 6 through to grade 9 of Junior High School in the United States

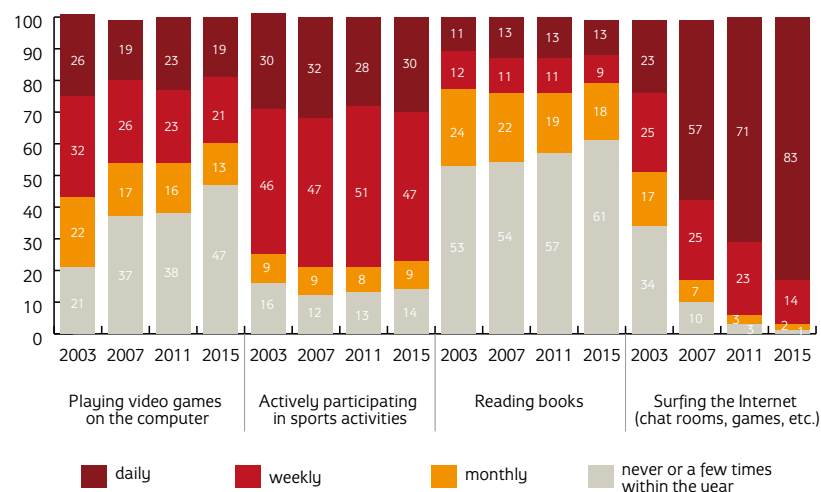
** The "lycée years" correspond to the last three years of secondary school which would be the equivalent of years 12 and 13 of Sixth Form College in the UK and grade 10 through to grade 12 of High School in the United States.

Figure 2 - Changes in the average age of initiation to use of the main substances among 17 year-olds



Source: ESCAPAD 2000-2014 (OFDT)

Figure 3 - Changes in leisure activities among 16 year-olds between 2003 and 2015 (%)



Sources: ESPAD 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 (OFDT)

predominantly observed in childhood, and then subsides in favour of models promoted by friends or classmates: peers. As substance use falls within the scope of relationship and social habits, friends play a vital role. In fact, part of the prevention action currently set in place to help young people focuses on the ability to resist peer pressure, via psychosocial approaches and brief interventions. Certain young NPS users, e-psychonauts, also operate by sharing information and creating a community, at least on a virtual level. The Internet is thus emerging both as a place for supply and trafficking, but also for information sharing and even as a medium for prevention action.

New generations are, in terms of incentives, a priority target for all suppliers, as diverse as they may be. The alcohol and tobacco industries, but also commercial websites offering NPS or drug dealers supplying illegal drugs such as ecstasy tablets, now larger and in 3D, are all developing similar strategies to make their merchandise more visible and attractive to young people. Product accessibility still remains a major challenge. The sale of legal drugs, alcohol and tobacco to minors has been prohibited since 2009. However, more than half of 16 year-olds who had consu-

med alcohol in the last month considered in 2015 that they did not have any difficulty obtaining wine or spirits. This level reached 80% for beer. As regards tobacco, nearly 9 out of 10 young smokers claimed they could easily purchase supplies in tobacco retail shops. These high figures are nonetheless in decline, and young infrequent users or non-users claim that these substances are less accessible.

Illegal drugs such as cannabis are sometimes offered by peers, or even by drug dealers to attract novice users. Six out of ten 17 year-olds who used cannabis in the last month claimed to have obtained it free of charge.

Although the proportion of young people engaged in trafficking is marginal relative to the overall population, these mainly concern males, occasionally minors, who tend to come from underprivileged social groups. The proportion of under 25 year-olds (including minors) facing offences related to illicit drug use appears to be very high. The figures show their growing weight in recent decades whereas varied penal responses have been issued, focusing on new schemes, such as the CJC which see approximately 35,000 young people each year. Young people

may also attend these clinics on their own initiative or via a family member. Cannabis is the main substance behind these visits, although in declining proportions in the past ten years.

■ Conclusion

Since the OFDT was set in place in 1993, insight into drugs and addictions has undeniably increased in France, but is now, above all, shared by all stakeholders, whether institutional organisations, professionals working in the health or law enforcement fields, or the general public. This common culture, supported by facts identified by tried and tested methods, allows dialogue to take place on a firm foundation, thereby enabling new policies and actions to develop. The younger generations are the first concerned. These are therefore targeted as a priority in the various public policy action plans, with the Interministerial Mission for Combating Drugs and Addictive Behaviours (MILDECA) 2013-2017 Government Plan at the forefront. Although they crystallise hope, worries and emotion, these new generations are also liable to give rise to the most lasting changes and thus warrant our full attention.

A new website has also been launched [In French only]

JEUNES & addictions

Retrouvez sur ce site toutes les informations de l'OFDT à l'occasion de la publication de sa nouvelle monographie

This comprises **graphics** along with a range of **questions/answers** on key issues presented in an accessible way, with the option of reading the publication for further information on the subject.

At the same time, five specialists from the OFDT team feature in **videos** discussing substance use among young people, their motives, the risks encountered, the party scene, support and prevention, and the challenges arising from the Internet.

The site also offers downloads of the publication and its appendices (bibliographical and legislative references, methodological sources, along with maps).

www.jeunes-addictions-ofdt.com

Contributions

Jeunes et addictions is a collective OFDT publication produced under the supervision of François Beck.

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