

Drug use and public policies - Indicators and trends in 1999 -

The OFDT (French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addictions) is publishing the third edition of its report, *Drugs and Drug Addictions – Indicators and Trends*. Each of these reports brings about the opportunity to indulge in a subtle practice, which implies appreciating tendencies in the field of drugs, drug use, their consequences, and the public policies settled in order to face them.

This year, a change in viewpoints makes this practice stand out. Actually, the OFDT observational mission has been recently enlarged to the use of alcohol, tobacco, and psychoactive medicines. Therefore, the report takes into account this extension of the observational field. However, putting data in perspective on a global level was not always possible, especially when it came to evaluating the indicators and tendencies. The breakdown presented here follows the same logic, inasmuch as the whole psychoactive substances are accounted for, with a particular emphasis on illicit drugs.

The drug phenomenon in France

- The use of different drugs

The use of cannabis is more widely spread, notably among the youth. In 1995, about one-quarter of the 18-44 year-olds had experienced cannabis during their lifetime, whereas according to recent surveys 23 to 34% of the youth declare having used cannabis during past year. The outstanding fact refers to frequent uses : at the lycée, the share represented by teenagers, who declare having used cannabis at least ten times during the year, increased by more than 50% between 1993 and 1997. This increase of declared use can be also observed in the Baromètre Santé jeunes 1998. Every survey tends to confirm field observations : cannabis use is becoming commonplace.

In the surveys concerning the entire population or young adults (18-44 year-olds), the declared use of illicit substances different from cannabis are very rare, and difficult to underscore. On the other hand, a significant proportion of individuals, who declare using these substances, can be found among the youth (15-23 year-olds). Repeated surveys (Parisian lycées, conscripts) enable to notice the outbreak of the ecstasy use during the nineties. **Generally speaking, the use of synthetic substances belonging to uppers or hallucinants seems to be increasing.** New uses of anaesthetics such as ketamine and GHB are being observed, as well the appearance of new substances derived from amphetamines.

Illicit drug use during the year, among the 15-19 year-olds, according to surveys (in percentage)

Substance	CFES 97/98 (n=2 675)	CADIS 97 (n=9 919)	INRP 98 (n=875)
Cannabis	22,8	29,8	34,4
Cocaine	0,1	1,9	0,8
Heroin	0,0	1,7	0,2
Ecstasy	0,5	undefined	1,5
Ecstasy or LSD	undefined	3,4	undefined
Hallucinants	0,7	undefined	0,9
Amphetamines	undefined	2,1	undefined
Medicines taken as drugs	0,1	undefined	undefined
Substances to inhale	0,3	5,7	1,0
Other drugs	0,1	4,1	undefined
All substances	22,8	33,5	35,3

Sources: CFES 97/98, CADIS 97 & INRP 98 (Parisian lycéens)

In the mid-nineties the number of “problem” opiate users (whose consumption entails or might entail damages on a sanitary, social, or judicial level, and/or an addiction) could be estimated between 140 000 and 170 000. Nowadays, this amount includes an important proportion of individuals undertaking substitution treatment (beyond the scope of any medical prescription), this population having much increased since 1996 (see below). According to the direct indicators at our disposal (police questioning, seizures, overdose-related deaths), **heroin use decreased in 1997 and 1998**, thanks to the distribution of substitutes first, and because the youth seemed to find heroin less attractive as well. Field observations suggest there is a decrease in the injection practice among heroin-addicts. On the other hand, the outbreak of a new consumption habit can be noticed: individuals resort to injection when using uppers. **Cocaine use is increasing**, a phenomenon being accounted for in police questioning statistics (which still remain on a low level in absolute terms), in the surveys among the youth as well as in field observations.

The uses during a party with the combination of multiple substances, including licit ones, are developing among young individuals. Tobacco and alcohol uses are often combined with the use of cannabis. The three-quarters of individuals experiencing cannabis declare smoking tobacco, if only from time to time (55% are regular smokers). In other respects, more than a half of cannabis users admit drinking alcohol regularly (at least once a week, during last twelve months) and four cannabis users out of five declare having been drunk at least once during their lifetime.

Since the early seventies, the average alcohol use per capita (calculated in litres of pure alcohol) is declining. Available data do not allow a faithful description of the use on a global level since the middle of the nineties. Nevertheless, an increase in the amount of drunkenness episodes, and in the proportion of regular users of other spirits but wine, can be noticed among young individuals. According to surveys carried out in 1995 and 1996, a little more than one French out of five declared a daily use of alcohol. Furthermore, the percentage of people, whose alcohol use may be potentially dangerous to their healths (an increase in mortality is observed beyond 4 glasses a day for men and 2 glasses a day for women) was estimated at 10% of the population of individuals beyond 18 years-old, in 1991-92. Around 8% of the 18-75 year-olds presented a risk of alcohol-addiction in 1995-96.

