The Sequence of Drug Use: Testing the Gateway Hypothesis in Latin America
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This article presents evidence obtained from general population surveys in Latin America on the hypothesis of the sequence of drug use, which begins with legal drugs, followed by the use of marijuana, and ends with abuse of hard drugs. The findings confirm that both the occasional and the drug-dependent users follow this sequence. Special attention was given to the “gateway effect” of marijuana and to the role of early age of onset of tobacco and alcohol use in the progression to hard drug use. Two factors are analyzed in depth: the decreased perception of risk among those who started using a drug about the next drug in the sequence as well as the increased exposure to it.

Keywords: gateway drugs, Latin America, epidemiology.