



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

EMCDDA 2003 ANNUAL REPORTS: SPECIAL FOCUS ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Rising concern about 'binge' drinking and intensive drug use among the young and vulnerable

(22.10.2003 LISBON/**EMBARGO 10H00 CET**) Concern is rising across Europe about increased 'binge' drinking and intensive drug use by a small but significant number of vulnerable young people.

And today's complex and changing patterns of substance use are a growing challenge for policy-makers. Young people now have access to a wider range of substances and more are using them combined with alcohol.

These issues are examined in this year's *Annual reports* on the drug situation in the **15 EU Member States** and **Norway** and the **13 acceding and candidate countries to the EU** ⁽¹⁾, released today in **Strasbourg** by the **Lisbon-based EU drugs agency**, the **EMCDDA**. Both reports carry a special focus on young people and for the first time highlight the use of alcohol as well as illicit drugs.

Speaking at today's launch, **Georges Estievenart, EMCDDA Executive Director**, said: 'Drug use among young people has risen steadily in the **15 EU Member States** over the last decade. Despite some signs of stabilisation among mainstream young people in some western European countries, there is no evidence of a significant overall reduction, especially among those most at risk'.

He added: 'The **EU** must work hard to meet the target of its Action plan on drugs – to reduce drug use significantly among the under-18s by 2004. One answer is to invest more in prevention among those we know are vulnerable and where drug and alcohol use is most intensive'.

In the **10 Central and East European Countries (CEECs)**, lifetime prevalence (tried at least once) of both alcohol and illicit drug use rose in the late 1990s. Compared to the **EU**, heroin, ecstasy and stimulant use is particularly high among young people in some **CEECs** and the potential for severe problems across the region remains high. In these countries, the need for prevention work is recognised, with school, peer-group and community programmes beginning to emerge.

Drug deaths among the under-20s totalled 3,103 in the **EU** in the last decade, rising steadily in this period from 161 in 1990 to 349 in 2000. Corresponding data are unavailable for the **CEECs**.

Young people face big alcohol threat

Across the **EU** and the **CEECs**, alcohol is the mind-altering substance used most by young people, and cannot be ignored when analysing the health and social burden of their substance use.

School surveys of **EU** 15 to 16-year-olds show that between 36% (**Portugal**) and 89% (**Denmark**) report having been drunk some time in their lives. Increased 'binge' drinking – five or more drinks in a row in the previous 30 days – was reported in the late-1990s, particularly in **Ireland** (up from 47% to 57%) and **Norway** (37% to 50%). In comparison, those trying cannabis at least once peaked at 35% (**France**) for the same age

group in the same period. Alcohol use is widespread in the **CEECs**, where laws intended to protect young people are often poorly enforced. In almost all **10 countries**, nearly two-thirds of 15 to 16-year-olds admit to having been drunk at least once in their life. Those described as 'experienced drinkers' – having drunk alcohol 40 times or more in their lifetime – rose in at least six of these countries between 1995 and 1999. For example from 22% to 41% in the **Czech Republic** and 18% to 26% in **Poland**.

Young people's disapproval of drunkenness varies considerably across the **EU** – generally highest in the south of Europe and lowest in the north. Some 80% of young **Italians** disapprove, compared with 32% in **Denmark**. Disapproval of other drugs varies less – for example, that of ecstasy ranged from 71% of 15 to 16-year-olds in **Greece** to 90% in **Denmark**. In the **CEECs**, disapproval of getting drunk once a week ranges from less than 49% in the **Czech Republic** to 70% and over in **Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania** and **Slovenia**.

Boys tend to use drugs and alcohol more than girls. But the gap is narrowing. Girls are more likely to take unprescribed tranquillisers and sedatives or alcohol together with 'pills'.

Solvent dangers often overlooked

One problem often overlooked but with a big impact on public health, warns the **EMCDDA**, is young people's use of solvents or inhalants.

After alcohol and cannabis, these are the substances most commonly used by 15 to 16-year-olds in the **EU**. Highest use is reported in **Ireland** (22%), **UK** (15%), **Greece** (14%) and **France** (11%). It is at its lowest in **Portugal** (3%). In some **CEECs**, anecdotal evidence suggests considerable problems with solvent use.

Some 1 700 deaths related to such substances were recorded among young people in the **UK** alone between 1983 and 2000. This suggests that, despite the high profile given to deaths associated with ecstasy and other controlled drugs, solvent use might be a greater acute health risk for young people.

Changing patterns of cannabis use

Cannabis remains the illicit drug most frequently used by young people in Europe, but figures vary widely. In some **EU Member States** and the **Czech Republic**, around a third of 15 to 16-year-olds have tried the drug at least once, with **Denmark** recording 24%, the **Netherlands** 28%, **Spain** 30%, **Ireland** 32%, and the **UK, France** and the **Czech Republic** 35%. In other countries, figures are much lower – **Portugal** (8%), **Sweden** (8%), **Greece** (9%) and **Finland** (10%).

