



## NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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26 JUNE: INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST DRUGS

### Youth media uncover emerging drug trends among young people

(23.6.2005 LISBON) For the magazine industry, young people represent big business. Editors and advertisers invest in research to know their readership intimately and they design their products to reflect the interests, lifestyles and fashions of their target audience.

Today, the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** publishes a new paper on how the 'youth media' – youth, music and lifestyle magazines – can help detect, monitor and respond to emerging drug trends among young people.

Released to mark **International day against drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking** on 26 June, the paper looks at the youth media as a possible information source on new drug 'fashions' and explores their potential as a channel to prevent drug-related harm among young people <sup>(1)</sup>.

#### 'Finger on the pulse' of emerging trends

'Because of the hidden (illegal or illicit) nature of drug use', says the report, 'a time lag usually exists between the appearance of a new trend in illicit drug use and the production and dissemination of (authoritative) data about it'. But, in some countries, the youth media often have a finger on the pulse of new drug trends long before analysts begin to report data.

The first accounts of ecstasy use in recreational and dance music settings, for example, were initially published in the mid-1980s by journalists working for youth, music and lifestyle magazines. However, it was not until the 1990s that drug information agencies began to collect and report data related to the drug.

Commenting on this issue, **EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Götz** says: 'Fashions and lifestyles are as relevant for understanding patterns of illicit drug use as they are for consumer research in general. Youth magazines that contain references to drugs or alcohol can reveal a great deal about young people's drinking and drug habits and add value to the picture we acquire from more routine data sources'.

The study focuses on print magazines with large circulations targeting mainstream young people with outgoing lifestyles and an interest in fashion (mainly 15–30 years) <sup>(2)</sup>. Covering five EU Member States – Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Finland and the UK – it looks at issues including attitudes to different drugs and where and how they are consumed.

A total of 1,763 drug references from 26 different publications were analysed during the study. All articles were scanned not only for textual, but also visual, drug references (e.g. a picture of a cannabis leaf on a 'T' shirt).

#### Heroin and crack, 'bad image'

Among the report's key findings is the fact that references to heroin and crack found in the sample were generally reported in a very negative way, using similar terms to those found in the wider mass media. As for drugs more commonly used by young people, the picture is quite different, with the magazines conveying both the benefits and the risks.

The more positive drug references found in the sample related to relaxation effects, increased physical energy and 'having fun', while negative references focused mainly on acute physical and psychological risks of drug use. Ecstasy was the drug most often mentioned in relation to acute physical risk and cannabis in relation to psychological risk (followed closely by alcohol and cocaine).

Mentions of 'drugs' in general accounted for 19% of all drug references found in the magazines selected for this study. The two drugs most frequently specified were cannabis (17% of all drug references) and ecstasy (13%), suggesting that these are the substances in which young readers are most interested – a finding supported by prevalence estimates from drug surveys <sup>(3)</sup>. Cocaine accounted for 9% of all references, heroin and other opiates 8%, hallucinogens 5% and ketamine or GHB 2%. Some 10% of drug mentions referred to combinations with alcohol. The remaining 17% was made up of small percentages of other drugs (e.g. amphetamine, tranquillisers, methamphetamine).

Drug references were evenly spaced throughout the year but were seen to increase markedly in July, reflecting findings that young people's social lives and drug use intensify during holiday periods <sup>(4)</sup>.

### **Lifestyle reflections: differences between magazines and countries**

Today's study shows that the number of drug references recorded differed greatly according to the type of magazine and the country concerned.

Forty-two percent of the drug references appeared in dance music magazines, reflecting a ubiquitous link between music, lifestyle and drug taking. Twenty-six per cent appeared in trend magazines, 25% in lifestyle journals and the remaining 7% in 'other' magazines targeted at teenage girls, students and homosexual/bisexual men. Music venues were more frequently linked with drugs in the sample than any other setting and included discos, music clubs, parties and holiday destinations popular with young clubbers. The total readership per issue ranged from 20,000 in one magazine to 650,000 in another.

