



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

COCAINE, AMPHETAMINES, ECSTASY AND CANNABIS: LATEST TRENDS

Cocaine becoming stimulant drug of choice for many young Europeans

(24.11.2005 LISBON) Cocaine has become a major element in the European drug picture, reports the **EU drugs agency (EMCDDA)** today in its **2005 Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in Europe** launched in Brussels. Indicators of cocaine trafficking and consumption now overwhelmingly point to a rise in importation and use of the drug and there is growing evidence of cocaine-related health problems.

The **EMCDDA** estimates that around 9 million Europeans (3% of all adults) have ever used cocaine. Between 3 and 3.5 million (1% of all adults) are likely to have tried the drug in the last year, while around 1.5 million (0.5% of all adults) are classified as current users, having used it in the last month. Use is concentrated mainly among young adults (15–34 years), particularly young males, and those living in urban areas.

Cocaine use varies considerably between countries, with most national surveys estimating that between 1% and 11.6% of young Europeans have ever tried the drug and that between 0.2% and 4.6% have used it in the last 12 months.

Spain and the **UK** report the highest levels of cocaine use, with over 4% of young adults having used the drug in the last year, exceeding levels of recent ecstasy and amphetamine use. These estimates now approach US figures, says the agency, fuelling worries that cocaine is establishing itself as the stimulant drug of choice for many young people in parts of Europe ⁽¹⁾.

Since the late 1990s, evidence of a rise in recent cocaine use among young adults has been reported from surveys in **Denmark, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands and Austria**. In **Spain** and the **UK**, the most substantial rises occurred prior to 2001, but more recent data suggest that this upward trend may now be levelling off.

The use of crack cocaine in Europe – a drug particularly associated with public health and social problems – remains limited, according to today's report. Significant use is only reported in a few major cities, principally in the **Netherlands** and the **UK**.

Dramatic rise in amounts of cocaine seized in Europe

Latest figures show that the amount of cocaine seized in the **EU** nearly doubled between 2002 and 2003, from 47 tonnes to over 90 tonnes, suggesting that Europe is now a major market for the drug. Most cocaine enters the **EU** via the **Iberian Peninsula** and the **Netherlands**, with **African** and **Caribbean** countries important transit zones for trafficking into Europe. **Spain** and the **Netherlands** report the largest amounts of cocaine seized in the **EU**. Volumes more than doubled in both countries between 2002 and 2003.

Cocaine's growing impact on public health

More Europeans are now seeking treatment for cocaine-related problems, according to today's report. Around 10% of requests for treatment for drug problems in Europe are now linked to cocaine use, although considerable variations are recorded between countries. The highest percentage of treatment clients seeking

help for cocaine use are found in **Spain** (26%) and the **Netherlands** (38%). In the **Netherlands**, among those new to treatment in 2003, more clients requested help for cocaine problems than for opiate use.

Cocaine-related death, says the **EMCDDA**, is a 'serious and possibly under-reported problem'. Cocaine use is frequent among opiate users and is commonly detected with opiates in cases of drug overdose. It is estimated that cocaine plays a 'determining role' in around 10% of all drug-related deaths (ranging from 1% to 15% depending on the country). According to the report, this could mean that there are several hundred cocaine-related deaths per year at **EU** level. Deaths attributed to cocaine use alone, however, remain rare, although concerns exist about the drug's potential to aggravate cardiovascular problems.

No sign of a downturn in use of other stimulants

Latest figures from surveys continue to show an upward trend in the use of ecstasy and amphetamine among young adults in most **EU** countries, says the **EMCDDA** (2).

Significant ecstasy consumption was first reported in Europe in the 1990s and use has now grown to equal or surpass that of amphetamine in most countries. The agency estimates that around 2.6 million adults in the **EU** have used ecstasy recently (0.8% of all adults).

National surveys show that between 0.6% and 13.6% of young adults report having tried ecstasy and 0.4–6% having used it in the last year. The highest rates of recent ecstasy use among young adults are reported by **Estonia** (3.7%), **Spain** (3.8%), the **Czech Republic** (5.9%) and the **UK** (6.9%). But unlike most other countries where data are available, **Germany**, **Greece** and the **UK** all report that ecstasy use has now stabilised.

Denmark, **Estonia** and the **UK** are the countries with the highest rate of recent amphetamine use among young adults (estimates of around 3%). But the **UK** is the only country in the **EU** reporting a significant fall in the recent use of amphetamine in this age group (15–34 years).

Europe remains a major centre for ecstasy and amphetamine production

Globally, Europe remains the main centre of ecstasy production, although its relative importance is declining as ecstasy manufacture spreads to other parts of the world. Worldwide amphetamine production and seizures also remain concentrated in Europe. In 2003 amphetamine laboratories were uncovered in **Belgium**, **Germany**, **Estonia**, **Lithuania**, **Luxembourg** (small-scale), the **Netherlands**, **Poland** and the **UK**.

