

# Psychotropic substances: use patterns and risk factors among young offenders in Lithuania

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Adolescents are a social subgroup at a high risk of initiating or increasing their use of prohibited drugs. It is the first study focused on a particular population and the use of tobacco, alcohol and psychotropic substances in Lithuanian custodial establishments for young offenders.

**The aim** of the study was to explore the extent of psychotropic substances used by young offenders in Lithuania and to identify the possible risk factors associated with the use of psychotropic substances, including home/family and wider social influences.

**Methods.** A self-completed semi-structured questionnaire was modified to include questions about illicit drugs, tobacco and alcohol use, social behaviour and psychological environment. All offenders filled in the questionnaire in privacy. The study was conducted in a Lithuanian prison for young offenders in May 2003. The study sample comprised 115 adolescents.

**Results.** The total sample comprised 111 young offenders. The age of adolescents imprisoned in the custodial establishment ranged from 15 to 17 years. The mean age of the respondents was  $16.7 \pm 0.6$  years. 78.4% of young convicts currently smoked tobacco. 90.1% of respondents had drunk alcohol in the month before imprisonment. 36% of young offenders had tried drugs at least once. By 9% of young drug offenders drugs were tried for the first time elsewhere, usually in the bathroom of a bus or railway stations, in a car.

**Conclusion.** The results of this study showed that the majority of incarcerated adolescents (87 / 78.4%) currently smoked tobacco and 100 (90.1%) of respondents had drunk alcohol in the month before imprisonment. Such factors of delinquency as tobacco and alcohol use are predictors of criminality. The mean age at which the participants of this study began smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol was 11 years.

**Key words:** adolescents, drugs, custodial establishment, smoking, alcohol, imprisonment, modification of questionnaire

## INTRODUCTION

Evidence based on observations and epidemiological research shows that the use of the substances that create addiction is a threatening social phenomenon. The society is witnessing a rapid increase of social, legal and health problems caused by alcohol, tobacco and drug use.

Across Europe, the definition of a 'young offender' varies. In some countries, the age of a young offender is 16–21, while in Lithuania young offenders are those aged between 14 and 18. These prisoners are housed in special units and institution.

It is very important to know the factors that stimulate the spread of tobacco, alcohol and other illegal drugs.

Banning smoking at home, even when parents do smoke, gives an unequivocal message to teenagers about the unacceptability of smoking as do restrictions on smoking in public places. Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke during childhood has been suggested to increase tolerance to tobacco smoke and to incline sensitive children to taking up active smoking in their teenage years by reducing the noxious deterrence of the first cigarette. Thus, children who are exposed to parents' smoking at home might have an increased likelihood of becoming established smokers.

Hungarian researchers note that regular smoking and early initiation of frequent and excessive drinking were also found to be likely for drug users as compared to non-users. Another factor was outing with friends to pubs and discos at an early age. All these factors may

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ultimately suggest that adolescents can be at risk of loosened family bonding and parental supervision. Mother's employment is significantly associated with the child's risk of becoming a regular drug user.

## METHODS

The questionnaire was compiled on the basis of the ESPAD questionnaire with some modifications to fit the specific respondent group. Questions that did not meet the objectives of the study were left out including new questions characteristic of the focus group. The questionnaire contained a preamble and 45 questions. The preamble gave a short explanation of the objective and goals of the study. The questions were meant to find out the age, education, living conditions, social environment of the respondents, the start of tobacco, alcohol and drug use, the problems their family members or close friends have as far as drug use is concerned, the opinion of the respondents on the influence tobacco, alcohol, drugs and other psychotropic substances have on their health. The questionnaire was submitted to a reliability test. The Kappa index was calculated and ranged from 0.3 to 1. Questions that were found inadequate were rephrased. After this questionnaire test, another reliability test was carried out. The Kappa index based double check proved that the questions were good or almost precise and led to the final version of the questionnaire.

The sociological study, opinion poll, was carried out in May 2003. Seeking to get more sincere answers, the questionnaire was anonymous; no personal data had to be indicated. The respondents both got from and handed the questionnaires directly to the researcher.

The data was stored in a personal computer. A mathematical statistical analysis was carried out using EpiInfo 6.04 and SPSS 11.0 software. The respondents were divided according to their sex and custodial establishments; then they were compared according to their education, marital status, and parent family. The following characteristics were calculated for quantitative features: the frequency, modes (*Mo*), medians (*Me*) of use of each group of drugs, alcohol and tobacco, standard deviation of the sample, standard error of the mean. The frequency of answer distribution in different groups was determined using cross-tables. The statistic reliability of frequency inequality was evaluated by calculating the *chi* square ( $\chi^2$ ) and *p* value. For the verification of statistic hypothesis, the chosen significance level was that of  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

The total sample comprised 111 young offenders. The age of adolescents imprisoned in the custodial establishment ranges from 15 to 17 years, mean  $16.7 \pm 0.6$  (mode = 17; standard error of the mean = 0.06).

