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Frequency and changes in trends in use of illegal drugs among students in Novi Sad

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Abstract

Aim: The aim is to determine the frequency and changes in trends and extent of the use of illegal drugs among students in Novi Sad during period 2008-2012.

Method: This research has been conducted among students of the University of Novi Sad between 2008 and the end of 2012. The study included 383 students in 2008 and 373 students in 2012 (aged from 19 to 20) with both genders equally represented. Anonymous special questionnaire was used and a statistical analysis was performed in SPSS17. Correlation between parameters was evaluated by Pearson Chi-Square test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks and Spearman correlation method. Statistical significance was analysed by χ² test and starting level was p<0,05.

Results: The results have shown that the prevalence of the usage of illegal drugs has an increasing character (from 24% to 26%) and students frequently use them (from 9,50% to 15,10%). In both surveys the incidence of was statistically higher in males (p<0,000). The students had the first contact with illegal drugs later, from the age of 16 (2008) to the age of 19 (2012). Marijuana is most frequently used (86,5%). The prevalence of using illegal drugs was statistically higher among adolescents who live in disturbed families (p<0,05), have poor achievement in school and have best friends who use illegal drugs (p<0,01).

Conclusion: The frequency of use of illegal drugs shows an upward trend compared to the previous period. These results indicate the necessity of primary prevention and organized, comprehensive and preventive activities at adolescents and students.

Key words: Illegal drugs, marijuana, students.

Introduction

Marijuana, cocaine, crack, heroin, LSD, amphetamines and ecstasy stand under the term “illegal drugs”. In most countries the use of illegal drugs is a serious public health challenge, and usually begins during adolescence. Thus, in all countries it is a public health imperative to assess the population rates of illegal drug use among adolescents. In addition, monitoring trends over time may reflect the net effects of activities and programs carried out to prevent adolescent from using these substances. (1).

The widespread abuse of illegal drugs represents very serious and socio-pathological problem of modern society, present from earlier in western, and more recently in the countries in transition (1,2,3).

During the last couple of years the usage of illegal drugs has got epidemic proportions, with tendency of increasing in the number of users (1).

Marijuana is the most used illegal drugs (2,3). According to World Health Organization (WHO) data on the use of illegal drugs, 20% adolescents try marijuana about the age of 18 (2). Among citizens, consumption of stimulants like amphetamines grows fast across Europe and Asia (4), with evident increase in the number of cocaine and crack addicts in Europe (5), South Africa (6) and the United States (7).

The data on the frequency of consumption of illegal drugs are very diverse and difficult to follow because of different research methods (8).

In the USA, the monitoring of the incidence of illegal drugs among younger population has been carried out since 1991, in the national study YRBS (Young Risk Behavior Survey) in 50 countries and every two years reports submitted to National Centre for Education Statistics, CDC (7).

Since 1995, every fourth year ESPAD study (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) has been implemented in 35 Europe-
The frequency of using illegal drugs follows the pattern of increasing abuse, particularly among younger age groups. This trend is evident in Europe, with a significant increase in the past few decades (1,2,8). The addiction to illegal drugs is growing (1,2). Conducting comprehensive epidemiological studies is essential to provide guidelines for organized and effective prevention.

The absence of a comprehensive study in the region prompted us to investigate the extent of taking illegal drugs in Novi Sad. The purpose of this study was to determine the frequency and changes in trends and the extent of the use of illegal drugs among students in Novi Sad during the period 2008-2012, following the adoption of strategies to combat drugs in Serbia.

Method and material

The research was planned as a prospective study and conducted in the period from 2008 to 2012. The first survey was in 2008. The sample has been randomly selected, and the study included 383 students (male 198 or 51.75% and female 185 or 48.3%), with the average age of 19.82.

The second survey was in 2012. The sample was randomly selected, and the study included 373 students with the average age of 20.18. Both genders were equally represented (male 192 or 51.5% and female 181 or 48.5%).

The sample represents 5% of the students at the first year of studies of University of Novi Sad, mostly students of medicine, mathematics, technology, agriculture, economy, engineering and students of sport and physical education.

The original questionnaire was designed for collecting the research data. The research was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Medicine in Novi Sad. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study (participation was voluntary and anonymous).