Most amphetamine seized in 2003 originated in the **Netherlands**, followed by **Poland** and then **Belgium**. Around 82% of the total amount of amphetamine seized worldwide in 2003 was in **Western and Central Europe**. Quantities seized appear to have been on the increase since 2002.

Europe bucks global trend – no signs of increasing methamphetamine use

Despite growing problems linked to methamphetamine use in **Africa**, **Asia**, **Australia**, **New Zealand** and the **USA**, significant use of the drug in the **EU** remains restricted to the **Czech Republic** and **Slovakia**. In the **Czech Republic** a localised problem has existed since the 1980s and over 50% of demands for drug treatment there are for methamphetamine problems.

Commenting on the above, **EMCDDA Chairman Marcel Reimen** says: 'Many European countries have strong links to parts of the world where methamphetamine problems exist. Given that the European market for stimulants is expanding, the potential for the spread of methamphetamine use cannot be ignored. On the contrary it remains a crucial area for vigilance and preventive action'.

Concern over popularity of naturally occurring hallucinogens

Use of synthetic hallucinogenic substances, such as LSD, remains low throughout Europe. However today's report notes that, among school students (15–16 years), experimentation with naturally occurring hallucinogens, such as 'magic mushrooms', is a relatively common phenomenon. In 2003, lifetime prevalence

of magic mushroom use equalled that of ecstasy use in the **Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria and Poland** and exceeded it in **Belgium, Germany and France**.

Over 62 million Europeans have tried cannabis

The **EMCDDA** estimates that over 62 million Europeans (or over 20% of all adults) have ever tried cannabis and around 20 million (over 6% of all adults) have used it in the last year. Around 9.5 million (almost 4% of all adults), are classified as current users, and roughly 3 million young adults, mostly young males, are estimated to be daily or almost daily, users.

Cannabis – more even picture emerges as national differences narrow

Since the mid-1990s, the predominant European trend in cannabis use has been upward ⁽³⁾. The overall **EU** cannabis picture however has been uneven, with the **UK** historically standing out as the country with the highest prevalence rates.

But this is no longer the case, says the **EMCDDA**, with other countries now closing the gap and the **UK** situation having stabilised since 1998. Levels of recent use among young adults, for example, now stand at 17.3% in **Spain**, 19.5% in the **UK**, 19.7% in **France** and 22.1% in the **Czech Republic**. (The lowest rates for recent cannabis use among young adults are found in **Greece, Sweden, Poland and Portugal**).

The **ESPAD** school survey project ⁽⁴⁾ provides a useful window on long-term trends (1995–2003) in drug use among European schoolchildren (15–16 yrs) and shows some signs of convergence for cannabis use. In 1995, **ESPAD** data estimated lifetime prevalence of cannabis use in this age group to be 41% in the **UK** and 37% in **Ireland**, dramatically higher than all other **EU** countries participating in the survey. The **Czech Republic** (22%), was the only other **EU** country reporting an estimate of over 20%. Most countries reported rates below 10%.

ESPAD data for 2003, however, reveal a very different picture, with nine **EU Member States** reporting estimates of lifetime use in excess of 20%: the **Czech Republic** (44%), **Ireland** (39%), **UK** (38%), **France*** (38%) **Slovenia** (28%) **Italy** (27%), **Slovakia** (27%), **Denmark** (23%) and **Estonia** (23%). Rises in lifetime cannabis use were most pronounced in the **new Central and Eastern EU Member States** where, in 1995, rates were often very low (generally below 10%).

The highest lifetime prevalence estimate of cannabis use among 15–16-year-old schoolchildren in Europe in 2003 was reported in the **Czech Republic** (44%) and the highest last-month use in **Spain** and **France** (22%). Between 1999 and 2003, there was a 5% increase in the **Czech Republic** in the number of school students reporting to have tried cannabis for the first time at the age of 13 or younger. But, the **Netherlands** and the **UK** both reported a small decrease of 1% in this number, although a change of this size is difficult to interpret.

Polydrug use – central feature of European drug phenomenon

Polydrug use is now a central feature of the European drug phenomenon, says the report, making a simple substance-specific analysis no longer realistic.

On this point **EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Götz** concludes: 'Analysis of the public health impact of drug use today needs to take into account the complex picture of the inter-related consumption of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and tobacco. Focusing on trends in one substance can be misleading, if the inter-relationship between different types of drug is ignored'.

Notes and definitions:

All adults – 15–64 years; Young adults – 15–34 years; Lifetime use – tried at least once in a lifetime/ever used; Recent use – last 12 months; Current use – last month/30 days.

⁽¹⁾ See 2005 *Annual report* Commentary, Figure 'Recent last year use of cocaine among young adults (15–34 years)'.

⁽²⁾ See Chapter 4, Figures 8 and 9.

⁽³⁾ See Chapter 3, Figure 4.

⁽⁴⁾ <http://www.espad.org/index.html> (* France participated in ESPAD from 1999 onwards only).