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► **To cite this version:**

Robert Courtois, W. El-Hage, Théodore Moussiessi, Etienne Mullet. Prevalence of Alcohol, Drug Use and Psychoactive Substance Consumption in Samples of French and Congolese High School Students. *Tropical Doctor*, 2016, 34 (1), pp.15-17. 10.1177/004947550403400106 . hal-02334599

HAL Id: hal-02334599

<https://hal.science/hal-02334599v1>

Submitted on 10 Nov 2024

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Prevalence of alcohol, drug use and psychoactive substance consumption in samples of French and Congolese high school students

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Summary

The aim of this study was to make a first comparative approach to teenagers' consumption of psychoactive substances within samples drawn in France and in Brazzaville the Congo. The samples consisted of 1637 French high-school students and 155 Congolese students. An anonymous questionnaire with 13 closed items was completed. Whilst 82.1 % of the male and 74.5% of the female French students had already consumed some alcoholic drinks, only 42.4% of the male and 44.0% of female Congolese students had consumed alcohol. French high school students were more affected by tobacco addiction: 22.2% (male) and 22.9% (female) of the French students smoked daily; only 3.0% (male) and 1.9% (female) Congolese students were smokers. The consumption of psychotropic medicines (sedatives, anxiolytics or hypnotics) appeared overall to be less among French high school students than the Congolese, particularly in boys (11.9% versus 17.2%). This consumption was mainly from medicine taken without medical prescription or misused. The use of cannabis appeared overall to be higher among French high school students (45.9% of males and 31.6% of females) than the Congolese (12.5% of males and 7.4% of females).

Introduction

In France and other European countries there has been a rise in the consumption of psychoactive substances among adolescents, as well as a more precocious initiation to these substances 1-4. There has also been an increase in the consumption of alcohol, although less marked than that of tobacco and illicit drugs especially cannabis (whose consumption has increased rapidly). The Congo (Brazzaville) is a country in central Africa that was recently ruined by a fratricidal war from which it has not yet recovered. In recent years, cigarette consumption, misuse of psychotropic medicines, and other drug abuse has increased in the cities, with illegal small-scale drug production and trading. There is still no advertising for tobacco cigarettes, unlike in other African countries such as Guinea. There is a lack of epidemiological data concerning the use of psychoactive substances in the Congo. The principal aim of this study was to make a first comparative approach to teenagers' consumption of alcohol, drug use and use of psychoactive substances in France and in the Congo (Brazzaville).

Methods

Subjects

The study population comprised French high school students from 4 different high schools in two departments of the region Indre-et-Loire and Loir-et-Cher. The students were affiliated to general or technical schools (60%), professional schools (35%), and agricultural schools (5%). The Congolese sample comprised highschool students from Pointe-Noire, in the Kouilou region. Pointe-Noire is the second city of the country and the economic capital. These students came also from general and technical schools (62%), professional schools (15%), and secondary schools (23%). (The Congolese pupils of secondary schools and high schools are older than those in France which is why we chose to include pupils of secondary schools to have comparable French and Congolese samples.)

Material

The anonymously administered questionnaire consisted of 13 closed items presented in the form of yes/no assertions. For most items, students were asked to reply on seven-point frequency scales of the type 'never' to 'every day', or 'never' to 'very often'.

Procedure

The study took place during the second school term of 1997 in France and the second school term of 1998 in Congo (Brazzaville). Questionnaires were auto-administered and anonymity was ensured. Head teachers and school medical services (local and supervisors) helped us with the samples.

Results

Subjects

The mean age of the 1637 French high-school students was 17.8 years (SD = 1.6, range = 15-25), and 71.2% of subjects were females (n = 1165). The Congolese sample was made up of 155 high-school students from Pointe-Noire (mean age = 18.3 years, SD = 2.1, range = 15-25), of whom 45% were females.

Alcohol consumption

A comparison of lifetime prevalence (%) of psychoactive substances' consumption in our samples of French and Congolese high school students is presented in Table 1. The results showed that a very large majority of French students had already consumed alcoholic drinks (82.1% of the males and 74.5 of the females), compared to 42% of the males and 40% of the females of the Congolese students. The males consumed more alcohol than the females, particularly in regards to regular use (French, 21.3%, versus 9.0%; Congolese 14.1% versus 7.3%) samples. Alcoholic intoxication was found greater in male rather than female students (66.5% of French male students versus 46.0% of the females; 46% of Congolese male students ,versus 16.7% of the females). The sex ratio of the alcohol intoxications was larger among the Congolese high school students (2.75) than the French (1.44), while the alcohol consumption was more prevalent in French high school students.

Tobacco consumption

Tobacco addiction was not widespread among the Congolese high school students. Only 3.0% of the Congolese male students and 1.9% of the females smoked daily compared with 22.2% of the French male students and 22.9% of the females. Close to 50% of the French students had already experimented with tobacco, compared to only 25% of the Congolese male students and 13% of the females.

Illicit drug use

We asked French and Congolese high school students about their use of other psychoactive substances (legal or illegal). The consumption of psychotropic medicines (sedatives, anxiolytics or hypnotics) appeared overall to be more widespread among the Congolese than the French students, particularly among the male students. Usually females consumed (on medical prescription) more psychotropic drugs⁵: (11.9% of the French male students and 19.5% of the females: 17.2% of the Congolese male students and 18.2% of the females). Table 1 shows that the proportions were higher among the French students than the Congolese.

