



POLICY BRIEF

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Addictions among
European adolescents/minors

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ABOUT US



Progressive Analytical Centre is an independent think-tank providing evidence-based solutions and proposals for progressive policy-making. The Centre supports the exchange of views between experts, interdisciplinary dialogue, and engagement with the general public both in the Czech Republic as well as in the European Union. It contributes to improving our understanding of key social, political, and economic trends through critical analysis, policy-oriented research, and awareness-raising. Among the main research and analytical interests belong to the future of the European economy and industry, climate change and energy policy, social justice, international solidarity, security, and societal resilience. The Centre is based in Prague and launched its activities in 2021.

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SUMMARY

The policy paper presents a systematic review of the addiction prevention policies of selected EU Member States - Italy, France, Poland, and Belgium – focusing on minors and adolescents. It examines the perception of the use of addictive substances, including their understanding of the legality and illegality of these substances. The review is complemented by a case study of the Czech Republic, which is generally considered as an example of a country with a progressive approach to addiction prevention policies.

Italy and France primarily focus on communication and awareness-raising in their approach as can be seen from their approach to minors and adolescents in the light of the fight against drug addictions. Both countries have well-developed informational websites for the public; however, most of the content is dedicated to legal drugs and internet addiction. Although there are topics focused on children and adolescents, the main emphasis of the states' information campaigns is on the general population. Despite specific campaigns such as Italy's INDiCI ⁽¹⁾, there is little evidence of broader campaign efforts in either Italy or France. Over time, awareness campaigns have expanded, primarily using TV and radio broadcasts, and occasionally leveraging social media to reach younger audiences. However, policies such as youth and adolescent access to drugs are not mentioned in official documents. As for the EMCDDA data, both countries Italy and France have similar data on drug prevalence with the issue in 2017 and it is one of the main sources where the public could easily monitor the prevalence of drugs.

As for Poland and Belgium, their approaches to addressing addiction issues are largely similar. Both countries have prevention programs and initiatives, as well as national plans aimed at countering drug possession and addiction-related problems. In the Polish case, a stricter approach to fighting addictions was initially adopted but the country has since reversed or modified some of its policies. A significant difference between

Poland and Belgium is that in Belgium, addiction prevention and protection against risks of addiction mechanisms vary across Brussels, the Walloon region, and Flanders, whereas in Poland, the central government has greater authority to implement nationwide drug policies.

The second part of the policy paper is the case study of the Czech Republic. It investigated two primary research questions concerning minors' perceptions of legal and illegal addictive substances and the internet, as well as their views on preventive and restrictive measures related to these substances. The findings revealed that participants generally view alcohol negatively, despite rather prevalent social consumption among them. Regarding tobacco smoking the opinions are mixed. Cannabis garners positive perceptions, even among those who do not use it regularly. Illegal hard drugs are viewed unfavorably, with limited personal experience reported. Regarding the internet, participants express negative views and acknowledge addiction issues among themselves and peers.

Regarding preventive measures, participants feel that age restrictions on alcohol and legal measures on tobacco are inadequately enforced and they express concerns about some emerging trends of legal substance use among peers. Many supports the legalization of cannabis and some even advocate for legalizing hard illegal drugs to enhance substance regulation and generate tax revenue. Participants emphasize the need for stricter enforcement of age restrictions on internet use, citing concerns about minors' difficulty distinguishing reality from fiction online, about ability to fully understand risks and potential threats of internet use, and the potential harm this could cause.

(1) *Intervention for Digital Aware and Informed New Generations*, a project by the National Coordination of Host Communities (Cnca) and the National Council of Researchers from 12 March 2018 to 11 March 2020, with a questionnaire for people "Under 18".

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The policy paper combines the systematic review method, which revises the situation regarding the usage of addictive substances, including the internet-related addictions, and general addictive patterns in selected countries. The review also examines the existing policies, with emphasis on the best practices, that aim to restrict or limit the use of addictive substances and to enhance addiction prevention. The systemic review focused on four EU Member States – Italy, France, Belgium, and Poland.

The selection of these countries aims to provide different geographical, legal, historical, and socio-economic contexts to assessing addiction policies targeting minors and adolescents across the European Union. This selection aims to highlight the specific differences in each state's approach to legal and illegal drugs. Including countries with diverse historical experiences provides a comprehensive perspective on how these histories shape drug policies.

The policy paper employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on the Czech Republic to delve into how minors perceive both legal and illegal addictive substances, as well as their attitudes toward internet usage. This exploratory case study aims to assess whether minors in the Czech Republic are aware of existing policies on addictive substances, how they perceive these policies, and what impact they believe these measures

have on their behaviors and attitudes. Specifically, the study examines whether minors acknowledge and adhere to preventive and restrictive measures concerning addictive substances, and to what extent these measures influence their perceptions and behaviors.

Within the framework of this case study, two primary research questions are explored in depth. Firstly, the study investigates the perceptions of minors regarding legal and illegal addictive substances and their interactions with the internet. It aims to uncover how these substances are viewed among minors, their patterns of use or abstention, and their perspectives on the associated risks and benefits. Secondly, the research explores how minors perceive preventive and restrictive measures implemented to curb addictive substance use. This includes their awareness of such measures, their opinions on their effectiveness, and whether these policies influence their behaviors or decisions regarding substance use.

By addressing these research questions, the case study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness and perception of policy measures aimed at minors in the Czech Republic. It sheds light on the nuanced ways in which young people understand and respond to regulatory efforts concerning addictive substances and internet use, offering policymakers a clearer understanding of how to tailor interventions that resonate

with this demographic and effectively mitigate risks associated with substance use and internet addiction.