The average tobacco use has been decreasing since the end of the eighties, an evolution going on through 1997. Among the 12-18 year-olds, the share of users decreased from

46% in 1977 to 25% in 1997. In 1998, about one third of the French beyond 15-years-old declared being smokers. The males declared use is decreasing, whereas the females one is going up.

Until 1997, the sales of antidepressants increased a lot (40% since 1991). Conversely, the sales of tranquillizers tended to decrease (-9% since 1991). The increase of antidepressant use seems to be widely connected with the appearance of a new kind of antidepressants (inhibiting serotonin recapture) on the market. Considered as a whole, **the regular use of psychoactive medicines might affect one adult or so out of ten**. In 1998, among youngsters, **8,7% of the 12-19 year-olds had taken a psychoactive medicine during the last thirty days**. Ten percent of the lycéens had taken psychoactive medicines on a more or less regular basis, during the year, and 20% of them had done so contrary to their general habits, these figures registering an increase when compared to those of 1993.

- Health consequences

As the evaluating methods of **mortality** associated with the use of illicit drugs, alcohol, and tobacco differ, the data collected cannot be compared from one substance to the other.

A global vision of the mortality of illicit drug users is not available in France. For the latter, only two death causes are well-researched thanks to specific follow-up systems : AIDS and overdoses. **Overdose-related deaths are strongly decreasing from year to year since the mid-nineties** (554 in 1994, 143 in 1998), after an almost non-stop increase since the seventies. Even if it remains major, the share of heroin among the substances being questioned is decreasing (64% in 1998); on the other hand, the proportion of medicines is rising (from 7% in 1990 and 1991 to 29% in 1998). **AIDS deaths associated with drug use by injection have also shown a dramatic fall for a few years** (1 037 in 1994, 267 in 1997), this evolution resulting mostly from the therapeutic progress which made globally subside the death rate for every patient, regardless of the infection mode.

There is an estimate of 26 000 deaths per year, which directly result from alcohol use. This figure would stand between 40 000 and 50 000, when considering deaths indirectly resulting from alcohol use. The death rate concerning alcoholism has been steadily decreasing for both genders since 1979. This evolution is mostly due to the decrease in cirrhosis-related deaths. The upper aerodigestive tracts cancer (lips, oral cavity, pharynx, oesophagus, larynx) are diminishing a lot among males, less among females, tobacco use — also a risk factor for these cancers — tending to go up among women. In 1995, an alcohol level over the legal limit has been detected in one-third of the deaths caused by road accidents.

At the end of the nineties, 60 000 deaths a year are considered due to tobacco use. When putting uses into perspective, according to the evolution of behaviours during last decades, **a doubling of male deaths and a tenfold increase of female ones due to tobacco is expected by the year 2025.**

Infectious diseases are the only aspect of the **morbidity** of illicit drug users that is comparatively well-known. They are still one of the major health consequences of using illicit drugs (mainly among users resorting to injection). Psychiatric troubles and suicidal attempts undoubtedly stand for other significant features, which cannot be easily measured by now.

Since the early nineties, the declared prevalence of the HIV infection has been diminishing among drug users undergoing medical treatment. It stood between 14 and 20% in 1993; it settled between 12 and 15% in 1997. Since the mid-nineties, this decrease seems to carry on more slowly, at least among drug users resorting to specialized centres. Furthermore, the amount of new cases of AIDS declared has strongly decreased. The declared prevalence of hepatitis C still lies on an upper level among drug users undergoing medical treatment. It settled between 44 and 66% in 1994, and it stood between 52 and 66% in 1997. The share of users

declaring they do not know their status has been decreasing for some years (one-third of the individuals having resorted to the social and health system in 1997). In the surveys founded upon biological tests, the hepatitis C prevalence declared by users is on average below than the actual one: one-third of the individuals who declare being seronegative are proved positive after a salivary test.

