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Facts and figures

Drugs and Drug Addictions, perceptions and opinions in 1999:

First Results

The French population perceptions and opinions concerning drugs and drug addiction have been studied through a general population survey carried out in April 1999. Selected by the quota method, 2 002 individuals from 15 to 75 years-old have been phoned and asked to give their viewpoints about different suggestions, during an interview lasting around twenty minutes. Once analyzed, these data brought out a number of tendencies, which were compared with the results of previous surveys, each time it was possible. As the full survey will be published at the beginning of the year 2000, only the first results are presented here.

Viewing psychoactive substances

- Substances stated as drugs

About 95% of those interviewed spontaneously state at least one drug. The individuals polled name on average 3,7 substances, the most stated one being cannabis (78%). Cocaine (54%), heroin (45%), ecstasy (39%; +10% when compared with 1997 figures), LSD (27%), tobacco (21%), alcohol (20%) and crack (12%) are following then. All other substances are named by less than 10% of the respondents. A more and more important minority spontaneously state alcohol as belonging to drugs (20% in 1999 versus 14% in 1997). This can be probably due to press campaigns taking up the Roques report conclusions about the dangerousness of substances putting alcohol on the same level as heroin. The increase of spontaneous statements concerning tobacco proves weaker (21% in 1999 versus 17% in 1997). However, a survey carried out by CFES in 1993 showed that when explicitly suggested, alcohol and tobacco are rather considered as drugs by a rather massive majority (84% and 77% respectively).

Spontaneously naming alcohol or tobacco as belonging to drugs is more frequent among the 36-64 year-olds, individuals having already tested cannabis, and those considering themselves well-informed about drugs. Being graduate is also a very significant factor, individuals having a lesser degree than baccalauréat or professional baccalauréat naming those substances as drugs less often than others.

- Perception of the dangerousness for health

In order to appreciate that perception for different psychoactive substances, the interviewed were asked for each substance if it was considered dangerous as soon as tried, when taken from time to time, when taken everyday, or if it was never harmful for health. Heroin, and cocaine to a lesser extent, are associated with immediate danger for a high majority of the polled (85%). Ecstasy experimentation proves less perceived as an immediate danger (76%), yet 5% of the interviewed declare they do not know that substance.

For more than a half of the polled, cannabis is judged dangerous at first try. One third considers regular use harmless, and 5% of the respondents think it is never risky, which is never the case for any other substance whatsoever (apart from

“nerves-related medicines” with 2%). On that scale, 41% consider cannabis less dangerous than heroin, whereas only 2% think the opposite.

The dangerousness threshold is then dependent upon the substances: if cocaine, heroin, or ecstasy are perceived as harmful from the first take onwards, specific differences are to be picked out for the other substances stated. Furthermore, the addiction risk is judged stronger for heroin and cocaine (56% and 58% respectively think it does exist as soon as the substance is experimented) than for cannabis (38%).

As for tobacco and alcohol, the answers differ much from those obtained for other substances, more than three-quarters of the French considering they are harmful for health when used daily in numbers of cigarettes or glasses. For 21% of the polled, tobacco use appears dangerous from the experimentation onwards, yet only 6% think so for alcohol. On average, the health-related risk stands from 9 daily cigarettes and 4 daily glasses respectively onwards. During the interviews, the success of the slogan, “Un verre ça va, trois verres bonjour les dégâts !” (“One glass is OK, three glasses, what a mess!”) has been noticed, the polled frequently stating it as a marker to fix the threshold to 2 or 3 glasses. Despite the differences due to varying modes of consumption for alcohol and tobacco, a consensus is emerging all the same for alcohol, the most often stated threshold of dangerousness being 3 glasses a day; whereas when it comes to tobacco, the notion of health-related risk seems to be more heterogeneous (12% of the interviewed state 5 cigarettes, 21% half a packet, 18% a packet). That result, which helps evaluating the impact of media campaigns in terms of threshold for tobacco, gives food for thought when it comes to tobacco, and maybe even more to illicit drugs.

