

DRUGS AND PUBLIC POLICIES: CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS AND OPINIONS, 1999-2002

For the second time since 1999, the EROPP¹ general population survey provides an opportunity to review the perceptions and opinions of the French population on the drugs and public actions that affect them. More than 2 000 people aged between 15 and 75, selected by the quota method, were thus interviewed by telephone at home and invited to give their point of view by answering a questionnaire lasting about twenty minutes. The main subjects tackled were the perceptions of the dangerousness of psychoactive substances, the fears they arouse and opinions on public policy measures actually in place or being considered. A comparison of these first two ERROP exercises highlights a number of trends which, where possible, have been positioned in relation to the results of surveys carried out before the end of the 1990s.

SOME ELEMENTS OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE ON PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

In 2002, a little over six out of ten respondents stated that they feel informed about drugs (which is slightly more than in 1999 where the figure was 57.9%). However, only one in ten considered themselves to be very well informed. This is a more of a masculine feeling (two-thirds of men consider themselves to be well informed whereas this is the case with less than 57% of women) and varies relatively little with age.

As in 1999, 70.4% knew that doctors are authorised to prescribe substitution products, but knowledge of the sale of syringes without prescription has dropped somewhat (moving from 68.4% to 63.8% in three years). This drop undoubtedly conveys the increasingly widespread use of this practice, which has been receiving less media coverage for some years. Moreover, 5.1% of the respondents stated that they had read the “Know more, risk less” booklet, which represents around 2 million people. The same proportion stated that they had been in possession of it (but had not read it) and 13.9% had heard of it, namely around a quarter of the French population. When the respondents were asked to estimate how many people, in France today, had ever smoked cannabis in their life, their estimates were in general above the figures published recently on the subject: if one takes as a reference the figure of around 20% of 15-75 year-olds being experimenters, given in the “Know more risk less” booklet, it appears that seven out of ten respondents were above this threshold.

In response to the question “What are the main drugs you know about, even if only by name?”, a large majority (96.3%) of the respondents mentioned at least one drug spontaneously. On average, they gave 3.8 products. The “reputation” of cannabis, which remains the product mentioned most frequently, has risen, as has that of heroin, opium and cocaine, which had fallen between 1997 and 1999. The reputation of LSD is very similar between the two surveys, whereas that of ecstasy, which had increased greatly between 1999 and 1997, is stagnating. As in 1999, and without the change being significant, tobacco and alcohol are in 6th and 7th places respectively, each mentioned by around one respondent in five.

Products mentioned spontaneously as drugs by at least 5% of the respondents

Substance	Publimétrie 1997 n = 1 002	OFDT 1999 n = 2 002	OFDT 2002 n = 2 009
Cannabis	67 %	78.0 %	82.0 %
Cocaine	56 %	53.7 %	59.7 %
Heroin	40 %	44.9 %	48.1 %
Ecstasy	29 %	39.1 %	37.4 %

¹ *Enquête sur les Représentations, Opinions et Perceptions sur les Psychotropes* [Survey on representations, opinions and perceptions on psychotropic drugs]

LSD	22 %	26.7 %	26.6 %
Tobacco	17 %	20.8 %	19.7 %
Alcohol	14 %	20.3 %	18.8 %
Crack	-	12.2 %	13.4 %
Opium and other opiates	7 %	7.6 %	10.0 %
Morphine	7 %	7.5 %	5.4 %
Does not know any product	14 %	6.2 %	3.7 %

Sources: Publimétrie 1997; EROPP 1999 / 2002, OFDT.

It should be noted that this “classification” is not the same as the list of products used most often in France: thus, inhalants, magic mushrooms and psychotropic medicines (prescribed or otherwise) were rarely mentioned by the respondents, but are however used more often by the population than products such as ecstasy, crack or even opium.

