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NEW DEVELOPMENT AND TRENDS

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NEW DEVELOPMENT AND TRENDS

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CHAPTER 2.

DRUG USE IN THE GENERAL POPULATION AND SPECIFIC TARGETED GROUPS

De Ridder K.

- Cannabis is by far the most common used illicit substance in all described settings, followed by amphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine.
- The prevalence of cannabis use among students in secondary and higher education has been stable since 2006.
- The prevalence of other illicit psychoactive substance use among students in secondary and higher education is limited and stable, if not slightly decreasing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Belgium, there is no recurring general population survey specifically on drugs and drug addiction. General population data on drug use is mostly derived from the Belgian Health Interview Survey (BHIS), the Belgian branch of the European Health Interview survey initiative (EHIS) launched by Eurostat. The BHIS covers a broad range of health topics such as health status, life style, prevention, and medical consumption (Demarest et al., 2001; Van der Heyden et al., 2010; Van der Heyden et al., 2010). Due to limitations in the length and duration of the questionnaire, only a few questions on substance use are included in the BHIS.

As policy on education, youth and culture are competences of the Communities in Belgium, population surveys about drug use in schools and nightlife are supported by the competent administrations and our regional focal points. Sometimes, more local large-scale surveys are administered with the support of the competent city administration.

This chapter describes the Belgian Health Interview Survey (section 2), the results of the VAD School Survey ('Leerlingenbevraging') among high school pupils in combination with the results of the Belgian Health behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey (section 3.1), the 'Head in the clouds?' survey among university and university college students in Flanders ("In hogere sferen?") (section 3.2), the Flash Eurobarometer 2014 (an ad hoc survey on behalf of the European Commission) (section 3.3), and some results of two surveys in the party scene, namely 'Drugs Risk Less' ('Drogues Risquer Moins') and the Belgian part of the Global Drug Survey (section 4).

2. DRUG USE IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

The most recent published results of the BHIS on psychoactive substance use date from 2008 (Gisle, L., 2010; Gisle, L., 2010; Van der Heyden et al., 2010; Van der Heyden et al., 2010). The results of this national general population survey (N= 11,026 for the drugs section; 15-64y) are described in detail in the 2011 Belgian Annual Report (Deprez et al., 2012). In 2013, the Surveys, Lifestyle and Chronic Diseases (SLCD) research group of the Scientific Institute of Public Health (WIV-ISP) performed the data collection of a new BHIS. Different from previous waves, the 2013 BHIS used the computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) method for the face-to-face part of the questionnaire, although drug use is still surveyed by the use of a self-completion part. The researchers maintained the same substance-related items of the 2008 survey, being the lifetime, last year and last month cannabis use; frequency of last month cannabis use; the age of first time cannabis use and the last year use of cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, LSD, heroin, methadone and buprenorphine. New for the 2013 BHIS is the inclusion of information on 'legal highs'. Results for the 2013 BHIS are expected by the end of 2014.

However, it is worth noting that the prevalence for illicit substance use (15-64 years old persons) found in general surveys, such as the BHIS, are probably underestimated, especially for drugs other than cannabis. Marginalized people (homeless, prisoners, institutionalized persons) are excluded from the sample because invitations to participate to this study are sent only to households after a prior phone contact. The self-completion questionnaire related to substance use is only filled out after having received the visit of the interviewer (Van der Heyden et al., 2010; Van der Heyden et al., 2010). It is highly likely that "hard" or "severe" users do not accept to receive the interviewer at home and/or do not take the time to complete the questionnaire (Demarest et al., 2012).

