



First Survey of

Illegal Drug Users

in Mexico City

*Colectivo por una política integral hacia las drogas A. C.
Información · Responsabilidad · Libertad*

Introduction

The principal motivation for implementing this survey was the lack of existing information regarding the relationship between drug users and their social networks. There is a lack of quality indicators that provide detailed information regarding the consumption of drugs, particularly when faced with the traditional dichotomy of user-addict. This dichotomy fails to see the complexity of the consumption of illegal drugs and reiterates the notion that the drug using population will inevitably move into addiction, thus ignoring the diversity of existing patterns of consumption.

When the socio-economic demographic of drug users was explored, it was found that more than half of all users had some university education, whether that be unfinished or graduated (54%) and more than a quarter indicated that they had some high school education (27.9). This is higher than the general Mexican population. Two out of 3 users surveyed, are engaged in full-time work (69.9%), a little less than half study (43.7%) and 1 out of 5 surveyed both work and study (22%). Only 1 out of 10 users surveyed indicated that they are currently unemployed or working without pay (9.9%).

Considering almost all of those surveyed have some sort of work or daily activity (91.6%), it is recommended that society do a better job of integrating users into the formation of the public policies which affect them.

The survey, which focused on the adult population of Mexico City, consisted of 350 questions and was implemented in February and March 2011. The sample size was 429 people with 310 males and 119 women and with an average age of 28.7.

Main Conclusions

Drug use

When asking about information available on **the risks and harms** related to drug use, we found that

- * 39.6% of all users did not have information on drugs when they initiated consumption, and a third of those who did have information, received it from “a friend”.
- * 54.3% of users reference knowing the legal sanctions of carrying drugs and 35.7% understand their rights as drug users.
- * 77.2% of users agree that drugs cause harm.
- * 68.5% of users know of a treatment center—either public and private; a third know of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Another third knew of more than one type of treatment center.
- * 52.7% of users know where to access treatment through public announcement. Only 1% received this information in school, even though 54% have received some degree of higher education.

Conclusions

- Information, in and of itself, is not enough for people to avoid or stop using drugs.
- The drug using population, from the beginning of their use has information regarding the risks and harms of illicit drugs.

When asking about **the risks and harms from the age of initiation**, we found that

- * The majority of users initiate drug use as adults (marijuana users begin on average at 16.1 years of age and inhalant users at the age of 14.7).
- * 43.7% of habitual users mixed alcohol when they first used drugs.
- * 87.7% of users first used drugs that were given to them, primarily by friends.
- * 77.2% of users shared drugs with friends during their first use.
- * 75.8% of users concurred that the first drug they tried was marijuana.

Conclusions

- Legal drugs (such as alcohol or inhalants) tend to be the gateway substance, while marijuana is the principal illegal gateway substance. This suggests that users consume the substances to which they have greater access.
- Peer networks have the greatest impact on initiation of use, information and perceptions regarding risks of consumption.

When asking about the **patterns of consumption**, we found that

- * 70.9% of users consume more than one drug (although not necessarily at the same time).
- * 26.8% of users mix drugs. The most common combination is marijuana and cocaine.
- * People prefer to consume 1-2 joints of marijuana for daily users and 1 gram of cocaine for weekly users.
- * 47% of users consume with high intensity—higher than the average. And 22% consume with extreme intensity –higher than the indicated average for those who use more than one drug.

Conclusions

- The drug using population currently is moving towards the poly-consumption of drugs.
- The perception of risk among drug users decreases based on the amount of time consuming. This fosters greater experimentation and the mixing of illicit drugs, thus increasing overall consumption.

When asking about **exposure to risks** while under the influence of drugs, we found that

- * 63.9% of users have had unprotected sexual intercourse.
- * 57.6% of users have driven a vehicle under the influence.
- * 23.7% of users have contemplated or attempted suicide.

- * 33.6% of users have suffered from physical violence.
- * 18.9% of users have had automobile accidents.
- * 8.9% have forced or had forced sexual relations.
- * 40.8% of users have indicated harms due to the continued use of drugs.

Conclusions

- Drug users increase their exposure to risk and others while under the influence of drugs.
- Drug users tend to only recognize harms related to long-term drug use, not the immediate harm.

Social Relationships

When asked about **family relationships**, we found that

- * 83.8% of users at least one family member who knows about their consumption.
- * 70.6% of users maintain good or very good relationships with their family.

Conclusions

- Family members of users tend to know about the drug consumption of other members.
- Family members tend to be tolerant regarding consumption, even if they reject the act of consuming.

When asking about **other relationships**, we found that

- * 73.2% of users consider themselves discriminated by public authorities and family members because of their use.
- * 69.1% of users have had problems with primarily family members, teachers or public authority figures because of their use .
- * 32% of users who have suffered physical violence go on to be physically violent with others.

Conclusions

- A majority of drug users have experienced discrimination and social issues due to their consumption.
- There exists a correlation between users that have suffered physical violence and those that then perpetuate physical violence.

When asking about **selling of drugs**, we found that

- * 32.5% of users buy drugs from small shops (tienditas), while 16.9% buy via telephone and 29.2% combine different means to buy drugs.
- * 47.8% of users have 2 to 5 sources from which to buy drugs and 34% have between 6 and 10 sources.
- * 52.3% of users have a pattern of high consumption.
- * 32.5% of users who only use one drug spend \$4 USD or less per week.

Conclusions

- Information, in and of itself, is not enough for people to avoid or stop using drugs.
- The drug using population, from the beginning of their use has information regarding the risks and harms of illicit drugs.

