

ESPAD

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The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs

The ESPAD Project

**Purpose, target population, data collection,
economy and governance**

**Björn Hibell, Ph.D.
Barbro Andersson, B.Sc.**

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Correspondence: CAN | Björn Hibell or Ulf Guttormsson | Box 70412 | S-107 25 Stockholm | Sweden
Phone: +46 8 412 46 00 | Fax: +46 8 10 46 41
E-mail: bjorn.hibell@can.se | ulf.guttormsson@can.se

History

The need for comparable data

At the beginning of the 1990's a few European countries were running national school surveys on alcohol and drug use on a regular basis. Others had made single studies at different times on, e.g. geographically limited samples, while most other countries had no data at all.

Earlier in the 1980's, a subgroup of collaborating investigators was formed within the group of experts in epidemiology of drug problems of the Pompidou Group at the Council of Europe, to develop a standardised school survey questionnaire. The purpose and rationale for the work was to produce a standard survey instrument, which would allow different countries to compare alcohol and drug use in student populations in different countries. Eight countries used the questionnaire in a pilot study in 1986-88. Due to differences in sample sizes, socio-cultural background, target age groups, and the timing of data collection, data were not directly comparable between participating countries. However, a major conclusion drawn was that the questionnaire was reliable and valid for use in Europe.

A Swedish initiative supported by the Pompidou Group

In Sweden, annual school surveys have been conducted among students in grade 9 (15-16 years old) since 1971. However, comparable data from other countries were earlier hard to find, despite the fact that similar surveys were done in some countries. The reason for this was that the countries' deviating methodologies made it impossible to draw any conclusions about differences or similarities.

In the light of these experiences, Björn Hibell and Barbro Andersson at the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN) initiated a collaborative project by contacting researchers in many European countries to explore the interest of simultaneously performed school surveys on tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. After a positive response from several researchers, contact was also made with the Pompidou Group secretariat to find out if it was possible to get support for the project.

The proposal was submitted to the Permanent Correspondents of the Pompidou Group in December 1993. The Pompidou Group gave financial support to, and hosted, the first meeting in Strasbourg in 1994. The Pompidou secretariat also assisted by suggesting possible contact persons in some countries in Eastern Europe.

Purpose, target population and field procedure

The purpose

A main goal of the ESPAD project is to collect comparable data on alcohol, tobacco and drug use among 15-16 year old students in as many European countries as possible. The most important goal in the long run is to monitor trends in alcohol and drug habits among students in Europe and to compare trends between countries and between groups of countries.

The target population

The target population of the ESPAD project is students that will become 16 years old during the year of the data collection, i.e. they should all be born in a specific year. In practice this means that the 2003 survey focused on students born in 1987, while the target population of the 2007 data collection will be students born in 1991.

The main idea behind the choice of this age group for the study is that students should still be available in schools, but “old enough” to have had some experiences of alcohol, tobacco or drug use. In many countries the students are doing their last year in compulsory school the year they turn 16.

The sampling

The sample should consist of randomly selected classes that all together make up a nationally representative sample of students. This can be done in different ways that are commented in a separate sampling paper. It is recommended that each country should draw a sample of classes that contains about 2800 students of the target population. Since some students will be sick or absent for other reasons, this is calculated to give about 2400 participating students.

Field procedure

The recommended data collection period is March-April. Data are to be collected by group administrated questionnaires under the same conditions as a written test. The survey leaders are mainly teachers or research assistants. It is up to each country to decide which kind of survey leader that is most trusted by the students.

The data collection is completely anonymous and there should be no names or other identification possibilities on the questionnaire. It is recommended that each student shall get an (unmarked) envelope to put his or her completed questionnaire in, before it is sealed by him- or herself.

Data collections and meetings

Three data collections

About 30 countries were involved in the planning process of the first ESPAD study. They were Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Faroe Islands, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

Some of these countries were unable to raise funds needed for the data collection. In addition, prior to the first ESPAD study in 1995, France, Greece and Spain had performed similar surveys, which made it impossible for economical reasons to repeat the study in these countries already in 1995. However, data from these studies were included in the first ESPAD report, thus containing data from 26 participating countries.

The second data collection within the ESPAD project was conducted in 1999 with 30 participating countries. This time some countries left, due to administrative or economical reasons, and eight new countries took part, including Bulgaria, France, FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Greece, Greenland, the Netherlands, Romania and Russia (Moscow).

