

SICAD - General-Directorate for Intervention
on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies
Ministry of Health - Portugal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young Offenders in Custody:
Characteristics, criminal practices and addictive
behaviours

2015



SICAD

Serviço de Intervenção nos
Comportamentos Aditivos
e nas Dependências

Executive Summary

The Survey on Addictive Behaviours in Young People in Custody is a Program of the General-Directorate for Intervention on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies – SICAD, developed in partnership with the General-Directorate of Reintegration and Prison Services, with the aim to update the knowledge about addictive behaviours in this population, their relation with criminality and identification of risk factors. The present study, with more specific aims, is integrated in this Program.

Aims

- To describe these young offenders in terms of specific aspects usually reported as being related with drugs and alcohol use/abuse and crime;
- To describe their crime career;
- To describe their patterns of addictive behaviours (alcohol, drugs, gaming and gambling);
- To explore the relation between psychoactive substance use and crime.

Methodology

It is a cross-sectional study, focused on the total population of young people in custody, at place in the 6 Custodial Facilities for young offenders of Portugal, in June 2015, through a self-report questionnaire, with the participation of 142 young offenders (93% of the population). Descriptive and bivariate statistics were produced.

Results

1. Psychoactive Substance Use

- The prevalence of alcohol and drugs use, and, also, the prevalence of riskier uses of these substances, is higher in this population than in young people with the same age, in public educational schools in Portugal.
- 93% already experimented alcohol and 89% already experimented drugs. In the 12 months before custody, 82% drank alcohol and 80% used drugs. Further, in the 30 days before custody, 72% drank alcohol and 68% used drugs.
- Whatever the temporal period, the types of alcohol beverages drunk by more young people were spirits and beer, and, concerning drugs. For instance, in the 12 months before custody, 74% drank spirits, 66% beer and 79% used cannabis.
- After cannabis, the group of drugs more reported as being used, was the one of stimulants other than cocaine (amphetamines, ecstasy, others): 22% used it in the 12 months before custody and 13% in the 30 days before. Opiates, misused hypnotic/sedatives and anabolic steroids were the types of illicit uses less reported.
- Concerning the more common psychoactive substances, generally speaking, young offenders don't differ from young people with the same age at public schools. However, in young offenders, prevalence's are higher, especially about cannabis, which prevalence is at the same level of alcohol drinking.
- At least half of young offenders had riskier patterns of substance use in the 30 days before custody: daily/almost daily cannabis use (46%), drinking until inebriation (53%), binge drinking (45%) and drunkenness (29%). Also, 62% usually (without reference to a specific temporal period) use more than one substance in the same occasion, especially alcohol and cannabis.
- 53% already had problems related with alcohol drinking, 56% related with drug use (24% with both), mainly violent acts (42% related with drug use, 41% with alcohol drinking), followed by serious problems in school/work productivity (30% related with drug use, 22% with alcohol drinking) and by behavioral problems at home (29% related with drug use, 22% with alcohol drinking). In both cases, these were related with riskier patterns of substance use.
- 37% reported having drunk, at least once, alcohol beverages in custody and 36% having used drugs. As some young offenders in custody have authorization to leave the Custodial Facilities for weekends/vacations at home and/or to go to school/training outside these Facilities, they were asked about substance use inside and outside the Facilities: after the beginning of custody, 34% already drank alcohol outside, 10% drank inside. 26% already used drugs outside, 23% inside.

- Concerning more recent substance use, 32% drank alcohol in the last 12 months in custody (27% outside, 10% inside) and 34% used drugs (25% outside and 22% inside). In the last 30 days in custody, 23% drank alcohol (7% inside) and 19% used drugs (13% inside). In this timetable, the frequency of use of alcohol/drugs was occasional (1 to 3 days/month).
- In custody, the main types of alcohol beverages drunk are spirits and beer, being cannabis almost the unique drug used.
- In this context, it is important to emphasize the reduction of substance use with custody: 2 in every 3 young offenders that drank alcohol in the 12 months before custody stopped drinking with the beginning of custody, situation that is applied to half of drug users in the same period.

