

„Substance use in general population – 2009 study results”

Artur Malczewski, Michał Kidawa

Reitox National Focal Point

National Bureau for Drug Prevention

Introduction

Under monitoring drug use prevalence in the general population Millward Brown SMG/KRC market research company was commissioned a qualitative study on a representative sample of 1001 Polish population. The study was concerned using psychoactive substances, particularly tranquilizers and sedatives. The questionnaire was prepared by the Information Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction of the National Bureau for Drug Prevention (CINN KBPN).

The study was conducted face to face at respondents' homes by means of a computer. Drug use issues as being delicate were treated with care. Here, the respondents completed specially designed questionnaires by themselves. .

This study was based on the Omnibus approach. This design has been used in marketing research for years, and a typical feature is that under one questionnaire respondents are asked questions regarding various aspects of life and respective thematic sections are commissioned by different institutions. Consequently, the questionnaire covers a number of research issues simultaneously and each commissioning institution introduces questions of their interest. Such projects are usually implemented by research companies on a regular basis within a timeframe and a sample planned in advance. Commissioning institutions do not have influence on the sample selection and the date of the study and just contribute their questions. This method is well described by the saying 'get on the bus'. The advantage of Omnibus is simplicity, short implementation time (results are available within approx. 1-2 weeks since the commission) and a low price. However, the study is not fully in line with methodological requirements of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) regarding general population surveys as the study sample should include at least 3000 respondents aged 15–64.

Study sample and analyses

The study conducted towards the end of last year covered a representative sample of Polish population aged 15-75 lat (N = 1001). The respondents were asked whether they had used respective substances in the last 30 days, 12 months and in a lifetime. These are typical and standard time frames in European surveys. Lifetime prevalence indicates the level of experimenting with drugs – the respondents might have dealt with a substance only once or might have used it many years before the survey. This question allows capturing the lifetime prevalence of most drugs whose rates are far higher compared to data for the last 12 months or 30 days prior to survey. The outcome analysis four substances with the highest prevalence rates were in focus: tranquilizers and sedatives, legal highs ('dopalacze' in Polish), cannabis and amphetamines. The 2009 results were compared to the results of the 2008 Hungarian Civil Liberties Union study results.

Based on the 2009 data the relationships between drug use and the following variables were analyzed: sex, age (10-year ranges), size of the location (four categories: village, city up to 100 000, city 100 000 – 400 000 and city over 500 000) and education (primary, vocational, secondary, post-secondary). Additional calculations were performed by means of PASW Statistica 18 statistical software.

Prevalence of legal highs

"Dopalacze" is a Polish counterpart of psychoactive substances, which are not controlled by the Act on counteracting drug addiction and which are sold in special shops or on line. In EU reports these substances are called "spice products", "legal highs", or just "smarts". "Dopalacze" is a name of a shops chain which sells legal highs and related accessories. The name is commonly used and is nowadays often associated with psychoactive substances sold as collectibles.

This study made the first attempt at measuring the scale of legal highs use in the whole Polish population. Earlier only selected groups were surveyed. In 2008 the survey included final grades of post-middle schools. The CBOS Foundation survey featured questions about drug and legal highs consumption. The results referred only to final grades of post-middle schools and they cannot be extrapolated to other age groups. 3.5% of the respondents admitted having ever used legal highs (lifetime prevalence question), 2.6% in the last 12 months and 1.6% in the last 30 days

(Badora et al., 2008). The 2009 national survey also included a question asking specifically about using legal highs or smarts (substances of psychoactive effects sold in special shops or on line). A question formulated in this way aimed at preventing answer errors e.g. declaring drinking energy drinks as using legal highs. In all three time ranges (lifetime prevalence, last 12 months and 30 days) the most prevalent substance were legal highs. 6% of the respondents admitted having used them at least once. Legal highs were more popular with men (7%) than women (5%). The variable is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In the age group 15-24, every tenth member reported using legal highs. The percentages of the respondents decrease, though slightly, in the case of using legal highs in the last 12 months (current use indicator) – 5% of the respondents admitted using legal highs. Similarly to experimental use, the discrepancy between men and women was 2%. 5% of men and 3% of women had used legal highs in the last year. The respondents were also asked about using legal highs in the last 30 days. In this case 4% of the respondents had had contact with legal highs (5% of men and 3% of women). As for using psychoactive substances in the last 30 days legal highs were the only ones to rank above the statistical error bar. The prevalence of the remaining substances ranged from 0% to 1%. Analyzing the place of residence of the respondents who reported at least a single episode of using legal highs, it must be noted that there were twice as many village residents as residents of cities over 500 000 population that had used legal highs. It is the only case where a higher substance prevalence rate was recorded in rural areas compared to big cities i.e. over 500 000 population. Such a distribution of answers can be interpreted with online sales of legal highs. Consequently, these substances can be available both in rural and urban areas. Analyzing the distribution of answers concerning education we record the highest prevalence rates in respondents with secondary education – 8%.