3. DRUG USE IN THE SCHOOL AND YOUTH POPULATION

3.1. DRUG USE AMONG BELGIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

In Belgium, several large-scale surveys (using self-completion questionnaires) are conducted among school students of both the Flemish and French Community. First, the HBSC survey is conducted every 4/5 years (1985/86, 1989/90, 1993/94, 1997/98, 2001/02, 2005/06, 2009/10) (Favresse and de Smet, 2008; Godin et al., 2008; Hublet et al., 2006). Second, the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD) was conducted in Belgium in 2003 and repeated in the Flemish Community in 2007 and 2010 as the Flemish School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs (VLASPAD) (Lambrecht et al., 2004; Lambrecht and Andries,

2013). Third, the School survey of the VAD is conducted on an annual basis among Flemish school students since 2000/01 (Kinable, 2011).

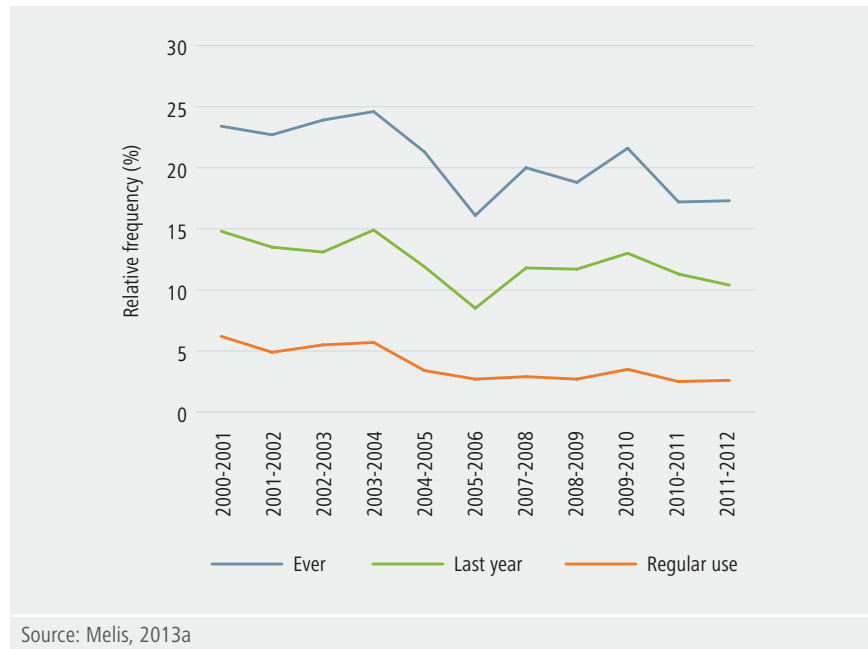
As for the most recent school year 2011-2012, only the VAD School Survey was conducted (Melis, 2013). In total, 39,999 students (12-18 years of age) from 68 Flemish schools participated in this survey. Based on sex, grade and type of education, a representative sample of 6,083 students was selected. In the 2011-2012 survey, 17.3% of the 12-18 year old students had ever used illicit psychoactive substances and 10.4% had used them the last year. In the following sections, the use of cannabis and other illicit psychoactive substances in this population are described.

3.1.1. Cannabis

The prevalence found for cannabis use in the 2011-2012 VAD School Survey confirm the trend found in previous Belgian studies (Godin et al., 2011; Kinable, 2011; Lambrecht and Andries, 2013; Lombaert, 2011; Melis, 2013). The study shows that about one fifth (20.9%) of the 15-16 year old and one third (36.6%) of the oldest school students (17-18y) used cannabis at least once in their lives. About one fifth (21.1%) of the oldest age group also used cannabis during the last 12 months prior to the survey. Both the lifetime and the last year prevalence of the oldest students were about 10 times higher compared to those found in the youngest age group (12-13y: respectively 4.4% and 2.4%). There is a stabilisation of regular use to around 3% since the 2005-06 survey (see Figure 2.1). "Regular use" was defined as use of cannabis "once a week", "more times a week" or "daily". The prevalence of regular cannabis use was 2.6% for all students (12-18 years of age) with 1.2% of the girls and 3.9% for the boys. Of the 15-16 year old students, 3.1% used cannabis on a regular basis compared to 5.4% of the oldest age group. A small but not trivial group of 12-14 year old students (0.7%) reported the regular use of cannabis.