If one of their close relations had problems with using drugs, nearly seven out of ten respondents would go to a doctor and nearly a quarter to a specialist organisation. The family circle and particularly the circle of friends was mentioned much less often, and only a minority of people responded that they would go directly to the person who had a drug problem (8.2%). Barely 2% would go to the police authorities.

AN INCREASED PERCEPTION OF THE DANGEROUSNESS OF LICIT DRUGS

For each of the six psychoactive products presented in the table below, the respondent was asked whether he considered it to be dangerous as soon as it is tried, as soon as it is taken from time to time, as soon as it is taken every day, or whether it was never a danger to health. This line of questioning shows that, in 2002, French people are expressing harsher opinions towards licit substances than in 1999. This trend can be seen firstly through a fall in the dangerousness thresholds for daily use: on average, alcohol is considered dangerous after 3.0 glasses per day (as opposed to 3.6 in 1999), and tobacco after 10.0 cigarettes per day (as opposed to 11.4 in 1999). Next, this trend is conveyed by an increased perception of the dangers of occasional use or experimentation: 14.5% of the respondents (as opposed to 8.5% in 1999) consider that occasional alcohol consumption can be dangerous, 24.7% (as opposed to 20.7%) consider that tobacco is dangerous as soon as it is tried. Moreover, a large portion of the population is convinced that tobacco (61.7%) and alcohol abuse (70.4%) represent greater dangers for society than the use of illicit substances.

Perceived dangerousness threshold of the various products (% in columns)

	alcohol	tobacco	cannabis	ecstasy	cocaine	heroin
Daily use	77.2 %	72.5 %	32.5 %	5.9 %	8.0 %	5.5 %
Weekly use	--	--	--	3.0 %	--	--
Quantity on a single occasion	14.5 %	0.8 %	--	3.0 %	--	--
Occasional use	0.5 %	0.4 %	11.9 %	8.0 %	8.1 %	5.7 %
As soon as one tries it	4.8 %	24.9 %	50.8 %	78.6 %	82.1 %	87.4 %
It is never dangerous	0.0 %	0.0 %	2.8 %	0.2 %	0.1 %	0.0 %
Does not know the product	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	3.3 %	0.5 %	0.6 %
Don't know, other, won't say	0.3 %	1.4 %	2.0 %	0.9 %	0.8 %	0.8 %

Source: EROPP 2002, OFDT.

The proportion of people who consider that cannabis is not dangerous as soon as it is taken for the first time, but only after daily use, has increased (32.9% as opposed to 28.1%). However, half the population continue to think that experimenting with it is already dangerous (51.3% in 1999 as opposed to 50.3% in 2002). In other words, cannabis is considered a little less dangerous by the fringe of the population which was already the least hostile to it, but, overall, the perception of the dangerousness of this product remains unchanged.

As in 1999, seven out of ten individuals are of the opinion that the use of cannabis could lead subsequently to the use of more dangerous products (i.e. the escalation theory). However, the proportion of people *who totally agree* with this idea has reduced by a little over three points in three years.