The policy paper employs a mixed-method approach combining systematic review and qualitative case study methodologies. The systematic review examines existing literature and studies to analyze addiction patterns among minors in selected states, including the Czech Republic. It investigates prevalence rates, state responses, protective mechanisms, approaches to prevention policies, and the effectiveness of these policies aimed at youth. This method provides a comprehensive overview of current policies and their impact on minors with addictive behaviours.

Concurrently, a qualitative case study centered on the Czech Republic explores minors' perceptions of legal and illegal addictive substances and internet usage. This exploratory study investigates how minors perceive and interpret preventive and restrictive measures concerning addictive substances, and assesses the effects of these policies on their attitudes and behaviors. Eight adolescents aged 16 to 18 from diverse regions of the Czech Republic participated in structured interviews. The participants were selected based on availability and intentional criteria to ensure geographical and demographic diversity.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted using open coding methods to analyze responses to questions related to patterns of alcohol use, tobacco smoking, cannabis use, hard drugs, and internet addiction. Interviews also aimed to provide an elementary understanding of the perceptions of existing policies among minors and adolescents. Participants' views on substance use, policy enforcement, educational efforts, and available support services were explored, providing nuanced insights into the effectiveness and perceived shortcomings of current approaches to addiction prevention among minors in the Czech Republic.

This policy paper represents the inaugural research effort of the Progressive Analytical Centre to address critical issues related to addictions among minors. Building on previous research and analysis, we have undertaken a focused approach, utilizing a limited dataset and conducting a modest number of interviews. Our primary objective was to uncover essential insights that can shape future research agendas and enrich discussions on addiction issues and policy responses. By establishing this foundational groundwork, our aim is to stimulate further exploration and contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on targeted interventions and policy reforms in this domain.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF INDIVIDUAL STATES

In this chapter, a systematic review of addiction policies and initiatives focusing on prevention and protection in Italy, France, Belgium, Poland, and the Czech Republic is conducted. It examines prevalent addiction patterns, evaluates existing policies, and highlights noteworthy approaches aimed at mitigating substance abuse among minors. Through this detailed analysis, the chapter endeavours to discern effective strategies, identify areas for improvement, and propose recommendations to enhance addiction prevention efforts on a regional and national level.

By focusing on these individual case studies within the broader European context, the policy paper seeks to illuminate critical insights into policy effectiveness, cultural influences, and societal responses to addiction. This approach not only enriches our understanding of addiction dynamics across different European landscapes but also underscores the importance of nuanced, evidence-based policymaking in addressing this multifaceted challenge.

ITALY

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) plays a crucial role in monitoring drug usage across all EU member states. In Italy, while the data is not current, it provides detailed

insights into the prevalence of various types of drugs. This data is segmented by period (lifetime, last year, last month), age groups (young adults 15-34, adults 15-64), and gender (male and female), based on statistics from 2017.

Regarding legal substances such as alcohol and tobacco, the statistics reveal significant usage patterns. In the lifetime category, 93.3% of young adults and 91.6% of adults reported alcohol consumption. Over the past year, these figures were 87.7% for young adults and 83.7% for adults. Tobacco smoking prevalence statistics show that 55% of young adults and 60.2% of adults have used tobacco in their lifetime, the last year usage was 34.9% of young adults and 27.3% of adults respectively (The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023).

For illegal drugs like cannabis, the lifetime prevalence stands at 41.4% among young adults and 32.7% among adults. In the last year (2016 data), these figures were 20.9% and 10.2%, respectively. Notably, cannabis ranks as the third most-used drug among young adults in Italy, following alcohol in second place, and places the country second in the EU after Czechia (Cannabis, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023).

Regarding cocaine, the lifetime prevalence is reported at 6.4% for young adults and 6.9% for adults, with a recent year (2016) figures at 1.7% and 1.2% respectively,

placing it fourth among drugs used by young adults and sixteenth in the EU (Cocaine, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023). Additional substances like synthetic stimulants and MDMA (ecstasy) are also monitored, with usage rates indicating lower prevalence compared to other EU countries.

Italian governmental efforts to address addiction are structured across various departments. The „Department of Anti-Drug Policies“ oversees addiction issues across all age groups, complemented by the „Department of Family Policies“ which includes the „National Documentation and Analysis Centre for Childhood and Adolescence.“ These departments provide essential support and information on substance use among minors and adolescents.

Recent studies have focused on drug prevalence among minors and adolescents, such as the INDiCI project initiated by the National Council of Researchers. Conducted from March 2018 to March 2020 in four cities, this initiative collected data on internet-related risky behaviours among those under 18, aiming to raise awareness and promote responsible internet use (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche).

Public awareness campaigns are also integral to Italy’s anti-drug strategy, disseminated through various media channels. These campaigns highlight the consequences of drug use and emphasize prevention among minors and young adults. Notably, Italy has assumed leadership within the Pompidou Group since 2022, extending its mandate to include legal drugs and online addictions, further reinforcing its commitment to comprehensive drug policies (Dipartimento per le Politiche Antidroga).

In line with European initiatives, Italy has also participated in projects like „Better Internet for Kids,“ fostering safe online environments through education and support for young people. Additionally, the „National Action Plan Addictions“ (PAND), implemented from 2022 to 2025, represents a comprehensive strategy to combat addiction through targeted prevention, governance models, and institutional cooperation (Dipartimento per le Politiche Antidroga, Piano di Azione Nazionale Dipendenze 2022-2025).

FRANCE

French data on drug prevalence among the young population is accessible through various sources such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and national institutes’ websites. Specifically, the „National Programme of Fighting Against Tobacco“ (PNLT) provides insights

into tobacco addiction trends. According to PNLT data, the prevalence of daily smoking among 17-year-olds decreased significantly from 25.1% in 2017 to 15.6% in 2022, surpassing the PNLT target of 20% (Ministère du Travail, de la Santé et des Solidarités, Programme National de Lutte Contre le Tabac 2023-2027, 2023).

