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SUMMARY — SELECTED ISSUE:

Trends in injecting drug use in Europe

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

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Introduction

This 'Selected issue' looks at the current situation in injecting drug use in Europe. Overall, two questions guide the report: What are the prevalence and trends in injecting drug use in today's Europe? How do European countries try to prevent or reduce this type of drug use and the harms associated with it?

Data from a variety of sources are analysed to estimate prevalence and trends in drug injecting in Europe. The most recent data point to injecting drug use remaining stable or declining in most European countries. Measures such as opioid substitution treatment and needle and syringe programmes, which aim to reduce injecting-related harms, now reach many of those who need them.

Prevalence estimates

- National estimates, available for 14 countries, range from less than one to 15 injecting drug users per thousand population aged 15–64, suggesting considerable differences in prevalence between countries.
- For the twelve EU Member States with prevalence estimates, the weighted average is about 2.5 injectors per thousand population aged 15–64. Extrapolated to the whole European Union, this corresponds to between three quarters of a million and one million active injecting drug users.
- Five countries were able to provide data to assess the trend in injecting prevalence between 2002 and 2007. Although decreases can be observed in three of these countries, only in the **United Kingdom** was the change statistically significant.

Drug users entering treatment

- Twenty-six European countries provided data on drug users entering treatment centres in 2007. Data on treatment entrants may not be representative of the treated population as a whole.
- One-third (33 %) of all drug clients entering treatment in 2007 report injection as the usual route of administration of their primary drug. The proportion 'usually injecting' their primary drug varies from under 2 % in the **Netherlands** to 93 % in **Lithuania**.
- About a quarter of treatment entrants report having injected drugs in the past, but not currently. Thus, about 60 % of drug treatment entrants are currently injecting or have injected drugs in the past.
- Injecting drug use in Europe is mostly linked to opioid use. On average, 45 % of those entering treatment for primary opioid use report usually injecting the drug. Among primary cocaine clients, 8 % report usually injecting the drug. In the countries where users of amphetamines form the largest group of drug clients, between 41 % and 83 % of primary users of amphetamine (**Finland, Sweden**) or methamphetamine (**Czech Republic, Slovakia**) report usually injecting the drug.
- Between 2002 and 2007, among those entering treatment for the first time for opioids, cocaine or amphetamines, the proportion who report injecting their primary drug has decreased in most countries.

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- Data on first-time treatment entrants between 2002 and 2007 suggest a declining trend in injecting among primary cocaine users and a stable trend among amphetamine users.

Injecting in prison

- Between 6 % and 38 % of prison inmates report ever injecting drugs, depending on the country. Injecting while in prison is reported by between 1 % and 31 % of inmates.

Infectious disease data

- Testing of drug injectors for infectious diseases reveals high proportions injecting for less than two years in some countries, suggesting higher levels of recent initiation, and high proportions of injectors under the age of 25 in several countries.
- In EU Member States, the rates of reported newly diagnosed cases of HIV infection among injecting drug users are mostly at stable and low levels, or in decline.
- Among countries neighbouring the European Union, increasing rates of reported HIV cases attributed to injecting drug use suggest high levels of ongoing transmission.

Trends in drug-induced deaths in Europe

- As heroin injection is involved in many of the deaths caused by drug overdose, data on drug-induced deaths may allow inferences about the prevalence and trends in injecting drug use.
- Data for 2007 show a stable trend in the number of drug-induced deaths in five out of 18 EU Member States, but an upward trend in 13 of these countries.
- The age profiles of drug-induced deaths suggest that the number of young heroin users is stabilising or even falling in most countries. However, in a number of countries, the data point to the continuing recruitment of young drug users, particularly heroin injectors.

Interventions targeting injecting drug use

- In European countries, responses to injecting drug use and its consequences have centred on drug treatment; in particular, opioid substitution treatment, which is the most effective intervention in reducing injecting.
- In 2007, there were an estimated 650 000 clients in substitution treatment in the European Union, equating to about 40 % of the estimated total number of problem opioid users. The number of people in substitution treatment in 2007 represents a more than three-fold increase since 1995.
- Data from ten countries show large variations in the proportion of problem opioid users that may have access to opioid substitution treatment: from 5 % in **Cyprus** to more than 50 % in **Germany**.
- Needle and syringe exchange programmes, which aim to reduce the risk of infectious diseases associated with sharing injecting equipment, exist in all EU Member States, Croatia and Norway, and have high availability in most countries.
- Between 2003 and 2007, the total number of syringes distributed increased by 33 % in the 14 countries able to provide information.
- Specialised syringe provision outlets — not including pharmacy sales — are estimated to distribute on average about 50 syringes a year per injecting drug user across the European Union.