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UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM

LICIT AND ILLICIT DRUG USE
IN AMSTERDAM II

Report of a household survey in 1994 on the prevalence of drug use among the population of 12 years and over

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Difficult drugs

7.1 Introduction

The concept of difficult drugs is introduced in this study to avoid definition problems. A simple division into licit and illicit drugs is not sufficient due to the specific wording of the Dutch opium law, which makes a distinction between cannabis and other illicit drugs. Both categories are illicit, but priority for criminal investigation and prosecution is given to the latter. So, while still illegal, the possession of cannabis is not prosecuted as long as small amounts are involved.

In common language, difficult drugs may be referred to as hard drugs. We have decided not to use this term because it gives the erroneous impression that we are referring a particularly hazardous category of drugs and that 'soft' drugs, on the contrary, pose no health hazard at all. However, in both cases, it is mainly the way in which the drugs are used that determines whether a drug, 'soft' or 'hard', is dangerous or not. In other words, ten glasses of beer daily can be considered more harmful than a single sniff of cocaine.

The difficult drugs included in this study were: cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, hallucinogens and heroin. Clearly, there are statistical problems involved in studying difficult drugs due to the small number of people that use difficult drugs. This makes it harder to determine whether results can be generalized, i.e. whether results are valid for the population as a whole. It goes without saying that, we remain uncertain in a great many instances[1].

7.2 Prevalence

In 1994, 10.6 percent of the response group had used a difficult drug at some time. Figures for shorter periods of time were much lower. A total of 2.9 percent of the population used a difficult drug in the year preceding the interview, and 1.2 percent in the preceding month.

Continuation rates for most difficult drugs were relatively low compared to the drugs we have studied so far. All in all, 26 percent of all the difficult drug users had engaged in use during the year prior to the interview, and 14 percent in the preceding month[2].

Figure 7.1 Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of difficult drug use
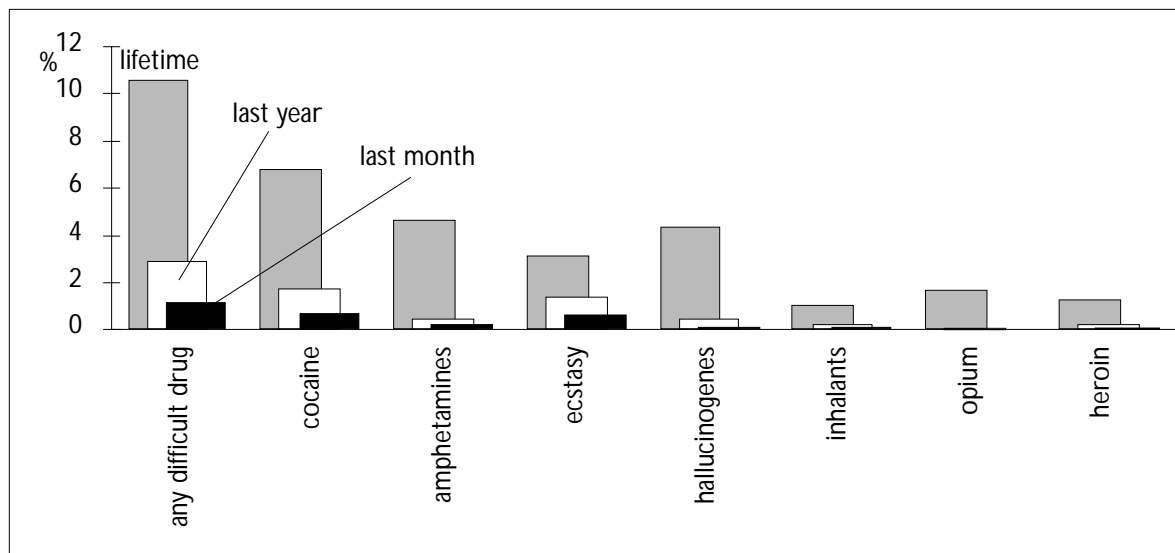
Of all difficult drugs, we found that cocaine was most widely used. Last month prevalence, however, was still lower than 1 percent of the population. Ecstasy came in second on the last month prevalence item. Given that ecstasy was only recently introduced on the market, this figure is quite high. If this trend continues, it will be only a matter of time before ecstasy becomes the prevailing difficult drug.