Meanwhile, EMCDDA statistics for tobacco indicate that in 2017, the lifetime prevalence was 75% among young adults and 76.3% among adults, with last year usage reported at 43% for young adults and 35.7% for adults (The European Drug Report 2023, EMCDDA, 2023). However, data on alcohol prevalence from EMCDDA is based on 2014 figures (The European Drug Report 2023, EMCDDA, 2023).

Turning to illegal drugs, cannabis had a lifetime prevalence of 54.5% among young adults and 47.3% among adults in 2021. In the last year (2020), these figures were 19.2% and 10.6%, respectively. Cannabis ranks as the third most-used drug among young adults in France and occupies the fifth position in the EU overall (Cannabis, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023).

For cocaine, the 2017 lifetime prevalence was 7.9% among young adults and 5.6% among adults, with last year’s usage reported at 3.2% and 1.6%, respectively. Cocaine holds the fourth position among drugs used by young adults in France and ranks similarly in the EU (Cocaine, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023). Synthetic stimulants (amphetamines) showed a lifetime prevalence of 3.1% among young adults and 2.2% among adults in 2017, with last year’s figures at 0.6% and 0.3%, respectively (Synthetic Stimulants, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023).

Regarding MDMA (ecstasy), specific table data are not available, but it is estimated that approximately 1.3% of young adults use ecstasy (MDMA, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023). Heroin and other opioids were reportedly used by 651 individuals in 2021, although specific age breakdowns were not provided (Heroin and Other Opioids, The European Drug Report 2021, EMCDDA, 2023).

The „Interministerial Mission to Combat Drugs and Addictive Behaviour“ (MIDELCA), under the auspices of the French Government, hosts a searchable website offering extensive information on various drugs, state assistance programs, and related documents. While not all legal and illegal drugs are covered, MIDELCA provides targeted articles on drug addiction among minors and adolescents, highlighting effective preventive measures and socio-psychological skill development

(Gouvernement, the Interministerial Mission to Combat Drugs and Addictive Behaviours).

Specifically addressing cannabis addiction, the government implements awareness campaigns aimed at minors and adolescents, emphasising the risks associated with cannabis use and promoting self-control skills (Cannabis, Gouvernement, the Interministerial Mission to Combat Drugs and Addictive Behaviours). Efforts also include measures to restrict tobacco and cannabis sales to minors and provide information on the harms of these substances to socially vulnerable groups (Cannabis, Gouvernement, the Interministerial Mission to Combat Drugs and Addictive Behaviours).

Moreover, MIDECA addresses internet addiction, offering data spanning 2017 to 2021 and guidelines for parents to manage screen time and video game usage among children (Screens and Video Games, Gouvernement, the Interministerial Mission to Combat Drugs and Addictive Behaviours).

Ministerial websites, such as those of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Solidarity, provide detailed insights into national strategies like PNLT, focusing on preventing addiction among minors and adolescents. These initiatives collaborate with local authorities and international networks to foster smoke-free environments and support families in combating addiction (Ministère du Travail, de la Santé et des Solidarités, Programme National de Lutte Contre le Tabac 2023-2027, 2023).

Awareness campaigns tailored for each type of drug, including tobacco and alcohol, are disseminated through social media platforms, underscoring the Ministry of Health's commitment to public health education (Tobacco, Alcohol, Ministère du Travail, de la Santé et des Solidarités).

France's comprehensive approach to addiction prevention integrates rigorous data analysis, targeted interventions, and robust public awareness campaigns, ensuring a coordinated strategy to safeguard the well-being of youth and the broader population. Central to this strategy is the regulation and control of access to addictive substances. Measures include strict enforcement of laws to restrict tobacco sales to minors, initiatives to curb underage drinking, and efforts to combat drug trafficking and distribution networks for illegal substances.

For instance, the PNLT emphasizes not only awareness but also legislative measures to reduce tobacco consumption, particularly among young people. Similarly, regulations on alcohol sales and advertising target

minors to prevent early onset of alcohol use. These efforts are complemented by educational programs and support services aimed at promoting healthier behaviours and providing assistance to individuals at risk of substance abuse.

France's proactive stance on limiting access to addictive substances underscores its commitment to public health and underscores its dedication to addressing addiction as a public health priority.

BELGIUM

In Belgium, recent data from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) 2023 highlights widespread alcohol consumption among adults aged 15-64, with 82.1% reporting use in the last year. Among young adults aged 15-34, the prevalence is slightly lower at 78.4% (EMCDDA, 2023). Additionally, Belgium's Health Interview Survey by Sciensano reported a hazardous drinking prevalence of 5.9% among the general population, with higher rates observed in males aged 55-64 years (13.5%) (Sciensano, 2010).

Regarding cannabis, lifetime usage rates indicate 22.6% among adults aged 15-64 and 32.8% among young adults aged 15-34. The reasons for consumption primarily include alleviating depression (75%), improving sleep (51%), and reducing stress (45%). Most consumption occurs at home (87%), with smaller percentages reported in bars/clubs (3%) and public spaces (10%). Among school-aged children, 10% have tried cannabis, whereas, among high-school and university students, the prevalence rises to 44.4% (Antoine, Balcaen et al., 2024).

Digital addictions are also a concern, with 2.9% of individuals under 18 and older being identified as compulsive users of social networking sites (SNS) (De Cock, Vangeel et al., 2014). Among adolescents, this rate is notably higher at 9.5% (Klein, De Cock et al., 2014).

Belgium faces a significant challenge in its approach to protecting and preventing the use of both legal and illegal substances, largely due to the decentralized nature of responsibilities across different levels of governance—local, regional, and federal. The country enforces stringent laws prohibiting the sale or provision of alcoholic beverages containing more than 0.5% alcohol by volume to individuals under 16 years old, with spirits restricted to those aged 18 and above (Antoine, Balcaen et al., 2022). However, comprehensive data on the effectiveness of these measures in limiting minors' access to addictive substances are currently unavailable.