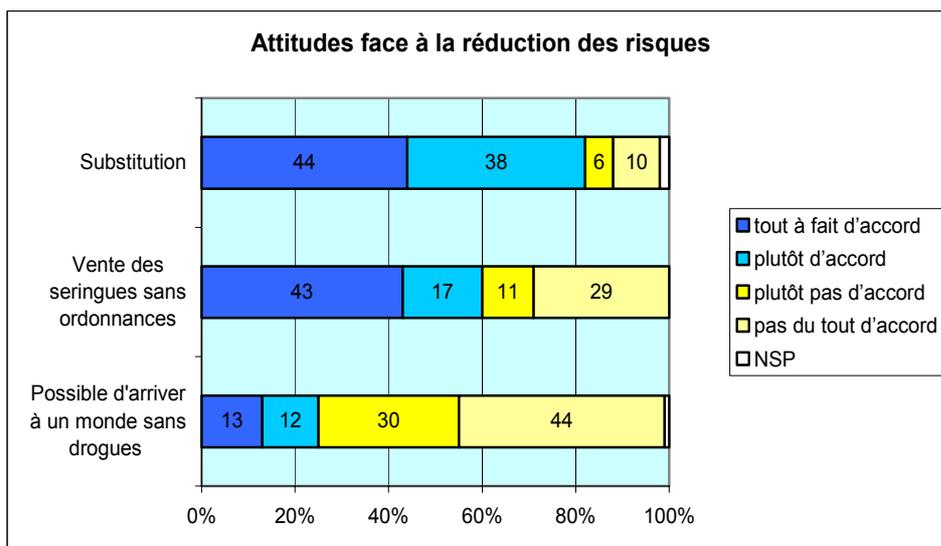
Heroin and, to almost the same extent, cocaine are associated with an immediate danger by a very large majority (around 85% of the population). The proportion of individuals who consider that ecstasy is dangerous as soon as it is tried has increased, moving from 75.6% to 78.6%, whereas in the same period, the proportion of people who said they were not aware of the substance has decreased, moving from 4.9% to 3.3%. The product considered by French people to be the most dangerous is still heroin. In fact, 42.6% put it at the top of the list, ahead of ecstasy (21.4%) and cocaine (19.3%), these two products appearing the opposite way round to how they were observed in 1999, followed by alcohol (6.9%) and tobacco (3.4%). Cannabis comes last, with only 2.0% of those interviewed considering it to be the most dangerous product, this proportion having dropped since 1999 (it stood at 3.4% then).

In terms of dependence, between tobacco, cannabis and alcohol, the product which is the hardest to go without is tobacco, ahead of alcohol then cannabis. Asked finally about the social dangerousness of the use of psychoactive substances, 70.4% of French people consider that alcohol abuse represents a greater danger for society than the use of illicit substances, this percentage moving to 61.7%, when it is tobacco that is compared with illicit drugs.

FAIRLY WIDE SUPPORT FOR CURRENT PUBLIC POLICIES

The respondents were also asked for their opinion on assessments of certain proposals and certain elements of current public policy as regards drugs: in order not to make the questionnaire too cumbersome, these focused solely on two of the most well known substances, cannabis and heroin. This involved in particular seeing the extent to which the respondents differentiated between these two substances from the point of view of the action of the public authorities.

In 2002, as in 1999, a large majority of the respondents adhered to the acknowledgement which underpins the risk reduction policy: nearly three-quarters did not think that it is possible to achieve a drug-free world (72.6% in 1999, 74.4% in 2002). Support for the existing measures proved to be equally sound: in 2002, 82.1% of the respondents were in favour of the prescription of substitution products (80.8% in 1999), whereas 59.9% were in favour of the free sale of syringes (63.0% in 1999).



Source: EROPP 2002, OFDT.

The consensus as regards the obligation of care for users of illicit drugs who undergo police questioning also remains very strong (91% in favour in the two surveys), but this result undoubtedly reflects two contrasting attitudes, with some people appreciating its coercive aspect and others considering it to be a means of avoiding legal proceedings by favouring the therapeutic alternative. Regarding cannabis in particular, the consensus is lower (77.0% in favour in 2002), perhaps because the therapeutic benefit for the user is regarded as less obvious.

The respondents are also still attached to the prohibitive measures, even if a clear distinction is made between cannabis and heroin. In 2002, as in 1999, 65% said that they were against authorising the use of cannabis under certain conditions and 99% were against authorising the use of heroin under certain conditions. However, there is a clear increase in the proportion who say that they are in favour of the free sale of cannabis: 24% in 2002 as opposed to 17% in 1999. This change is happening partly as a result of the increasingly widespread use of cannabis (+10 points among those who have used it previously), but not only because of this: among those who abstain, the increase in the proportion of individuals in favour of the free sale of cannabis is also appreciable (+ 4 points). The ban on using it is considered an attack on individual liberty by only 13.8% of the respondents in the case of heroin, and 31.0% in the case of cannabis.

