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# Representative surveys: key indicator to estimate drug use in the general population

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## Aim: Why use population surveys?

The aim of general population surveys is to provide valid, reliable and comparable information on:

- prevalence of drug use in the general population, including illicit drugs such as cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, and LSD, and licit substances such as alcohol and psychoactive medicines;
- characteristics and use patterns of drug users and attitudes of different population groups;

with the purpose of helping policymakers identify priorities, plan responses and monitor progress towards targets.

## Methods: How?

Sources — information is obtained through national representative surveys of:

- the general population, with particular focus on young adults (standard EMCDDA age range for adults is 15 to 64 years);
- school student population, with particular focus on 15- to 16-year-olds (some countries collect data on 11- to 18-year-olds).

Definitions — survey respondents are asked to report their use of a substance within given time frames, and this data is used to provide prevalence estimates, commonly:

- any use during their life (lifetime prevalence);
- any use during the previous year (last year/last-12-months prevalence);
- any use during the previous month (last month/last-30-days prevalence).

Strengths — general population surveys collect information from each respondent, including substances used, frequency of use, potential determinants and consequences, such as health status, attitudes, perceptions and individual lifestyles.

Limitations — participants in population surveys may inaccurately (generally under) report drug or alcohol use, particularly intensive forms of use.

Periodicity — many European countries collect information every two to four years; surveys are not carried out in the same year in all countries.

New developments — progress is being made: in collecting data on frequent and daily drug use (mainly cannabis); in validating short psychometric scales to assess dependent or otherwise problematic forms of drug use (mainly cannabis); and in exploring methods for coordinated analysis of individual data at European level.

## EMCDDA guidelines

EMCDDA guidelines include a set of common core questions ('European model questionnaire' EMQ) and basic methodological recommendations. The EMQ can be used to collect data from existing surveys, or can be inserted into broader questionnaires (see the EMCDDA Handbook).

