

Summary

The three large ESPAD (The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) surveys that were conducted in 1995, 1999 and 2003 investigated the use of alcohol and other drugs among students aged 15–16 (Hibell, Andersson et al 1997, Hibell, Andersson et al 2000, Hibell, Andersson et al 2004). Over the years an increasing number of countries have joined the project and in the last survey 35 European countries collaborated on data collections on nationally representative samples.

In some countries these surveys have covered also other age groups, since this have been of important national interest. In 2003 eight ESPAD countries collected data also among students aged 17–18, i.e. students born in 1985. These countries are: France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and Sweden. Due to organisational change and limited resources the Portuguese data are not included in this report.

Methodology

The ESPAD surveys are conducted with a standardised methodology including an identical questionnaire to provide as comparable data as possible. Data reported here were mainly collected during Spring 2003 and the students included in this report are all born in 1985. This means that they turned 18 during the year of data collection. At the time of data collection the mean age of this group was 17.8 years. Data were collected by group-administered questionnaires in schools on nationally representative samples of classes. The questionnaires used were the same as in the regular ESPAD surveys.

Teachers or research assistants collected the data. The students answered the questionnaires anonymously in the classroom under conditions similar to a written test. The sample sizes varied from 1640 in Latvia to 5130 in Italy.

The results of the surveys were reported in a standardised format. These country reports constitute the basis of the content of this report.

Data quality

Every effort was made to standardise the methodology of the ESPAD project across countries. Nevertheless, some methodological issues inevitably arise in this kind of surveys.

The representativeness of the samples vary between countries, since school is no longer compulsory at this level, which means that some individuals earlier enrolled in compulsory school have now left school. However, the absolute majority of the age cohort is still enrolled in some kind of schooling. Thus, the results presented in this report are representative for students born in 1985.

The validity is deemed to be high in most of the countries. The cultural context in which the students have answered the questions has most probably differed between countries. However, this does not necessarily indicate large differences in the willingness to give honest answers.

For various reasons it was not possible to give precise levels of statistical significance in this report. Small differences in point estimates between countries should therefore be interpreted with caution. However, given the size of the national samples and the sampling methods employed,

differences of more than a few percentage points can with considerable confidence be considered significant.

Tobacco

The prevalence rate of smoking cigarettes 40 times or more in lifetime are highest in Latvia, the Slovak Republic and Greece, where more than 40 percent reported this (data from France not available for this variable). The lowest rate was found in Sweden (33%).

In five of the seven countries about half of the students had been smoking during the past 30 days. Again the lowest figure was found in Sweden, where this was reported by one third of the students.

In three countries the boys report a higher prevalence rate of smoking than the girls (Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic). In the three Mediterranean countries there are hardly any gender difference, but in Sweden the girls are in majority.

Alcohol consumption

In this age about half of the students or less have been drinking alcohol 40 times or more in lifetime. The prevalence rates of this behaviour do not differ very much between these countries. The highest proportion was reported from Greece (55%) and the lowest from France (39%). It is also a behaviour that is reported by more boys than girls in all participating countries.

A more frequent use of alcohol – 10 times or more during the last 30 days – is in comparison also more prevalent among the Greek students, of which 23 percent had done so. In Italy this was reported by 18 percent. Least frequent is this behaviour among the Swedish students. Just four percent had been drinking that often during this period. The gender pattern reveals a strong male dominance for this frequency of drinking, especially in Poland where this behaviour is almost non-existent among the girls (2 vs 23%). In Sweden, however, the proportions are about equal between the sexes.

Beer consumption 3 times or more during the last 30 days is more common in Poland (55%) than in the other countries. In Italy and Latvia this is reported by around 40 percent, while in the other countries about one third of the students consume beer that frequently. The lowest rate was found in France (27%). In all countries there is a clear dominance for this behaviour among the boys.

The proportions of students that had been drinking wine three times or more during the last 30 days vary between the countries. The highest figures were found in Greece and Italy, where 30 percent of the students reported this, while in the other Mediterranean country (France) only half as many students had done this (15%). The lowest figure was reported by Poland (8%). More boys than girls report having been drinking wine, except in Latvia and the Slovak Republic where no gender differences are found, and in Sweden where the relation was reversed, i.e. more girls than boys had been drinking wine that often.

The country that reported the highest frequency of spirits consumption three times or more during the last 30 days is Greece. Of the Greek students 47 percent reported this, which is much higher than in France, Italy and the Slovak Republic where around 32 percent had done so. Interestingly, the lowest proportions (about 22%) were reported from the “vodka countries” Latvia, Poland and Sweden. In all countries, but Sweden, more boys than girls reported this behaviour. In Sweden there were no gender differences.

Drunkenness

The number of students that have been drunk 20 times or more in lifetime differ substantially between the countries. The largest proportion reporting this is found in Sweden where half of the students (49%) had this experience. In the three Mediterranean countries on the other hand, only one fifth of the students reported this. In the remaining three countries Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic, about one fourth had been drunk that often. In all countries this is a behaviour that is more common among boys than among girls.