The mean age at which school students used cannabis for the first time was 15.4 years. Higher prevalence of ever, last year and regular cannabis use were found in students following technical or vocational educational programmes compared to students of general programmes. The most frequently reported reasons to use cannabis were "sociability", "relaxation", and "curiosity". Important reasons not to use cannabis were: "they don't need it", "cannabis is dangerous", "it's unhealthy" (Melis, 2013).

Figure 2.1 | Relative frequency (%) of ever, last year and regular use of cannabis in Flemish Community school students (12-18 years of age) between 2000 and 2012



In the cross-national HBSC study of 2009/2010, 17% of the 15 year old girls and 23% of the boys had ever used cannabis. In the Flemish Community, respectively 7% and 11% of the girls and boys had reported cannabis use the last 30 days compared to 9% and 14% in the French Community (WHO, 2012). The prevalence of frequent use of cannabis (>40 times) in life-time among 15 year old Belgian girls and boys was estimated to be respectively 2.0% and 4.9% in 2010 (ter Bogt et al., 2014). Compared to the HBSC study of 2002, a decline in frequent use occurred for both the girls and boys. However, the prevalence of frequent use of cannabis in 2010 has been stable compared to the prevalence of 2006. This trend is in accordance with the trend in the VAD School Survey.

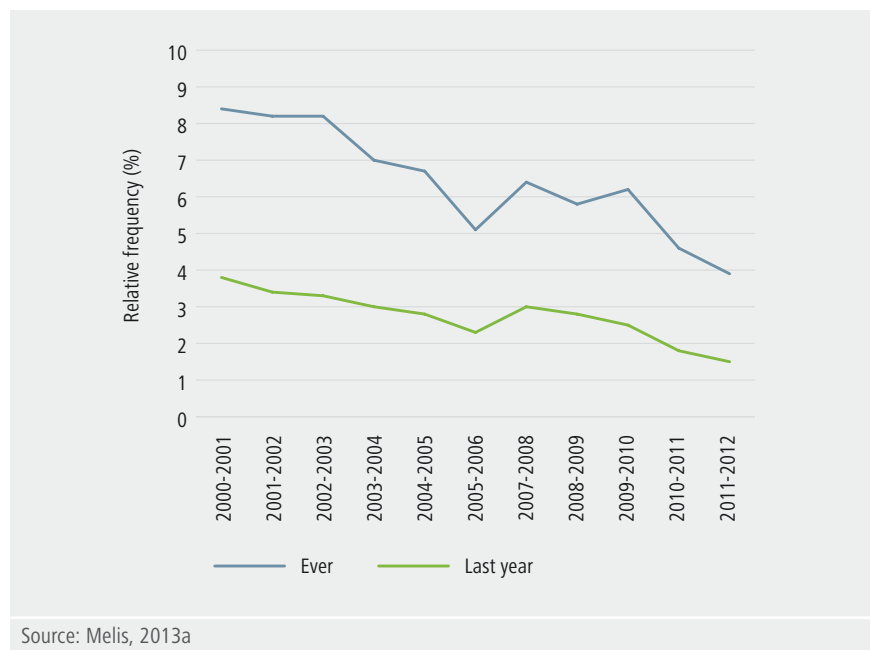
3.1.2. Other illicit psychoactive substances

Results of the VAD school survey 2011-2012 show that the use of illicit psychoactive substances other than cannabis was rather limited in the population of school students (Melis, 2013). In the whole school population, only the older students mentioned ever use of these substances: 4.4% of the 15-16 year old students and 7.7% of the 17-18 year old students. The highest lifetime prevalence among the oldest school students (17-18y) of the Flemish Community were reported for ecstasy (3.8%), hallucinogens (3.5%), amphetamines (3.4%)

and cocaine (2.5%). A lifetime prevalence of heroin use was found to be about only 0.4% among the oldest school students (Melis, 2013).

