

## **ESPAD Launch 2001**

*On Attitudes and Habits relating to Tobacco, Alcohol, Illicit drugs and other behavioural patterns among School Attendees Born in 1983*

### **Results for Malta**

In March 1995, a study of attitudes and habits with respect to certain substances and leisure time activities among 16 year old school children was carried out in several European countries, among them Malta. The same study was conducted in January 1999. sedqa's Policy and Service Development Division and the Education Division worked hand in hand under the guidance of the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and other Drugs and the Council of Europe in order to reach the desired goals in making this study a success.

On the whole, this exercise is nonetheless a great step forward towards understanding some of the important trends in substance abuse and social change among Maltese youth. The need to repeat this exercise at regular intervals is important in order to keep abreast of newer trends and to serve as a basis for policy direction and change.

Since it's not uncommon in Malta that due to matriculation exams, students do not attend the last grade of school after the first months of the year, the survey was conducted in January instead of later on during the year, as agreed with other European counterparts. This proved fruitful, since the response rate was better than that of the previous study carried out in 1995. Whereas in 1995, the response rate was 53.2%, this year's response rate escalated to 77%. 4321 fifth form students (born between 1981 and 1984) from all local and private schools in Malta and Gozo took part in this survey. From this population, only those born in 1983 were selected for this study, which sums up to 3703 (1723 boys and 1980 girls) eligible students participating in this study.

Some important factors contributing to students' absenteeism on the day of the survey included:

- \* participation at higher education centres
- \* those already in the workforce
- \* those sick or abroad
- \* those studying for exams at home, and
- \* those in special schools.

Another relevant element which one has to take into consideration when interpreting the outcome of this study is the period the survey was conducted. Although the primary goal to have a higher response rate was reached by conducting this study in January, one has to take into consideration that after the Yuletide season, a small shift is expected, especially in the alcohol consumption.

Another word of caution concerns students' willingness from up front to admit to the use of illicit drug taking such as Hashish and Heroin. Approximately 23% of all students born in 1983, stated outright that they would not "probably" or "definitely" admit taking either of these drugs if they were taking them. This could imply that the results may not be accurate with regard to reported frequency. But it must also be borne in mind, that generally students were consistent in their responses, which shows that on the whole their answers genuinely.

## **Results**

### **Alcohol**

As in the previous study, the greatest and most widespread use and abuse of substances studied was alcohol. Only 5.96% (a decrease compared to 8% in 1995) of 16 year olds (boys and girls) had not had alcohol at least once in their lives. Coming to more frequent use of alcohol, 51.2% (49.6% in 1995) of this population actually reported taking alcohol on 20 or more occasions in their lives. When subdividing by gender, it is found that boys drink more commonly than girls. In this study, 56.7% boys (55% in 1995) reported taking alcohol on 20 occasions or more when compared to 46.4% girls (46% in 1995). 39% of students taking part reported that they have been drunk at least once over the previous 12 months, as opposed to 35% of students taking part in the 1995 study. Consumption of alcohol continued to be a frequent current occurrence among participants

There was a slight drop (from 5.42% in 1995 to 5.35% in 1999) of students who reported drinking beer almost daily, while an increase was reported in this cohort for daily drinking of liquors (from 7% in 1995 to 7.21 % in 1999). A significant increase was noted when compared to the previous study, in those who have reported drinking more than 5 drinks in a row during the last 30 days (39.5% in 1995, 48.44% in 1999). Boys were twice as much more likely to be heavier drinkers than girls: 5.36% (4.32% in 1995) reported taking 10 or more 5 drinks in a row (bingeing) during the last 30 days as opposed to 2.43% girls (1.09% in 1995).

21.3% have reported that the last time they drank alcohol was at home, while 16.57% at a bar and another 16.39% in a disco.

Alcohol is started quite early in children. Almost 31% (a slight drop compared to 1995 – 32.69%) have reported as first consuming Beer by age 11, while 39.98% (41.26% in 1995) have reported consuming wine by that tender age.

### **Tobacco**

Cigarettes are experimented with by more than 1 of every 2 students (56.6%). 13.9% report this to have taken place by the age of 11. Most of those who smoke have taken up their first cigarette before the age of 14 years.