When organizing the substances into a **hierarchy** according to their perceived dangerousness (among heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and “nerves-related medicines”), a high proportion of the interviewed name heroin (41%), cocaine, and ecstasy to complete the group of the most frequently stated substances, with 20% and 17% respectively. As for seldom stated substances, alcohol (6%), cannabis (3%), and tobacco (2%) can be noticed. Individuals having been offered or having already used cannabis more frequently name alcohol or heroin as the most dangerous substance. Age also appears to be significant, the 18-24 year-olds stating heroin, whereas the youngest and the oldest name cocaine or cannabis comparatively more often. Seventy percent of the respondents consider that cannabis use leads to consuming more dangerous substances. Only 13% rather disagree and 14% do not agree at all. Nevertheless, the notion of escalation appears less strongly settled in public opinion as it was in 1992, when a similar question was asked in a survey among the 12-44 year-olds.

The questions alluding to testing various psychoactive substances also uncover a whole range of **fears** among the polled.

The level of substances-related fear globally appears to be very high, above 80% for all illicit drugs other than cannabis. However, a distinction can also be made when it comes to individuals answering “much fearful” among those declaring to be fearful. Six groups of substances can then be isolated:

- Substances whose experimentation stands in the “much fearful” category for more than a half of the polled (especially heroin, but ecstasy, crack, cocaine, and LSD as well),

- Substances whose experimentation generates a lesser fear (substances to inhale, hallucinogenic mushrooms),
- Substances associated with performing feats (amphetamines, stimulants) which have a balanced proportion of “much fearful” and “rather fearful” around 40%,
- Cannabis whose “just to taste it” use worries two-thirds of the French, with around 40% of “much fearful” and a quarter of “rather fearful”.
- “Nerves-related medicines” which individuals are frequently enough “rather fearful” of yet a few are “much fearful” of.

Would you be fearful of using even once:

Heroin
Ecstasy
Crack
Substances to inhale
LSD
Hallucinogenic mushrooms
Stimulants
Cannabis or haschisch
Nerves-related medicines
Tobacco
Alcohol

Much fearful
Rather fearful

Source: OFDT 1999

Public policies concerning drugs and drug addictions at stake

Meanwhile they were asked about their perceptions of drugs, evaluations upon current public policies and the drug addiction-related policy to be carried out were suggested to the interviewed. So that the questionnaire would not be too heavy, these assessments were only referring to two substances among the best-known ones: cannabis and heroin. The point was to discover to what extent the polled would make the difference between one substance and the other, as far as public policies were concerned.

Viewpoints about the efficiency of prohibiting use show rather the same proportion of favourable and unfavourable assessments, whether heroin or cannabis is concerned. On the other hand, only one-third of the French regard this prohibition as prejudicial to an individual’s rights, when it comes to cannabis, and one-quarter when it comes to heroin. The difference between both substances appear to be clearer here. Then a majority of French consider lawful the prohibition of use, yet comparatively inefficient.

Opinions on the efficiency
and the lawfulness of the
prohibition of cannabis

totally rather **sub-total**
agree agree **agree**

rather totally **sub-total**
disagree disagree

Don

	disagree	know							
and heroin use:									
prohibiting cannabis use helps preventing people from using it	22	24	47		24	28	52		1
prohibiting heroin use helps preventing people from using it	27	24	51		23	25	48		1
prohibiting cannabis use is prejudicial to an individual's right to dispose of his/her body		13	20	33		26	39	65	2
prohibiting heroin use is prejudicial to an individual's right to dispose of his/her body		12	14	26		27	45	72	2

Percentages linearly presented (each line amount to 100)
OFDT 1999

Source:

Among alternative measures concerning the present situation, a **regulation** (in terms of a permission of use, under such conditions as prohibition to individuals under age and before driving) for cannabis and heroin, and the legalization (no sales restriction) of cannabis. In such a context, the distinction between cannabis and heroin proves the clearest. Nearly one individual out of two declares he/she "totally disagrees" with cannabis regulation, versus three out of four when heroin is concerned. About one-third agree with permission of cannabis use under some conditions, whereas only 12% think so when it comes to heroin.