Each survey respondent was approached with the possibility of voluntary withdrawal at any time. The improper and under-staffed polls were not taken into account. The survey contained the following questions: year of birth, gender, success in school, place of residence (city, village and suburbs), the family status (both parents, father, mother, with relatives and in boarding school), the economic status, and then the habit of using illegal drugs. The students explained that the illegal drugs include: marijuana, ecstasy, amphetamines (LSD), cocaine, heroin, glue and a combination of pills and alcohol.

The survey was conducted by using personal contact with respondents and thus the occurrence of logical errors was avoided. Then the data were computer processed. Statistical analysis was performed in SPSS17. For the statistical analyses absolute numbers and percentages, a Pearson Chi-Square test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test and Spearman’s correlation test were used (p<0.05 was statistically significant).

Results

The prevalence of used illegal drugs among students in Novi Sad in both surveys is shown in the Table 1. In both surveys, the males have been using illegal drugs in higher percentage than females, and there was a statistically significant difference between gender (p<0.000).

Table 1. The distribution of illegal drugs usage among students by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes n %</th>
<th>Not n %</th>
<th>Yes n %</th>
<th>Not n %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>65 (32,8)*</td>
<td>133(67,2)</td>
<td>68 (35,4)*</td>
<td>124 (64,6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>28 (15,1)</td>
<td>157 (84,9)</td>
<td>29 (16,0)</td>
<td>152 (84,0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93 (24,3)</td>
<td>290 (75,7)</td>
<td>97 (26,0)</td>
<td>276 (74,0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*statistically significant difference of the gender p<0,05
In the first survey, the students often had the first contact with illegal drugs at the age of 16 (24.1%), but in the second survey larger number of respondents made its first contact later, at the age of 19 (26.4%), and there was a statistically significant difference (Figure 1).

Looking at types of illegal drugs, students have been using mostly marijuana, in 86%, and then by combination of pills and alcohol, hashish, LSD, ecstasy, heroin and cocaine. The similar situation was in the study in 2012, but in addition to other types of illegal drugs marijuana has been used in a larger percentage. There was statistically significance difference for using hashish between surveys (Figure 2).

Students usually have used one type of illegal drugs. In the second survey, there were higher prevalence rates of students who have used more than 3 types of illegal drugs and this is a very serious problem (Figure 3).

The results of this study show the increase in the prevalence of respondents who have used illegal drugs more than 7 times (from 28% in 2008 to 42% in 2012) and there were statistically significant differences (Figure 4).

The results of this study show the increase in the prevalence of students who frequently consumed illegal drugs (from 9.5% in 2008 to 15.1% in 2012) (Figure 5).
The respondents have used illegal drugs in the street (57.1%), in the disco (15.5%), or in the other houses (11.9%), on the travelling (8.3%), at home (7.1%). It was the same in both studies.

We analysed the correlation between the usage of illegal drugs in students and some socio-economic parameters, in both studies. There was a statistically significant correlation between success in school and the usage of illegal drugs. The frequency of the usage of illegal drugs was statistically higher in respondents with poor success at school, so the excellent success is a good protective factor for the prevention of usage of the illegal drugs. There is a negative correlation between family status and the usage of the illegal drugs, so the respondents who live in disturbed families use drugs more frequently.

Students frequently used illegal drugs if they had the best friends who used illegal drugs. There was no statistically significant correlation between economic status and the usage of illegal drugs (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between used illegal drugs and some socio-economic the parameters

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<tr>
<td>Success in school</td>
<td>.222**</td>
<td>.204**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status</td>
<td>-.104*</td>
<td>-.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best friends used illegal PAS</td>
<td>.301**</td>
<td>.333**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic status</td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
<td>.535</td>
<td>.401</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Pearson Correlation;
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level,
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Discussion

In the first decade of the new millennium, an increasing prevalence of using illegal drugs among young people has gained epidemic proportions, with a tendency to increase in the next few years (1,11,12).

Our study shows that illegal drug usage is a widespread and probably expanding epidemic among students in Novi Sad. Boys are more vulnerable in comparison with girl’s drug usage. The similar situation is in Italy (11,12).

According to the ESPAD studies (8) male students experiment more often with the illegal drugs than female students, which is the same as in our study. The results of this study have shown that the prevalence of illegal drugs usage among students in Novi Sad has an increasing character (from 24% to 26%) and it is very similar to the studies from Germany (23%). The abuse of illegal drugs is the most frequent in Czech Republic (46%) and lower than in our study is in Croatia (19%), Great Britain (18%) and in Ireland (14%).