When asking about **the risks and harms from the age of initiation**, we found that

- * The majority of users initiate drug use as adults (marijuana users begin on average at 16.1 years of age and inhalant users at the age of 14.7).
- * 43.7% of habitual users mixed alcohol when they first used drugs.
- * 87.7% of users first used drugs that were given to them, primarily by friends.
- * 77.2% of users shared drugs with friends during their first use.
- * 75.8% of users concurred that the first drug they tried was marijuana.

Conclusions

- Legal drugs (such as alcohol or inhalants) tend to be the gateway substance, while marijuana is the principal illegal gateway substance. This suggests that users consume the substances to which they have greater access.
- Peer networks have the greatest impact on initiation of use, information and perceptions regarding risks of consumption.

When asking about the **patterns of consumption**, we found that

- * 70.9% of users consume more than one drug (although not necessarily at the same time).
- * 26.8% of users mix drugs. The most common combination is marijuana and cocaine.
- * People prefer to consume 1-2 joints of marijuana for daily users and 1 gram of cocaine for weekly users.
- * 47% of users consume with high intensity—higher than the average. And 22% consume with extreme intensity –higher than the indicated average for those who use more than one drug.

Conclusions

- The drug using population currently is moving towards the poly-consumption of drugs.
- The perception of risk among drug users decreases based on the amount of time consuming. This fosters greater experimentation and the mixing of illicit drugs, thus increasing overall consumption.

When asking about **exposure to risks** while under the influence of drugs, we found that

- * 63.9% of users have had unprotected sexual intercourse.
- * 57.6% of users have driven a vehicle under the influence.
- * 23.7% of users have contemplated or attempted suicide.

20.1% of users who have high consumption of two or more drugs spend \$15-\$40 USD a week.

- * 32.6% of users have sold drugs, primarily because the opportunity presented itself and they could make money and/or to supplement their own use.
- * Only 3 of the 140 users who sold drugs, accepted that selling drugs is recognized as a crime.

Conclusions

- The majority of users have a broad network of drug dealers, which leads to increasing their patterns of consumption.
- The illegal drug market is made up of two principal segments, differentiated by the average cost of the preferred drugs.
- As consumption increases, the relationships between drug dealers and users also increases, often including users in selling of drugs.

When we asked about the **relationships with law enforcement**, we found that

- * 49.9% of users consume in public spaces.
- * 67.8% of users have been detained by law enforcement for consuming drugs.
- * 66.7% of users have been extorted by the police or other law enforcement officials.
- * 26.8% of users have committed a crime while under the influence of drugs.
- * 11.4% of users have committed a crime prior to using drugs.
- * Of the users who committed a crime, 78.3% committed robbery.

Conclusions

- Encounters with law enforcement are common amongst drug users, primarily because they tend to consume in public.
- Users are highly vulnerable to being extorted by police or other law enforcement.
- Half of all users who committed a crime while under the influence of drugs, committed crimes prior to ever having experimented with drugs.
- Users that commit crimes, tend to commit non-violent robbery.

When asking about the **relationship with treatment centers**, we found that

- * 74.5% of users know of some sort of treatment center but only 34.4% believe that treatment works.
- * 19.3% of users have had the intention of seeking treatment, but not all of them follow through with it.
- * 24.7% of users have received addiction treatment.
- * 60.8% of those who received treatment believed that it worked.
- * 55.6% of users who received treatment went to private facilities, primarily known as anexos.
- * 23.7% of users would be interested in seeking treatment for the first time or returning to treatment.

Conclusions

- Users do not have key information regarding access to treatment.
- A large number of users who received treatment believe it worked, even if they continue to consume drugs.
- The high demand for private treatment facilities demonstrates the need for greater information on state-run treatment centers and the dynamics between the two.

When asking about **rights or services required by users**, we found that

- * 47.9% signaled that they don't have access to services that the government should be offering (from all three levels of government), such as information, security, treatment and medical attention.
- * 35.1% of users signaled the need for mechanisms that permit safe access and use of drugs.
- * 14.4% of users mentioned the need to end discrimination and for their rights to be respected, particularly relating to drug use.

Conclusions

- There is a lack of mechanisms that favor access to health services for drug users.
- It is necessary to promote a democratic culture that defends the human rights of drug users, both them and their families. With the end goal of eliminating discrimination, we must build the capacity of authorities who interact with drug users.

Recommendations

- * Expand and improve information on drugs, paying special attention to age of initiation, symptoms of abuse, and where to seek out attention and treatment.
- * Focus special attention on the role of peer networks regarding the age of initiation of drug use.
- * Re-classify drugs based on the risks and scientific characteristics of each substance and create a regulatory framework that allows institutions to interact in a more effective manner with users of diverse substances.
- * Create harm reduction programs that clearly identify signs of abuse and dependency.
- * Build the capacity of law enforcement officials who interact with users, particularly by better understanding the human rights of drug users.
- * Provide users with safe access to drugs as a means to increase security, impede connections with illegal markets and strengthen their formal links with health institutions.
- * Disseminate and diversify the types of publicly offered treatment.
- * Build relationships within the three levels of government and with civil society in order to guarantee the rights of the user.

- * Create new metrics of success and indicators that focus on legal and illegal drugs in their specific environment.
- * Fight discrimination as a key part of drug policy, particularly through raising awareness among family members, teachers and public officials, and
- * Provide alternatives to incarceration for those who commit small and non-violent offences.

