



European Monitoring Centre  
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

MEETING REPORT

# Prevalence and patterns of drug use among the general population (GPS)

2016 Expert meeting

19–20 September 2016  
**EMCDDA, Lisbon**

# 2016 annual EMCDDA expert meeting 'Prevalence and patterns of drug use among the general population'

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Date            **November 2016**

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## Brief summary

The 2016 annual expert meeting on the EMCDDA epidemiological indicator 'Prevalence and patterns of drug use among the general population' (often referred to as the 'General population surveys indicator') took place on 19 and 20 September at the EMCDDA in Lisbon.

The meeting brought together experts from almost all EU Member States, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries, Australia, Switzerland, the United States as well as from the ESPAD schools project and the MedSPAD project from the Pompidou Group.

These regular meetings on the indicator change their focus from year to year. This year particular attention was given to methodological developments on the indicator, the link between drug use surveys and other drug-related monitoring tools. In addition, targeted surveys in drug use served as a platform for discussion on drug use issues.

## Meeting objectives

- Provide an overview of progress and results for 2015/16.
- Exchange information between countries and international projects.
- Promote methodological discussion about ways to progress measuring and describing substance use as well as ways to analyse and interpret trends.
- Explore ways to bridge the gap between surveys, policy and responses.

## Specific topics for the meeting

- Recent trend analyses based on the most recent national surveys, including a presentation of the Swiss rolling drug survey.
- A special focus was given to a session on 'The dark side of drug use surveys', on which there was an in-depth discussion on the revision of the alcohol module of the European Model Questionnaire (EMQ). The revision is based on the outcomes from the RARHA Joint Action (Joint Action on Reducing Alcohol Related Harm) of the Health and Food Safety Directorate General (DG SANTE) of the European Commission to develop common instruments to measure alcohol use and problems.
- Different presentations on targeted surveys that should work as a complement to general population surveys: recreational/nightlife settings, web surveys (e.g. European Web Survey on Drugs).
- Session on linking traditional epidemiological surveys on drug use and wastewater methodology, with a presentation, among others, on the preliminary results of a study using wastewater data and hospital emergencies.

- Link between prevalence data with other indicators, with a focus on recent analyses on the field of prevention and drug policy, using ESPAD data.
- Launch of the 2015 ESPAD (European school survey from 35 countries) report.
- The meeting brought together international experts from Australia and the United States for a final joint session with the Problem drug use expert meeting that focused on the link between the two indicators, addressing among others the challenges of monitoring high-risk cannabis use.

**National abstracts** that serve to collect information on new developments in general population surveys (GPS) from national experts identified that:

- At least 21 countries have conducted, or are conducting, surveys in 2016 to 2019.
- More than half of the countries collect data on perceived availability and use of new psychoactive substances using the EMCDDA modules.
- Nineteen countries provided information about efforts being made to measure use of new psychoactive substances in general and school population surveys.

In general, positive improvements have taken place in GPS data availability and comparability. However, several countries reported difficulties in guaranteeing regular surveys due to lack funds.

In relation to the experts' perception on the way forward for the GPS indicator in the medium and long term, suggestions commonly mentioned were:

- To promote a better connection between general population surveys and school surveys.
- To promote a higher comparability of data between countries.
- To develop the monitoring of the misuse of medicines.
- To improve collaboration and sharing of information among countries.

A web platform was the preferred method by almost all experts as a way to improve communication with the expert network.

### **Progress in 2014–16**

The collection of methodological information has been improved by the mapping of core survey questions and the provision of more detailed information on response rates. This contributes to a better informed and nuanced assessment of the implementation of the key indicator than was possible in the past.

Relations with international school surveys have been strengthened, with the EMCDDA supporting the publication of the 2015 ESPAD Report and the hosting of the ESPAD schools survey meeting at the end of 2016.

In 2016 we are focusing on non-probabilistic surveys as a way to complement national drug surveys. A contract was launched to explore and map the existing studies on drug use in nightlife settings in the EU.

The new EMQ modules on use of 'new' psychoactive substances and perceived availability were made available on the EMCDDA's GPS webpage.

Increased profile in international initiatives: GPS as a European core health indicator and cooperation with European projects (RARHA) to improve measurement of alcohol use.