The UK magazine market is disproportionately large compared to most other EU countries and many UK magazines are exported or are used by foreign editors for content. Although only two UK magazines were included in the study, these provided 39% of all drug references, two thirds of these being found in one single dance music magazine. Twenty-two per cent of drug references were found in the Irish magazine sample, 16% in the Portuguese and Greek magazines and 7% in the Finnish sample.

Legal controls over drug content in the media are stronger in some countries than others, but magazine editors interviewed in Greece, Ireland and Finland said they felt more constrained by public opinion and the need to satisfy their readers' interests than by any legislation.

### **Multiple drug images**

One third of the references collected for the study were neutral with regard to drugs and drug taking, carrying neither positive nor negative attributes. Meanwhile, the remaining references showed an equal balance between positive and negative imagery, although some articles carried very 'mixed images'. The latter included interviews with drug-using celebrities portraying lifestyles to which young people might aspire.

Other articles appeared to be trying to provide detailed drug information, that could play an unofficial role in communicating drug facts in a way likely to be viewed as both 'objective' or interesting by young readers.

Most of the drug references appeared in investigative style reports, news reports and in interviews with celebrities in the music industry.

Concern has been raised about the potential influence over young people of musicians and other celebrities who express positive opinions on drugs. However the study found that only 10% of references were to opinions

expressed by celebrity musicians and DJs. Over 50% of the references were proffered by journalists or editors writing the articles, 9% by experts such as doctors and scientists and 6% by young people themselves.

### Potential for preventing drug use

Some magazine editors interviewed for the study saw their magazines as playing a role in reducing drug-related harm by providing balanced information on drugs. In general they considered that their magazines reflected readers' interests rather than tried to shape them.

Today's study concludes that youth magazines constitute a useful and low-cost source of information for monitoring and understanding drug trends among defined readerships, by reflecting lifestyles that reveal much about young people's drug behaviour and attitudes that official statistics do not reveal. As such, they could potentially be harnessed to inform drug strategies.

Of the references collected for the study, 12% included some claim to an evidence-based statistic, although the source was seldom cited. This suggests some interest from the youth media for this type information on drugs and a potential for communicating education and prevention messages to young people through this channel.

**Wolfgang Götz** concludes: 'While it is clear that the youth media provide valuable insights into the lifestyles of young people, the jury is still out on the extent to which they actually *influence* young people's behaviour. More work is required to study this influence and to determine how to constructively engage with media-makers to explore the possible role of the youth media in communicating factual information on drugs to young people.'

### Editor's notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) This year, International day against drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking, on 26 June, carries as its theme 'Value yourself: make healthy choices'. This slogan, kicking off a yearlong UN campaign, aims to send out a message of self-respect to young people around the world. It is not only about steering young people away from drugs but also about encouraging them to make healthy and positive choices in their lives. [http://www.unodc.org/unodc/event\\_2005-06-26\\_1.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/event_2005-06-26_1.html)

(<sup>2</sup>) The sample included: two trend magazines; 13 mainstream lifestyle magazines; six dance music magazines; and five publications targeted at teenage girls, students and homosexual/bisexual men. Alcohol and tobacco references were only included when mentioned in the same context as an illicit drug. Magazine titles are not divulged to protect the anonymity of the magazines and their editors.

(<sup>3</sup>) *Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union and Norway 2003*, EMCDDA, 2003. <http://annualreport.emcdda.eu.int>

(<sup>4</sup>) Bellis, M., Hale, G., Bennett, A., Chaudry, M., and Kilfoyle, M. (2000) 'Ibiza uncovered: changes in substance use and sexual behaviour amongst young people visiting an international nightlife resort', *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Vol. 11, pp 235–244.

This news release is also available in French and Portuguese on the EMCDDA website <http://www.emcdda.eu.int>