



NACIONES UNIDAS  
Oficina contra la Droga y el Delito



**“Subregional System of Information and Research on Drugs in  
Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay”**

***GUIDING ELEMENTS FOR PUBLIC  
POLICY ON DRUGS IN THE SUBREGION***

**FIRST COMPARATIVE STUDY ON DRUG USE AND  
ASSOCIATED FACTORS IN THE GENERAL  
POPULATION 15 TO 64 YEARS OF AGE**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND MAIN  
FINDINGS**

June 2008

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD/OAS), through its Inter-American Observatory on Drugs, provide technical and financial support to South American countries within the framework of the Subregional System of Information and Research on Drugs in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay. The goal is to strengthen National Drug Commissions, specifically, their National Observatories or their equivalent in each country, in order that they may generate statistical data and updated information on the magnitude and tendencies of drug use in each country and at the same time allowing comparability among the countries.

During 2006 - 2007, the countries carried out national studies on general populations between 12 and 65 years of age applying the same methodology which allows for comparative analysis of the data. Thus, for the first time, countries will be able to compare national data of general populations on drug use and certain associated risk/protection factors, as well as contextual information related to public policies on the subject and the progress made on drug prevention, drug treatment, and control of the supply of drugs.

Although the studies covered urban population between 12 and 65 years of age, this report covers the **15 to 64 years** of age segment so that the results may be compared to those of studies carried out in other countries.

Specifically, **the objectives** were:

- To determine lifetime, past year and past month prevalence of consumption of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and cocaine base in the 15 to 64 years of age segment of the population according to sex and age, and to compare results among the countries.

- To estimate and compare the percentages of the population with signs of marijuana, cocaine and cocaine base dependency.

- To determine the distribution of risk and protection factors associated with drug use such as perception of risk, perception of accessibility to different illicit drugs and the availability of drugs, and to compare the results among countries.

- To evaluate the relationship between drug use and risk factors in each country.

- To understand the composition of poly-drug use in each country.

- To determine and compare the ages of first use for legal and illegal substances.

In every country, random samples were selected based on a stratified multistage design (regions or geographic areas previously defined); first, selecting area segments (census blocks); second, selecting a household in each selected block and, in the third stage, selecting a person from each selected household. A total of 61,607 people between the ages of 15 and 64 were studied and included in this report, representing a total of 43 million people in the six countries. The size of the samples—that is, the number of people interviewed—per country was: Argentina, 12,459; Bolivia, 8,662; Chile, 15,776; Ecuador, 7,341; Peru, 10,927 and Uruguay with 6,442 individuals. The differences in the size of the samples in each country were due to the level of geographic representation determined by each country (in accordance with the desired number of regions or sampling areas); sampling errors, due to the actual size of the sample in each country, are shown in the annex for different measures of prevalence.

The most noteworthy **results** of this study were:

- The questionnaires included modules of questions related to legal drugs, mainly

tobacco and alcohol. As is the case in most countries, these two substances accounted for the highest consumption levels. In terms of tobacco consumption, current use varied quite a bit from country to country. In Ecuador and Peru, 19% of the population reported using tobacco; that number was about 26% in Bolivia; 34% in Argentina and Uruguay, and around 44% in Chile.

- In every country tobacco use was higher among men than among women and, in the case of men, differences between countries were much smaller (from 30% in Peru to 48% in Chile) than the differences observed among women (from 7% in Ecuador to 41% in Chile). Without major variations in the interior in each country, tobacco use was higher among people between 15 and 34 years of age than among people between 35 and 64 years of age. The age at which people began using tobacco was about the same in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay with an average age of first use between 16 and 17 years. In these three countries, 25% of tobacco users began before they were 15 years old, while in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, they started two years later.

- Alcohol consumption followed a similar pattern to that of tobacco use. Current consumption levels in the total population between 15 and 64 years of age varied significantly between countries; more than 50% in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay; a little more than 40% in Bolivia and around 35% in Ecuador and Peru. Although men consumed more than women, variations between countries were less pronounced among men between 15 and 34 years of age.

- With regard to the age at which the population between 15 and 64 years began consuming alcohol, there was quite a bit of similarity between countries with an average age of first use of around 18 years. In the case of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, the 25% of the population that began consuming alcohol at an earlier age did so one year after the age of first use for tobacco. In the other three countries, the age of first use for

alcohol and for tobacco consumption was quite similar.

