The World Health Organization (WHO) recently completed a survey of rates of lifetime drug use in 17 countries. Over 54,000 people were questioned about whether they had ever used specific drugs during their lifetimes. Substances included in the survey were alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and cocaine. The survey included countries from the Americas (U.S., Mexico, Colombia), Europe (Belgium, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, France, and the Ukraine), Africa and the Middle East (Nigeria, South Africa, Lebanon, and Israel), and Asia/Oceania (China, Japan, New Zealand).

When lifetime drug use rates were examined, the United States showed the highest lifetime use rates for cocaine, cannabis, and tobacco and ranked sixth in lifetime rate of alcohol use. The most striking result was that for lifetime use of cocaine. In the United States sample, 16% reported that they had ever used cocaine. The countries closest to this rate were New Zealand (4.3%), Spain (4.1%) Mexico (4%), and Colombia (4%). Results for other drugs also showed that the U.S. sample reported that 42.4% had ever used cannabis and 73.7% had ever used tobacco. For alcohol use, the Ukraine reported the highest lifetime use (97%); the U.S. ranked 6th at 91.1%.

The high rate of cocaine use the United States is attributed by National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) scientists in part to epidemics in the U.S. of cocaine use in the 1970’s and 1980’s that affected the lifetime use rates; drug use rates are now lower in this country. They also point out that the focus on lifetime use does not reflect current
use patterns, which are generally lower. For instance, current tobacco use in the U.S. is estimated at about 30% as compared to 74% reported ever having used, according to Dr. Nora Volkow, NIDA Director.

Other results of the survey suggest that the traditional gender gap (males use more than females) in use is narrowing in younger groups of people. In addition, the high-risk age range for initiation of drug use used to be from adolescence into the early 20’s; it now extends into the late 20’s.

References:


United States ranks first in lifetime use of three drugs. NIDA Notes, 22 (5), 19.

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