Prevalence of other difficult drugs, especially on the more recent items, was negligible. Only a very small share (2%) of all difficult drug users ever injected a difficult drug (heroin, opium, hallucinogens and/or amphetamines).

Professional assistance had been sought by nine percent of those who had ever used a difficult drug. This was relatively high compared to the whole group of respondents, two percent had sought assistence at some time.

Chapter 2 devoted some attention to multiple drug use. Naturally, since difficult drug use is rare, multiple difficult drug use is even more unusual. For this reason, we decided to limit the analysis to a few drugs. On a lifetime basis, the combination cocaine, hallucinogens and amphetamines proved to be the most common. Figure 7.2 represents the lifetime prevalence of the 430 persons that use one or more of these three drugs (simultaneously or not).

Almost all difficult drug users are represented in Figure 7.2. It is obvious that once difficult drug use has been established use of several drugs is not uncommon. Last year (Figure 7.3), the most frequent combination of three drugs was cocaine, ecstasy and hallucinogens, the latter being of marginal importance.

Another difference with Figure 7.2 is that use of more than one drug is much less common. The largest group (39%) used cocaine only and slightly over a quarter used only ecstasy. The group of respondents that used both ranked third.

Figure 7.2 *Lifetime prevalence of cocaine, amphet-amines and hallucinogens (N=430)*
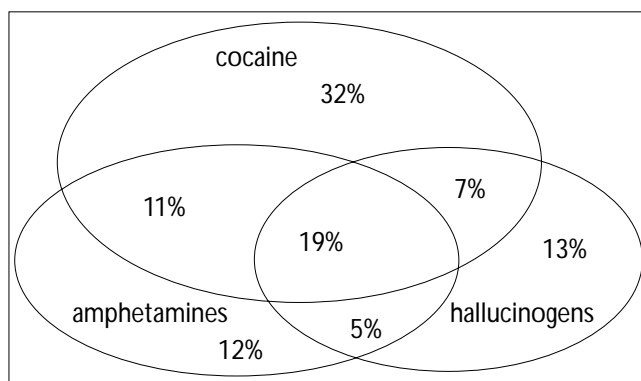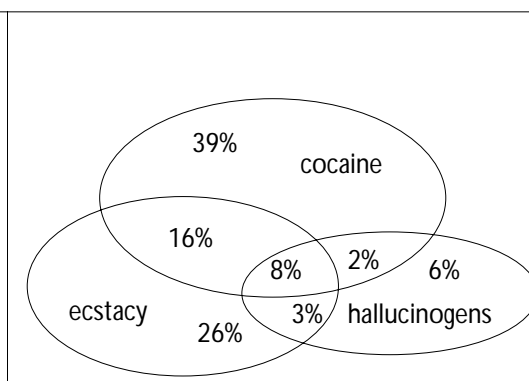
Figure 7.3 *Last year prevalence of cocaine, ecstasy and hallucinogens (N=118)*

7.3   Social-demographic aspects of difficult drug use

Analysis of the relation between drug use, age and gender is presented somewhat differently from earlier chapters. The reason for this is that the figures were too small to allow three dimensional tables. We decided to present difficult drug use by age and gender in two separate tables, rather than one table.

Table 7.1 presents use of difficult drugs by gender. The figures for the aggregate 'any difficult drug' are followed by the results for cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, hallucinogens and heroin separately. Difficult drug use (lifetime prevalence) was found more often among male respondents. Lifetime prevalence for men was 12.6 percent; for women 8.9 percent. Last year prevalence of difficult drugs measured at 3.9 percent for men and 2.0 percent for women. For both men and women, cocaine was the most frequently used difficult drug on a lifetime basis (8.3 and 5.5 percent respectively), followed by hallucinogens for men (5.9%) and amphet-amines for women (3.8%).

Difficult drug use by age group is shown in Table 7.2. Except for a few very unusual cases, difficult drug use was unheard of in the age groups of 12 to 19 years and over 60. The age group with highest lifetime prevalence was 40-59 years, 25.3 percent of which had used a difficult drug at some time. Last year prevalence reached a peak in the age group 20-29 years. The generation and age effects are clearly visible here. The generation effect can be traced as those in the age group 40-59 years were in their teens or early twenties when drugs became available on the market and thus, had had the opportunity ever since to use or experiment with drugs. Older generations, were already too old to start using drugs when they first became available. This phenomenon in itself was caused by the age effect, which means that present use prevails in certain (younger) age groups.