In countries with higher levels of cannabis use, trends seem to be converging. But in those with lower levels, the picture is less clear. In countries with high lifetime prevalence of cannabis use among 15 to 16-year-olds – **Ireland**, the **Netherlands** and the **UK** – estimates are stabilising or falling slightly. This might be due to use reaching saturation point.

The likelihood of young people experimenting with cannabis rises sharply with age. Figures for 2001 show that use among boys in **France** tripled between age 13 (13.8%) and 18 (55.7%). They also show that boys are more prone to intensive cannabis use than girls. For example 13.3% of **French** boys and 3.6% of girls used the drug intensively.

Although the under-20s accounted for less than 10% of all clients of specialised drug treatment centres in the **EU** in 2001, over half of them cited cannabis use as their main problem drug.

Mixed picture on other illegal drugs

Ecstasy and amphetamine use remains intensive among some specific groups, such as partygoers. But today's report says there is no evidence of a dramatic **EU-wide** rise in use. Where ecstasy use was high in 1995 – in **Ireland, Italy** and the **UK** – some decline is now evident. But rises are seen where use was low – **Denmark**,

Portugal, Finland, Norway and in the **CEECs**. Relatively high lifetime prevalence among 15- to 16-year-olds is reported in **Latvia** (6%) and the **Czech Republic, Lithuania** and **Slovenia** (4%).

Experimentation with cocaine and heroin is relatively rare among school students – usually under 2% in the **EU**, although higher in the **CEECs**, peaking at 4.1% in **Lithuania**. But it is higher among vulnerable groups such as young offenders, school drop-outs and homeless young people, all of whom are often poorly represented in school-survey data. Almost all **EU** Member States report concern about a possible rise in the cocaine and base/crack cocaine market for young problem drug users, although estimates of use remain low.

Responding to young people's diverse needs

It is increasingly recognised that drug and alcohol problems are intertwined and that patterns of drug taking among young people have diversified. As well as investing in general drug-prevention work in schools and communities, **EU** countries are beginning to promote projects targeting those most vulnerable to drug and alcohol problems. Such projects aim to prevent substance use problems by strengthening self-esteem and problem-solving abilities and by helping people deal effectively with risks, such as living in a drug-using environment. Such initiatives are still rare in the **CEECs**.

Drug prevalence among the young is often higher in particular localities, such as deprived areas of inner cities. **Ireland, Portugal** and the **UK** are the only **EU** Member States to map particularly disadvantaged communities and to provide special, intensive prevention programmes. **Germany, Austria** and **Norway** have evaluated programmes helping teachers identify and assist drug-using pupils. Specific interventions in **Ireland** and the **UK** have been successful in keeping school students away from drugs. Other programmes in these two countries, as well as in **Spain** and **Portugal**, focus on school drop-outs. Evaluation shows that, to be successful, such interventions need to be timely and sufficiently intensive. Specific programmes for young drug offenders have been developed in **Germany, Finland** and the **UK** and seem to reduce re-offending. Prevention initiatives targeting vulnerable recreational drug users in party settings often involve their peers and offer information and appropriate support – e.g. in **Spain, France** and the **Netherlands**. Hotlines and websites can be additional features, although studies suggest that face-to-face information is more readily accepted.

Marcel Reimen, Chairman of the EMCDDA Management Board, said today: 'Substance-use problems among young people are often concentrated in specific groups and local communities. We must be careful not to overlook this fact when considering the wider national and European picture and must ensure that we target those in greatest need'.

Notes to editors

⁽¹⁾ The chapter on young people in this report covers only the 10 Central and East European Countries (CEECs).

- **Annual report 2003: the state of the drugs problem in the European Union and Norway** (available in the 11 EU languages and Norwegian at <http://annualreport.emcdda.eu.int>). See special issues on: **Drug and alcohol use among young people; Social exclusion and reintegration** and **Public expenditure in the area of drug demand reduction** (Chapter 3).
- **Annual report 2003: the state of the drugs problem in the acceding and candidate countries to the European Union** (available in English at <http://candidates.emcdda.eu.int>). See special issues on: **Drug and alcohol use among young people; Drug-related infectious diseases** and **Drug strategies** (Chapters 2–4).
- **Sources** for these special features on young people include: Reitox national reports 2002; European school survey project/ESPAD (1995 and 1999); published and ad hoc research; and government publications on drug and alcohol use among young people (to 2003).
- **News releases** can be downloaded from http://www.emcdda.eu.int/infopoint/news_media/newsrelease.cfm
- A **European Conference on 'Drug use among young people'** will take place in Malaga from 30–31 October (for details see <http://www.emcdda.eu.int>). The **EMCDDA** will be launching a new policy briefing at this event focusing on 'Drug use amongst vulnerable young people' (<http://www.emcdda.eu.int/infopoint/publications/focus.shtml>).