Opinions on regulation

Don't know
Legalization
Permission under some conditions
Prohibition

Cannabis Heroin Tobacco sales to minors
Source: OFDT 1999

N.B.: Questions referring to heroin unrestricted sales and tobacco prohibition were not asked. Furthermore, as far as cannabis was concerned, it must be noticed that a low proportion (2% of the whole sampling) of individuals agree with legalization yet disagree with permission under some conditions.

Nearly two-thirds of the French strongly oppose cannabis **legalization**, and 17% only agree with it. When compared with surveys carried out in the nineties, it reveals a tendency to an increasing acceptance of the notion of cannabis sold without restriction⁽¹⁾, even though it remains a minority against general opinion regarding it as an incentive to use. On the other hand, more than a half (57%) of the individuals, who agree with permission under some conditions, disagree with legalization. The major claim of people wishing the law to be revised is then regulation but not an unrestricted sale of cannabis.

A **court-ordered treatment when a drug user has been arrested** appears to be widely accepted (39% regard it as “a very good decision”, and more than a half “a rather good decision”). Only one individual out of ten declares to disagree with it. One-quarter of the French only approve of the statement according to which: “a situation with nobody taking drugs can be reached”, the most important proportion (41%) claiming to totally disagree with it. Men more often “totally disagree” than women, and that disagreement linearly decreases according to age.

At the same time, a majority of French favour the notion of limiting the risks taken by users. Resorting to **substitutes**, presented as prescribed by doctors and replacing heroin effects, is judged favourably by 81% of the French. The knowledge of substitute programmes goes together with that agreement: 53% of the individuals who know that doctors can prescribe substitutes are totally agree with them, versus only 25% of those who do not know. The **sale of syringes without prescription** do not stand on the same level of acceptance (63% of agreements). As seen previously, the level of acceptance is higher among individuals being informed of such a practice.

Attitudes facing risk reduction policies

Totally agree
Rather agree
Rather disagree
Totally disagree
Don't know

Substitutes
Cannabis on prescription
Syringes sold without prescription
Heroin distributed under control

Source: OFDT 1999

The **distribution of heroin under control** is a measure less accepted than the ones aforementioned, yet a majority of the French agree with it (53%). If gender does not influence that opinion, age proves discriminating, the youngest and the oldest being the least favourable to it. Having already use cannabis is associated with a higher level of agreement (68% versus 49%). Globally speaking, there is no real division but rather a continuum of perceptions focusing sometimes on the substance, sometimes on a particular practice.

The **cannabis therapeutic use** is agreed by 68% of the polled. Males are more often totally favourable than females (39% versus 31%). Having already used cannabis is positively associated with that viewpoint, yet not as significantly as it could be expected (76% against 65%).

Considered as a whole, actions associated with the risk reduction policy seem to be increasingly better accepted by the French since the early nineties.

Two interviewed out of three think that in our society: “there is an attempt to help addicted drug users to pull through”. However, less than 10% of them regard this assistance as adapted, because 63% declare it should be strengthened and 21% it

should be different. Only 1% think addicted drug users should not be helped to get rid of their addiction.

The French consider themselves rather well-informed

A consensus is emerging (86%) about the usefulness of informing the youth. The share of individuals thinking drugs must not be too much talked about has decreased during the nineties. Otherwise, the information delivered to the youth is perceived as sufficient by 71% of individuals and dangerous by 15%.