Prevalence of tranquilizers and sedatives

Poland belongs to the countries with the highest prevalence of prescription tranquilizers and sedatives without medical indications. The latest ESPAD survey of 2007 (Ahlström et al., 2009) and CINN KBPN studies of 2002 and 2006 (Sierosławski 2006) show that these psychoactive substances are more popular than cannabis, which is the most popular illegal substance. In the 2009 study the respondents were

asked about using prescription tranquilizers and sedatives without medical indications. A new element, so far not used in national qualitative studies on drugs, was the question about giving names of medicines the respondents had used. It was meant to verify the validity of answers concerning medicines, which were to be exclusively OTC drugs. The response validation was conducted for the first time.

Analyzing the distribution of answers it must be noted that tranquilizers and sedatives were second (right after legal highs) most popular substance in the respondents. Lifetime prevalence rates stood at 4%, 2% had used the medicines in the last 12 months and 1% in the last 30 days. In the case of the first two indicators, identical rates were recorded from men and women – 4% (lifetime prevalence) and 2% (in the last 12 months). Only 1% of women admitted to having used prescription tranquilizers and sedatives without medical indications in the last 30 days prior to survey. This figure must be treated with care as it is within margin of statistical error. Prevalence rates in individuals reporting at least a single contact with tranquilizers or sedatives are the highest in cities over 500 000 population. The highest was recorded in cities up to 100 000 population – 6%. Discrepancies in city sizes constituted a variable statistically significant ($p < 0.003$).

The results concerning tranquilizers and sedatives must be regarded as overestimated and not reflecting precisely the prevalence of tranquilizers and sedatives without medical indications. As it has been mentioned, in the survey the respondents were asked to give the name of the medicine that he or she had reported in the questionnaire. More than one medicine could be specified. More than half of the medicines specified by the respondents were actually not prescription medicines. Respondents mentioned such drugs as: Persen, lemon balm, Deprim, Valerian, Validol, Nervosol, Neospamina, Melatonina, Kalms, and even APAP noc (paracetamol). Despite a relatively precise question and emphasis on prescription medicines only, 15% of the respondents mentioned lemon balm, teas or herbs. 26% of the respondents who positively answered the question did not remember what substance they had used and 8% specified Persen or Kalms. In the case of actual prescription drugs, every fourth respondent used Relanium. The other tranquilizers or sedatives were much less prevalent. They were used by not more than 2-3% of the respondents who declared contact with such medicines e.g. Propranol (3%); Polsen (2%), Olzapin (3%), Oksazepam (3%).

The study yielded an interesting conclusion and a suggestion how to interpret results of previous studies on tranquilizers and sedatives. As one can see, they should be treated with care because when asked about prescription drugs respondents report using popular and widely available OTC drugs or even diet supplements.

Cannabis

Cannabis i.e. marijuana and hashish are the most prevalent drug in Poland and Europe (EMCDDA 2009). In this study lifetime prevalence was found in 5% of the respondents, 2% had used the drug in the last 12 months and none in the last 30 days. In the case of all the three questions (time ranges) men reported using cannabis more often than women. In experimental use the rates were 7% and 3% respectively and in the current use 2% and 1%. Every tenth respondent aged 15-24 had used cannabis at least once in a lifetime. Age is a statistically significant variable, the older the cohorts the lower the percentages of cannabis users ($p < 0,000$). The cannabis rates among the respondents were recorded in cities over 500 000 population – 9%, while in the country only 2%. Discrepancies between location sizes are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Among respondents with post-secondary education cannabis use was more prevalent (9%) compared to respondents with primary (4%) or vocational education (3%). Education is also a statistically significant variable ($p < 0.013$).

Amphetamine

Apart from the Netherlands and Belgium, Poland is one of the leading European manufacturers of amphetamine (EMCDDA 2009, p. 56). Amphetamine is the most popular stimulant drug in Poland as well as in Scandinavia. In Western European countries the dominant drug is cocaine. (EMCDDA 2008, p. 56). Analyzing the results of the study in question we note that 3% of the respondents reported using amphetamine once in a lifetime, 1% in the last 12 months and 0% in the last 30 days. Along with the rise in location size the lifetime prevalence rates for amphetamine use increase as well ($p < 0.001$). In the country the rate was 0%, and in cities over 500 000 population - 7%. The highest rates were recorded in respondents with secondary education and lower – 4% in each group.