The sample displayed several characteristics that have been associated with drug use:

- more than half (95 / 85.6%) of them had primary education;
- more than half (64 / 57.7%) of the respondents grew up in a two-parent family; 32 (28.8%) or almost one third of the respondents grew up only with their mother and 6 (5.4%) only with their father;
- the majority of incarcerated young convicts (87 / 78.4%) currently smoked tobacco and the mean age at which they had begun was  $11.1 \pm 2.7$  years (minimum = 5; mode = 13; standard error of the mean = 0.3). Usually young offenders smoke a pack of cigarettes a day (there are 20 cigarettes in a pack), approximately  $17 \pm 11.4$  cigarettes (mode = 20; standard error of the mean = 1.53).

### Substance use prior and during imprisonment

100 (90.1%) of respondents had drunk alcohol in the month before entering prison. The mean age at which they had begun to drink alcohol was  $11.5 \pm 2.8$  (minimum = 5; mode = 14; standard error of the mean = 0.3).

The question "Have you ever tried drugs?" was answered by 109 (98.2%) young convicts; 40 of them (36%) had tried drugs at least once. The mean age of the first use of illicit drugs was  $14.5 \pm 1.9$  (minimum = 7; mode = 15; standard error of the mean = 0.31).

8 (7.2%) of the young convicts used intravenous drugs; 2 (1.8%) of young drug users smoked drugs and 2 (1.8%) used mixed forms (pills, intravenous drugs, smoking).

The question about the place where drugs were tried for the first time was answered by 39 (35.1%). Seven (6.3%) of them indicated that it was at home, 8 (72%) – in a café or in a bar, 6 (5.4%) – a friend's at home, 1 (0.9%) – in a custodial establishment, 7 (6.3%) – in the street, 10 (9%) – elsewhere, usually in the bathroom of a bus or railway station, in a car.

Evaluation of the relation between drug use and smoking showed that 15 (17.4%) of the smokers currently used drugs.

Thirteen (86.7%) of the young users had primary education ( $\chi^2 = 0.4$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p \geq 0.05$ ). Having analysing the relation between six (40%) young drug users grew up in a two-parent family, 7 (46.7%) had only mother ( $\chi^2 = 10.78$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $p \geq 0.05$ ).

Among the young convicts that used drugs, the majority were imprisoned for the first time (12 / 85.7%).

## DISCUSSION

The American Public Health Association notes that tobacco is one of the leading causes of premature death in the general population and is known to contribute to heart diseases and cancer, both of which are among the leading causes of death of long-term prison inmates (4).

P. Gilpin and other scientists (1999) have found that the average age when people start smoking in the USA is 15 years. The research carried out in Lithuanian custodial establishments on adolescents showed that the average for Lithuania is 11 years. According to Ashwin and Krubel (2003), the number of cigarettes smoked per day at the age of 18–20 is related to a poor mental health (psychiatric diagnoses, low level of self-control, constant nervous strain), abuse of other substances (alcohol and drugs), divorce of the parents. The fact that the majority of convicts start smoking at the age of 11 and consume almost a pack of cigarettes a day (an average of 17 cigarettes) leads to an assumption that at the age of 18–20 the state of their mental health will be poor. It is well known that personalities with an unstable state of mind show a higher tendency to delinquency and inadequate behaviour in general. Therefore, the prevention of delinquency has to be implemented together with the prevention of the offer and demand of drugs and other psychotropic substances.

The questionnaire data have shown that the average age at which alcohol is tried for the first time is 11 years. Psychiatrist E. Krepin has noticed that those who start using alcohol before arriving at their twenties are more likely to become alcohol-addicted. This has been proven by various researches in different countries – the earlier an individual starts to abuse alcohol the greater the damage.

In 1997, Hungarian scientists have conducted a research in a custodial establishment for minors and found out that children usually try drugs when they are 14. At the age of 15 to 16 they become regular drug users. 83% of the respondents indicated that for the first time they were offered drugs by a friend or a group of friends (7). The research carried out in Lithuania shows that the majority of adolescents in custodial establishments tried drugs for the first time when they were 15 years old. Those who have drug-addicted friends are more inclined to use drugs themselves. This was confirmed by 76.5% of the respondents. People that have such friends belong to a high risk group and are potential drug users.