For the school years 2007-2008 until 2009-2010, a stable prevalence of lifetime and last year use of psychoactive substance other than cannabis was found (Kinable, 2011). Compared to this, a gradual decrease was found in the school surveys of 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 (see Figure 2.2) (Melis, 2013).

Figure 2.2 | Relative frequency (%) of ever and last year use of illicit psychoactive substances other than cannabis in Flemish community school students (12-18 years of age) between 2000 and 2012



3.2. DRUG USE AMONG FLEMISH UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

The survey “Head in the clouds?” (“In hogere sferen?”) is based on the collaboration of the research group “Medical Sociology and Health Policy” of the University of Antwerp, the research group “Health promotion” of the University of Ghent, the Catholic University Leuven, Catholic University College Limburg and the VAD. The third version of “Head in the clouds?” surveyed the use of psychoactive substances in students of the universities and university colleges in Antwerp, Ghent, Leuven and Limburg in 2013 (Rosiers et al., 2014). These participating institutions represent 46.7% (N=107,126) of the total Flemish

student population and 18.5% of the eligible students (n=19,822) participated in the survey. With a stratified sampling based on institution and sex, a representative sample of 2,375 students was selected. Of the representative sample, 55.0% was female, which is in concordance with the gender balance of the studied student population. The students' mean age was 21.2 years. Similar to the surveys performed in 2005 and 2009, the 2013 survey was a web-based questionnaire on the use of (legal and illegal) psychoactive substances, motives and consequences of substance use, mental health, and contextual aspects of substance use (Rosiers et al., 2011; Van Hal et al., 2007).

3.2.1. Cannabis

Four out of ten students reported ever cannabis use (39.6%; n=940) and one in five had used cannabis in the last 12 months (22.0%; n=519). These results are of the same size as the values reported in the previous survey (2009) (43.0% ever cannabis users and 22.9% last year cannabis users) and as the results of the VAD School Survey of 2011-2012 among the 17-18 year old school students (36.6% ever cannabis users and 22.9% last year cannabis users). Male students had more often used cannabis than female students (49.4% versus 31.6% respectively). Among the ever cannabis users, 31.0% of the male students had used cannabis the last 12 months compared to 14.7% female students.

Among the students who had used cannabis the last 12 months, about half of them used it once a month or less during the academic year. One in five used it at least once a week (for more details see Table 2.1) and one in 20 used it every day. During the holidays the frequency of daily use was slightly higher (6.3%) than during the academic year (5.3%) or the examination period (4.2%). Although nearly all of the 'last 12 months' cannabis users confirmed the use during the holidays, almost half of them did not use cannabis during the exam period. Regular users of cannabis were more often male than female. The survey also showed associations between age and cannabis use: a higher proportion of 'last year use' is found among the younger students. In addition, a younger age of first time cannabis use was associated with more frequent use during the academic year and the holiday period.

Table 2.1 | Frequency of cannabis use (%) among students in the 'last 12 months' cannabis users in the Flemish Community, 2011/2012

Time framework	Total (N=519)			Men (N=327)			Women (N=192)		
	not	<1x/ week	≥1x/ week	not	<1x/ week	≥1x/ week	not	<1x/ week	≥1x/ week
Academic year	10.5	68.8	20.7	7.8	64.6	27.6	15.0	75.7	9.3
Examination period	45.3	42.3	12.4	39.0	45.4	15.6	55.5	37.2	7.3
Holiday period	4.3	72.2	23.5	3.2	66.2	30.6	6.2	81.9	11.9