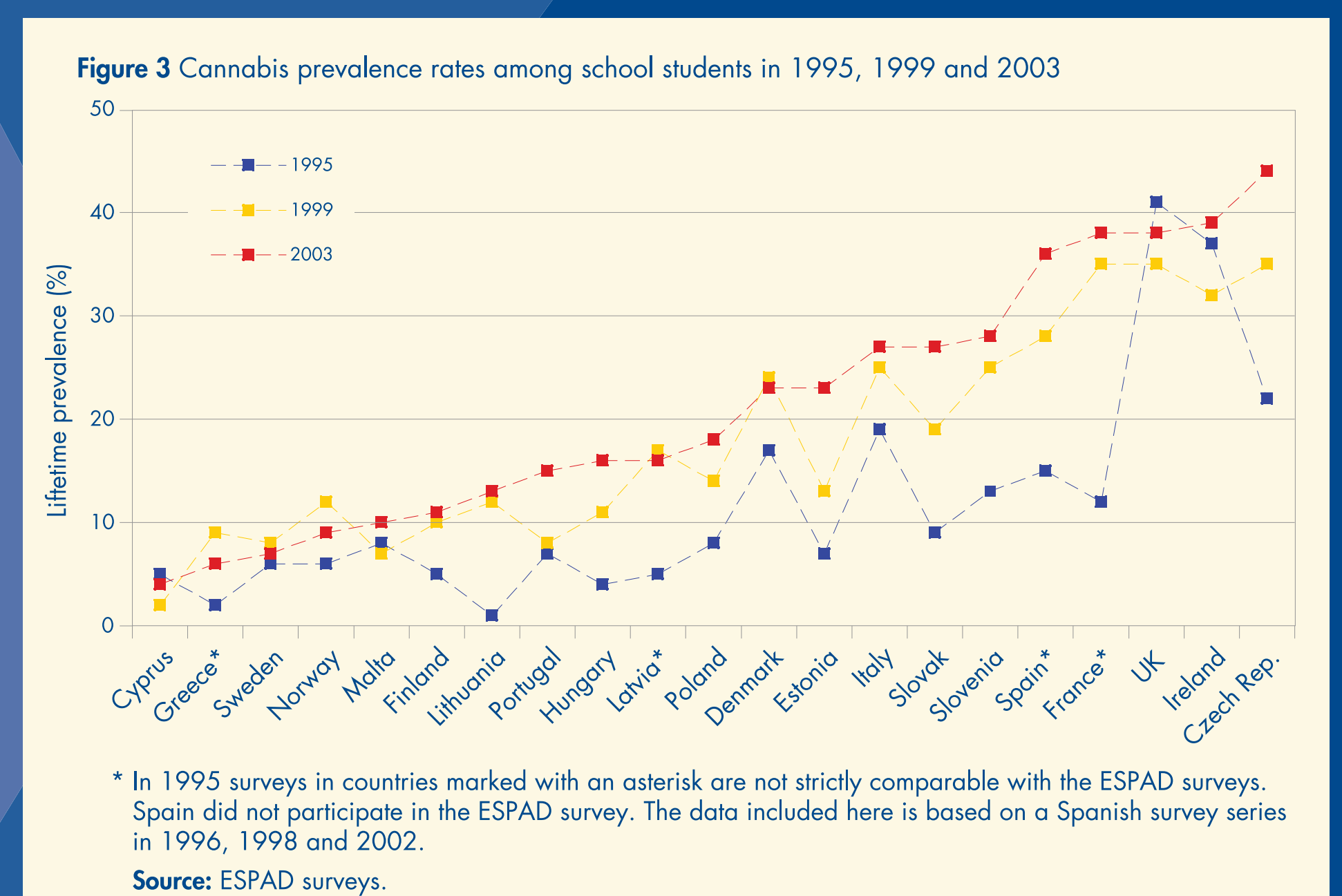
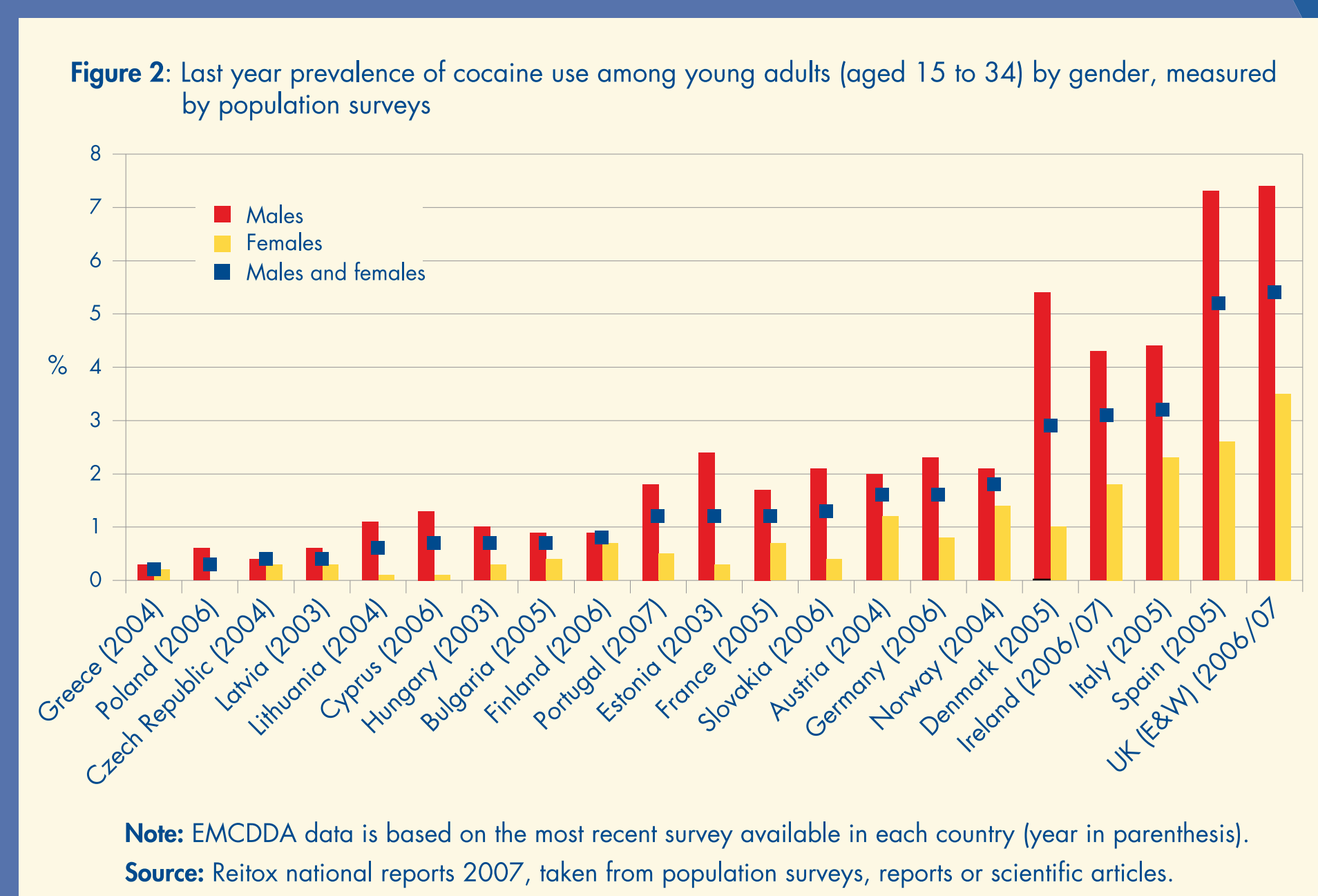
