



## SUMMARY — SELECTED ISSUE

### NATIONAL DRUG-RELATED RESEARCH IN EUROPE

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#### Introduction

Drug-related research is crucial to understanding Europe's drug problems. Research enables Europe to learn lessons from the past, by identifying historical patterns of drug use, and studying the cycles and variations in the use of substances. Research sharpens Europe's awareness and monitoring of the present. It provides surveys and data on the scope and scale of drug problems, and looks into emerging trends and new patterns in drug use. Research helps Europe to prepare for the future, by looking at practical issues such as resource allocation, best practices and the piloting of innovative approaches to managing problem drug use.

Today, European drug policy is increasingly 'evidence-based'. This implies that policy is underpinned by scientific research and findings, and research plays a role in defining policy priorities, best practice and options. Yet building a picture of drug-related research in Europe is challenging. Just as drug use cuts across broad sections of society, so drug-related research embraces numerous disciplines, such as public health, psychiatry and psychology, sociology, medicine, law, criminology, political science and economics, with research on illicit drugs often sharing resources with licit substances such as alcohol, tobacco or prescription drugs, or more general concepts of addiction and compulsive behaviours. Drug-related research projects use a variety of methodological approaches and involve numerous actors. Funding for research in Europe is similarly varied — in terms of periodicity and budgetary cycles, national, regional or international focus, prioritisation of research objectives, and the multiple sources of financial support. Added to this general variety are national, local and regional variations: drug-related research is not evenly distributed and available across EU Member States.

The EMCDDA Selected issue National drug-related research in Europe provides an overview of the framework within which drug-related research is carried out in European countries. It focuses on the role of drug-related research at national level, coordination and funding arrangements, research and dissemination structures as well as major current projects. It identifies progress in comparison to a tentative, fact-finding study of available information that was conducted in 1996, and it further identifies some limitations and gaps, suggesting future developments in the area. The Selected issue is accompanied by a website, compiling fuller reports of the information collected from reporting countries, which is available at: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/themes/research>.

#### Report methodology

In 2007, the EMCDDA's Reitox network of national focal points in 27 Member States, Croatia, Norway and Turkey were requested to draft a chapter on drug-related research in their country. Responses were received from 25 Member States, Croatia and Norway. The request for information covered:

- an overview of national drug-related research structures and policies;
- a snapshot of current drug-related research within each Member State;
- a description of national structures and approaches for collecting and disseminating drug-related research results.

Both 'applied' and 'basic' research were included in the reporting exercise. Research related to the supply reduction field — that is, in the areas of criminology, policing, enforcement, and seizures — was excluded, as many national focal points have limited access to information in this area.

The reports from the Reitox national focal points enabled the Centre to build an overview of current drug-related research in Europe, and to apply a tentative framework of categories to classify (i) research actors in Europe, (ii) the broad themes and subjects of a corpus of research as reported to the

Centre, and (iii) available dissemination channels. The reports were compared to the 1996 report, when the EMCDDA was first involved in a tentative overview of drug-related research in 15 Member States, entitled 'Drug research-related initiatives in the European Union'.