Source: Rosiers et al., 2014

3.2.2. Other illicit psychoactive substances

Next to cannabis use, the third wave of “Head in the clouds?” also assessed the use of amphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine. The proportion of students that used one of these substances is substantially lower than the proportions of cannabis users: about 5% ever users and 2.5% last 12 months users for each of these substances (Rosiers et al., 2014). These proportions are of the same size as the proportions in the second survey in 2009 (Rosiers et al., 2011) and the proportions are of the same size as in the 17-18 years old high school students of the VAD School Survey (Melis, 2013). Among the last 12 months users, amphetamines, ecstasy or cocaine were seldom used on a regular basis (once a week or more frequent) during the academic year or examination period. However, during holidays, they reported more often the use of these substances on regular basis (amphetamines 15.4%; ecstasy 10.1%; cocaine 6.9%). Of the last 12 months users, 3.8% of the amphetamines users and also 1.5% of the ecstasy users reported daily use in the examination period. No one reported daily use during the academic year or holidays. On the contrary, daily use among the last 12 months users of cocaine was only reported during the summer holidays (2.3%). Male students reported more ever use and last 12 months use of amphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine than female students. Older students reported less ecstasy use in the last 12 months.

3.2.3. Mental well-being and illicit substance use

Well-being was measured with the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) with four questions related to anxiety and depression symptoms, two questions related to self-confidence and six questions related to social functioning (Vanheule and Bogaerts, 2005). A higher GHQ-12 score (more psychological problems) was associated with a higher DAST-10 score (problems related to illicit substance use other than cannabis). Consequently, anxiety and depression symptoms were associated with more problems related to cannabis use and other illicit substance use. Less self-confidence was associated with problems related to illicit substance use other than cannabis.

3.2.4. Contextual factors of illicit psychoactive substance use

In the third wave of “Head in the clouds?” survey, half of the students lived in a student room, 40% lived at their parental home and 10% were living independently. The latter group reported more cannabis use (54.7%) compared to students living in rooms (39.5%) or at home (36.6%). The same pattern of more substance use among independently living students was observed for the other illicit psychoactive substances. However, the living condition had no association with the frequency of substance use or problems related to illicit psychoactive substance use.

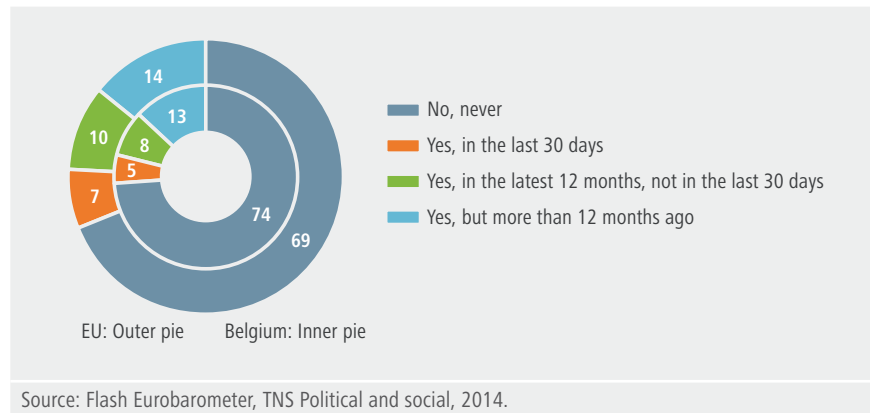
In addition, the survey did not report any association between the frequency in use of illicit psychoactive substances and the membership or management in an association for students or a sport club.

3.3. EUROPEAN STUDY ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND DRUGS

In June 2014, the TNS Political and Social Network (Tayler Nelson Sofres) of the European Union carried out the Flash Eurobarometer Survey “Young people and drugs” in the 28 Member States on behalf of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice. This thematic Flash Eurobarometer has also been performed in 2002, 2004, 2008 and 2011 (TNS Political and social, 2014). About 13,000 respondents aged 15-24 from different social and demographic groups were interviewed by telephone (landline and mobile phone) in their mother tongue. The basic design applied in all countries is a multi-stage random method taking into account region and urbanisation. In Belgium, 500 young respondents were interviewed.