We have noticed that students start using illegal drugs later between the age of 16 and the age of 19. According to WHO (2,3) the first data of illegal drugs usage in adolescents appear around the age of 18, which is very similar to our research.

In our study the students usually experiment with marijuana, but there was not difference between genders. Our results are very similar to the results in Russia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia and Slovenia (8). In the last seventeen years the consumption of marijuana in Novi Sad has an increasing character (from 12% in 1995 (14) to 47% in 2008(10) and now is 80% among students). The average European prevalence of marijuana consumption is 19% (boys more than girls) (8) and it is lower than the prevalence of marijuana usage in Novi Sad. The prevalence of marijuana consumption in Novi Sad is higher than the prevalence of marijuana consumption in Czech Republic 46%, France, Ireland, Swiss and Great Britain 38-40% (8) and in USA (7,15).

On the second place, the most commonly used illegal drugs are amphetamines (LSD) and ecstasy. Young people in Estonia, Germany and Ireland use amphetamines most, but in Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Ireland and Great Britain they use ecstasy most. Our results for ecstasy and LSD consumption are similar to European average, which is 7% (8). Slightly lower prevalence of ecstasy and LSD usage is in USA (4.1%) (7,15). The number of illegal laboratories for production of synthetic substances is growing in the world, because the production is simple and cheap. There is a danger not only of the respective substance, but also of the synthesis and uncontrolled contamination of drugs (11,15). This makes production of synthetic substances relatively cheap and widely available, so possibility of increasing number of
addicts exists, and should be taken into account when planning prevention programs (7).

One of the new trends is combining illegal drugs. It was observed that the mostly used combination is alcohol with medicaments or with marijuana among the young people (17). In the last four years in Novi Sad the prevalence of using more types of illegal drugs has increased (from 12% to 21%) among students.

After using marijuana, most of our respondents used alcohol with pills (24%), which is higher than in the Czech Republic (18%). Significantly lower prevalence (8%) was in neighbouring Croatia (8).

The usage of illegal drugs among students is associated with several factors. The prevalence of using illegal drugs was statistically higher among students whose best friends consume illegal drugs, have poor achievement in school and live in disturbed families. The excellent success presents a good protective factor in the prevention of using illegal drugs as previous research which has been done in this area shows (12,14,18).

Students from disrupted families tend to start consuming illegal drugs later in comparison with students from undisturbed families. Backović mentions that marijuana abuse is more frequent in foster families (38,8%), compared with children from biological families (8,6%) and their first contact was earlier (aged from 11 to 14). Completed families are a protective factor in risky behaviour among young people (17).

Our results have not indicated a statistically significant correlation between the economic status and usage illegal drugs among students, as well as in previous studies (Rakić, 1995) made in these areas (14). The low socio-economic status is also significant predictor of illegal drugs abuse among young people (12,19).

The comparative analysis of our and European research of the usage of illegal drugs suggests that the prevalence rates in our country is similar to many countries in Europe but it is still significantly higher than those in the past.

During the period 2008-2012, following the adoption of strategies of Ministry of Health to combat illegal drugs in Serbia, the expected result was not obtained. The prevalence and frequency of usage illegal drugs is still significantly higher than those in the past.

There is an increasing concern about illegal drugs usage during adolescence, since the brain development during this period is more vulnerable to drug-related deficits (8). At the public health level, the large proportion of adolescents who misuse illegal drugs calls for more effective intervention strategies as well as better perception by politicians and decision makers of the seriousness and complexity of this issue (1,20,21,22,23).

Therefore it is important to implement integrated prevention and control measures. The measures in prevention and controlling must be organized and synchronized, and need to be participated by individuals, families, schools, health services and the society. Education is an important prerequisite for the promotion and preservation of health among young people (10,14).

**Conclusion**

A high incidence of illegal drugs was observed among students in Novi Sad. The frequency of usage of illegal drugs shows an upward trend compared with the previous period. Male students were more frequent consumers. Frequently abused illegal drugs were marijuana, pills and alcohol in combination, cocaine and amphetamines. These results indicate the necessity of primary prevention and organized, comprehensive and preventive activities among adolescents and students.

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