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Original Research Article

Self-reported cannabis products and other illicit drugs consumption in older school-age children in Northern Lithuania: A comparison between 2006 and 2012

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ABSTRACT

Background and objective: Cannabis use is widespread among young people in Europe. The aim of this study was to analyze and to compare the associations between the self-reported consumption of cannabis products and other illicit drugs among older schoolchildren in 2006 and in 2012.

Materials and methods: Two cross-sectional surveys were conducted in 2006 and 2012 in Northern Lithuania. In total 3447 young people aged 17–19 years were investigated (1585 male and 1862 female). For this survey, the ESPAD questionnaire was used.

Results: In Northern Lithuania, the schoolchildren aged 17–19 years self-reported that 16.7% in 2006 and 23.9% in 2012 of them tried cannabis products. The consumption of cannabis products in the age group of 17 years increased from 14.9% in 2006 to 21.5% in 2012. The consumption of cannabis together with alcohol increased from 7.6% to 14.3%. Cannabis consumers more often tried amphetamines, heroin, LSD, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and injective drugs. In 2012, cannabis consumers girls less than boys used only crack and injective drugs; all other illicit drugs they used the same often as boys.

Conclusions: The cannabis products consumption in schoolchildren has increased by 7%. Nearly twofold increase was observed in the consumption of cannabis together with alcohol. Young people who used cannabis products more often tried other illicit drugs. There were no differences by gender in the consumption of illicit drugs among cannabis consumers.

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1. Introduction

In all European countries participating in European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) studies, according to the prevalence data, cannabis products are the most frequently used illicit drugs among young people. By 2011 ESPAD data, 25% boys and 14% girls tried cannabis products at least once per their lifetime in Lithuania [1]. According to the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) reports, the consumption of cannabis products is increasing in the countries of the European Union [2]. While in some countries this growth has stabilized, there are countries where over the years the products of cannabis were used quite often. In France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the abuse of cannabis products is very common, whereas in Finland, Sweden, and Portugal cannabis frequencies are low. In all EU countries (according to the most recent data), the prevalence of cannabis products consumption among adults remains less than 10%. However, 20% of young people aged 15–25 years in France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom have used cannabis during the last 12 months. The prevalence of cannabis products in young people in these countries ranges from 20% to 35% [2].

Recently, in Lithuanian press, other media channels, and articles targeted to the young people, we can find statements that marijuana or hashish are not dangerous and do not cause physical and mental addiction to these drugs. In addition, some comments state that marijuana and hashish consumption do not lead to the stronger illicit drugs abuse. Non-professional articles about the successful use of cannabis products in other countries' industry and agriculture as well mislead the readers. They usually ''forget'' to inform their readers on special, complicated, and serious control mechanisms in such cases.

There are international scientific studies with sufficient evidence on the harm of marijuana and other cannabis products. Authors from different countries found that cannabis products abuse leads to the same adverse effects as of other illicit drugs [3–6]. The regular use of cannabis products is associated with an increase of the incidence in mental disorders for young people [7].

The level of seriousness of physical or mental health disorder, and how rapidly it occurs depends on the illicit drug type, its toxicity, amount, the duration of consumption, the way of the use, and the frequency of the particular drug consumption. Many researchers agree on the statement that, if someone tries marijuana only few or even a dozen times, it does not evolve addiction to cannabis, and desire to try stronger illicit drugs. However, a regular use of cannabis products is dangerous, and can lead to the development of addiction to cannabis products and the addiction to other illicit drugs [2,7–9].

In Lithuania, there are limited research and evidence on the cannabis products abuse and on prevention of the derivatives from cannabis consumption. There are not enough studies on association between the cannabis and stronger illicit drugs consumption. The aim of this study was to analyze and to compare the associations between the self-reported consumption of cannabis products and other illicit drugs among older school-age children of Northern Lithuania in 2006 and in 2012. The objectives of the study were firstly, to determine the number of cannabis products consumers in 2006 and 2012 (by gender and by age groups); secondly, to establish the associations between the consumption of cannabis products and other illicit drugs (among boys and girls), and to compare these results in 2006 and in 2012.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Sampling and procedures

The study was performed using two cross-sectional surveys, conducted in 2006 and 2012 in Northern Lithuania. In 2006 and 2012, a consent document for conducting survey was obtained from the municipalities located in Siauliai County. The Departments of Education (in Šiauliai, Akmenė, Joniškis, Kelmė, Pakruojis, Radviliškis cities and districts) agreed in conduction of this survey on drugs abuse in older school-aged children aged 17–19 years. The school class was modeled as a cluster. The schools and the classes for this survey were selected randomly. In 2006, the response rate was 92%; in 2012, the response rate was 94.5%.

In 2006, in the survey 2270 schoolchildren participated (1053 boys and 1217 girls), and in 2012, 1177 schoolchildren took part (532 boys and 645 girls). In total 3447 young people were investigated (1585 male and 1862 female). The distribution by the age groups was: 1602 aged 17 years, 1051 aged 18 years, and 794 aged 19 years.

2.2. Measurements

For this survey in both 2006 and 2012, the questionnaire for schoolchildren from European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) was used. ESPAD questionnaire is widely used for international studies on prevalence of the drugs and psychoactive materials abuse among children and young people. The questionnaire was designed to consist of 49 closed questions with few or several values of answers. For this survey we used 12 items, because we asked about the consumption of each drug (or about the consumption of the cannabis products together with alcohol) separately, naming every drug. Schoolchildren should answer the questions ''Have you tried this drug at least once in lifetime?''

2.3. Statistical analysis

SPSS for Windows 20.0 statistical package was used for analysis of the study data. The z and chi-square (χ^2) tests were applied for the evaluation of statistical hypotheses on difference in the distribution of variables between respondents' groups and the study years. The level of statistical significance established at $P \leq 0.05$ was considered as statistically significant. Our data in 2006 and in 2012 statistically significantly differed by some demographical indicators. Direct standardization procedures were applied for adjusting and standardizing the data by the age and