- Problem alcohol consumption analyzed through the Brief Scale for Detecting Abnormal Drinking (EBBA) also showed significant differences between countries. While 9% of Uruguay's alcohol consumers in the past thirty days were considered problem drinkers, the number climbed to 42% in Ecuador and to 49% in Bolivia. In Argentina, problem drinkers constituted 13% while in Chile the number was 17% and 16% in Peru.

- With regard to illicit drugs, marijuana was the most used drug – primarily among young people – much as it is in most countries around the world that collect data on the subject. In this group of six countries, recent (past year prevalence) average use was 4.8%, higher than the world average of 3.8%. This 4.8% translates into **2.1 million** out of the 43 million people between the ages of 15 and 64 years represented in this study.

- The highest levels of recent marijuana use (past year prevalence) were observed in Argentina and Chile (about 7%) and Uruguay (about 6%); marijuana use in Bolivia reached 4.3% while in Ecuador and Peru the rate did not exceed 1%. In all countries men used marijuana more than women, and users were primarily concentrated in the age group between 15 and 34 years. The average age of first use varied between the age of 18 (Argentina and Chile) and almost 19 (Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay), the exception being Bolivia, where the average age of first use was 22 years.

- The number of people showing signs of marijuana dependency varied between 20% of all marijuana users in Chile and Uruguay, to about 36% in Peru and 51% in Ecuador.

- The relationship between marijuana and tobacco use was also evaluated. In those countries with the highest levels of

marijuana use, both for recent use and for current use, marijuana consumption was 7 to 8 times higher among tobacco users than among those who did not use tobacco.

- The perception of great risk from frequent marijuana use was quite high in all countries but the perception of risk was lower in those countries with higher levels of marijuana use.

- The perception of ease of access to marijuana showed significant variations between countries but the percentages were higher in the countries where consumption levels were higher. Something similar occurred with the availability of marijuana. Those countries where a larger number of people interviewed indicated having been offered marijuana to either try or purchase were also the countries with higher levels of marijuana use.

- With regard to cocaine use, in terms of prevalence of use during the past year, the average number in the six countries was 1.4%, exceeding the world average of 0.3% reported by the United Nations. In the countries covered by this report close to **600,000 people** reported having used cocaine at some point during the previous 12 months. The earliest age of first use among individuals who reported using cocaine was found in Argentina where 25% (25 percentile) used this drug for the first time at age 16 or younger, and about 50% (50 percentile) tried it for the first time at age 18 or younger. In the other countries, the average age of first use was one or two years later.

- Consumption levels for the past year showed significant variations between countries, ranging from 0.1% in Ecuador to 2.7% in Argentina.

- With the exception of Bolivia, which showed similar consumption levels among men and women, in the rest of the countries, cocaine consumption was higher among men. With regard to age, in all countries

consumption was higher among those in the 15 to 34 years of age group than among those in the 35 to 64 years age group. The exception was Peru where consumption levels were similar for both groups.

- The percentage of people using cocaine who exhibited signs of dependency was higher than for marijuana users in all countries except in Uruguay where the figures were similar. Between 42% and 46% of cocaine users exhibited signs of dependency in Argentina, Ecuador, and Peru; in Chile the figure was 29% and in Uruguay, 19%. On average, 41% or 240,000 people exhibited signs of dependency.

- The perception of great risk from frequent cocaine use exceeded 90% of the individuals surveyed in each country. Ease of access to this drug spanned from 14% of those surveyed in Ecuador to about 36% in Argentina. The other countries showed results somewhere in between. There was a strong link observed between cocaine use and the perception of ease of access to this drug; those countries with greater ease of access also registered higher consumption levels. Something similar occurred with the availability of cocaine. There were higher levels of consumption in countries where higher percentages of people reported having been offered the drug to either try or purchase.

- In addition to questions about cocaine use, the study included questions about use of other drugs that are by products in the process to produce cocaine hydrochloride (HCL); in general terms, and for the purpose of this report, the term *cocaine base* was used. In general, the results indicated that there was a low level of consumption of this drug. Based on prevalence of consumption during the past year, figures varied from 0.4% to 0.6% in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, to around 0.1% in Bolivia and Ecuador. In Ecuador and in Peru prevalence of consumption figures for this drug were similar to those for cocaine hydrochloride

while in the other countries they were considerably lower.

- In all countries consumption of cocaine base among men was higher than among women. With regard to age, in Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay, the highest level of consumption was found among the youngest group (those between 15 and 34 years of age). But in Bolivia and Ecuador consumption was higher among people between 35 and 64 years of age. The lowest average age of first use was found in Argentina and the highest in Bolivia. Among the 25% of those surveyed who indicated having used cocaine base at some point, the average age of first use in Argentina was about 14 years; in Peru and Uruguay the average was 16 years; in Chile it was 17 years and 18 years in Bolivia and Ecuador.