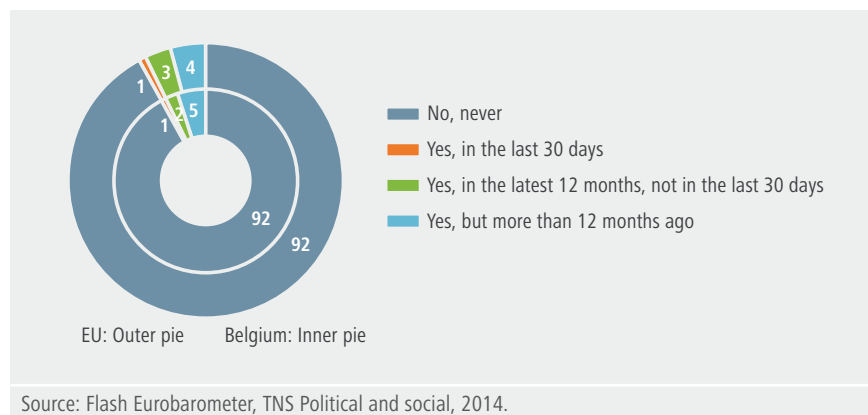
Overall, 13% of the participants in Belgium reported that they had used cannabis the last 12 months (Figure 2.3) compared to 17% in the EU. 5% of the Belgian participants reported the use of cannabis during the last 30 days (EU: 7%). Going against the overall EU trend, the respondents in Belgium were more likely to say they never tried cannabis (74%) compared to the Flash Eurobarometer 2011 (Belgium: 71%). The proportion of cannabis users in this survey is substantially lower than the results from the presented school and student surveys. This may be a reflection of the different designs and selection biases. In Belgium, 59% reported that it would be “easy” to obtain cannabis within 24 hours (EU: 58%) and about 61% said that cannabis should continue to be banned (EU: 53%) (TNS Political and social, 2014).

Figure 2.3 | Proportion (%) of youth aged 15-24 reporting the use of cannabis, 2014



The large majority (92%) of the respondents in Belgium has never tried new psychoactive substances (NPS), which is similar to the mean in the EU (92%). Only 1% had used NPS the last 30 days, 3% the last 12 months and 5% more than 12 months ago (Figure 2.4). However, the number of ever-users has risen with 4% in Belgium compared to the Flash Barometer 2011. Of the last 12 month users, 87% was given or had bought NPS by a friend, while respectively 35% and 30% reported to have bought them from a drug dealer or in a specialised shop. Only 3% reported to have bought the substances online. All of the last 12 months users reported that they used the NPS with their friends, and 76% used it during a party or event. Of all respondents, 34% reported to have received information on the effects and risks of NPS through the media, while 36% found this information on the Internet. Respectively 29% and 21% reported to have received information through a school prevention programme or from friends and 19% said that they have not been informed at all. A large majority considers regular use of NPS to carry a high health risk (87%).

Figure 2.4 | Proportion (%) of youth aged 15-24 reporting the use of NPS, 2014



4. DRUG USE AMONG TARGETED GROUPS/ SETTINGS AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

4.1. DRUG USE IN RECREATIONAL SETTINGS IN BELGIUM

Several recent reports of Belgian student surveys (Kinable, 2010; Lombaert, 2011; Rosiers et al., 2011) highlighted the fact that recreational and nightlife settings (e.g. pubs, clubs, parties) are preferred settings for the use of illicit substances. Although the gap in drug use habits between music lovers and non-lovers has narrowed, dance music lovers are still more likely to (frequently) use illicit drugs (Van Havere et al., 2011; Van Havere et al., 2012). The (patterns of) use of psychoactive substances and the characteristics of users in these settings are therefore regularly monitored in the Flemish and the French Community by the VAD research in nightlife settings and the risk reduction project “Drugs risk less” (“Drogues Risquer Moins”) coordinated by Modus Vivendi (Hogge and Denoiseux, 2014) respectively. The methodological approaches of these monitors are significantly different and were described in detail in previous Belgian Annual Reports on Drugs (van Bussel, J. C. H. and Antoine, J., 2012). In preceding years, the prevalence of substance use in both Communities fluctuated to some extent. Changes in the coverage of number, type and location of recruitment settings could have contributed to this fluctuation, especially in the French Community (Rwubu and Hogge, 2013).