Also in relation to the very frequent drunkenness behaviour, three times or more during the last 30 days, the Swedes report this to a higher degree than others. One fourth of the Swedish students reported this, compared to 12–15 percent in Italy, Latvia, Poland and the Slovak Republic, while only around seven percent of the students in France and Greece did so. In all countries this is a male behaviour, but the gender gap among the Greek students is not very wide.

Binge drinking

The differences between the countries are less evident in relation to frequent binge drinking compared to the case of drunkenness. The country that reports the highest proportion of students that have been binge drinking 3 times or more during the last 30 days is still Sweden (26%), but the distance to the other countries is less evident. The range of proportions runs from 17 percent (France) to 23 percent (Poland). In all countries the gender distribution shows that there are more boys than girls reporting this behaviour.

Illicit drugs

The use of illicit drugs is overall dominated by the cannabis use. There is, however, a rather wide gap between the high and low prevalence countries. The highest prevalence rates for the use of hashish or marijuana are found in France (59%) and Italy (43%). In Poland and the Slovak Republic just over one third (around 38%) and in Latvia one fourth (26%) of the students reported this. In Greece and Sweden, however, only around 15 percent had ever used cannabis. In all countries more boys than girls have ever used cannabis, although in Sweden the difference is probably not significant.

A more active and recent use is mirrored by last 30 days prevalence rates. The relation between the countries is almost the same as for the lifetime figures. France and Italy are at the top with 31 and 24 percent respectively, while Greece, Latvia (around 7%) and Sweden (3%) show rather low prevalence rates. The boys are still in the majority also on this variable, except in Sweden where no gender difference was found.

As indicated above, rather few of those who have used any illicit drug have used anything else than cannabis. On average in all participating countries five percent had used amphetamines, three LSD, and four percent had used ecstasy. For amphetamines the largest proportion of users was found in Poland where 15 percent reported this. The lowest figures in this respect were reported from France, Greece and Sweden (1–2%).

LSD is not very frequently used – no country reported a frequency higher than four percent (Italy, Poland and the Slovak Republic). The use of ecstasy is not very frequent either, the highest percentage was found in the Slovak Republic (7%), France and Poland (5% both), while Sweden reported the smallest figure (2%).

The gender distribution of the prevalence rates for these drugs is rather even in most countries, but in the countries (mainly Poland) where differences are found the percentages are higher among the boys. This is for example true in relation to the use of amphetamines in Poland. For LSD it is higher among boys in Poland and the Slovak Republic. Finally, the use of ecstasy is higher among the boys than among the girls in France and Poland.

The use of tranquillisers or sedatives without a doctor's prescription is highest in Poland (20%) and in France (14%). All other countries reported rather small figures, varying between four (Greece) and seven percent (Italy and Sweden).

The gender distribution is mainly even, although higher proportions are found among the girls in France (17 vs 11%) and Poland (27 vs 13%).

The use of inhalants is rather limited in this age group in participating countries. The highest proportions are reported from France and Greece (13% both), while all other figures are below ten. The lowest prevalence rates are reported from Latvia and Sweden (5% both).

The gender pattern reveals, that in those countries where there is a difference, the figures are higher among the boys. This is true in France (17 vs 10%), Italy (10 vs 6%) and in the Slovak Republic (12 vs 6%).

A comparison between two age cohorts

The studies presented here were conducted at the same time as the regular ESPAD surveys on students aged 15–16. A comparison on a few variables shows, as expected, that the prevalence rates are generally higher among the older students, with the exception of inhalants use.

Despite a frequent alcohol consumption in e.g. Greece and Italy the prevalence rates of intoxication in these countries are rather low in both age cohorts. In Sweden, on the other hand, the frequency of intoxication is markedly higher in the older group.

Conclusive remarks

The number of countries included in this study is limited but represent different parts of Europe. On many variables France and Sweden appear as opposite poles regarding alcohol consumption and drug use. The French students drink little and seldom get drunk, while the prevalence of cannabis consumption is high. In Sweden, on the other hand, drunkenness is frequent, but the prevalence of illicit drug use, mainly cannabis, is the lowest among the countries included in this study.

Overall, the results indicate that the tobacco, alcohol and drug use pattern among students aged 17–18 varies a great deal between the seven countries included in this study. For example, almost half of the students are more or less habitual smokers, except in Sweden where this is true for about one third.

Rather few – one fifth or less – had been drinking alcohol 10 times or more during the past 30 days, especially in Sweden. Drunkenness, on the other hand, is much more frequent among the Swedish students in comparison, but especially in relation to the Mediterranean countries, which are very low on this variable.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions from the pattern of alcohol consumption and drunkenness. It seems as if the Swedish students were more inclined to declare a high frequency of intoxication than students in other countries, despite the fact that they drink less often. The binge drinking frequency, however, is a little bit higher among the Swedes than among students in the other countries, but still not far from average.

The lifetime prevalence of illicit drug use, however, gives a picture rather opposite to the alcohol variables. France, which is generally low on most alcohol variables, is dominating the picture with 6 out of 10 students reporting use of cannabis. Italy is the country that comes closest to this, but is still lower (4 out of 10). In contrast, the use of illicit drugs other than cannabis is generally much lower in all the countries under study.

To analyse why some students refrain from alcohol and/or alcohol intoxication, but consume illicit drugs such as cannabis would be an important contribution to the understanding of the formation of drug habits among people this age.