(1) The question about the unrestricted sale of "soft drugs" had led to a significant increase of favourable opinions (from 10 to 28% between 1992 and 1995). It could also be noticed that the use of the term "soft" favoured agreement, whereas specifying "as alcohol and tobacco" (as it was the case in the 1999 OFDT Survey) increased the disagreement with that assessment.

If only 8% of the French consider themselves very well-informed about drugs, they are 58% on the whole to regard themselves as well-informed. More than two-thirds (68%) of the 18-24 year-olds judge themselves well-informed, whereas less than half (48%) of the 65-75 year-olds think so. The perceived level of information also steadily increases according to the education level (from 43% for individuals having no degree to 74% for individuals with at least two years' higher education), and thanks to having already used cannabis during one's lifetime (76% versus 54%). This last result confirms the theory according to which experimentation stands for a significant source of legitimacy.

As for media campaigns in the future, defining the profile of individuals feeling very ill-informed is a must. They are 45% over 50 years-old (versus 33% in the whole sampling), 88% to possess a lesser degree than baccalauréat (versus 57% in the whole sampling), 35% to live in a country town (versus 26% in the whole sampling). Workers and pensioners are over-represented among the very ill-informed. On the other hand, gender and religious fervour do not apply to the feeling of being very ill-informed.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be noticed that the ages furthest apart stand for close representations, the youngest and the oldest revealing the most important need for information and the strongest fears towards drugs and drug users. The substances-related fear and the opinions supporting cannabis use prohibition are clearly less strong among individuals who have been in touch with a drug, and particularly the users. Gender seems to be less discriminating as far as its effect disappears when the individual concerned does or does not experiment an illicit drug. The fact that cannabis experimentation has become commonplace in adult general population is also confirmed by this survey, an observation OFDT had already noticed thanks to many surveys carried out among the youth. As it is, two French out of five declare having been offered cannabis, one out of five having already tried it, and one out of sixteen having used it during last twelve months. Cannabis use particularly affects teenagers and young adults (one third of the 18-44 year-olds having already used it), and males more than females.

Generally speaking, individuals possessing a higher education level, people who

rather live in rather urbanized areas, and those who feel best-informed about drugs prove less apt to condemn drugs and drug users. They are also more favourable to risk reduction policies and to the notion of cannabis use legalization under some conditions. However, a high majority of the French agree about limiting damages caused by drug use.

François BECK

- **Methodological references**

Settled by the OFDT, this survey was carried out over the phone (CATI system ⁽²⁾) from March 30th to April 10th, 1999 by the BVA polling institute. It is based on a quota ⁽³⁾ sampling of 2 0002 individuals ageing from 15 to 75, representative of the French population.

The purpose of this survey is to single out the individuals' value judgements and to follow their opinions about public policies (and measures to be taken) according to their perceptions of substances and risks. Representations alone are accounted for, as knowledge is of no relevance for this survey. Broadly speaking, the use of generic terms (drugs, drug addiction) and of such expressions as "hard drug" or "soft drug" has been avoided, for their meaning varies too much from one individual to the other, and because they arbitrarily imply a value judgement that we precisely want to detect. The questionnaire splits up into separate units:

- 1) Socio-demographic features
- 2) General questions about the attitude
- 3) Perception of the dangerousness of 4 distinct illicit substances (cannabis, heroin, cocaine, and ecstasy) and of 3 licit substances (alcohol, tobacco, and psychoactive medicines) in order to determine what these substances represent, and to help putting things in perspective.
- 4) Perception of addicted drug users (represented by heroin users)
- 5) Public policies about drug addiction
- 6) Perception of the substances-related risks
- 7) Closeness of substances and users
- 8) Political and religious stand

This survey is then making up the basis of a "panel" of the French beliefs and opinions about drug addiction, that helps describing the range of these perceptions and reviewing public policies impacts.

⁽²⁾ Computer Assisted Telephone Interview.

⁽³⁾ For quotas, gender, age, the household referential individual's occupation, the geographical area, and the demographic area category are taken into account.

- **For more information**

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