

Drugs and drug addictions – main data 2005

Summary

Drugs and Drugs Addiction, Essential Data tries to bring about some facts to answer three basic questions: how many people use drugs in France, as regards a single experience or a more regular one? Which users are in trouble? Which sanitary, social and legal damages are caused by these uses?

How Many People Use Drugs in France?

Uses in the whole population

Tobacco and alcohol are the mostly used psychoactive substances in France. Alcohol is used at least occasionally by a large majority of French, and more regularly by a quarter of the entire population. Tobacco is also mainly experimented. Yet, because of its powerful addictive power, its use very often operates daily: 3 individuals out of 10 smoke on a daily basis. Psychotropic medicines, mainly used in a medical prescription context, rank third when it comes to psychoactive substances frequency of use.

Cannabis stands for the mostly used illicit substance. While almost 11 millions French have experimented it, only a slight minority uses it on a regular basis. The other illicit drugs are tested more marginally.

Estimate of the amount of regular users of psychoactive substances among the 12-75 year-olds in Metropolitan France, 2003

<i>Alcohol</i>	<i>13.1 millions</i>
<i>Tobacco</i>	<i>13.0 millions</i>
<i>Psychotropic medicines</i>	<i>3,8 millions</i>
<i>Cannabis</i>	<i>850,000</i>

Note: regular use = 10 uses or more during last thirty days, except for tobacco (daily use)

Sources: Data from OFDT, INSERM/OFDJ/MJENR, INPES; OFDT estimates

Use among young individuals

Uses among youngsters differ from those of their elders according to two main features: the prevailing rank of tobacco as well as the crucial role of cannabis.

Tobacco is undoubtedly the substance most regularly used by the young. At the age of 17-18, 4 youngsters out of 10 smoke on a recurring basis. Regular uses of alcohol and cannabis rank far behind: they relate to 1 youngster out of 7. As far as daily uses are concerned, cannabis ranks before alcohol. Therefore alcohol daily use is quite infrequent at that age (1%), yet less so when it comes to cannabis (5%).

Regular use of psychotropic medicines is very occasional among young people (3% at the age of 17-18). At that age, contrary to what happens among adults, the intake of such medicines occurs through medical prescriptions.

Experimenting illicit drugs other than cannabis is a quite infrequent phenomenon that occurs in around 5% of young people (aged 17-18) at most, for such substances as: poppers, hallucinogenic mushrooms or ecstasy. Recent use of these substances remains even more occasional and never exceeds 1%, except for ecstasy.

Mostly male users

Regular uses of alcohol and especially of cannabis relate mostly to males rather than females. On the other hand, smoking tobacco stands for a less gender discriminating behaviour, whereas the use of psychotropic medicines can more frequently be observed among females than among men.

The same gender disparities can be noticed among the 17-18 year-olds yet with some differences: the gaps between genders are more significant than those occurring among adults, as far as alcohol and psychotropic medicines are concerned, and less relevant when it comes to cannabis and tobacco.

Frequency of recent use for illicit drugs other than cannabis among the 17-18 year-olds, 2003

Ecstasy	1.6%
Hallucinogenic Mushrooms	1.0%
Poppers	1.0%
Amphetamines	0,9%
Cocaine	0.9%
Inhalants	0.7%

LSD	0.5%
Crack	0.4%
Heroin	0.3%

Note: Recent use = use during previous month

Evolutions

Evolution tendencies in drug uses among the whole French population differ according to the substance and the age-bracket surveyed.

A decrease tendency comes into view for both mostly used substances: tobacco and alcohol. The reduction of alcohol quantities used is very old (more than 40 years) and mainly stems from the drop off in wine use. Thanks to such a decrease France is still losing its most outstanding early rank in Europe, although it stays within the group of countries with a high alcohol use. The decrease concerning tobacco use is more recent (around 15 years) and relates to a declining male tobacco addiction. The current level of French tobacco addiction stands around European average.

Other uses are increasing, such as psychoactive medicines, and notably antidepressants. The frequency of using psychotropic medicines ranks high in France, as well as the use of regular medicines in general. Cannabis use is also on the rise. For other illicit drugs infrequently used, an increasing distribution can be observed, as far as hallucinants and stimulants are concerned, cocaine and ecstasy in particular.

Conclusions are a little different among youngsters. In this age-group the decrease tendency has reversed these last years. Currently the young French are around the European average as far as tobacco addiction is concerned.

The same yet more recent (2002-2003) turnaround seems to come into view for cannabis. After a decade (1990's) of high steady increase, when French youngsters were among the most heavy cannabis users in Europe, more recent data actually show a stabilization, and even the beginning of a tendency reversal.

Alcohol use among youngsters, whose evolution proves more complex to establish, seems to increase slightly. Even so, young French register much lower levels of use than the European average. The same can be observed when it comes to experimenting or using other illicit drugs than cannabis. Yet in that respect the tendency is increasing.

Which users are in trouble?

Challenging uses

According to standards as regards the quantities used and the interval between waking-up and the first daily cigarette, one third of daily smokers aged 26-75 show some signs of addiction. Among the younger ones, 12% of the 17-18 year-olds show a strong addiction to tobacco.

Challenging alcohol uses may be considered through a criterion setting up the maximum amount of standard alcohol glasses drunk on a daily basis without harming one's health (3 glasses a day for men, and 2 for women, according to the World Health Organization): in 2002, on the previous day, 18% of men and 6% of women had used a higher number of glasses than those advised. According to surveys, there is an estimated 4 millions individuals (13% of men and 4% of women among the 12-75 year-olds) who can be categorized alcohol users registering the risk (old or current) of an addiction.