Opinions on the appropriateness and the legitimacy of banning the use of cannabis and heroin:

	totally agree	mainly agree	sub-total agree	mainly disagree	totally disagree	sub-total disagree	don't know
The use of cannabis could be authorised under certain conditions	13.6 %	20.9 %	34 %	13.4 %	51.8 %	65 %	1 %
The use of heroin could be authorised under certain conditions	6.4 %	5.4 %	12 %	10.2 %	77.7 %	88 %	0 %
The ban on cannabis use is an attack on individual liberty	12.8 %	18.2 %	31 %	20.7 %	47.3 %	68 %	1 %
The ban on heroin use is an attack on individual liberty	6.4 %	7.4 %	14 %	14.5 %	70.5 %	85 %	1 %

The percentages presented are in rows (total of each row = 100%)

Source: EROPP 2002, OFDT.

Conversely, when the use of illicit drugs is envisaged for therapeutic purposes and under medical control, the opinions expressed are very different: half the respondents said that they were in favour of heroin being issued under medical control, in 2002 as in 1999 (50.8% and 52.9% respectively), men more than women. Age appears to make a difference, with the youngest and the oldest being less in

favour of it. A large majority, clearly on the increase, said that they were in favour of the medical prescription of cannabis to certain seriously ill people (67.4% in 1999, 74.6% in 2002). More men than women said that they were in favour of this.

Barely one person in twenty (4.7%) said that they were opposed to the creation of care centres for drug addicts in consultation with local partners. However, this proportion reached 21.5% if this involved opening such a centre in their own district.

Finally, whether for alcohol, tobacco or even for the other drugs, more than nine out of ten respondents considered the information given out in schools to be useful. The consensus that emerges, therefore, on the usefulness of giving information to young people is even stronger than that observed three years ago (94.9% as opposed to 85.7% in 1999), which does not prevent three-quarters of the population from considering the information given out in schools to be insufficient, whereas less than one person in six see a danger in this.

PERCEPTIONS HIGHLY STRUCTURED BY THE USE OF PRODUCTS AND THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION

This survey is also an opportunity to update the knowledge on the levels of drug use in the general adult population. Thus, a little less than half of 15-75 year-olds stated that they had previously been offered cannabis, a little less than a quarter had previously tried it and one in twelve had used in during the past twelve months. The other illicit drugs had been tried by less than 5% of 15-75 year-olds. The use of illicit drugs, which remains a clearly more male behaviour, involves adolescents and young adults in particular.

Tobacco and alcohol remain the most frequently used psychoactive substances in France: one third of 15-75 year-olds stated that they are currently smokers and 28.5% are daily smokers (31.4% among men and 25.8% among women), these prevalences clearly diminishing with age. Less than one fifth of French people consume alcohol daily, men (25.1%) clearly more frequently than women (10.4%), with this practice being more common among older people, conveying in particular a generation effect. Moreover, a quarter of the sample stated that they had been drunk at least once during the past twelve months.

The relationship with each product does, of course, influence the representations: for example, those who experiment with cannabis have a more tolerant view of this product and those who consume alcohol and tobacco tend to set higher dangerousness thresholds for these products. Among the associated factors considered in this survey, it is the proximity with cannabis and in particular the fact of having previously used it which seems to influence opinions most strongly. The only exceptions to this are very widely shared opinions, such as the perception of the dangerousness of products such as heroin, cocaine or ecstasy, or the opinion in favour of banning the use of heroin..