According to the available data concerning hospitalization, we can conclude that **an important proportion of hospital stays is directly or indirectly connected with harmful tobacco use. Thus, 20 to 30% of the male in-patients should need treatment for that use.** When it comes to men, ten percent of the hospitalizations should directly result from alcoholism complications. As stated by a survey undergone in hospitals, during the years 1991 and 1992, alcohol use would be connected with 29% of the hospitalizations for mental disorders, 12% of the hospitalizations for tumours, 12% of the hospitalizations for circulation disorders, 8% of the hospitalizations for traumatism or poisoning, and 8% of the hospitalizations for digestive system diseases. The hospitalizations for respiratory and nervous systems are following.

Nicotine addiction is indicated as a risk factor for 16% of in-patients.

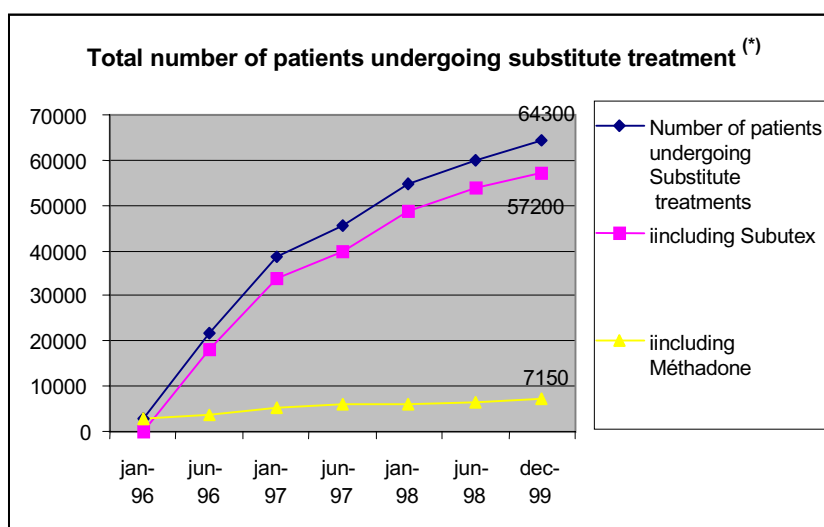
Public policies for fighting illicit drugs

- The social and health system

Since Subutex® has been launched on the market in 1996, the quick and steady increase of its sales show that an important amount of heroin addicts has been put and maintained under substitute treatment. Since autumn 1995, the distribution of methadone in pharmacies has moderately increased. That could be connected with a stricter delivery context: the methadone treatment being initiated in specialized centres, whose capacities are limited because the out-patients must come daily or at least once a week; stabilizing the user is required for a take over by a general practitioner; prescription period limited to 7 days, etc.

Individual information is not available to know the number of patients undergoing substitute treatment. However, an estimate can be done on certain assumptions considering the sales in pharmacies issued from the SIAMOIS system (information system on the accessibility to the injection equipment delivered by pharmacies and to the substitution, developed by the Institut de Veille Sanitaire).

Estimate of the number of patients undergoing substitute treatment



Sources: SIAMOIS/IVS and DGS

In 1997, 13 800 000 syringes are estimated to have been sold to drug users in pharmacies. Out of this amount, 4,6 millions refer to Stéribox® sales, which are constantly and moderately increasing since their outbreak in autumn 1994. The sales of syringes conditioned under other packaging remained stationary, it seemed. In 1996, the syringes distributed freely amounted to 10-11% from the whole number used by drug-addicts. The evolution of the quantities of injection equipment distributed freely or sold can be interpreted as resulting from an increase of lesser risk injections (less re-use, less sharing), and from the impact of substitute treatments tending to make resorting to injection decrease. Although difficult to evaluate, the impact of the accessibility policy to the injection equipment, seems to unquestionable when it comes to HIV transmission among drug users. On the other hand, it may be less effective for HCV transmission.

Using a constant field, the number of users resorting to the health and social institutions registered a 10% increase between 1996 and 1997. This rise is mostly due to an increase of treatments in specialized centres. It could be explained by the development of substitute treatments offered. The proportion of users directly treated that way by specialized centres is dramatically rising (1,2% in 1993, 32% in 1996).

The amount of users treated by general practitioners increased between 1995 and 1997. The number of doctors treating drug users seems to remain stable, and this increase of treatments appears to be mainly connected with the number of individuals looked after by doctors already seeing these kinds of patients. Drug users are more often regular patients in 1997 than in 1995. In 1997, GP treatment is more global; somatic disorders are widely accounted for. Prescription of substitute treatment strongly increased (that rise mainly refer to Subutex®, whose sales quickly went up from its launching on the market in January 1996), whereas anxiolytic agents, hypnotics, and antalgics were less prescribed.