As was the case with other drugs, difficult drug use is more prevalent among younger people, i.e. the age group between 20 and 29 years. The relation between

difficult drug use and ethnicity is no different from the use of other drugs and ethnicity. Use of difficult drugs is most frequently found among people of Dutch origin, other Europeans, and Americans. Only very few respondents from Turkish or Moroccan origin had ever used difficult drugs.

Of all household categories, difficult drug users are mainly found among singles and single parents. The scores for the category 'other' were surprisingly high. Most of the users within this category had no children and neither lived with a partner nor alone. These individuals were probably adults who shared housing with roommates, friends or relatives.

7.4   Socio-economic aspects of difficult drug use

The most important socio-economic variable was position on the labour market. The incidence of difficult drug use among retired people was very low. Of course, this is largely a generation effect. The other non-working groups, on the contrary, stand out for high levels of prevalence. The level of drug use for both categories of unemployed people is interesting. Those who were unemployed for a long time scored 30.1 percent on lifetime prevalence but 'only' 5.3 percent had used a difficult drug in the year preceding the interview. Lifetime prevalence for the short-term unemployed was high, but not extreme. Last year prevalence, on the contrary, was very high compared to other categories.

Education and difficult drug use are positively correlated. In other words: a higher level of education coincides with a higher level of lifetime prevalence. Results on the relation with income levels are not significant.

Figure 7.4 Use of difficult drugs by position on the labour market
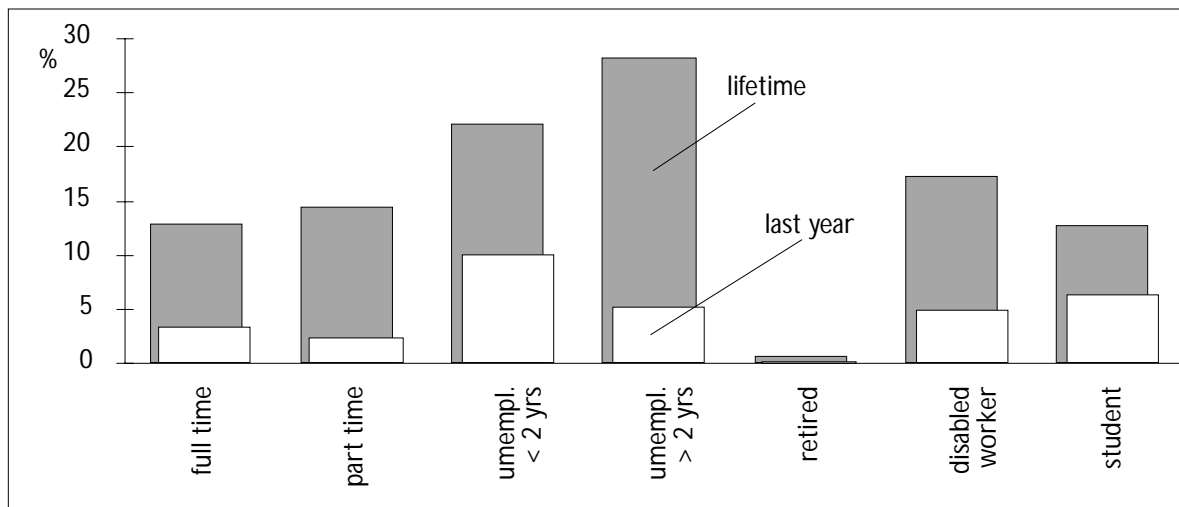
7.5   Summary

The difficult drugs studied here are: cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy, hallucinogens and heroin. Prevalence of difficult drugs was relatively low. Lifetime prevalence was 10.6 percent. The figures for the last year and last month items were 2.9 percent and 1.2 percent respectively.

Use of cocaine was most widespread, but ecstasy is catching up on last year and last month prevalence. Difficult drug use was more prevalent with men. The age group 40-59 scored highest on lifetime prevalence, but many have apparently given up using, as indicated by a fairly low last year and last month prevalence. The respondents' position on the labour market and educational level proved to be important socio-economic variables, but income showed no significant relation with difficult drug use.