For 2013, data were available through the “Drugs risk less” project in the French Community. The next VAD research in night life settings is scheduled for the year 2015. “Drugs risk less” is a joint action of more than 30 harm reduction and prevention organizations active in recreational settings (Hogge and Denoiseux, 2014). Professionals and peers provide information and advice to users and those who are interested. The primary objective of the accompanying survey (paper questionnaire; in 2013 N=1,653, mean age is 23.1 years old) is to verify whether the harm reduction activities are well matching the targeted audience. Therefore, the survey is not representative to the whole party scene and, hence not interpretable as prevalence data because there is no sampling method (Hogge and Denoiseux, 2014). The results can be interpreted as a first indication of specific (new) issues of substance use among the targeted group. Because of changes in the questions in the 2013 survey, results on last month and last year use of illicit substances are no longer available. Instead, the participants were questioned about their usual substance use during nightlife.

Cannabis is by far the most used illicit psychoactive substance in the recreational settings in the French Community. In 2013, 66% of the partygoers has sometimes or often used an illegal drugs during nightlife events; more specifically, 53.3% had sometimes or often used cannabis, followed by amphetamines (27.1%), cocaine (24.2%), hallucinogenic mushrooms (23.5%) and ecstasy (23.5%).

Additionally, 13.7% and 11.4% of the respondents reported sometimes or often use of respectively ketamine and NPS (in this questionnaire referred to as 'research chemicals') during nightlife events (Hogge and Denoiseux, 2014). Of all night life event visitors, 44.1% reported the use of any illegal drugs during the event. 36.0% of the respondents had used cannabis during the event, followed by amphetamines (12.5%), ecstasy (8.5%) and cocaine (6.8%) (Hogge and Denoiseux, 2014). Additionally, 4.2% of the visitors reported the use of ketamine during the event and 2.5% had used NPS.

Finally, the 2014 Global Drug Survey has launched its yearly drug research in November 2013, in which Belgium participated. This was coordinated by the Association of University and University Colleges of Ghent (Vanderplasschen, 2014). Globally, 80,000 people participated in 18 different countries. In Belgium, about 2,670 persons completed the online survey on drug use. It is important to emphasize that such kind of survey is not representative for the Belgian population, as it has shown to comprise an overrepresentation of drug users because respondents are self-selected (no sampling method). Two-thirds of the Belgian participants were men and the mean age was about 27 years. Three-quarters currently had a job or was still a student, 23% was unemployed. Two-thirds visited at least once a month a club or disco. Also, two-thirds had used at least one illicit substance during the last year, while 52% had used a substance during the last month. Cannabis was the most often used substance (42%). Among the cannabis users, half of them used it more than 50 times during the last 12 months. About 30% of the cannabis users would like to use less cannabis. Other drugs regularly used are ecstasy (23.5%) and cocaine (20%). Speed (8%) and ketamine (6.5%) were less prevalent. About 4.5% of the Belgian respondent reported to have used NPS in the last 12 months compared to 5.3% of all the Global Drug Survey respondents. Buying drugs over the internet is not yet as common (done by 7% of the Belgian participants) when compared to other countries (e.g. 22% in the UK), but the number has been increasing during the last years (Winstock, 2014). It should be noted that the samples from the different countries vary significantly in a number of ways including mean age and involvement in clubbing. Therefore, caution is needed when comparing the data between countries.