In Brussels, regional policies vary widely, with each community implementing healthcare strategies under the „Brussels Takes Care“ plan. Recently, the adoption of the Integrated Social Health Plan (PSSI) as part of a five-year health promotion strategy (2023-2027) underscores efforts in addiction prevention (Antoine, Balcaen et al., 2022).

The Walloon Region has implemented the „Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Plan Horizon 2030“ (2018-2030), prioritizing addiction prevention among its key objectives (Antoine, Balcaen et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in Flanders, the „Flemish people will live healthier in 2025“ action plan integrates health considerations into all policy domains, including addiction prevention. An interim evaluation in 2022 will inform adjustments and new emphases (Antoine, Balcaen et al., 2022).

In Belgium, The Federal Drug Note of 2001 and the Joint Declaration of the Interministerial Conference of Drugs of 2010 identify seven main objectives within the pillar of Prevention. These objectives include implementation of strategic measures specifically targeted at psychoactive drugs, discouraging driving under the influence of legal or illegal drugs, prevention of use of tobacco and alcohol, development of a prevention policy, application of a policy of dissuasion towards (non)users of legal and illegal drugs, development of social prevention at work and prevention of drug-related nuisances (Colman, Blomme et al., 2021).

In general, Belgium’s approach involves the integration of policies, especially health promotion and addiction prevention into broader health and social policies, at both regional and federal levels. While having serious problems, the decentralized governance structure allows for tailored approaches to addiction prevention and enforcement of substance control laws across different regions. In addition, efforts are supported by evidence-based strategies outlined in regional health plans like the PSSI in Brussels and the Horizon 2030 plan in the Walloon Region. Belgium also tries to ensure policies remain responsive and adaptable to emerging challenges. These practices highlight Belgium’s commitment to a comprehensive and adaptable approach to addiction prevention, aiming to safeguard public health and well-being across its diverse regions.

POLAND

Poland is among the European Union countries grappling with significant alcohol consumption issues. The European Drug Report 2023 indicates that 79.9% of adults (15-64 years old) and 77.8% of young adults (15-34 years old) reported alcohol consumption in the past year (EMCDDA, 2023). Studies highlight socio-economic factors influencing alcohol-related problems, with lower education levels correlating with increased mortality from alcoholic liver diseases (Pikala, Janik-Koncewicz et al., 2020). Men exhibit higher levels of alcohol consumption, particularly heavy episodic drinking, compared to women, and alcohol misuse is more prevalent among older, male, and less educated individuals (Zatońska, Psikus et al., 2021). Interestingly, while individuals with higher education consume more alcohol overall, they tend to prefer low-alcohol beverages (Zatońska, Psikus et al., 2021).

Regional disparities in alcohol consumption are evident, with urban areas showing higher rates of current drinkers, especially those consuming low-alcohol beverages, whereas rural areas exhibit higher consumption of high-alcohol beverages (Zatońska, Psikus et al., 2021).

In terms of cannabis use, approximately 22% of Polish teenagers have experimented with illicit substances, predominantly cannabis, according to a 2023 study (Engelhardt, Krzyżanowski et al., 2023). Among young adults (15-34 years old), 19.1% have used cannabis, with a higher prevalence among men (24.6%) compared to women (13.3%) (EMCDDA, 2023). Among the adult population (15-64 years old), cannabis use stands at 12.1%, with men reporting higher usage (16.4%) than women (7.7%) (EMCDDA, 2023).

Digital addiction is also a concern, with internet addiction reported among 0.45% of adolescents in urban areas and 2.9% in rural areas (Pawłowska, Zygo et al., 2015). However, a significant portion of adolescents in both settings show risk factors for developing internet addiction (Pawłowska, Zygo et al., 2015).

Mechanisms of Protection and Prevention – Young People

Poland has implemented targeted programs to address youth addiction issues. The „FreD Goes Net“ program, initiated in 2007 and operational in 50 cities, focuses on early intervention for drug and alcohol use among youth aged 14-21 through motivational dialogues (Rychert, Palczak et al., 2014). Similarly, the CANDIS program, launched in 2011, has demonstrated

effectiveness in cannabis use prevention among young people (Rychert, Palczak et al., 2014).

Policy Effectiveness – Criminalization and Beyond

In 2000, Poland amended its Counteracting Drug Addiction law to penalize drug possession, including for personal use, aiming to deter drug use and protect young people (Rychert, Palczak et al., 2014). This legislative change led to a significant increase in identified drug-related offences, reflecting a robust approach to law enforcement and prevention (Kuźmicz, 2010).

Mechanisms of Protection and Prevention – Whole Population

The National Health Programme 2021-2025 (NHP) in Poland outlines comprehensive objectives for addiction policy. It aims to reduce the physical and economic availability of alcohol, enhance early intervention in primary health care for risky alcohol consumption, and improve compliance with regulations governing alcohol production, distribution, and promotion (Narodowy Program Zdrowia na lata 2021-2025, 2021).

Regarding illegal drugs, the NHP emphasizes health education, addiction prevention (universal, selective, indicated), harm reduction, treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration for addicts and their families. Goals include reducing narcotic drug use and expanding therapeutic programs for cannabis users and opioid addicts across regions (Narodowy Program Zdrowia na lata 2021-2025, 2021).

Addressing behavioural addictions, including digital addiction, the NHP focuses on public awareness campaigns, educational resources, early intervention programs, and rehabilitation services for individuals at risk of internet and other behavioural addictions (Narodowy Program Zdrowia na lata 2021-2025, 2021).