In 2003 the third data collection was implemented. This time the project had grown a little further. One country left and six new participated, including Austria, Belgium, Germany, Isle of Man, Switzerland and Turkey, which meant that data were collected in all together 35 countries. The fourth data collection will be done in 2007.

Project meetings

An important part in the ESPAD working process is the use of regular Project meetings. All major decisions are taken at these meetings, which are open for all ESPAD researchers. In the first years it was only possible to have one Project meeting before the data collection and one meeting to discuss the results when the report was printed. However, in later years Project meetings were held annually to have enough time to share findings, analyse results in depth and to prepare for future data collections.

As mentioned earlier, the first ESPAD Project meeting took place early in 1994 at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. About 30 countries were represented at this meeting. The first discussions and decisions about the ESPAD methodology were drafted at this meeting and a working group was appointed to develop the methodology further. The next meeting was held in Istanbul in the autumn the same year, at which the questionnaire was discussed and decided.

In 1997, after the publication of the 1995 ESPAD report, a Project meeting was held in Lisbon. Before the second ESPAD study in 1999 another Project meeting took place in Cyprus in September 1998. The 1999 ESPAD report was released early in 2001 and a Project meeting was held in Malta in May the same year. The next Project meeting took place in Prague in June 2002.

After the release of the third ESPAD report in 2003, three Project meetings have been held, one in Vienna in September 2004, the second in the Faroe Islands in September 2005 and the third in Helsinki in June 2006.

Regional seminars to improve the ESPAD standardisation

From the start of the ESPAD project it was decided that methodological discussions of each country's project plan was necessary to ensure that the sampling and data collection procedures followed the agreed standardised model. Discussions in small groups were seen as a great advantage for the detailed planning. To keep updated on what is happening and to serve as a link between the different groups one of the two coordinators are attending each of these meetings.

Since it was thought that neighbouring countries might have social and cultural features in common the Regional seminars have been organised geographically. The first four groups met in Helsinki, Kiev, Ljubljana and Athens during the late autumn of 1994.

The next wave of the ESPAD project had increased to 30 countries and in order not to oversize the seminar groups it was decided to form five regional seminars. They met in 1998 in Prague, Kiev, Rome, Edinburgh and Stockholm.

For the 2003 data collection, now embracing 35 countries, again five seminars were organised. This time the groups met in 2002 in Zagreb, Moscow, Athens, Reykjavik and Stockholm.

For the autumn of 2006 six Regional seminars are planned. Five are mainly geographically related while the sixth is a special seminar for small countries that plan to include all students in the country in the data collection. The groups will meet in Cyprus, Budapest, Munich, Riga, Paris and Warsaw.

The questionnaire and improved use of ESPAD data

The ESPAD questionnaire

The base of the ESPAD questionnaire was the above mentioned questionnaire that was tested in the 1980's. However, that version contained a broad area of items and could not be used as it was. For the ESPAD project a draft version was prepared by the Steering Committee and decided at the second Project meeting.

A well-established fact is that a survey questionnaire is sensible to changes. Even small changes of the order of appearance of questions, or question wording, may cause changes in the results, that are not always possible to differentiate from changes in behaviour. However, minor changes are sometimes necessary and the ESPAD questionnaire has been slightly amended before each data collection.

To prepare the 2007 data collection a working group aimed at analysing and reconstruct the ESPAD questionnaire has been working. The objective of this work is to maintain the questionnaire as far as possible, but to track possible methodological flaws that can produce questionable data. **The questionnaire group** consists of Björn Hibell (Sweden) chair, Thoroddur Bjarnason (Iceland), Ludwig Kraus (Germany), Patrick Lambrecht (Belgium), Leena Metso (Finland) and Alfred Uhl (Austria).

The questionnaire to be used in 2007 was decided at the Project meeting in Helsinki in June 2006. However, since it contains rather many changes it was decided to do a field test at the beginning of the autumn of 2006. The new questionnaire will be tested in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Latvia, Russia, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Thematic groups

At the Project meeting in 2004 the possibility of forming thematic groups was discussed. The background was that the rich collection of ESPAD data should be better utilised for research purposes. The objectives of each group is to produce one or more articles in peer reviewed scientific journals.

Four groups were formed with about seven people in each, of those who actively had indicated an interest to participate in this work. The themes for the groups are: Attitudes, Gender, Risk groups and Trends.

The groups have the following members:

Attitudes: Patrick Miller (United Kingdom) chair, Barbro Andersson (Sweden), Sharon Arpa (Malta), Francois Beck (France), Anina Chileva (Bulgaria), Zsuzsanna Elekes (Hungary), Pavla Lejckova´ (Czech Republic) and Eva Stergar (Slovenia).

