

Cocaine Use among High School Students in Six South American Countries

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Abstract

Objectives: To compare lifetime and past year prevalence estimates of cocaine use among secondary school students in six South American countries. *Methods:* Data are from the 2009 Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) and United Nations Office on Drug Control Policy (UNODC) collaborative study on drug use; with national representative samples of over 170,286 secondary school students in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay. *Results:* Cocaine was the second most commonly reported illicit substance used following marijuana in Argentina and Uruguay, and was the most common illicit substance following marijuana and inhalants in the other four countries surveyed. Past year use ranged from a high of 3.5% in Uruguay to a low of 1.1% in Peru. *Conclusions:* Cocaine prevalence shows a worrisome pattern among high school students in South America. Rates in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay are close to the United States and Canada. This analysis provides evidence to support the notion that cocaine use is a problem in South American countries, particularly among those that have no known history of cocaine production. Implications for drug policy, health among teenagers and education in Latin America are discussed.

Key words: Cocaine, street drugs, use, adolescents, South America.

Título: Uso de cocaína entre estudiantes de secundaria en seis países de Suramérica

Resumen

Objetivos: Comparar la prevalencia de vida y el último año del consumo de cocaína entre estudiantes de secundaria en seis países de Suramérica. *Métodos:* Los datos son del 2009 y fueron recogidos en el Estudio Colaborativo de Uso de Drogas de la Agencia Interamericana para el Control del Abuso de Drogas (CICAD) y la Oficina de Naciones Unidas de Control de Drogas (ONUDD). Las muestras fueron representativas de más de 170.286 estudiantes de secundaria en Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Perú y Uruguay. *Resultados:* La cocaína fue la segunda droga más utilizada después de la marihuana en Argentina y Uruguay, y fue la sustancia

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ilegal más común después de la marihuana y los inhalantes en los otros cuatro países estudiados. La prevalencia del uso de cocaína en el último año osciló entre un máximo del 3,5% en Uruguay a un mínimo del 1,1% en el Perú. *Conclusiones:* La prevalencia de uso de cocaína presenta un patrón preocupante entre los estudiantes de secundaria en América del Sur. Las prevalencias en Argentina, Chile y Uruguay están cerca de la de Estados Unidos y Canadá. Este análisis proporciona pruebas que apoyan la idea de que el consumo de cocaína es un problema en los países suramericanos, especialmente en los que no tienen antecedentes conocidos de la producción de esta droga. Se discuten las implicaciones para la política de drogas, la salud entre los adolescentes y la educación en América Latina.

Palabras clave: cocaína, drogas ilícitas, adolescentes, América del Sur.

Introduction

Recent information from the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicate that substance use among secondary school (high school students) is a major issue concern in South America. Although in previous studies illicit drug use has been lower in South American countries than in the United States (1-3), international reports indicate a growing problem among this population (4). For example, a 2004 comparative study among high school students in nine South American countries showed past year prevalence rates of cocaine ranging from 0.9% in Bolivia to 2.5% in Ar-

gentina. A follow up study carried out in 2009 among six countries, showed that cocaine prevalence had increased in each of the six countries studied.

Unfortunately, although national reports exist, there are few published articles readily accessible to international audiences on drug use among high school students in South America. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the current prevalence rates of cocaine use among high school students in the six South American countries that participated in the CICAD/UNODC 2009 study.

Methods

Data for this study were taken from the first comparative study on drug use in South American youth, *Informe Subregional sobre Uso de Drogas en Población Escolarizada: Información para el Diseño de las Estrategias Nacionales y Regionales sobre la Problemática de Drogas en Jóvenes*. This comparative study of drug use in six South American countries was conducted in 2009 and was a joint effort between the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNODC) through its regional office in Peru. The participating countries were Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay (4).

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