In summary, Poland's approach integrates legislative measures, targeted interventions for youth, comprehensive health strategies, and public education campaigns to mitigate addiction's impact and promote public health and well-being.

CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic faces significant challenges concerning addiction patterns, particularly among minors and adolescents. Alcohol consumption is widespread among adults, with 88.3% of individuals aged 15-64 reporting alcohol use in the past year, according to the European Drug Report 2023 (EMCDDA, 2023). Among young adults aged 15-34, the rate remains high

at 84.7% (EMCDDA, 2023). These statistics highlight a pervasive societal issue with alcohol, often starting during adolescence.

Regarding illicit substances, cannabis is the most commonly used drug among Czech adolescents. Recent data indicates that 27% of Czech teenagers have experimented with cannabis, posing a significant challenge in substance use prevention among youth (EMCDDA, 2023). Despite legislative efforts, concerns persist about the availability and accessibility of cannabis.

Digital addiction, particularly internet and gaming addiction, is also on the rise among Czech adolescents. A study revealed that 4.5% of adolescents exhibit signs of internet addiction, with higher prevalence rates in urban areas compared to rural settings (Šmahel, Blinka et al., 2020). This underscores the need for comprehensive strategies addressing behavioral addictions alongside substance abuse.

The Czech Republic has implemented several policies aimed at protecting minors and preventing substance abuse. Strict laws regulate the sale and consumption of alcohol and tobacco, with the legal age for purchasing and consuming both set at 18 years. These laws are strictly enforced to prevent minors from accessing addictive substances.

Prevention efforts include comprehensive school-based programs designed to educate adolescents about the risks associated with substance abuse. These programs often incorporate interactive workshops, peer-to-peer education, and information campaigns to raise awareness among young people. Various support services and counselling centres across the country cater specifically to adolescents struggling with substance abuse, providing confidential counselling, rehabilitation programs, and family support to help individuals overcome addiction.

Community involvement plays a crucial role in prevention efforts through grassroots initiatives and community-based projects aimed at creating supportive environments and fostering healthy lifestyles among adolescents.

The Czech addiction policy for minors emphasizes several key aspects. Firstly, there is a strong emphasis on early intervention through school programs and community outreach to identify and address substance use at an early stage, critical in preventing long-term addiction issues. Secondly, the policy adopts a holistic approach by addressing both substance abuse and behavioural addictions like internet and gaming addiction,

recognizing the interconnected nature of various addictive behaviours among young people.

Similar to Belgium, the Czech Republic prioritizes evidence-based practices in addiction prevention and treatment, continuously evaluating programs and interventions for effectiveness and relevance to the local context. Lastly, parental and community involvement is pivotal in the Czech approach to prevention, ensuring a supportive environment for young people and reinforcing messages about responsible behaviour and substance use as outlined in key strategic documents.

In conclusion, the Czech Republic's approach to addressing addiction among minors and adolescents combines legislative measures, educational initiatives, community involvement, and evidence-based practices. By focusing on early intervention, providing holistic support, and integrating services, the country aims to mitigate the impact of addiction and promote healthy development among its youth population.

BEST PRACTICES

When comparing addiction patterns among minors and adolescents across Italy, France, Belgium, Poland, and the Czech Republic, both similarities and distinctions emerge. Alcohol and tobacco use are prevalent across all countries, reflecting common societal challenges. In Italy, for instance, high rates of alcohol consumption among young adults are accompanied by significant tobacco use, whereas in France, efforts like the PNLT have successfully reduced smoking rates among adolescents. Cannabis emerges as a widely used illicit drug, particularly notable in Italy and France, where it ranks prominently among young adults. Conversely, Belgium and the Czech Republic also report substantial cannabis use among adolescents, indicating a pan-European trend despite variations in prevalence rates and enforcement strategies.

When examining addiction prevention policies among minors and adolescents in Italy, France, Belgium, Poland, and the Czech Republic, several commonalities and distinctions become apparent. Across these countries, there is a shared commitment to enforcing strict legislative measures aimed at regulating the sale and consumption of addictive substances such as alcohol and tobacco to minors. The legal age for purchasing and consuming these substances is uniformly set at 18 years old, demonstrating a concerted effort to restrict access and curb early-onset substance use.

Educationally, all five nations implement comprehensive school-based programs designed to educate adolescents

about the risks associated with substance abuse. These initiatives typically incorporate interactive workshops, peer-to-peer education, and extensive information campaigns to raise awareness among young people about the consequences of drug use on their health and well-being.

Community involvement plays a pivotal role in addiction prevention efforts across these countries. Local communities are actively engaged in supporting adolescents through various programs and services that promote healthy lifestyles and provide counselling and support to those grappling with addiction issues. This grassroots approach helps create supportive environments that foster resilience and discourage risky behaviours.

However, despite these efforts, there remains a gap in the emphasis on harm reduction strategies specifically tailored for youth. While legislative measures and educational programs focus on prevention, there is less emphasis on harm reduction approaches that could mitigate risks for young people already engaged in substance use. Strategies like needle exchange programs, supervised injection sites, and overdose prevention initiatives, which are common in adult-focused harm reduction policies, are often lacking or not well-developed for youth populations across these countries.

In identifying best practices, a consensus emerges on the importance of adopting a holistic approach that integrates legislative measures, educational initiatives, community involvement, and evidence-based strategies. Effective policies are grounded in rigorous data collection and analysis to inform decision-making and ensure program efficacy over time. Early intervention through school-based interventions and community outreach is emphasized across these nations to identify and address substance use issues before they escalate, thereby mitigating long-term addiction problems among youth.