The use of cannabis is relatively unusual among Congolese high school students; 12.5% of the male students and 7.4% of the females had tried it compared to 45.9% of the French male students and 31.6% of the French females. It is interesting to note that the female Congolese students stated that they tried cannabis only once, whereas male Congolese students consisted of

onetime users (4.5%), occasional users (3.1%) and daily users (4.7%). Again the French male high school students consumed cannabis more frequently than the females: onetime use (10.9% versus 9.7%), occasional use (24.5% versus 17.7%), or regular use (10.5% versus 4.3%, including daily users 6.4% versus 2.0%).

Poly-use

We also observed the frequency of poly-use of three psychoactive substances (alcohol, tobacco, cannabis). Among French high-school students who admitted consuming alcohol, 62.7% used tobacco (37.2% regularly) and 50.2% had already tried cannabis. Among Congolese high school students who admitted consuming alcohol, 25% had already used tobacco and 12.5% had already tried cannabis. However, we did not receive sufficient information to be able to detail poly-use.

Discussion

In terms of prevalence, the Congolese students clearly used less alcohol and tobacco. The proportion of alcohol consumers in the Congolese sample was about a half that of the French sample, whether we referred to regular or occasional consumers. However the number of alcohol intoxications were comparatively higher among the Congolese sample. Thus, regular alcohol intoxications in boys occurred with the same frequency in both countries. Although Congolese students drank less alcohol, we noticed that the regular use of alcohol among the Congolese female students was comparable to that of French females; which could mean that, in fact, Congolese females presented riskier behaviour than French.

Tobacco use was still not a very widespread practice among Congolese high school students: (3%) compared to the 23% French (23%). The consumption of psychotropic medicines (sedatives, anxiolytics or hypnotics) was usually higher among the female students⁵. Nevertheless, we noticed that this sex ratio was almost 1:1 among the Congolese. We believe that this concerned medicines taken either without medical prescription or misused. This phenomenon was also observed among the French male students who were poly-users and whose results showed an increase in the use of psychotropic medicines. It should be noted that these medicines are freely available in the Pointe-Noire markets.

The consumption of cannabis in Pointe-Noire was low, as almost 90% of the Congolese high school students had never used it at the time of the study. It was not easy to estimate the consumption of the other illicit drugs ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD, opioids, cocaine, solvents, etc). Indeed, some of them ignored even the meaning of these words, whereas others seemed to know them well. The validity of such data appeared uncertain, and so we have chosen not to mention it. Some Congolese professionals seemed alarmed by a sharp increase in the consumption of drugs over the last 10 years, and especially since the last war. However, as we lacked consistent data we are unable to comment.

Limitations

The Congolese sample was not as large as the French. The rate of initial data loss was 40% (from 250 students) which may be partially explained by the difficulty that some Congolese students had in understanding some of the words. The 13 closed items were included in a more important questionnaire which concerned risk taking. Not all Congolese students answered all the questions, notably those dealing with illicit drugs (ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD, opioids, cocaine, solvents, etc.). Therefore, we decided not to report data concerning poly-use and illicit drugs (except cannabis). In the future, we shall attempt to verify these data in other epidemiological

studies. In addition, the two samples are not representative of the national populations in France and the Congo, as no sampling methods were used in the selection process. Even if our results may be concordant with national data, both the French and Congolese samples were taken in relatively small geographical areas.

In spite of these limitations, and considering the absence of studies in this field in the Congo, the present study constitutes a first and unique exploratory approach.

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Table 1 Comparison of lifetime prevalence (%) of alcohol, drug use and psychoactive substance consumption among samples of French (n=1637) and Congolese (n=155) high school students

<i>Psychoactive substances</i>	France		Congo	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Alcohol				
Just once	13.2	19.9	10.9	5.5
Occasional	47.5	45.7	17.2	27.3
Regular	21.3	9.0	14.1	7.3
Total	82.1	74.5	42.2	40.0
Alcohol intoxication				
Just once	13.8	12.1	7.9	9.3
Occasional	34.6	25.3	20.6	3.7
Regular	18.2	8.6	17.5	3.7
Total	66.5	46.0	46.0	16.7
Tobacco				
Just once	7.0	8.0	13.6	7.4
Occasional	14.7	12.6	7.6	3.7
Regular	26.9	27.5	3.0	1.9
Daily*	22.2	22.9	3.0	1.9
Total	48.6	48.1	24.2	13.0
Cannabis				
Just once	10.9	9.7	4.7	7.4
Occasional	24.5	17.7	3.1	0.0
Regular	10.5	4.3	4.7	0.0
Daily*	6.4	2.0	4.7	0.0
Total	45.9	31.6	12.5	7.4
Sedatives/hypnotics/ anxiolytics				
Just once	4.2	8.1	13.6	12.7
Occasional	5.7	8.7	4.5	5.5
Regular	2.0	2.6	0.0	0.0
Total	11.9	19.5	17.2	18.2

*Precision on the 'daily' consumption that is included in the 'regular' consumption