Addiction among Hungarian youth – facts and trends

Key indicators of smoking or consumption of alcohol and other drugs show improving trends –the survey project performed by the Institute of Sociology and Social Policy of Corvinus University of Budapest concludes, when comparing the latest information available on domestic conditions with all the data collected over the past 20 years, thus putting changes in addiction among Hungarian youth into an international context.

Although not many people can claim to be free from harmful habits, only those are regarded as addicts who excessively use chemicals with a sedative effect or capable of influencing their daily thinking or mood (such as nicotine, alcohol, narcotic drugs or other substances), and experience physical and emotional distress upon discontinuance. A few decades ago, European countries faced an alarming tendency: first-users were getting younger while the consumed amount of such substances was increasing.

To explore the background of this trend a joint programme was launched in 1994 to regularly collect data in a standardized way about the cigarette, alcohol and drug use of adolescents, the most vulnerable age group. Hungary has participated in the quadrennial European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) from the beginning, so today domestic social scientists can rely on 20 years of internationally comparable data for their research. By analysing the data researchers can identify the underlying causes, monitor trends in consumption habits and compare trends by country. In the sixth data collection wave in 2015 more than 96,000 16-year-old high school students from 35 European countries were surveyed, and the results were released in the full report published in September 2016.

As part of this action, the latest data collection was performed in March 2015 by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (the legal predecessor of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund) and the Ministry of Human Capacities. Altogether 6,664 grade 9/10 students from 306 high schools completed the self-delivered questionnaires for the nationally representative sample of classes, while the number of students involved in the international comparisons and the analysis of the changes between 1995 and 2015 was 2,647. 2015 was the first year when the central ESPAD survey contained a set of compulsory questions on behaviour-related addictions and the use of new psychoactive substances (NPS). Besides the compulsory questions the Hungarian questionnaire was complemented with a few optional ones on to the circumstances of alcohol consumption, the use of designer drugs and energy drinks and certain behaviour-related addictions. Some of the key findings about the alcohol and drug use among Hungarian youth include the following:

- At least 62.5% of the respondents reported to have tried cigarettes at least once, but a downward trend could be observed in both the early onset of cigarette use and the perceived availability of cigarettes. It was, however, an unfavourable change that young people are less aware of the risks of smoking: occasional and regular smoking was both considered less dangerous in 2015 compared to 2011.
- The majority of Hungarian students in grade 9/10 reported to have consumed alcohol with some regularity and nearly two-thirds had been drunk at least once in their lifetime. The quantity of alcohol consumed on one occasion was 79 ml per person which is significantly above the comparable information for adults. Although the main indicators of alcohol consumption have decreased since 2011 and young people drink alcohol less frequently, they drink more on one occasion.
- Almost one in five students reported to have tried illicit drugs, one in every six took medication without prescription and one in every ten tried one of the emerging designer drugs. Compared to the findings of former ESPAD surveys, however, it can be stated that by 2015 the prevalence of all substances has decreased markedly and substance use has become rarer among Hungarian high school students.

“The data collected in the ESPAD 2015 survey has made it possible for us to determine, for example, the dimensions of social exclusion of young people using drugs and to validate formerly identified indicators approaching the concept of exclusion from the aspect of quality of life,” said Professor Zsuzsanna Elekes, leader of the Hungarian research project. “In our analyses, on the one hand, we try to identify the various types of consumption and behaviour, on the other hand, we examine the relationship between drug use and social exclusion, the key indicators for the latter being poverty, followed by the local community and the so-called individual indicators, where self-image is also an important factor.”

Today, however, not only intoxicating substances can cause addiction but practically anything from the internet and smart phones to eating and dieting. This implies that the boundaries between chemical and behaviour-related addictions become blurred. “In Hungary the ESPAD survey included questions on internet use and other behaviour-related addictions as early as in 2011, and our data collection was complemented with a series of questions specifically addressing problematic uses in 2011 and 2015. In 2015 the international data collection also included similar questions,” the project leader said.

ccording to the new national survey, 97.9% of the examined age group regularly go online, on average 23 hours a week. The most common online activity is the use of social networking sites. Further frequent activities include downloading music and films, surfing and seeking information. Only 7.4% of the respondents reported to have been regularly engaged in gambling. Gambling is not very popular in this age group: only 6% of adolescents bet on a weekly basis, mostly boys.

Comparing the 2015 survey results with the information of the preceding five data collection waves it can be concluded that with a slight delay the favourable changes already marking most European countries have finally reached Hungary as well: key indicators show improving trends in the use of cigarette, alcohol and other drugs. This gives rise to some optimism in a country where smoking and excessive alcohol consumption are among the most harmful behaviours and greatly contribute to the unfavourable mortality rates of the population. However, only the next ESPAD survey will be able to tell whether this trend is lasting or not.

The study on the relevant Hungarian facts and trends is available for download from the research group leader's website, while the full report summarising the international data is available at the official ESPAD website. The international research project is coordinated by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

The researchers' previous relevant funded projects:

- 2006–2008: European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) 2007 – Hungary – K60709 (HUF 5.891 million)
- 2010-2011: ESPAD 2011 – Fifth wave of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs in Hungary – K81353 (HUF 7.745 million)

Funded project: K111740
Differences and similarities of adolescents' substance use habit in Hungary and other European countries. Causes and interpretation on the basis of ESPAD 2015.

Duration: October 2014 – June 2016
Project leader: Zsuzsanna Elekes (Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Corvinus University of Budapest)
Other participants: Tamás Domokos (ECHO Nonprofit Network Kft.) methodology expert, Eszter Szilágyi (PHD student at Corvinus) research organiser, Zita Szűcsné Kovács fieldwork leader, Tamás Kosztolnyik data entry clerk, Sociology students at Corvinus, Adrienn Nyírády (Hungarian National Focal Point), Zsolt Demetrovics (Department of Clinical Psychology and Addiction, Faculty of Education and Psychology, ELTE)
Amount of domestic funding: HUF 10.554 million