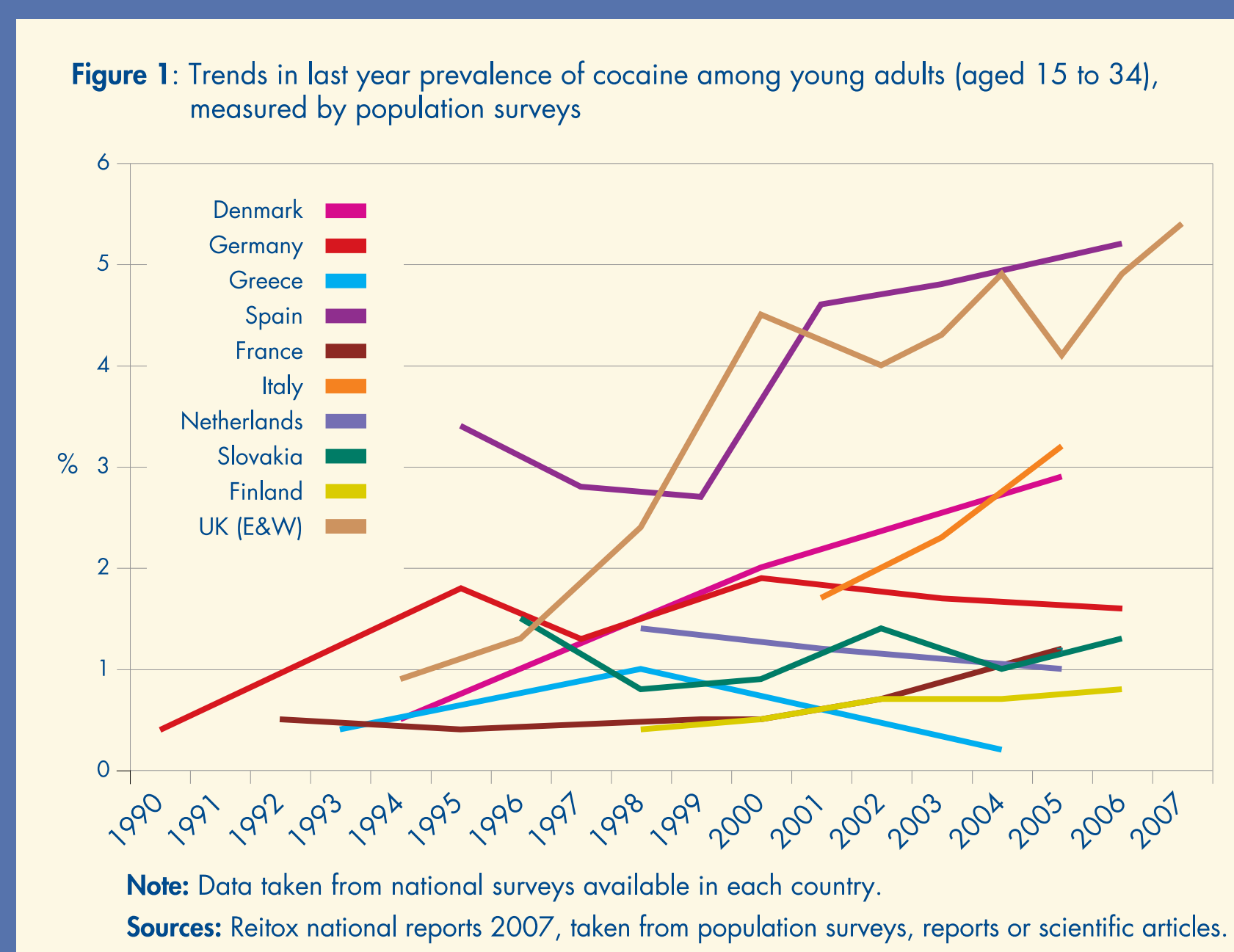
## Some key results from the EMCDDA's 2008 Annual report