5. CONCLUSIONS

For this report, the results of the latest general population survey (BHIS 2013) were not yet available and will be presented in the Belgian national drug report of 2015. In general, we remark that population and/or school surveys usually will have difficulties to reach marginalized people, and as such, “hard” or “severe” drug users will often not be included. These surveys will give us some information on more common forms of substance use, but are not suitable to study high risk substance use such as injecting drug use (for a description of high risk drug use please refer to chapter 4) or the use of less common substances in the general population (e.g. heroin).

The regional based surveys among students of secondary and higher education in the Flemish region suggested that the use of cannabis has declined in 2006 and remained stable since then. About one fifth of the 17-18 years old (21.1%) and of the university (college) students (22.0%) used cannabis during the last 12 months prior to the survey. “Regular use” of cannabis among 12-18 years old school students was limited to 2.6% of the study population. The use of cannabis among university and university college students is very time dependent. About half of the last 12 months cannabis users did not use cannabis during the exam period, but almost all students of the last 12 months user group used cannabis during the holidays.

The decreasing trend in the prevalence of cannabis use among youngsters since 2006 has also been observed in other European countries, such as Germany, France, UK and Spain (EMCDDA, 2014). The results of the Flash Eurobarometer 2014 also showed a slight decrease in the prevalence of cannabis use compared to 2011. Therefore, the results of the latest HBSC study 2013/14, the future VLASPAD 2015 and their conclusions on spotted cannabis trends are expected with great interest. On the latest General Population Survey (GPS) expert meeting organised by the EMCDDA (June 2014), an oral presentation from the Spanish national focal point (GPS expert Alvarez Elena) suggested a correlation between the risk perception of cannabis use and the prevalence of cannabis use among youth. In periods of higher risk perception the prevalence of cannabis use decreased and vice versa. Additionally, the oral presentation of the French national focal point (GPS expert Spilka Stanislas) suggested a correlation between the age of onset of tobacco and of cannabis. In France, there have been no major legislative modifications concerning the use of cannabis, but when the anti-tobacco efforts increased, the age of onset of tobacco increased and so did the age of onset of cannabis. The VAD school survey also describes a gradual decrease in smoking among adolescents during the last 10 years, however more profound research on the mechanisms of onset of drug use is currently not available in Belgium.

The school and university (college) based surveys also suggested that the use of other illicit psychoactive substances than cannabis is limited (about 1.5 to 2.5% last 12 months users of amphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine). A minor group of students in higher education reported the daily use of amphetamines and ecstasy during the examination period. Especially the latter is rather surprising as it not only has a central stimulating effect similar to amphetamines, but also a hallucinogen effect that might become more and more reinforced with repeated and long-term use. Although the use of NPS in Belgium still seems to be limited, based on the results of the Flash Eurobarometer 2014 and the Global Drug Survey, vigilance is needed as an increased use of these substances is reported over the last 3 years.

Observational data from the party scene (French Community) suggest that illicit substance use is much more common in this setting. Partygoers most often reported the use of cannabis during the event (33%), followed by amphetamines (12.5%), ecstasy (8.5%) and cocaine (6.8%). We also notice that 4.2% and 2.5% of the respondents reported the use of respectively ketamine and NPS during the event. As ketamine and other NPS are gaining popularity among partygoers, it should be considered in all kind of substance-related surveys to add these substances in the questionnaires in order to better monitor this phenomenon.

As no recurring general population survey specifically on drugs and drug addiction exists in Belgium, all data are cross-sectional using different samples and methodology. Therefore these data are difficult to compare and formulating general conclusions isn't easy. Because of different time and priority schedules in the different Communities, it is also difficult to give a good national overview at all times. In a European context, Belgium is one of the few countries that is not yet systematically collecting national prevalence data on all forms of drug use (Decorte et al., 2009). As such, this research should be prioritized as it is the basic information for other research and policy actions within the field of drugs and drug addiction.

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