2. Gaming and gambling

- In the last 12 months, 83% of young offenders played electronic games (in computer, tablets, smartphones...), without money involved, especially Real Time Strategy games, Grand Theft Auto and First/Third Person Shooter games, being these the favorite games.
- 58% changed, with custody, the types of games played (mostly for not being available the preferred games) and 56% started playing during less time. In Custodial Facilities, the practice of this gaming is allowed in line with the attainment of educational goals and in a specific schedule.
- In the last 12 months, 33% gambled (28% online and 28% offline). Gambling is not authorized inside Custodial Facilities. The types of games gambled by more young people were cards for money/dice games (20% online, 19% offline) and lotteries (12% online, 12% offline). The games played more frequently were cards for money/dice games and betting. Usually, these young people gambled once or less per week.
- In a typical day, young offenders play electronic games without money involved and/or gamble online usually for less than 1 hour inside the Custodial Facilities and about 3 hours outside.
- In a typical day of gambling, young offenders usually spend less than 10€.
- 20% already had problems with game playing, especially involvement in violent acts (13%). Problems were more common in gamblers (online/offline).

3. Psychoactive substance use and crimes related with current custody

- The main types of crimes by which these young offenders were in custody were theft and assault. 28% also reported crimes related with drugs (excluding drug use, which is not a crime in Portugal), probably reporting more crimes than the ones related with the current custody.

- The age of first experiences with alcohol and drugs increases with the age of the first commitment of crimes.
- 65% committed, at least part of the crimes, under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs: 34% sometimes under the influence of alcohol, 8% always, and 45% sometimes under the influence of drugs, 15% always.
- 66% reported having committed crimes in order to obtain money or goods, 40% for the fun/adrenaline and 33% for motivations related with substance use (24% to be able to buy drugs/alcohol, 19% because were under the influence, 4% because were with a hangover).

4. Description of young offenders risk factors towards alcohol and drugs use/abuse and criminality

- This population has experienced a series of transitions/disruptions in life, possibly more than young people in general, considering, for instance, changes in the family structure (only one third always lived with both parents), house changes (42% changed house 3 or more times) and changes in schools (half or more studied in more schools than it was expected for their school grade).
- These young people reported that, before custody, were in school grades inferior to what was expected for their age, 95% usually skipped classes, 86% already had been suspended or expelled from school, 16% that school had no use and 70% didn't like school.
- 56% mentioned psychoactive substance use as a way to deal with difficult situations in life.
- 28% reported that one or more members of their close family usually get/got drunken, 25% that usually use/used drugs and 8% that have/had problems with games.
- 24% reported that their close family accepts their eventual cannabis use and 21% that accepts their eventual riskier alcohol drinking (drunkenness). The level of perceived approval toward other drugs use is inferior.
- The risk perception of cannabis use of these young people is inferior to the risk perception of young people in general: half report that, if used occasionally, cannabis use doesn't bring major problems.
- 76% use cannabis when they are with friends, 37% do it always in these circumstances. In turn, 21% report that when with friends, usually commit robbery and 11% do it always.
- The perceived ease of access to drugs is superior to the one of young people in general. More specifically, 71% reported being very easy to access cannabis in a period of 24 hours.

5. Young offenders and Custodial Programs

- Almost all go to school in the Custodial Facilities (Adult Education and Training Course). More than half (57%) like this school, while, only 30% liked the school where they used to go before custody.
- As a matter of fact, considering the functions that they attribute to school, while, 16% think that school frequented before custody had no use, now, 5% have this opinion about school frequented in Custodial Facilities. In comparison (school frequented before vs school frequented currently), the school frequented currently is seen by more young people as having the function of learning (65%) and/or as a means to get a job that they like and/or with good income (70%), and by less young people as a setting to socialize (21%).
- More than half young offenders report wanting to change their lifestyle concerning crime, psychoactive substance use and game playing, after custody: 85% want to change their lifestyle concerning crime, 75% concerning alcohol drinking, 67% concerning drug use and 66% concerning game playing.



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