- Nearly 22 % of Europeans (15–64 years) have tried cannabis and 7 % in the last 12 months.
- Nearly 4 % have tried cocaine and just over 1 % in the last 12 months.
- Just over 3 % have tried amphetamines and under 1 % in the last 12 months.
- Nearly 3 % have tried ecstasy and just under 1 % in the last 12 months.

Table 1 Prevalence of cannabis use in the general adult population — summary of data

Age group 15–64 years	Time frame of use		
	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
Estimated number of users in Europe	71.5 million	23 million	12.5 million
European average	21.8 %	6.8 %	3.8 %
Range	1.7–36.5 %	0.8–11.2 %	0.5–8.7 %
Lowest prevalence countries	Romania (1.7 %) Malta (3.5 %) Bulgaria (4.4 %) Cyprus (6.6 %)	Malta (0.8%) Bulgaria (1.5 %) Greece (1.7 %) Sweden (2.0 %)	Malta (0.5 %) Sweden (0.6 %) Lithuania (0.7 %) Bulgaria (0.8 %)
Highest prevalence countries	Denmark (36.5 %) France (30.6 %) United Kingdom (England and Wales only) (30.1 %) Italy (29.3 %)	Italy, Spain (11.2 %) Czech Republic (9.3 %) France (8.6 %)	Spain (8.7 %) Italy (5.8 %) United Kingdom (England and Wales only), France, Czech Republic (4.8 %)

Note: These prevalence estimates are based on weighted averages from national surveys conducted in different years (mainly 2004–07), therefore they cannot be attached to a single year.



## Acknowledgements

The national focal points and general population survey experts of all participating countries are gratefully acknowledged.

## References

EMCDDA Handbook for surveys on drug use among the general population: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index58052EN.html>  
 General population surveys (GPS) overview, methodological notes, tables, figures, all statistics: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/stats08/gps>  
 Drug use in the general population: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/themes/key-indicators/gps>

Schools survey overview, methodological notes, tables, figures, all statistics: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/stats08/eye>  
 The European school survey project on alcohol and other drugs (ESPAD): [www.espad.org](http://www.espad.org)  
 Health behaviour among school children (HBSC): [www.hbsc.org](http://www.hbsc.org)