- On the other hand, the percentage of individuals who exhibited signs of cocaine base dependency varied from 38% in Ecuador to 63% in Argentina. In the group of countries that evaluated this condition, approximately 100,000 people – 54% of users – could be considered as exhibiting signs of dependency.

- The perception of great risk from frequent use of cocaine base was quite high in all countries while the perception of ease of access varied significantly between countries; from 10% of those surveyed who considered it easy to obtain cocaine base in Bolivia and Ecuador to 36% of those who felt the same way in Chile and Uruguay. A similar picture emerged with regard to the number of people who reported having been offered to either try or purchase cocaine base during the past year. The figures varied from less than 1% in Bolivia and Ecuador to approximately 4% in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.

- There was an estimate done on the number of drugs (illegal or misused legal drugs such as solvents and inhalants) consumed by users during the past year. With regard to

adolescents and young adults between 15 and 34 years of age, the majority were found to be users of just one drug with certain variations between countries. In Argentina, 68% of users were single-drug users; in Bolivia the figure was 89%; in Chile it was 84% and approximately 72% in Peru and Uruguay. Looking at the figures from a different perspective, Argentina registered the highest percentage of people in this age group using two or more drugs during the past year (multidrug users).

- In all countries, the majority of drug users between 15 and 34 years of age used only marijuana, with numbers varying from 48% in Peru to approximately 79% in Chile. The second most frequent mode of drug use among users in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador and Uruguay was the combination of marijuana and cocaine registering 20%, 9%, 10% and 18% respectively. In Bolivia, the exclusive use of solvents and inhalants registered the second highest level of drug use with 12.8%, while in Peru the exclusive use of cocaine base was in second place with 12% of users.

## MAIN FINDINGS

The objective of this study of random samples in the general population between 15 and 64 years of age in six South American countries was to look at various aspects related to the consumption of legal and illegal drugs. On the one hand, the magnitude of drug use was evaluated through the prevalence of consumption; at least once in their lifetime, sometime during the past year (recent consumption) and sometime in the past 30 days (current consumption). In addition to estimating consumption levels of the most used drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, and cocaine base, the study evaluated signs of dependency exhibited by users of those drugs and the use of multiple drugs or polyconsumption. On the other hand, the study analyzed the perception of risk associated with the frequent use of drugs, the perception of ease of access to drugs and

offers of drugs that individuals received during the past year. These two last elements allowed for an approximation of what is happening in the countries in terms of controlling the supply of drugs.

In terms of consumption, the first picture to emerge from this study is of the differences that exist between countries, something that had already been observed two years ago in a study of the school age population between 13 and 17 years of age. In much the same way as it had been seen in other parts of the world such as in Europe, marijuana consumption in countries with the highest rates of drug use could be up to ten times the levels in countries with the lowest rates.

In broad terms, there was a higher level of illegal drug use in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. Bolivia fell somewhere in the middle and Ecuador and Peru had the lowest levels of consumption of these drugs. This fact was particularly clear with regard to marijuana and cocaine use. On the other hand, there was a high percentage of users who exhibited signs of dependency with respect to the three main drugs the study focused on (marijuana, cocaine and cocaine base). There were significant variations in that regard between countries, but these results were an unmistakable indication of the addictive power of all these drugs (with differences between them), with the resulting negative consequences not only for an individual's personal, family and social life but also for the health systems in the countries involved, most of which would be hard pressed to satisfy a massive demand for treatment.

This study also showed that whether a country had a high level or a low level of illegal drug use, the majority of illegal drug users consumed one drug, primarily marijuana, so it should not come as a surprise that there would exist a higher demand for treatment of this drug abuse in many of these countries.

An important link between illegal drug use and the perception of ease of access to those drugs also emerged from the study. In fact, the countries registering higher consumption were also the countries where a higher percentage of people perceived that drugs were easily accessible. The same thing occurred with the supply of drugs in the sense that in those countries with higher levels of illegal drug use, more individuals reported having been offered to either try or purchase drugs.

With regard to the legal drugs included in this report, tobacco and alcohol are by far the most used drugs regardless of a person's sex or age. Given the magnitude of alcohol consumption, the high percentage of problem drinkers was very troubling. In some countries, more than 40% of users were problem drinkers.