While each country adapts its approach to suit its specific context and challenges, the best practices in addiction prevention among minors and adolescents involve a coordinated effort that prioritizes comprehensive support systems, continuous evaluation, and responsiveness to evolving societal needs. By focusing on these principles, these nations aim to safeguard the well-being of their youth populations and reduce the prevalence of substance abuse in future generations. Integrating harm reduction strategies into these frameworks could further enhance the effectiveness of addiction prevention efforts by addressing the immediate health risks associated with substance use among youth.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC

– THE QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

The systemic review reveals that addiction patterns among minors and adolescents exhibit notable similarities across the countries studied. Alcohol and tobacco smoking remain prevalent substances of choice, reflecting pervasive societal norms and availability. Cannabis, while illegal in most contexts, consistently ranks among the top substances used by young people, indicating a shared pattern of experimentation and use. These findings underscore a pan-European trend in substance use behaviours among youth, highlighting the need for coordinated efforts in prevention and intervention.

While addiction patterns show alignment, there are variations in how these countries approach protection and prevention strategies. Common approaches include stringent legislative measures to restrict access to addictive substances, such as alcohol and tobacco, coupled with comprehensive school-based education programs and community involvement initiatives. However, differences emerge in the enforcement and scope of these policies, influenced by cultural norms and governance structures. Understanding minors' and adolescents' perspectives on these issues is crucial to tailoring effective prevention measures. Their insights into perceived risks, preferences for prevention strategies, and receptivity to harm reduction approaches can inform more targeted interventions that resonate with youth populations across diverse European contexts.

By incorporating youth perspectives, policymakers can enhance the relevance and impact of addiction prevention efforts, ensuring they are responsive to evolving societal challenges and the needs of young people. The case study aims to contribute to our knowledge by addressing two key questions:

A. How do minors perceive legal and illegal addictive substances and the internet?

When it comes to legal substances like alcohol and tobacco, the perceptions among participants in this study vary widely. Alcohol, for instance, is viewed both positively and negatively, depending on the context of its consumption. As expressed by one participant, *„I take it both positively and negatively, if only for the reason that there are people here who are used to going somewhere on Friday evening to sit down and have a beer with their friends...“* (Participant n. 1). The social aspect of alcohol consumption emerges prominently, contrasting between occasional social drinking and excessive, habitual use, which is viewed negatively due to its potential for addiction and health risks. This duality in perception underscores the complex attitudes towards alcohol among young people, influenced by their immediate social environments.

Similarly, tobacco smoking elicits predominantly negative perceptions among participants. Most describe

tobacco as harmful to physical health and associate it with addiction. However, some participants note the calming effects of tobacco, highlighting a nuanced perspective on its use. Despite varying opinions, a notable number of participants refrain from smoking, with observations indicating that their peers engage in alternative nicotine consumption methods like vaporizers. This diversity in perceptions reflects ongoing societal debates on tobacco use, its implications for public health, and the need for evidence-based debate regarding the health and social implications, as well as the reduction of risks and harm options.

Moving to light illegal drugs like cannabis, the attitudes among participants lean towards legalization, with many advocating for or not opposing its legal status. This contrasts sharply with perceptions of alcohol and tobacco, with some participants viewing cannabis as less harmful. This viewpoint aligns with broader societal shifts towards legalization, echoing contemporary discourse on cannabis as a potentially less harmful alternative to legal substances like alcohol and tobacco (Hopfer, 2015). Participants' experiences and observations within their social circles further illustrate the normalization of cannabis use among young adults, despite its illegal status.

In contrast, perceptions of illegal hard drugs are uniformly negative among participants, emphasizing the severe physical and psychological risks associated with such substances. The unanimous rejection of hard drugs reflects societal stigma and awareness campaigns highlighting their dangers. While most participants have never used hard drugs themselves, a few have encountered such substances indirectly through peers or personal experiences, underscoring the perceived threat posed by these drugs within their communities.

Shifting to digital addiction, participants generally perceive internet addiction as less severe compared to substance addictions, attributing this perception to the ubiquitous nature of the internet in modern life. However, one participant highlighted concerns over its pervasive influence, stating, *„I would honestly say that it's even worse because, on the one hand, there are treatment centres for addictions to alcohol, for example, and almost the entire society is on the Internet today...“* (Participant n. 7). This viewpoint suggests a nuanced understanding of digital addiction's impact, recognizing its pervasive nature despite differing in severity compared to substance dependencies. Participants' self-awareness regarding their own internet usage underscores a growing awareness of digital behaviours and their potential risks, reflecting evolving attitudes towards technology in contemporary youth culture.

B. Do minors perceive preventive and restrictive measures regarding addictive substances? What do they perceive? And how do these measures affect them? And how much?

Interviewed participants generally support the legality of alcohol and tobacco but express concerns about underage access. They perceive the legal age limit of 18 as appropriate, aligning with the onset of adulthood. However, they note widespread non-compliance with these regulations, citing instances where minors access these substances through older individuals or less stringent retail environments. Concerns about vaporizers among minors are also raised, although participants observe stricter enforcement of age limits in shops for these products compared to alcohol products and traditional tobacco products.

Most participants advocate for the legalization of cannabis, influenced by perceptions of its relative harmlessness compared to legal substances like alcohol and tobacco. This stance reflects broader societal shifts toward cannabis legalization, emphasizing regulation for purity and revenue generation. Participants' views on cannabis legalization highlight their belief in the potential benefits of regulatory frameworks over current prohibitionist policies.

Participants generally favor maintaining the illegality of hard drugs, citing concerns over their severe health impacts and societal consequences. Despite some advocating for legalization to enhance regulation and reduce criminality, the predominant view favors stringent control to prevent widespread harm and addiction.

Regarding internet use, participants lean towards restrictive measures for minors, suggesting age limits ranging from 12-13 to 18 years. They emphasize the challenges minors face in navigating online environments, including exposure to harmful content such as pornography and the risks of internet addiction. Participants stress the importance of effective enforcement of age restrictions and user authentication to safeguard minors from these dangers.

