The 2011 European school survey report produced by the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has been released. ESPAD is a collaborative network of independent research teams in more than forty European countries and the largest cross-national research project on adolescent substance use in the world - following 100,000 students in 36 countries. It is available electronically in 23 languages and in printed form in four to ensure wide dissemination of the findings across Europe. The summary serves as a complement to the full report that is available in English.

The main purpose of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) is to collect comparable data on substance use among 15- to 16-year-old European students in order to monitor trends within as well as between countries. So far, five data-collection waves have been conducted in the framework of the project. The first study was carried out in 26 countries in 1995.

**Main findings of the report concerning alcohol**

**LIFETIME AND PAST-12-MONTHS USE OF ALCOHOL**

In all ESPAD countries but one, 70% or more of the students have drunk alcohol at least once during their lifetime. The ESPAD average is 87% (range: 56–98%). The highest rates of lifetime alcohol prevalence (above 95%) are found in the Czech Republic and Latvia. There is one ESPAD country that stands out with a low figure, namely Iceland, but the proportion is actually the same (56%) in the United States (not an ESPAD country). Other countries with relatively low rates (below 80%) include Montenegro, Norway, Portugal, Romania and Sweden.

Those who have tried alcohol at least once are not all particularly experienced consumers or regular drinkers. On average, about a third have consumed alcohol only on 1–9 occasions while, on the other hand, 24% have done so 40 times or more. In the latter group, the sex differences are more pronounced –30% of the boys report use on 40 or more occasions but only 18% of the girls. There is no country where more girls than boys indicated this consumption frequency.

Large proportions of students having drunk alcohol 40 times or more (35% or more) are found in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany (5 Bundesländer) and Latvia. At the other end, with figures below 10%, are the Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway and Sweden. On average, 22% of the boys and 14% of the girls reported drinking 20 times or more during the 12 months prior to the survey. This tendency, with higher figures among the male students, is found in nearly all counties.

The countries where many students reported consumption on 20 or more occasions in the past 12 months are partly the same ones where many students had drunk alcohol on 40 or more occasions in their lifetime. Around 30% of the students in Belgium (Flanders), the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany (5 Bundesländer), Liechtenstein and Malta had been drinking at least 20 times during the past 12 months, while low proportions (under 10%) were found in the Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway and Sweden as well as in the Balkan countries of Albania and Montenegro. The United States (not an ESPAD country) also belongs to this low-frequency group.
Both recent and relatively frequent alcohol use is exhibited by those students who report use of alcohol on 10 occasions or more during the past 30 days. This behaviour was particularly common among students from Belgium (Flanders), Cyprus, Germany (5 Bundesländer) and Malta (15–18%). In some other countries, recent drinking of this magnitude is hardly reported at all: in the Nordic countries of the Faroe Islands, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, the prevalence rate was only 1–2%. Overall, boys were twice as likely as girls to report this level of frequent drinking.

Types of beverage used in the past 30 days

The most commonly reported type of beverage was beer (47% on average), followed by wine and spirits (37–38%), alcopops (32%) and finally cider (27%).

Countries scoring particularly high (60% or more) on beer use in the past 30 days were Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Germany (5 Bundesländer). Cider was most prevalent in Denmark (59%), followed by the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (around 40%). Countries with particularly high reporting of alcopops use include Cyprus, Denmark, Germany (5 Bundesländer) and Italy.

Wine drinking in the past 30 days was reported by 63% of the students in Monaco while roughly 55% of those in Croatia, Hungary, Malta and Moldova reported this. As regards use of spirits in the past month, the rate was highest (63%) in Malta, with another three countries around 57% (the Czech Republic, Denmark and Greece).

Sex differences are most apparent for beer, which was far more commonly reported by boys (55% versus 38%). When students were asked what beverages they consumed on their latest drinking day, beer was mentioned by 48%, spirits by 35% and wine and alcopops by a little more than two in ten (22%). The figure was slightly higher for cider (25%).
How much are they drinking?

On average, the students reported having consumed alcoholic beverages corresponding to 5.1 centilitres of pure alcohol on their latest drinking day. Reconverted into a specific beverage, this corresponds, for example, to about 13 centilitres of spirits (2–3 drinks), 40 centilitres of wine or one litre of beer. In terms of weight, 5.1 centilitres of pure alcohol corresponds to 40 grams of pure alcohol.

Consumed volumes almost twice the average were reported by students in Denmark (9.7 cl of pure alcohol). Three other Nordic countries – Finland, Norway and Sweden – also display high levels for the latest drinking day (7.0-7.5 cl), followed by Ireland and the United Kingdom (limited comparability see footnote) (6.7 cl each).

Lowest consumption levels were amongst students in Bulgaria and the Russian Federation (Moscow). Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republic of Srpska) also reported relatively low levels (3.6–4.0 cl).

The highest volume for girls was reported from Denmark (8.9 cl), followed by the three other Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden. These four also all belong to the top countries for boys. The alcohol volume reported by Danish girls was actually larger than that reported by boys in any country except Denmark itself.

Self reported feeling of drunkenness

The highest average intoxication score was reported from Denmark, but it was equally high (4.6) in the Faroe Islands. Behind these two follows the United Kingdom (limited comparability) at 4.0. The Czech Republic, Croatia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden also display relatively high values (3.6–3.8). The average was 3.1, and the lowest level of intoxication – 2.0 points – was reported by Albanian students, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republic of Srpska), Cyprus, Greece, Moldova, Montenegro and Portugal also display relatively low scores (2.2–2.4).