The level of education and, to a lesser extent, age emerge equally strongly. More highly educated individuals are thus more inclined to make a distinction between cannabis and the other illicit products in terms of dangerousness, and to have a pragmatic view of the drug. This is expressed in general opinions as the fact of not believing that a drug-free world is possible, or of spontaneously mentioning alcohol and tobacco among the drugs, or of fully supporting risk reduction measures. More highly educated individuals are also more favourable towards certain liberal proposals concerning the legal status of cannabis. As for age, this in general divides the older people, who are less tolerant towards cannabis, from the younger people. Women seem more worried than men about certain specific topics: they more frequently mention drugs as a subject of concern, they more frequently support the escalation theory and more willingly reject the liberal measures concerning cannabis. However, as a general rule, the sex and above all the size of the urban area in which they live appear to make little

difference insofar as their effect, where it exists, very often disappears or becomes indistinct under the influence of the proximity of cannabis or the level of education.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, since the beginning of the 1990s, the risk reduction policy, in both its principle and its concrete measures, seems to be increasingly accepted by French people. In the same period, a large majority of the population remains attached to the ban on the use of narcotics, for cannabis and in particular for heroin, with their opinion still being subject to the practicalities of this use: it is accepted much more widely when it is envisaged for therapeutic purposes and under medical control.

The opinions expressed with regard to licit drugs (here mainly alcohol and tobacco) seem increasingly critical: on the one hand the usage thresholds above which alcohol and tobacco are considered a danger to health are tending to fall, and, on the other, the majority of the respondents reckon that these two products pose more problems to society than the illicit drugs, and that their addictive power is greater than that of cannabis. It is therefore not surprising that eight out of ten French people say that today they are in favour of a ban on the sale of tobacco to minors.

These changes increasingly highlight the ambiguous status of cannabis: although the majority of the population remain in favour of a ban on its use, it is perceived as much less dangerous than the other illicit drugs, and now also tends, to a certain extent, to be perceived as less dangerous than tobacco and alcohol.

Methodological indicators:

This survey, finalised by the OFDT, was carried out by telephone (CATI² system) by the SOFRES polling institute. It is based on a quota³ sample of 2009 people aged from 15 to 75, who are representative of the population of metropolitan France. This representativeness was ensured by carrying out an adjustment by calibration of the marginal totals on the data produced by the 1999 population Census updated by the 2000 INSEE employment survey. To measure the changes between 1999 and 2000, the comparisons between the two EROPP surveys focus on data adjusted in an identical manner in both surveys, in accordance with the calibration carried out in 1999 (on the basis of the 1990 population Census updated by the 1996 INSEE employment survey). All the changes presented in this document are significant at the 0.05 threshold at least.

Another sample comprising 201 individuals who have a mobile telephone but no fixed line was also interviewed, in order to try to evaluate the impact of such a gap in the polling base. The results for these individuals led to an exploratory study presented in a chapter of the report.

The objective of this survey is to update the value judgements formed by the individuals around questions concerning the use of drugs and drug addiction. It is a means of monitoring opinions on public policy and the measures to be taken as regards the perceptions of the products and risks. The questions focus on four quite distinct illicit products and three licit products: the use of generic terms (drugs, drug addiction) and expressions such as “hard drug” or “soft drug” was avoided in order to differentiate the representations of the products and put them into perspective.

EROPP 2002 constitutes the second exercise in monitoring the trends in the beliefs and opinions of French people as regards drugs, describing the diversity of these perceptions and reporting some of the

² Computer Assisted Telephone Interview

³ The criteria used for the quotas are the sex, the age, the profession of the reference person in the household, the region and the category of urban area.

impacts of the policy followed in this regard. The report presents the results of this survey in their entirety, sometimes putting them into perspective with the earlier surveys and with the political decisions and recent events in the media. Like any quantitative survey, EROPP allows the major opinion trends to be observed but never presents an individual point of view in all its detail. The use of field observations during the interviews or comments expressed by the researchers can lead, throughout the analysis carried out in the report, to the relativisation of the statistical indicators presented, with certain respondents sometimes feeling incapable of answering, or even limited by the small number of possible responses implied by the closed question.

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