



## Risky behaviors and substance use in youth leisure time

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### Abstract

This research is related to a wider program promoted in Italy by European Union, whose participants are Public Institutions, No Profit Enterprises and Faculty of Psychology of University of Florence. The program is aimed to improve health promotion in young people leisure time by means of community based interventions. Theoretical approaches come from studies about risky behavior, legal and illegal substances use, outreach work in leisure time for promoting healthy behaviors. The aim of this step of the research is to obtain quantitative data about youth lifestyle and about risky behaviors, particularly drug use, during entertainment events. Participants are 1283 subjects, male (51,4%) and female, aged 18-30 years, living in different Italian regions.

Instrument: a specifically adapted questionnaire to collect biographical data and information about life style, spending leisure time, risky behaviors and patterns of substance use.

Results highlighted in young people importance of peer group in spending leisure time, patterns of undertaking risky behaviors as legal and illegal substances use, particularly party drugs use, careless and drunken driving coming back from discos, concerts or raves. Results moreover show behaviors change in leisure time, problems in recreational drug use, gender differences, experiences in harm reduction and in health promotion programs.

Key words: Risky behaviors, young people lifestyle, leisure time, community based programs.

### Introduction

This research is related to a wider program EQUAL (2008), promoted by Europe Union, whose participants are Public Institutions, No Profit Enterprises and Faculty of Psychology of Florence.

The program is aimed to improve health promotion in leisure time, promoting young people enterprises and committing them in planning events safeness, for young participants and for local communities.

Theoretical approaches come from studies about risky behavior, legal and illegal substances use, outreach work in leisure situations (for instance in great musical events) for promoting healthy behaviors (Ostazewski, Zimmerman, 2006; White, Degenhardt, Breen, Bruno, Newman, Proudfoot, 2006; Eiserman, Diamond, Schensul, 2005; ter Bogt, Engels, 2005; Mair, 2006; Meringolo, Chiodini, 2005; Sweeting, West, 2003). They come also from systemic approach in system change (Hirsch, Levine,

Miller, 2007; Tseng, Seidman 2007; Kelly, 2007; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Yang, 2007).

Particular attention was paid to analyze experiences in prevention of risky behaviors that happen frequently during events, as drug dealing and drug use, car accidents, driving while intoxicated, aggressive behaviors, difficulties in relationship with local communities and with inhabitants.

### Aim

The aim of this step of the research is to obtain quantitative data about youth lifestyle and about risky behaviors, particularly drug use, during entertainment events in order to better promote community based interventions in leisure sites.

### Method

Participants are 1283 subjects; male (51,4%) and female; aged 18-30 years (mean 22,7).

Instrument: A specifically adapted questionnaire to collect biographical data and information about life style, spending leisure time, risky behaviors and patterns of substance use. The Questionnaire form was preceded by depth interviews carried out in the previous qualitative research.

### Results

Demographics: participants were students (35,3%), employed (25,1%), students/employed (22,6%) and subjects looking for first employment (16,2%); they live usually with their families (73%), and for the most part of them (59%) in a small town, that is sometimes perceived (33%) lacking of leisure opportunities. They come from different Italian regions (North of Italy, Center, South and Isles).

Results highlighted in young people importance of peer group in spending leisure time, patterns of undertaking risky behaviors as legal and illegal substances use, and particularly "party drugs" use, careless driving and drunken driving coming back from discos, concerts or raves. Results moreover show behaviors change in leisure time, gender differences, experiences in harm reduction and in health promotion programs.

### Particularly:

Young people usually spend their leisure time prevalently *alone*, *at home*, then with *significant others* (as family, partner, friends), or *outside*, *without a planned activity*, or *playing sport*, or in *discos* and *musical events*. *Cultural activities* seem less attended. There are significant gender differences: for instance girls seem more interested in

activities carried out at home or with a small group, and less in sport and in going anywhere. We can see nevertheless that staying alone and at home is negatively related to satisfaction in spending leisure time, that is more relevant when they stay with their peer group, or when they go outside for a walk, or in a pub.

Preferred meeting places are pub, town *squares*, and also *home*. Less chosen seem associations as *recreational clubs* or *parish groups*. Few participants state that they are often attending *gyms*.

There is a strong correlation between closeness to *substances* and some everyday activities. *Closeness to substances* is a variable that we have built on answers to these items: "to know some people who are using substances, to be present while other people are using, to receive a proposal for using, to use".

Musical events are strongly related to closeness to substances, as we could foresee, but

also staying alone at home and going outside anywhere appear as predictive factor for substance use. On the contrary, spending time with significant others or groups seems to be a protective factor.

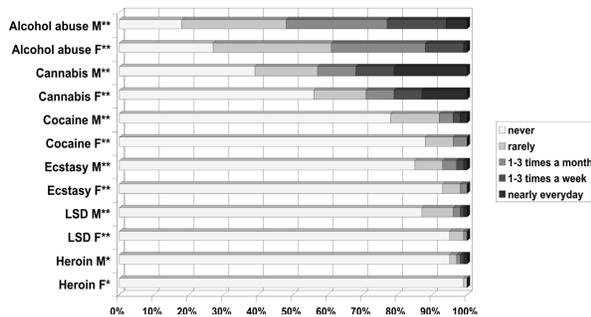
ANOVA shows significant differences between means, and particularly it reveals that *Closeness to substances* increases with different kind of *Meeting places*: recreational clubs and pubs are at the top, followed by town squares and home (also in this case staying at home doesn't appear a protection against drug use), and finally by gyms and parish groups.