- Law-enforcement policy

Arrests for drug-related offences have been strongly increasing these last years (from 45 206 in 1993 to 85 507 in 1998). This evolution obscures contradictory movements: **dramatic increase of cannabis users arrests** (30 344 in 1993, 72 281 in 1998), **decrease of heroin users arrests** (14 959 in 1993, 7 469 in 1998, following a peak at 17 356 in 1995). The cocaine users arrests went up strongly in 1997 and 1998, even if they stood for a small proportion among drug-related arrests (4% in 1998). In a number of départements, the cocaine use-related arrests exceeded those referring to heroin use, which had not been the case so far. **The arrests for simple users are progressing quicker than those of users-dealers.** Of the total amount of arrests, the share concerning users-dealers (12% in 1998) has little decreased since 1993. Conversely, the proportion of simple users has increased from 74,6% in 1993 to 82% in 1998. **The number of individuals arrested for trafficking dropped rather dramatically between 1996 and 1998**, to wit: from 8 412 down to 5 541. In 1998, the number of arrests nearly equals the one referring to the years 1991/92. In 1998, cannabis traffickers stood for a little more than half the traffickers arrested (52%), a proportion just a bit lower than the 1997 figure (53,5%). The share concerning heroine traffickers dropped from 33% in 1997 to 24% in 1998, although the proportion of cocaine (and crack) traffickers rose from 12 to 17%.

Following a strong advance between 1992 and 1995, the number of court-ordered treatments remained level in 1996, then dropped a bit in 1997. This decrease observed in 1997 could be relating to the decrease of heroin users arrests in 1996 and 1997. Nevertheless, this phenomenon only partly explains such an evolution, inasmuch as 60% of treatments are ordered by court following cannabis use-related arrests, which are strongly on the rise. As the development of compulsory care (suspended sentence and probation with compulsory treatment accompanying) is partly replacing court-ordered treatment, it could provide another explanation.

The number of drug-trafficking sentences remained comparatively stable between 1991 and 1997 (11 798 sentences in 1997), whereas the amount of sentences made up of at least one offence for drug use increased by around 50% (15 685 sentences in 1997). The rise of the number of sentences made up of at least one offence for drug use is mostly due to the increase of sentences for use relating to trafficking, transportation, or transferring, that is: offences done by users involved in dealing drugs as a rule. The sentences for simple use tended to decrease between 1991 and 1997, those when use is relating to other offences remaining rather stable. It is difficult to know if this evolution can be explained by the fact that more users are involved in drugs dealing (more users are employed to transport drugs and cross borders), or if public prosecutor's offices have changed their qualification practices, resorting to only two offences, use and trafficking, whereas only drug use-related offence would have accounted for so far.

The number of individuals being imprisoned for an offence mainly relating to drug use regularly decreased between 1993 (1 213 people jailed) and 1997 (700 people jailed). Following a quite perfect stability between 1993 and 1996, the amount of trafficking-related imprisonments suddenly fell in 1997. This last evolution may be compared with the drop of the amount of traffickers arrested. When considering no more the annual flow of imprisonments but the population of prisoners at a given date, a drop of 21% in the amount of individuals sentenced for drug-related offences between January 1st 1996 and January 1st 1998 can be noticed.

- **For more information**

For the references and methods used in the surveys mentioned in this breakdown, please refer to the 1999 edition of the report *Drugs and Drug Addictions, Indicators and Trends*, available at the OFDT.

Conclusion

The available data do not provide a more precise image of the report set up that way on the phenomenon of drugs in France. Basing its work on the studies already done, the OFDT will attempt to sharpen the knowledge of the phenomenon, directing its research as follows:

- Perpetuating the monitoring system of the overall population use it has settled. This system should provide its first results from 1999 onwards. It includes three parts (entire population, young individuals attending school, young individuals attending the preparatory day to defence) and a part on perceptions and opinions. These surveys must help following up the evolutions of the whole psychoactive substances consumption and the public attitudes towards the latter.
- Automatically accounting for the broadening of its observational field to licit substances use, and strengthening the comparative analysis on such themes as: health consequences for these uses and public policies settled to face them. Some relevant indicators are supposed to be defined, as well as undergoing the studies needed for their development. In that perspective, the indicators relating to public authorities action will be given a particular care.
- Developing a monitoring network liable to detect and report the outstanding tendencies for that matter. The OFDT is already working that way in setting up two innovative programmes: TREND (recent tendencies in the use of psychoactive substances), and SINTES (analysis and identification system for synthetic substances being circulated).

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Tendances

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