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1   In the tables this will be indicated as 'n.s.' (not significant) which means that there is no statistical certainty whether our measurements in the response group hold for the whole population as well. The notation 'n.a.' (not applicable) indicates that statistical procedures failed to test the significance of our data because of too many empty cells in the table.
2   It is important to realise that difficult drugs are an aggregate. The calculation of the continuation rate may, therefore, be based on different substances. It is possible that a person started using cocaine as a first difficult drug, but took only ecstasy in the year prior to the interview. This is seen as continued use of difficult drugs, even though different drugs are involved. Continuation rates for the drugs separately are presented in Chapter 2.

7.6 Tables regarding the use of difficult drugs

Table 7.1 Use of difficult drugs by age group

lifetime preval.	any diff. drug abs.	%	cocaine abs.	%	amphet. abs.	%	ecstasy abs.	%	hallucinog. abs.	%	heroin abs.	%	N
12-19 yrs	13	3.5	1	0.3	4	1.1	9	2.4	5	1.3	0	0.0	374
20-29 yrs	119	12.3	74	7.7	43	4.5	68	7.1	48	5.0	12	1.2	964
30-39 yrs	179	17.9	141	14.1	77	7.7	42	4.2	65	6.5	31	3.1	1001
40-49 yrs	114	15.6	65	8.9	56	7.7	17	2.3	61	8.3	12	1.6	731
50 yrs a.o.	38	2.9	16	1.2	23	1.8	1	0.1	13	1.0	2	0.2	1294
total	463	10.6	297	6.8	203	4.7	137	3.1	192	4.4	57	1.3	4364
sign. chi-sq.	p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		

last year preval.	any diff. drug abs.	%	cocaine abs.	%	amphet. abs.	%	ecstasy abs.	%	hallucinog. abs.	%	heroin abs.	%	N
12-19 yrs	9	2.4	1	0.3	2	0.5	6	1.6	4	1.1	0	0.0	374
20-29 yrs	55	5.7	31	3.2	14	1.5	37	3.8	12	1.2	6	0.6	964
30-39 yrs	42	4.2	33	3.3	3	0.3	15	1.5	4	0.4	3	0.3	1001
40-49 yrs	15	2.1	7	1.0	2	0.3	5	0.7	2	0.3	3	0.4	731
50 yrs a.o.	5	0.4	4	0.3	1	0.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1294
total	126	2.9	76	1.7	22	0.5	63	1.4	22	0.5	12	0.3	4364
sign. chi-sq.	p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		

last month preval.	any diff. drug abs.	%	cocaine abs.	%	amphet. abs.	%	ecstasy abs.	%	hallucinog. abs.	%	heroin abs.	%	N
12-19 yrs	3	0.8	0	0.0	1	0.3	3	0.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	374
20-29 yrs	26	2.7	13	1.3	8	0.8	17	1.8	4	0.4	1	0.1	964
30-39 yrs	15	1.5	12	1.2	2	0.2	6	0.6	0	0.0	1	0.1	1001
40-49 yrs	7	1.0	4	0.5	1	0.1	2	0.3	1	0.1	1	0.1	731
50 yrs a.o.	3	0.2	3	0.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1294
total	54	1.2	32	0.7	12	0.3	28	0.6	5	0.1	3	0.1	4364
sign. chi-sq.	p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		n.s.		n.s.		

Table 7.2 Use of difficult drugs by gender

lifetime preval.	any diff. drug abs.	%	cocaine abs.	%	amphet. abs.	%	ecstasy abs.	%	hallucinog. abs.	%	heroin abs.	%	N
male	256	12.6	169	8.3	114	5.6	85	4.2	120	5.9	38	1.9	2028
female	207	8.9	128	5.5	89	3.8	52	2.2	72	3.1	19	0.8	2336
total	463	10.6	297	6.8	203	4.7	137	3.1	192	4.4	57	1.3	4364
sign. chi-sq.	p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		