Participants report receiving education on addictive substances primarily focused on hard illegal drugs, with lesser coverage of alcohol and tobacco, and minimal discussion on cannabis and the internet. They critique the educational approach as overly focused on worst-case scenarios, advocating for more balanced and practical information that includes both positive and negative effects. This sentiment is encapsulated by one participant's view that education should openly discuss the nuanced impacts of substances, preparing minors for informed decision-making.

Participants note a lack of targeted campaigns tailored to minors regarding addictive substances and the internet. Existing campaigns are perceived as challenging to comprehend due to complex language and insufficient accessibility, hindering their effectiveness in reaching and informing young audiences effectively.

The analysis reveals nuanced perceptions among minors regarding preventive and restrictive measures related to addictive substances and the Internet. Participants generally support legal frameworks for substances like alcohol and tobacco, advocate for cannabis legalization, and favor stringent controls on hard drugs. They emphasize the importance of practical, balanced education that acknowledges both positive and negative aspects of substance use. Concerns about underage access, internet addiction, and the adequacy of educational campaigns highlight the need for tailored approaches that address minors' specific needs and comprehension levels effectively.

This comprehensive understanding underscores the importance of integrating minors' perspectives into policy-making and educational initiatives concerning addictive substances and the internet, ensuring that preventive measures are not only implemented but also relevant and impactful in their daily lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

– 11 PROPOSALS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION AND MEMBER STATES

These recommendations aim to strengthen regulatory frameworks, educational efforts, enforcement mechanisms, and public awareness initiatives to effectively address drug addiction among minors and adolescents. Emphasizing evidence-based policy making and harm reduction approaches is crucial to achieving sustainable and impactful outcomes in addiction prevention and treatment.

- 1. Promote Evidence-Based Policy Making:** Prioritize evidence-based approaches in developing and implementing policies on addiction prevention among minors and adolescents. Utilize research findings, best practices, and evaluations to inform policy decisions and ensure effectiveness.
- 2. Evaluate the Effectiveness of National Strategies:** Conduct systematic evaluations to assess the effectiveness of national strategies addressing drug addiction among minors and adolescents. Use findings to refine interventions, allocate resources efficiently, and achieve measurable outcomes.
- 3. Enhance Accessibility of Drug Addiction Information Online:** Improve the accessibility and interactivity of national websites to provide clear, user-friendly information on drug addiction issues. Enhance content presentation, update information regularly, and optimize navigation for easy access to resources.
- 4. Targeted Awareness Campaigns for Different Age Groups:** Develop targeted awareness campaigns tailored to various age groups and specific types of drugs. Focus on raising awareness, promoting prevention measures, and providing support resources to effectively address diverse demographic needs.
- 5. Enforce Age-Restricted Laws:** Strengthening the enforcement of age-restriction laws for legal substances is critical. The European Union should harmonize policies across all Member States to ensure rigorous adherence to age limits, particularly where enforcement may currently be lax. This entails robust monitoring of sales outlets and imposing significant penalties for non-compliance.
- 6. Conduct Further Legislation Study on Cannabis:** Conduct comprehensive research and analysis on current cannabis legislation across EU Member States. Collaborate closely between EU institutions and Member States to evaluate potential legal reforms. This should include thorough assessments of public health impacts, regulatory frameworks, and societal attitudes towards cannabis use.
- 7. Implement Stricter Age Restrictions for Internet Use:** Consider implementing stringent age restrictions on internet use to safeguard minors from harmful online content and behaviors. This should involve robust age verification methods and enhanced parental control options.
- 8. Enhance Substance Education for Adolescents:** Advocate for a more informative and practical approach to substance education in schools. Provide balanced information on risks and benefits, emphasizing long-term health consequences and responsible decision-making.
- 9. Explore Harm Reduction Approaches:** Consider integrating harm reduction principles into policies addressing addiction among minors. Explore strategies such as needle exchange programs, safe consumption sites, and overdose prevention measures to mitigate risks and promote health outcomes.
- 10. Expand Cooperation with the Private Sector:** Increase collaboration with private companies to enhance efforts in combating drug addiction among minors and adolescents. Develop joint initiatives for prevention, treatment, and support services tailored to youth needs.
- 11. Publish Annual Drug Prevalence Data:** Establish a regular practice of publishing comprehensive data on drug prevalence among minors, adolescents, and adults. Share this data with relevant stakeholders including the EMCDDA to support evidence-based policymaking and international comparisons.

ANNEX

– RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

ANALYTICAL METHODS

This study combines the systematic review method, which revises the results of previous studies on the given topic, and the qualitative case study method - when the subject of this case study is the case of the Czech Republic. Specifically, it is an exploratory case study, that aims to examine how minors perceive the legal and illegal addictive substances and the internet and the effects of policies in the Czech Republic, whether minors register them, and what effects these policies have. The exploratory case study was conducted based on a systematic review. Interviews were conducted semistructured and were coded by open coding method.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

1. *What are the patterns of addiction among minors in selected states and the Czech Republic?*
2. *What is the prevalence of addiction among minors in selected states and the Czech Republic?*
3. *How, and whether, do the selected states and the Czech Republic react to these formulas?*
4. *What are the mechanisms of protection and prevention of addictions among minors in selected states and the Czech Republic?*
5. *What is the level of effectiveness of policies aimed at young people in selected states and the Czech Republic?*
6. *What are the protection and prevention mechanisms for the population in selected states and the Czech Republic?*
7. *Are there any effects of this policy on minors with addictions?*

CASE STUDY

1. *How do minors perceive legal and illegal addictive substances and the internet?*
2. *Do minors perceive preventive and restrictive measures regarding addictive substances? What do they perceive? And how do these measures affect them? And how much?*

PARTICIPANTS AND INTERVIEWS

Participants of this study were 8 adolescents and minors, ranging from the age of 16 to the age of 18. The study participants were selected based on a combination of selection based on availability and intentional selection of participants based on the required criteria, which were age, living in the Czech Republic in various areas of the Czech Republic mixing participants from villages, districts towns, and county seats in multiple districts.