Cannabis use is usually "occasional", especially among teenagers and young adults. Its regular use may cause some troubles. Therefore cannabis daily users mostly acknowledge having troubles at least once: memory disorders, people around them blaming them for their behaviours, and other problems such as lousy grades at school or quarrels with friends. However such difficulties hardly ever occur twice in the same person. They may nevertheless cause some users to resort to the medico-social system.

Heroin use still prevails as regards the challenging consequences of using illicit drugs. This is the main substance inducing a socio-sanitary care for illicit drug users, as cocaine, often used in combination with opiates, appears to a lesser extent. In 1999 there is an estimate 150,000 to 180,000 opiate or cocaine "problematic" users. It concerns a comparatively young yet ageing population (around 30), mainly male (4 men vs. 1 woman), frequently suffering from psychiatric disorders and socially challenged. Observing the uses and users of such substances during last years, among problematic users, shows a rise in cocaine use, no matter what mode of use (injected, sniffed, smoked) is at stake, while heroin use becomes even after having decreased. The uses of other substances, particularly alcohol, psychotropic medicines, and cannabis, are frequently combined with it.

Care

Psychoactive substance users experiencing difficulties with their uses can benefit from a sanitary or social care. The number of new patients cured each year for their challenging uses can be

assessed: around 55,000 new patients admitted in consultations specialized in tobacco, 43,000 in structures devoted to alcohol, and 34,000 in those dedicated to drug addiction.

Specialized consultations in tobacco register as many for both males and females, generally around forty. These are most of the time heavy smokers: more than one packet a day on average. Since 1999, when they could be sold without prescription, the use of nicotine substitutes has been fully increasing.

Specialized structures in alcohol care for a population mainly including males (3 men vs. 1 woman), aged 40 on average, reasonably well-fitted in society. Nearly one third of patients are legally instructed to treatment, following road offences in relation to their alcohol uses, and that proportion is increasing.

A large part of the population with a challenging use of opiates or cocaine is subjected to a socio-sanitary care, notably through an opiate substitute treatment with methadone or high-dosage buprenorphine (HDB). The latter strongly developed in France during the second half of the 1990's. There was an estimate majority of drug-addicts, between 83,000 and 100,000, who were granted a substitute treatment. In about 85% of cases, it was a HDB cure.

Which damages are caused by these uses?

Sanitary damages induced by tobacco and alcohol

Tobacco is the psychoactive substance causing the most significant sanitary damages on a community level. Pathologies mainly relating to tobacco are upper aerodigestive tracts cancers, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Tobacco addiction is regarded as responsible for about 60,000 yearly deaths, that is more than 1 decease out of 9. Such a death rate mostly affects males (90%) but it has been decreasing in that gender since the mid-90's, while rising during the same period among females, thus following with a time-lag the evolutions observed in the uses.

Alcohol is directly at the origin of a number of pathologies such as liver cirrhosis and foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). It is more or less involved in the outset of a vast number of other damages: aerodigestive ducts cancers, circulatory system diseases (alcohol and tobacco are both responsible for these two groups of pathologies), liver cancers, optical nephritis, polyneuropathy, psychological disorders, accidents (road, domestic, job), fights and suicides. The proportion of individuals in danger of an alcohol overuse, among hospitalised patients, is about 20%. There is an estimate 45,000 yearly alcohol-induced deceases in France.

Sanitary damages induced by illicit drugs

No decrease by cannabis acute intoxication has been recorded yet. Cannabis is nevertheless presumably involved in road accidents, pulmonary and upper aerodigestive tracts cancers, some vascular and psychiatric pathologies. Studies currently available do not allow to ascertain the consequences of cannabis uses in these pathologies.

Among drug-addicts, intravenous injection, at the origin of most sanitary damages undergone by this population, was frequently performed in the 1990's. This mode of administration has been decreasing ever since. AIDS (HIV) prevalence keeps on decreasing since the early 90's while hepatitis C virus (HCV) carries on spreading among drug-addicts, now massively affected by this disease.

The number of drug-addict deceases has strongly decreased since the mid-90's. Therefore the yearly amount of overdose-induced deaths acknowledged by the police has dropped from 500 in the mid-90's down to less than 100 during last years. Nevertheless drug-addicts have been proved 5 to 10 times more likely to die.

Social damages and legal problems in connection with alcohol and illicit drugs

Social damages with regard to alcohol or illicit drugs use are still poorly documented. However some deductions can be supplied. Individuals using alcohol or illicit drugs during treatment characterized themselves with social conditions being more unstable than the whole French population. A connection can also be found between an alcohol and illicit drugs challenging use and social exclusion, the features of that connection remaining difficult to figure out.

As far as justice is concerned, the main problems are misdemeanours as regards drug uses and trafficking, as well as alcohol-induced road offences. In 2003, 108,000 individuals were detained for breaches of the law on narcotics, among which 84% for illicit use, mainly of cannabis. Drug-induced legal proceedings mostly involve trafficking: nearly 17,000 convictions in that respect in 2002 with prison sentences in 8 cases out of 10, definite prison terms in 4 cases out of 10. In cases of simple use, following arrest, a great number of individuals involved have not been sentenced, as they benefit from an alternative measure to legal proceedings.

More than 191,000 alcohol-induced offences against the Highway Code have been recorded in 2003. With nearly 109,000 sentences in 2002, such offences stand for more than half of the sentences for breaching the law in that area, and nearly a fourth of the whole sentences in France. Incarceration is ordered in more than 6 cases out of 10.