Table 7.2   Use of difficult drugs by gender (continued)

last year preval.	any diff. drug		cocaine		amphet.		ecstasy		hallucinog.		heroin		N
	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	
male	80	3.9	48	2.4	13	0.6	41	2.0	18	0.9	10	0.5	2028
female	46	2.0	28	1.2	9	0.4	22	0.9	4	0.2	2	0.1	2336
total	126	2.9	76	1.7	22	0.5	63	1.4	22	0.5	12	0.3	4364
sign. chi-sq.	p<.05		p<.05		n.s.		p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		

last month preval.	any diff. drug		cocaine		amphet.		ecstasy		hallucinog.		heroin		N
	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	
male	33	1.6	19	0.9	7	0.3	20	1.0	5	0.2	2	0.1	2028
female	21	0.9	13	0.6	5	0.2	8	0.3	0	0.0	1	0.0	2336
total	54	1.2	32	0.7	12	0.3	28	0.6	5	0.1	3	0.1	4364
sign. chi-sq.	p<.05		n.s.		n.s.		p<.05		n.a.		n.a.		

Table 7.3   Use of difficult drugs by ethnicity

ethnicity	lifetime		last year		last month		N
	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	
Dutch	423	11.9	108	3.0	47	1.3	3 543
Sur./Ant.	16	4.6	8	2.3	2	0.6	349
Moroccan	3	2.0	2	1.3	1	0.7	152
Turkish	1	1.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	102
Europ./USA	13	11.8	5	4.5	3	2.7	110
other	7	6.5	3	2.8	1	0.9	108
total	463	10.6	126	2.9	54	1.2	4 364
signif. Chi-square	p<.05		n.a.		n.a.		

Table 7.4   Use of difficult drugs by type of household

type of household	lifetime		last year		last month		N
	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	
single	193	14.2	54	4.0	19	1.4	1 355
single parent	33	13.3	5	2.0	4	1.6	248
couple	78	8.2	17	1.8	8	0.8	957
couple with children	75	8.7	11	1.3	4	0.5	861
living at home	22	4.5	16	3.3	7	1.4	485
other	62	13.5	23	5.0	12	2.6	458
total	208	8.2	49	1.9	23	0.9	2 551
signif. Chi-square	p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		

Table 7.5 Use of difficult drugs by level of education

level of education		lifetime		last year		last month		
		abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	N
elementary	LO	32	5.3	15	2.5	8	1.3	609
vocational (low)	LBO	25	4.4	8	1.4	2	0.4	566
secondary (low)	MAVO	52	8.6	15	2.5	7	1.2	602
vocational (middle)	MBO	50	12.1	15	3.6	7	1.7	412
second. (middle/high)	HAVO/VWO	94	14.2	26	3.9	13	2.0	662
voc. (high)/University	HBO/WO	200	16.9	44	3.7	16	1.4	1 181
other		10	3.0	3	0.9	1	0.3	332
total		463	10.6	126	2.9	54	1.2	4 364
signif. Chi-square		p<.05		p<.05		n.s.		

Table 7.6 Use of difficult drugs by position on the labour market

position at labour market	lifetime		last year		last month		
	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	N
employed full time	176	12.9	47	3.4	23	1.7	1 363
employed part time	80	14.5	13	2.4	5	0.9	551
unemployed < 2 years	35	22.2	16	10.1	4	2.5	158
unemployed > 2 years	32	28.3	6	5.3	1	0.9	113
retired	4	0.7	1	0.2	1	0.2	549
work disability	35	17.4	10	5.0	6	3.0	201
student	24	12.8	12	6.4	4	2.1	188
other	77	6.2	21	1.7	10	0.8	1 241
total	463	10.6	126	2.9	54	1.2	4 364
signif. Chi-square	p<.05		p<.05		p<.05		

Table 7.7 Use of difficult drugs by household income

income (Dutch guilders)	lifetime		last year		last month		
	abs.	%	abs.	%	abs.	%	N
< 750	8	9.5	4	4.8	1	1.2	84
750-1250	49	16.0	13	4.2	3	1.0	307
1250-1500	36	12.9	9	3.2	4	1.4	279
1500-2000	61	11.1	13	2.4	6	1.1	548
2000-2500	55	12.1	22	4.8	10	2.2	456
2500-3000	30	7.4	9	2.2	4	1.0	405
3000-4000	55	11.5	13	2.7	4	0.8	480
4000-5000	42	10.9	9	2.3	4	1.0	384
>5000	58	13.1	10	2.3	6	1.4	444
unknown	69	7.1	24	2.5	12	1.2	977
total	463	10.6	126	2.9	54	1.2	4 364
signif. Chi-square	p<.05		n.s.		n.a.		