Daily smoking is generally adopted between the age of 13 and 15 years. This trend holds true for both boys and girls. 23% reported smoking just one on a daily basis - and are clearly at risk of taking up the habit in a greater way. Unlike the evidence from studies among older generations, the frequency and intensity of smoking among girls (24.7%) at this age is more than that of boys (21.07%) and reflects a negative form of equality achieved.

### **Illicit Drug Use**

By the age of 16 years, experimentation with illicit drugs is not uncommon as already evidenced in the 1995 Espad Study. The so-called “soft drugs” are often the first to be tried out. In this study, 7.24% reported at least one time experimentation with Marijuana or Hashish (7.42% for boys and 7.08% for girls). This signifies a drop when compared to 1995 study, where 8.03% of the participants, admitted to have used Marijuana at least once in their

lifetime. The most commonly abused illicit drug emerged again as the Inhalants. 16.24% reported to have used inhalants, with an insignificant drop compared to the previous study (16.94%). A significant drop was registered in related to Tranquillisers and sedatives. While in 1995 8.91% admitted to have used tranquillisers and sedatives, in 1999, 5.18 % reported that they have used the said substances illicitly. Another worrying trend is that 8.63% (9.88% in 1995) of the cohort has reported that they were prescribed tranquillisers and sedatives by a medical doctor.

Fortunately, by this age, the experimentation with many other drugs is not high – but still remains a worrying threat. It was anticipated that there would be a significant increase in lifetime use of Ecstasy, being the drug of the moment. Actually, the increase was rather insignificant. 2.29% admitted to have experimented with Ecstasy as compared to 2.08%. The figures for other drugs include 1.36% for amphetamines (0.9% in 1995); 0.68% admitted using crack; 1.25% abused cocaine; 1.09% anabolic steroids, while 1.04% abusing Heroin by smoking. A considerable 12.01% reported as having mixed alcohol with any pills on at least 1 occasion. Overall, 9.46% of boys and 7.63% of girls have reported in having experimented with illicit drugs at least once in their lifetime by the age of 16.

Over 90% of the students taking part in this survey said that they have heard of Heroin, Cocaine, Marijuana and Tranquillisers. More than half the respondents have heard of the not so common substances like Amphetamines and Crack, while only 29.42% have heard of the synthetic substance Methadone. 8.35% have heard of Relewin, which is a dummy drug.

### **Problems related directly or indirectly Alcohol and Drug Abuse**

2.98% of the respondents were engaged in sex which they regretted the next day due to alcohol use, while another 0.25% claimed to have had the same problem due to drug abuse. 3.44% and 0.41% were involved in a scuffle fight due to alcohol and drug abuse respectively. 1.23% claimed to have had trouble with the police after drinking alcohol.

20.77% and 25.17% of the 16-year-old cohort said that they are not satisfied with their relationship with their mother and father respectively, while 16.63% are dissatisfied with their relationship with their friends.

37.57% of the boys who took part in this survey, said that at least once in their lifetime they have participated in a group bullying an individual. For girls the figure was 23.35%.

45.23% of boys have admitted in being individually bullied by a whole group of people, while 34.47% of the girls said that they have been bullied by a group at least once in their lifetime.

### **Conclusion**

Alcohol remains the number one problem. The fact that 1 in every 5 respondents said the last time they drank alcohol was at home, indicates the strong reflection of the acceptance of alcohol within our society and indeed, within our families.

A percentage of the population is always going to abuse substances, be it alcohol, tobacco or drugs. Various factors can lead to substance abuse, namely ecological environment, family environment, personality of the person, early behaviour problems, negative adolescent behaviour and experiences. As the population of substance abusers is on the increase, the fact that this study show no significant increase over the study carried out 4 years earlier, could indicate positive signs.

- a) The fact that 16-year-old students have more information on substance abuse, and yet were not attracted in starting experimenting with drugs, shows the importance of knowledge on the subject.
- b) stabilisation in the comparative results indicate that prevention programmes starting from an early age are having positive impact on the students.

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