### First results

- Although already present in 1996 as a topic of public interest, emphasis on drug-related research is now a formal priority in Member States. Since then research has been introduced within the formal policy guidelines in many EU countries. Today, research is specifically mentioned in the national drug policy documents of 20 of the 27 reporting countries.
- Reviewing the recent history of drug-related research in the EU, we can see some evidence of 'sequencing' taking place. There is a clear tendency for initial drug-related research priorities to be linked closely to the need for an estimation of the extent of drug use at national and regional level, in order to better plan interventions and policies. In a second stage, priorities shift to applied research, namely as far as needs assessment and evaluation of interventions and policies are concerned (such as treatment approaches and prevention interventions). In this phase, additional qualitative research of drug users and their patterns of use complements the quantitative epidemiological studies. Finally, in some countries, innovative and resource-intensive biomedical research has moved into the area of drug effects and predisposal.
- There are numerous producers of drug-related research in Member States. These include universities, public health institutes, specialised research centres, NGOs and the pharmaceutical industry. In total, more than 70 main research structures were cited by reporting countries. These can be distributed into four types of structure: (i) academic centres (including universities and university-linked research centres); (ii) public research centres and institutes; (iii) private research centres and institutes (including foundations and the pharmaceutical industry) and (iv) institutions hosting Reitox national focal points.
- Well-functioning coordination among researchers, research centres and research areas is a prerequisite for continuous, comprehensive and high quality research. A serious lack of such coordination was noted in the EMCDDA exploration of drug-related research in 1996, and this continues to be a fundamental structural problem in most countries. Interdisciplinary, national research networks with sustainable funding were reported only by a few countries.
- Governments are the main source of funding for drug-related research, with priority given to research supporting evidence-based policy in the country concerned. Governments may provide basic funding for some universities and research institutes, though funds are mostly available through open calls for proposals or contracts for specifically-commissioned research. Channels and sources for funding include national drug coordination bodies, national focal points, or specific government research programmes in the drugs field. Other funding sources include publicly-financed foundations, philanthropic foundations and private institutions, such as pharmaceutical companies and NGOs.
- Quantifying and describing the expenditure on drug-related research across countries has proved a difficult task. Only six Member States (Czech Republic, Ireland, Spain, France, Hungary, Portugal), notably some of those with more centralised national coordination mechanisms, were able to report more detailed information on the allocation of funds to drug-related research. Some Member States were only able to report on funding for the main research projects (Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland and Slovakia) or main research funding sources (Finland, the UK). For most reporting countries, almost no information on drug-related research funding was available. More research on public expenditure and its influence on research, and on the impact of drug-related research and its potential financial benefits, would therefore be welcomed.
- A diversified dissemination infrastructure for research results exists across reporting countries. This includes a multitude of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed journals, newsletters and professional magazines, the national focal points themselves, libraries and documentation centres, national annual reports, dedicated websites, professional and scientific conferences and press conferences.
- Journals are a natural platform for communicating research, and 27 drug research-specialised peer-reviewed journals were reported in 2007, more than twice as many as in 1996. These journals are mainly published in each country's national language. A corpus of journal articles was used to assess common themes of research: out of 288 classified articles, 65 related to research on

prevalence, incidence and patterns of drug use; 81 to research on responses to the drug situation; 51 to research on determinants of drug use and risk/protective factors; 29 to research on consequences of drug use and abuse; and 62 to research on drug mechanisms and effects.

## Conclusions

- Overall, since 1996, European drug-related research has seen considerable improvement. Most countries report relatively stable support and funding structures at national level, though significant differences exist amongst them, and concerns about funding availability and sustainability are expressed. Areas which have seen a more visible increase in terms of research effort are: prevalence, incidence and patterns of use, in which all countries now have recent or ongoing projects; the evaluation of interventions (mainly treatment, prevention and drug policies and strategies) and economic aspects.
- National focal points currently report data to the EMCDDA using instruments and methods that promote data comparability and reliability. Cross-national comparative studies, such as the ESPAD school survey, are routinely undertaken by a large number of countries in Europe. Furthermore, new dissemination channels, notably those based on the Internet, have developed and made access to research findings easier, quicker and available to a wider public.
- The link between research results and policymaking is difficult to assess. There is a consensus among countries that no 'linear relationship' is directly perceivable. Nonetheless, the vast majority conclude that research does have an influence on decision-making, at least to a certain degree. Reports suggest that research specifically commissioned by the policymakers themselves has a greater chance of being taken into account in decision-making. In addition, numerous examples exist across countries of direct policy actions based on applied research.
- While improvements have been made, significant limitations and information gaps still exist. New challenges have arisen based on demands for the evaluation of interventions and policy design and implementation. Although multi-disciplinary research is common, more can be done on coordinating the efforts of researchers working in different fields. Funding sources and cycles remain fragmented. Specialised university education and research training are insufficient in most countries, which jeopardises the recruitment of young researchers to the field. The funding available for large-scale drug-research projects, such as general population surveys but also important basic research, is still insufficient.
- Finally, more efforts are needed to promote coordination and the availability of information in this area, and in mapping and evaluating the vast amounts of information available to researchers, particularly on the Internet. The research environment remains in a state of flux in Europe, and so general snapshots of the state of drug-related research across countries will remain valuable for defining priorities, assessing countries' performance and encouraging evidence-based drugs policy.

Three in-depth reviews of topical interest are published as Selected issues each year, based on information provided to the EMCDDA by the EU Member States and candidate countries and Norway (participating in the work of the EMCDDA since 2001) as part of the national reporting process.

All Selected issues (in English) and summaries (in 23 languages) are available on the EMCDDA website: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/selected-issues>