These criteria enabled the following selection of respondents:

- *Participant one, female, age 17, from Pardubice, Pardubický region*
- *Participant two, female, age 16, from Meziměstí, Královeský region*
- *Participant three, female, age 16, from Lukavice, Královeský region*
- *Participant four, male, age 17, from Frýdek Místek, Moravskoslezský region*
- *Participant five, male, age 17, from Kroměříž, Zlínský region*
- *Participant six, male, age 17, from Ostrava, Moravskoslezský region*
- *Participant seven, female, age 18, from Rychnov nad Kněžnou, Královeský region*
- *Participant eight, male, age 17, from Volary, Jihočeský region*

ANALYSIS METHOD

The exploratory case study analysis was conducted using the open coding method. The codes were sorted into the following categories:

- personal experience with the substance of tobacco and alcohol, the experience of their peer's usage of tobacco and alcohol, reasons for personal use of tobacco and alcohol, attitude towards tobacco and alcohol, negative attitude towards restriction of tobacco and alcohol, reasons for negative attitude towards restriction, positive attitude towards restriction of tobacco and alcohol, reasons for positive attitude towards restriction, participant education on topics of usage of tobacco and alcohol in school by external educational subjects, the attitude towards this education, participant education on topics of usage of tobacco and alcohol in school by school, the attitude towards this education.
- personal experience with the substance of cannabis, the experience of their peer's usage of cannabis, reasons for personal use of cannabis, attitude towards cannabis, negative attitude towards restriction of cannabis, reasons for negative attitude towards restriction, positive attitude towards restriction of cannabis, reasons for positive attitude towards restriction, participant education on topics of usage of cannabis in school by external educational subjects, the attitude towards this education, participant education on topics of usage of cannabis in school by school, the attitude towards this education.
- personal experience with the substance of illegal hard drugs, the experience of their peer's usage of illegal hard drugs, reasons for personal use of illegal hard drugs, attitude towards illegal hard drugs, negative attitude towards restriction of illegal hard drugs, reasons for negative attitude towards restriction, positive attitude towards restriction of illegal hard drugs, reasons for positive attitude towards restriction, participant education on topics of usage of illegal hard drugs in school by external educational subjects, the attitude towards this education, participant education on topics of usage of illegal hard drugs in school by school, the attitude towards this education.
- personal definition of addiction to the internet, personal experience with the internet and with addiction on the internet, the experience of their peer's usage of the internet, reasons for personal use of the internet, attitude towards internet, negative attitude towards restriction of internet, reasons for negative attitude towards restriction, positive attitude towards restriction of internet, reasons for positive attitude towards restriction, participant education on topics of usage of internet in school by external educational subjects, the attitude towards this education, participant education on topics of usage of internet in school by school, the attitude towards this education.

Also, the analysis contained the categories of experience with campaigns against using or against addiction to named substances and the Internet, the presence of psychological help in school, and the presence of trust of the participant toward this psychological help overall and concerning the addiction problematics.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *What is your stance on the use of alcohol and tobacco? Can you describe your experiences or opinions?*
2. *How do you think alcohol and tobacco affect young people around you?*
3. *What is your opinion on the use of light illegal drugs, such as cannabis?*
4. *What is your view on hard drugs? In what ways do you think addiction to hard drugs, such as cocaine, differs from addiction to legal or lighter drugs?*
5. *How would you define internet addiction? It is something relatively new but also a part of our lives. How would you define internet addiction? What is your stance on it? Is it as bad as addiction to substances?*
6. *How does spending time on the internet affect you and your friends? Do you see it as a problem?*
7. *In the Czech Republic, legal drugs include tobacco and alcohol, while everything else is illegal. What do you think about this distinction? Should it be different, or is it fine as it is? Or should we legalize some other substances? Or make illegal alcohol and tobacco?*
8. *You can buy alcohol and cigarettes or vape only from the age of 18. What do you think about this?*
9. *People often break this rule and buy these substances earlier. What do you think about that? What would have to be done to prevent people from breaking this rule? Enforce stronger regulations? Or, on the contrary, should we respond by loosening the rules and lowering the legal age?*
10. *Addiction can also occur on the internet; young people spend a lot of time on social media. There are no restrictions on its use. What do you think about that? Do you see it as problematic that our generation spends much time online?*
11. *The Czech Republic is a country where a lot of alcohol is consumed, it is considered a tradition. How do you perceive this tradition?*
12. *The same can be said about smoking and vaping tobacco and nicotine. How do you perceive this?*
13. *Have you attended any school lectures that talked about drugs, legal addictive substances, or the internet? Who conducted these lectures?*
14. *Did you find them enriching or useful? Was such a lecture beneficial for you? If not, what did you think was missing? What do you generally feel is lacking from the school's side on this topic?*
15. *Did you discuss drugs or internet addiction or alcohol and tobacco in any class, such as biology or civics? Did you find it enriching or useful? Was it beneficial for you? If not, what did you think was missing? What should be done differently? What do you feel would practically help you more?*
16. *Did you receive any materials or recommendations on where to seek help if you had problems with any addictive substance or needed more information?*
17. *Do you have the possibility to talk to a school counsellor or psychologist if you start having problems with drinking, for example? Do you think this person is trustworthy and capable of helping with addiction issues? Is this person knowledgeable about addictive substances and internet addiction?*
18. *Have you noticed any external campaigns warning against the use of addictive substances or the internet?*
19. *Do you think the Czech Republic is doing enough to help people with addictions? What about the education system?*

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