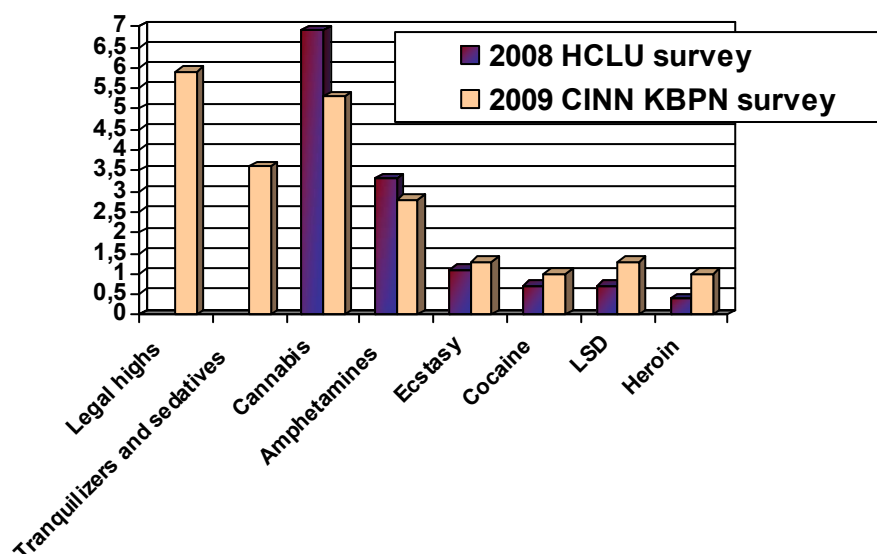
In terms of age 4% of the respondents aged 15-24 and 5% aged 25-39 had used amphetamine. In older cohorts the rates fall steadily. Age is a statistically significant variable ($p < 0.05$).

Comparing situation in Poland to the use of amphetamine across Europe we note that the prevalence in Poland is below the European average, which is 3.5% (amphetamine lifetime prevalence rate, age 15-64) (EMCDDA 2009, p. 58). In the Polish study we recorded 3% in the age group 15-75 lat. It must be stressed that in Europe a more popular substance is cocaine, whose prevalence rates are higher and stand at 4% for lifetime use (EMCDDA 2009, p. 70).

Comparison of 2008 and 2009 results

In 2008, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU) commissioned Millward Brown SMG/KRC to conduct a study on drug use and attitudes towards the problem by supplementing Omnibus with over a dozen questions. The study was conducted in seven countries, including Poland; on a representative sample of 1003 respondents aged 15-75. The results were processed in request of the Open Society Institute. Consequently, we are able to compare the results of the 2009 SMG/KRC study commissioned by CINN KBPN with the 2008 study results as both studies were conducted according to the same methodology and within the same time frame (November/December). In the HCLU survey the respondents were asked about lifetime use. The most prevalent substance was marijuana – 7%, which constitutes a fall of 2 percent points compared to 2009 (5%). Second came amphetamine – 3%, both in 2008 (Sieniawska 2009, p 33) and 2009 (CINN study). In the 2008 study the respondents were not asked about consumption of medicines or legal highs. Prevalence rates of the remaining substances stood at approx. 1%, which is within margin of error. Comparing the situation in 2009 to 2008, we record a slight fall in cannabis use and the stabilization of amphetamine use.

Figure 1. Percentages of respondents aged 15-75 in 2008 & 2009 – lifetime prevalence of psychoactive substance use (N = 1003 – 2008; N 1001 = 2009).



Source: 2008 HCLU survey, 2009 private calculations

Discussion

New substances entered the Polish drug scene – ‘legal highs’. The survey results show that they are the most prevalent psychoactive substance. A question arises: is it really the case and did the respondents, despite efforts to clearly formulate the question, not report using other substances, e.g. energy drinks, in the meaning of legal highs? The example of tranquilizers and sedatives shows that it cannot be ignored. Follow-up measures in general population will be complemented with an additional question – a request to specify substances or products which a respondent considered legal highs. This way we will obtain information whether the respondents had included other substances, which are not legal highs.

Another vital conclusion from the study is the verification of previous results regarding tranquilizers and sedatives. Wrong definition of medicines by respondents requires supplementing the survey questionnaire with an additional question listing names of medicines a respondent has used. Analyzing results of the international ESPAD survey, where Poland ranks first in terms of medicine consumption, one must consider that respondents from other countries might also have reported using OTC

drugs. In the latest study of 2007 18% of 15-16-year-olds declared that they had used medicines at least once in a lifetime. This result is threefold higher than the European ESPAD average (Ahlström et al., p. 113). Comparing the situation in Poland to the situation in other countries one must consider Polish tendency to frequent consumption of OTC drugs, especially painkillers.

Summary

The most prevalent drugs in Poland include cannabis (5%) and amphetamine (3%). Among legal psychoactive substances legal highs were the most popular (6%). Based on the study results one can attempt at determining groups where substance use is more prevalent. Psychoactive substance use is particularly in residents of cities, especially big ones (over 500 thousand population). The highest prevalence rates of substances use were recorded in respondents with post-secondary education aged 40 and younger. Men use substances more often than women. Exceptions must be noted. In terms of medicine consumption higher rates were recorded in older age cohorts. In the case of legal highs higher substance use prevalence is recorded in residents of rural areas compared to big cities. However, it must be stressed that the highest proportions of the respondents who admitted to using legal highs is recorded among residents of small and medium-sized cities.

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