Drunk to point of slurring words and feeling sick and frequency of drunkenness

On average, nearly half of the students in the ESPAD countries (47%) reported that they had been intoxicated in this sense at least once during their lifetime. Particularly low proportions (22–24%) were found in Albania, Iceland and Montenegro. On the other hand, about seven in ten had been this drunk in Denmark and between 60% and 66% in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia.

Countries with the highest percentages of students indicating that they have been drunk 10 times or more include Denmark (21%) and Spain (18%). By contrast, in some countries this was reported by only 3% or less of the students (Albania, Belgium (Flanders), Greece and Norway).

On average, 37% answered that they had been intoxicated during the past 12 months. Among Danish students 69% reported intoxication during that period, and levels were also high (45–50%) in the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany (5 Bundesländer), Hungary, Liechtenstein, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain (not an ESPAD country). The lowest rates are found in Albania (14%), Montenegro (16%) and Iceland (19%).

A total of 17% reported intoxication during the past 30 days. Denmark scored highest with more than one-third of the students (37%), followed by Spain (not an ESPAD country) with 32%. At the other end, with levels below 10%, are Albania, Iceland, Montenegro and the Russian Federation (Moscow).

The number of students who had been intoxicated three times or more during the past 30 days is of course lower, but the pattern across countries remains more or less the same. About 10% reported this frequency of intoxication in Denmark and Spain (not an ESPAD country), while the figures were (much) lower in the rest of the countries.
AGE OF ONSET FOR USE OF DIFFERENT ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES AND DRUNKENNESS

In three-quarters of the countries, at least half of the students reported that they had drunk at least one glass of an alcoholic beverage at the age of 13 or younger. This was most common for beer (with an average of 44%), followed by wine (38%), while spirits on average had the lowest proportion (20%), i.e. also lower than cider (34%) and alcopops (27%).

The highest proportions of students who had consumed a glass of an alcoholic beverage at the age of 13 or younger are found in Latvia (79%), Estonia (76%), Bulgaria (73%), Slovenia (71%) and the Czech Republic (70%). At the opposite end, with the lowest figures, are two Nordic countries: Iceland at 20% and Norway at 29%.

It is clear that many students in most ESPAD countries have tried alcohol at a fairly young age. Such consumption, however, did not lead to intoxication in all that many cases. The proportion of students reporting that they had been drunk at the age of 13 or younger varies quite substantially across countries around the average of 12%. Nearly one-third of the Estonian students (32%) had been drunk at the age of 13 or younger, and the second-highest proportion was found in another Baltic country (Latvia at 25%).

In other countries, this percentage is considerably lower. The lowest rate, roughly 5%, was reported from Greece, Iceland, Italy, Monaco, Montenegro and Norway.

**Trends 1995 - 2011**

**PAST-12-MONTHS ALCOHOL USE**

On the average level, the proportion of students who had used alcohol during the 12 months prior to data collection shows a slight reduction from 2003 (83%) through 2007 (81%) to 2011 (78%). A look at the period encompassing the three most recent surveys, i.e. from 2003 to 2011, shows that decreases throughout this period can be found in the three Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway and Sweden as well as in Ireland and the Russian Federation (Moscow), with reductions between 12 (Sweden) and 21 (Iceland) percentage points. In many countries levels have stayed the same or fallen. But significant increases in past year consumption have occurred in France and Hungary.

**PAST-30-DAYS ALCOHOL USE**

After a certain increase on the aggregate level between 1995 and 2003 there were slightly fewer students in 2007 (58%) who had used alcohol during the 30 days prior to data collection.

A further small drop can be seen in 2011 (to 56%).

**PAST-30-DAYS HEAVY EPISODIC DRINKING**

On average, heavy episodic drinking (having five or more drinks on one occasion) during the 30 days prior to data collection increased from 1995 to 1999 and from 2003 to 2007, but it is slightly lower in 2011. The increase between 2003 and 2007 mainly happened among girls, while the decrease between the two most recent surveys is found for both sexes.
In 1995, heavy episodic drinking was much more common, on average, among boys than among girls, but this gender gap has diminished substantially since 2007.

One of the most striking results in the 2007 ESPAD survey was the large number of countries with increased heavy episodic drinking. However, this trend has continued only in Hungary, while the increases now seen in Cyprus and Greece ‘build on’ a relatively unchanged situation between 2003 and 2007. The fourth country with higher figures in 2011 than in 2007 is Serbia, which has taken part in the two most recent data-collection waves only. The most pronounced increases between the two most recent surveys are found in Cyprus and Hungary: about 10 percentage points.

In nine countries heavy episodic drinking has fallen since the latest survey.

Sadly, the UK figures have limited comparability

The Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University, was responsible for the ESPAD study in the United Kingdom, following the death of the Principal Investigator for the UK PI for the four previous ESPAD studies.

The sampling frame included students in grades 4, 5 and 6. Unlike in the first two ESPAD surveys in 1995 and 1999, a lack of funding prevented the drawing of separate samples for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Hence, like in 2003 and 2007, only a sample for the UK as a whole was used. Out of 1,255 sampled schools, 1,181 did not participate, and the corresponding figures for classes were 2,488 and 2,362, respectively, which corresponds to a school-participation rate of 6% and a class-participation rate of 5%. This is a dramatic reduction since 2007 when the school rate was 49% and the class rate 40%.

About one-quarter of the non-participating schools provided reasons for their refusal to participate.

The most common reasons were that the school was busy (bad timing), not interested in taking part in ESPAD, had recently taken part in other research projects or had a school policy not to take part in external research.

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