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The current drug situation in Europe

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The current drug situation in Europe

Based on data submitted to the EMCDDA, **cannabis** is the most popular illegal drug in Europe. There are, however, large differences in the prevalence of use between countries: the highest reported estimates are more than 30 times greater than the lowest. Overall, trends in consumption show stable or declining levels of cannabis use, although there are divergent patterns within this general long-term picture. For instance, in some Eastern European countries, consumption levels still appear to be increasing. In some of these countries, cannabis consumption levels now rival or even exceed prevalence levels observed in Western Europe. The overall number of treatment clients with cannabis as the main drug is also decreasing in most countries, either because of a reduced service capacity to accept new clients or because of a decrease in the number of people being referred to cannabis-related treatment. According to surveys conducted between 2004 and 2008 (representing the most recent data available), on average 22.5% of European adults (at least 75.5 million) report using cannabis at least once in their lifetime. Only a third of lifetime users, i.e. 6.8% of European adults (about 23 million), report using the drug also in the previous year, with a country variation between 0.4% and 15.2%. The prevalence of last month use – an indication for regular and intense use – is at 3.7% (about 12.5 million Europeans). It can therefore be concluded that only a small minority of those trying cannabis actually develops more frequent use patterns.

Cocaine is the second most commonly used illegal drug in Europe, although prevalence levels and trends differ considerably between countries. Generally speaking, prevalence levels are comparatively low. Among school pupils, cocaine use is much less common than cannabis use. For example, in half of the 28 reporting countries, between 1% and 2% of 15- to 16-year-old school pupils report using cocaine in their lifetime. Most of the remaining countries report prevalence levels of between 3% and 4%, while Spain, France, and the United Kingdom report 5%. Based on the most recent data available (surveys conducted between 2004 and 2008), among European adults, lifetime prevalence for cocaine is overall at 4.1% (about 14 million). As with cannabis, only a third of these adults, i.e. 1.3% of European adults (4 million), report using the drug also in the last year, with a country variation between 0.0% and 3.1%. With last month use at 0.5% (around 2 million adult users), the transition rate from experimenting to regular cocaine use appears to be similarly low to that of cannabis. Although drug treatment services in Europe have been traditionally dominated by clients with opioid problems, cocaine users now represent about a quarter of new treatment entrants. The majority of these is reported by a small group of countries, principally Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom. There appear to be two distinct groups: socially integrated males who sniff the drug, and marginalised drug users who inject cocaine or use crack cocaine alongside other drugs.

Amphetamine use is overall lower than cocaine use in Europe, but in many countries amphetamine or methamphetamine is the most commonly used stimulant drug. Problematic amphetamine use is mostly reported by countries in the North of Europe, while problematic methamphetamine use is largely restricted to the Czech Republic and Slovakia. According to surveys conducted between 2004 and 2008, 3.3% of European adults (about 11 million) report using ecstasy in their lifetime. Only a quarter of lifetime users, i.e. 0.8% (about 2.5 million), report last year use, with a country variation from 0.1% to 3.7%. For amphetamines, lifetime prevalence is reportedly at 3.7% of European adults (about 12 million), and only a sixth of lifetime users, i.e. 0.6% (around 2 million), report last year use, with a country variation of 0.0% to 1.7%.

Heroin use, particularly by injection, accounts for the greatest share of drug-related morbidity and mortality in the EU. Drug-induced deaths represent 4% of all deaths among 15- to 39-year-old Europeans, with opioids found in around three quarters. The number of

problem opioid users in Europe is cautiously estimated at 1.35 million. Most treatment entrants report opioids as their primary drug. Data from a range of sources point to an overall stable to slightly increasing opioid problem in the EU since 2003/04. Trend data from prevalence estimates appears stable, but new treatment demand has been slowly increasing in several countries, and drug-induced deaths have also increased. To some extent, this may reflect the long-term nature of opioid problems where, once addicted, users tend to remain dependent for long periods of time. Thus, even a relatively small number of new users is sufficient to maintain the overall population. The number of injecting drug users in Europe is estimated to be between 750 000 and 1 million, with large differences in prevalence between countries. Trends in injecting use are particularly difficult to gauge because the quality of data requires particular caution. Data from treatment monitoring suggests that the medium-term trend is pointing downwards, and injecting drug users are now in the minority among new opioid users entering treatment services in Europe.