Choosing an entertainment: what kind of criterion? *Friends presence* seem to be the most important reason for choosing an event. There are significant differences between male and female participants: the last ones seem to be more worried for price, *engagements for the day after and return time*.

About substance use: we have asked what kind of substance young people prefer, in a scale from never to rarely, 1-3 times a month, 1-3 times a week, nearly everyday. The prevalence is for alcohol abuse, that concerns youth at least several time a month, then cannabis use and at last, with low prevalence, cocaine, LSD, heroin. For alcohol we considered "abuse", and not use, according to literature, particularly in Italy when alcohol use is a social habit. From the interviews we say, nevertheless, that incidence of cocaine is increasing and also heroine is now rising, particularly in younger participants.

Gender differences are lower than in past generations, for all kinds of substances, and in both

male and female seems to prevail use of recreational drugs (alcohol and cannabis).



The results show significant gender differences ( $*=p<0,05$  and  $**=p<0,001$ ) in way of substance use. For all the substances the use in female participants seems to be generally less frequent (Fig. 1), and it seems to concern only few of them. However a very high use, that is the habit of consuming nearly every day concerns, for instance use of *cannabis*, more then 20% of males and more then 10% of female. We suppose, according with literature and with evidence based interventions, that the use of recreational drugs, that's cannabis, is now an "usual" practice for young people, that probably need prevention and health promotion based on youth commitment, on all behaviors in every day life and on harm reduction, rather than on indiscriminating prohibition.

Perception of prevention in leisure places: we asked participants about their perception of street outreach work that is usually carried out in leisure places in Italy. Youth that experiences risky behavior (as *Closeness to substances and Substance use, Driving while intoxicated, Alcohol abuse, Unsafe sex and Aggressive behaviors*) knows this work, even though they don't pay a great attention to it. The matter is that they don't think that this intervention may be addressed to them, with a sort of unrealistic optimism. What's more, the higher are undertaken risky behaviors the less is perceived importance of prevention.

We have identified then three cluster, based on importance of experienced risks. Low risk cluster concerns about 43% of participants, medium risk cluster 39% and high risk cluster 18%. Female participants are decidedly more present in low risk cluster, while male participants prevail in the medium risk cluster and above all in high risk cluster.

Low risk cluster experiences less risky behaviors, but results show increasing means for *Alcohol abuse and*

*Aggressive behaviors*. Medium risk cluster undertakes several risky behaviors, and particularly *Dangerous driving, Closeness to substances, Unsafe sex, and Alcohol abuse*. These results may indicate need of prevention also for youth that appears as "normal" population.

For high risk cluster, more experienced behaviors seem to be *Drive while intoxicated* and *Substance use*, but we can also observe *Unsafe sex, Aggressive behaviors and Dangerous driving*.

We can think that *Driving while intoxicated* together with *Careless and dangerous driving* lead to the great number of accidents that usually happens in the week end on Italian roads.

Participants were asked about their perception of *Motivation* for substance use. They stated different motivations, and above all *Curiosity and Emotions seeking*.

Results show (Fig. 2) that as well that the higher is the experienced risk level, the less are perceived "problematical" motivations, as *Being agreeable to friends, Escaping difficulties, Problems at home, Loneliness or Lack of values*.

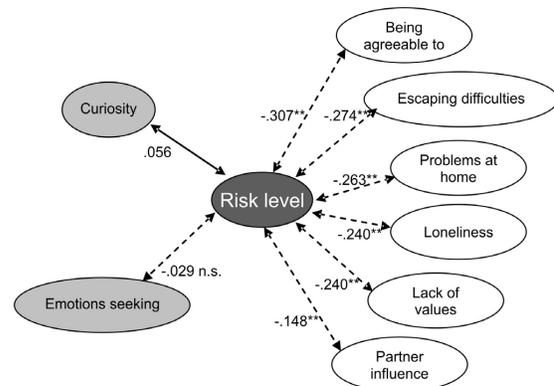


Fig. 2

Particularly for high substance users (from 1/3 times a week to nearly everyday) Curiosity and Emotions seeking reach the highest values.

High users (18% for alcohol abuse and 26% for cannabis use) are participants recruited prevalently in large towns (for instance Rome). This group will require paying attention in future researches and above all in future interventions for health promotion, analyzing also other psychological variables and personality features.

**Conclusions**

Results highlighted in young people everyday activities a gap between what they are used to do (staying alone and at home) and what they wish to do (staying with significant others). Importance of peer group in spending leisure time is often pointed out. We have reached besides a better knowledge about present patterns of undertaking risky behaviors, particularly legal and illegal substances use, quite different if compared with what happened only few years ago, and quite different in high use for males and females. Other behaviors, as dangerous and drunken driving coming back from discos, concerts or raves, ask for planning specific prevention programs in the future.

Results show as well difficulties in participation in health promotion interventions, and lack of motivation in protecting themselves. Young people seem to think that perhaps outreach work in this field would be important, but not for them. It's possible that only individual prevention or school site prevention is not enough to change this kind of risk perception, while community based programs, being able to commit young people and especially the whole peer groups, would be a better practice to improve healthy behaviors.

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