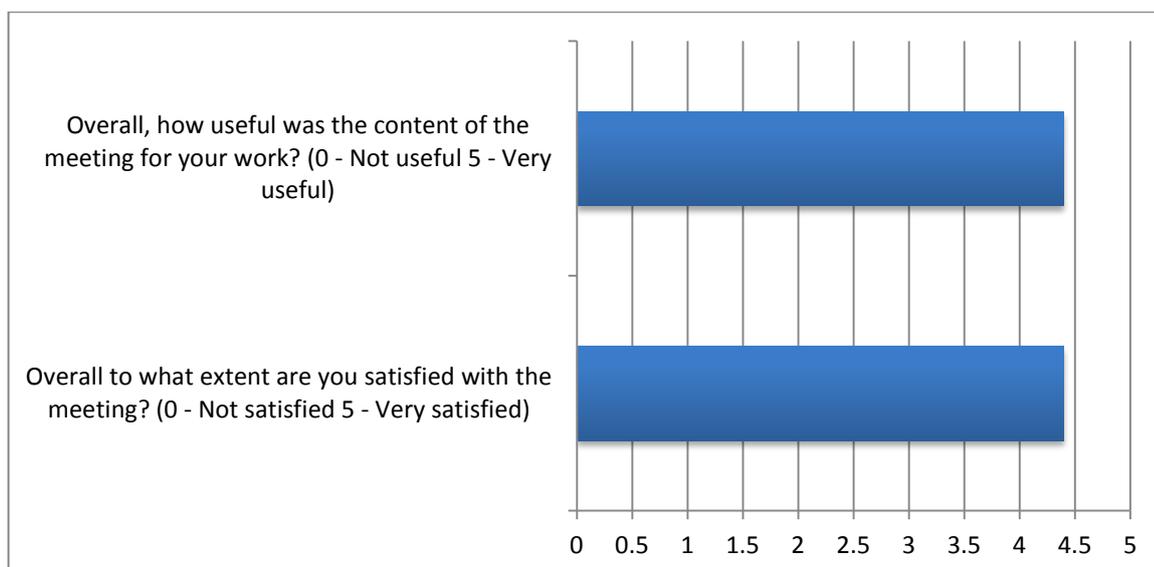
Increased capacity building together with the Reitox unit: a call for tenders for the first GPS in Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was launched and technical assistance given.

The key-indicator assessment was finalised in 2015. Overall, there is a better understanding and reporting of survey methodologies and greater comparability with the EMQ. All countries but one have conducted at least one national representative population survey, although some countries are not able to maintain a series of surveys with the same regularity, due often to budget constraints. Progress relies on the continuity of repeated general population and school surveys, because this indicator, like others, produces the most accurate assessment of the situation (and therefore allows for better policy formulation and evaluation) when it is repeated over time.

Despite a growing recognition of the potential value of more targeted surveys, the mapping and reporting of surveys at the European level remains weak, as does the question of consolidation with the EMQ. More work is also needed to explore the value of internet surveys. Moreover, it was concluded that work is required to develop, test and implement standard questions in emerging areas of importance such as new psychoactive substances, the measurement of cannabis-related problems and the misuse of medicinal products.

### Meeting assessment

An online survey was set up to evaluate the GPS experts' opinion on the 2016 expert meeting. The questionnaire was filled in by 28 of the meeting's participants, and the overall opinion was very positive towards the content of the meeting, its usefulness and the possibilities for networking.



It was suggested to allow more time for discussion between presentations and, possibly, to have parallel sessions instead of only plenary sessions.

### Next steps in 2016–17

- Rationalise and improve web-based information on the drug situation from population surveys.
- Explore ways to make the annual European GPS expert meeting more interactive; promoting focused analyses and filling information gaps about methodological differences between surveys and across countries.
- Continue work, in co-operation with the PDU indicator, to assess intensive forms of cannabis use in population samples (psychometric scales) and finalise a technical paper on the guidelines for monitoring high-risk cannabis use in GPS.
- Inclusion in Standard Table 1 (to be communicated in the next meeting of the Heads of focal points) of questions from the EMQ module on perceived availability.
- Voluntary field trial to be launched in 2017 (to be communicated in the next meeting of the Heads of focal points) to collect available data on the prevalence of new psychoactive substance use.

- Assess the possibility of using the Reitox Forum as a web platform for the GPS expert network.
- Ask for volunteers for the monitoring of open source information.
- Update the meeting page, and ask for agreement for uploading of presentations (done).
- EMQ draft alcohol module to be sent again and feedback to be received by October 15 (done).

We invite you to check our GPS indicator page and our Statistical Bulletin website where we present the detailed methodological information about national surveys and on which you can find the most recent data.

Meeting page: [\[link\]](#)

**Provisional date of the next annual meeting: 6–7 June 2017**