Society should change its opinion about prisoners, especially about young offenders. Societal attitudes are a problem for released prisoners due to fears that ex-prisoners will be violent, carriers of infectious diseases and continue to be involved in crime. This makes that hard for young ex-prisoners to take higher education. In addition, released prisoners often find it difficult to re-establish relationships with family and friends, and they are seduced into a life of crime again. Education is probably a better indicator of socioeconomic status, because income and employment levels are likely to reflect the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse. An ECA (Epidemiological Catchment Area) study suggested that higher educational attainment is correlated with lower lifetime alcohol disorder rates.

Family members, because they influence the child's early psychosocial environment, have a tremendous impact on the child's vulnerability or proneness to alcohol or

drug use. The early family environment is considered the primary determinant of attitudes, life stressors, and coping skills that will eventually influence the youth's need for and choice of drugs, including alcohol. The parental role in modelling alcohol use is positively associated with adolescent use of alcohol, whereas the quality of family relationship is inversely related to the use of illicit drugs (11). Stanton and Ziegler-Driscoll suggest that familial stressors on the child include a pattern of overinvolvement by one parent and the distance or permissiveness by the other.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study showed that the majority of incarcerated adolescents (87 / 78.4%) smoked tobacco and 100 (90.1%) of respondents had drunk alcohol in the month before entering prison. Such factors of delinquency as tobacco and alcohol use are predictors of criminality. The mean age at which the participants of this study began to smoke tobacco and drink alcohol was 11 years. In this lifetime the young people are particularly influenced by a stressful environment. They try to cope with emotional strain by smoking, alcohol or/and drug use and criminal actions.

There is a public opinion that children who grow up in social establishments or in one-parent families have a stronger tendency to use tobacco, alcohol and other psychotropic substances. Nevertheless, the research has proved the opposite. More than a half (59.8%) of the respondents grew in two-parent families, only 2.9 % in social establishments, one third only with mother, and 3.1% only with father. Children that grow in two-parent families also have a tendency to commit bad habit related crimes. Therefore, not only the composition of the family but also its harmony, social and psychological environment are that matter.

Alcohol and drugs are often used due to a psychological impact. The well known narcologist R. Nait calls alcohol use a symptomatic attempt to solve emotional conflicts. It has already been proven that the course of psychic and behavioural disorders is influenced by the social and economic status of the individual. Education determines the income, the possibility to lead a worthy life and experience less stress.

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### **PSICHOAKTYVIŲJŲ MEDŽIAGŲ VARTOJIMAS IR JŲ RIZIKOS VEIKSNIAI TARP LIETUVOS NEPILNAMEČIŲ NUTEISTŲJŲ**

#### *Santrauka*

Paaugliai, vartojantys psichoaktyviasias medžiagas, yra padidintos rizikos socialinė grupė. Tai pirmasis populiacinis tyrimas, nagrinėjantis tabako, alkoholio ir kitų psichoaktyviųjų medžiagų vartojimo paplitimą Lietuvos nepilnamečių pataisos namuose. Tyrimo **tikslas** – nustatyti psichoaktyviųjų medžiagų vartojimo paplitimą ir jį lemiančius veiksnius tarp Lietuvos pataisos namuose kalinčių nepilnamečių nuteistųjų. **Metodologija.** Klausimynas modifikuotas įtraukiant klausimus apie nelegalių narkotikų, tabako ir alkoholio vartojimą, socialinę elgseną ir psichologinę aplinką. Tyrimas atliktas 2003 m. gegužės mėnesį Kauno nepilnamečių pataisos namuose. Tyrime dalyvavo 115 nepilnamečių nuteistųjų. **Rezultatai.** Įvertinta 111 tinkamų anketų. Nuteistųjų nepilnamečių amžius – nuo 15 iki 17 metų, amžiaus vidurkis  $16,7 \pm 0,6$ . 78,4% nepilnamečių nuteistųjų pataisos namuose rūko, 90,1% nepilnamečių mėnesį prieš patekdami į įkalinimo įstaigą vartojo alkoholį, 36% bent kartą yra bandę narkotikus. Kaip vietą, kurioje pirmą kartą pavartojo narkotikus, nuteistieji dažniausiai nurodo autobusų ar geležinkelių tualetus, automobilius. **Išvados.** Tyrimo duomenimis, didesnė dalis nuteistųjų nepilnamečių (87, 78,4%) rūko, beveik visi (100, 90,1%) nepilnamečiai mėnesį prieš patekdami į pataisos namus vartojo alkoholį. Ankstyvas tabako, alkoholio vartojimas sąlygoja kriminalinę elgseną. Amžiaus vidurkis, kai nepilnamečiai nuteistieji pradeda rūkyti ir vartoti alkoholį, yra 11 metų.

**Raktažodžiai:** paaugliai, psichoaktyviosios medžiagos, rūkymas, alkoholis, pataisos namai, modifikuotas klausimynas