Gender: Salme Ahlström (Finland) chair, Marie Choquet (France), Anastasios Fotiou (Greece), Marina Kuzman (Croatia), Sabrina Molinaro (Italy), Alojz Nociar (the Slovak Republic) and Martin Plant (the United Kingdom).

Trends: Gerhard Gmel (Switzerland) chair, Fernanda Feijao (Portugal), Silvia Florescu (Romania), Karin Monshouwer (the Netherlands) and Marcis Trapencieris (Latvia).

Risk groups: Thoroddur Bjarnason (Iceland) chair, Olga Balakireva (Ukraine), Björn Hibell (Sweden), Anna Kokkevi (Greece), Svend Sabroe (Denmark), Andreea Steriu (Isle of Man) and Konstantin Vyshinsky (Russia).

The ESPAD Data base

To stimulate further use of the ESPAD data for research purposes most countries have made their 2003 data sets available for the common ESPAD data base. The manager of the data base is Thoroddur Bjarnason, Iceland.

In line with a special protocol the use of the data base will initially be limited to ESPAD researchers. A data base group has been appointed to administrate applications for the use of the data base. The **Data base group** consists of Björn Hibell (Sweden) chair, Ulf Guttormsson (Sweden), Thoroddur Bjarnason (Iceland), Gerhard Gmel (Switzerland) and Marina Kuzman (Croatia).

At the Project meeting in Helsinki in June 2006 it was decided that all countries should send their national datasets to a common ESPAD 07 database for the production of the international ESPAD report of the 2007 data collection.

The ESPAD economy

The project does not have a budget of its own. Each ESPAD researcher is supposed to raise funds for the data collections and the participation in the ESPAD Project meetings. However, the Swedish Government has over the years contributed substantially to the maintenance of the project. It has paid for the coordination, which has included a part time salary for one of the coordinators, meetings with the Steering Committee and the Thematic groups, Regional seminars and the layout and printing of the ESPAD reports.

The Pompidou Group hosted the first Project meeting and has made funds available for participation in Project meetings for researchers from countries in the Eastern part of Europe. Initially they were about fifteen countries, but in recent years the number of supported Eastern non-EU countries has diminished to five. For some of the years the Pompidou Group also supported the participation of researchers from Central and Eastern Europe in Regional seminars and travel expenses for the Steering Committee.

Over the years, some funds have also been available from other sources. A few countries in the Eastern part of Europe have got support for their data collections from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Social Research Unit for Alcohol Studies (STAKES) in Finland.

Another example of a funding resource is the Swedish National Institute of Public Health that has funded some of the printing costs for the ESPAD reports as well as the ESPAD Methodology Project in 1998. The build-up of the ESPAD data base has been economically supported by the Research Council of the Swedish Alcohol Retailing Monopoly. Three of the Thematic groups are funded by the Swedish Government and one is supported by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions (EMCDDA).

The questionnaire test in the autumn of 2006 is economically supported by EMCDDA (7 countries) and the Pompidou Group (1 country).

The governance of ESPAD

As mentioned above, all major decisions are taken at the **Project meetings**, which are open to all ESPAD researchers. They include decisions about the questionnaire, the data collection procedure, Regional seminars, national project plans and reports, as well as about the ESPAD data base. The Project meetings are organised once a year.

Between the Project meetings all major decisions are taken by the **Steering Committee** (earlier called the Working group). Besides taking necessary decisions the Steering Committee also prepares the Project meetings. The committee also functions as an editorial board for the ESPAD reports, which means that while the reports mainly have been written by the coordinators, manuscripts have been sent to the committee members for comments and amendments.

It has been important for the ESPAD project that the Steering Committee should include experienced researchers from different parts of Europe. For the time being (September 2006) the **Steering committee** consists of Björn Hibell (Sweden) chair, Ulf Guttormsson (Sweden) secretary, Salme Ahlström (Finland), Olga Balakireva (Ukraine), Thoroddur Bjarnason (Iceland), Anna Kokkevi (Greece) and Ludwig Kraus (Germany).

The daily coordination of ESPAD is done by the two **Coordinators**. Björn Hibell and Ulf Guttormsson from the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN), Sweden. Besides the coordination they prepare the Steering Committee and Project meetings.

The future

The next ESPAD data collection will be in 2007. The next ESPAD Project meeting will be in Pisa in October/November 2007.