



The 17<sup>th</sup> Year Publication, No.1

June 2025

## SUBSTANCE USE AMONG ALBANIAN YOUTH: HEALTH CONSEQUENCES, KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** The use of psychoactive substances among young people is an increasing challenge in Albania, with serious impacts on their physical, mental, and social well-being. This study aims to assess the level of knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and practical experiences of young people related to drug use, as well as the contributing factors and possible consequences in their personal and academic lives.

**Objective:** The objective of this study is to evaluate the level of knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and practices of young people in Tirana regarding drug use, and to identify the factors contributing to its use and the effects on mental, physical health, and social/professional life.

### Methodology

This study was conducted using a quantitative research method through the collection of data via a structured questionnaire. Participants were selected through random sampling, including young people from various cities in Albania. Data was collected from 517 young individuals aged 18–25 in the city of Tirana. The data were statistically analyzed to identify key trends and correlations between various factors. Data collection was carried out online (anonymously), using the Google Forms platform to ensure quick and efficient information gathering.

### Conclusions

The results revealed a significant lack of knowledge about the real risks of drug use, especially concerning the most widespread substances such as cannabis. A considerable portion of young people expressed tolerant attitudes toward drug use, influenced by peer pressure, curiosity, and emotional stress. The findings highlight direct impacts on mental health, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and deterioration in sleep and concentration. The social and academic effects include social isolation, decreased academic performance, and strained family relationships. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the need for comprehensive educational interventions, prevention strategies, and psycho-social support for young people in Albania in order to reduce the long-term impact of this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** *Drugs, youth, mental health, knowledge, perceptions, contributing factors, physical impacts, Albania, etc.*

## Introduction

In recent decades, the use of narcotic substances has become a global public health and social issue, particularly affecting the youth population.

In Albania, the issue of drug use among young people has received increasing attention in recent years, due to the spread of various substances in both urban and rural environments. However, the lack of up-to-date studies on young people's knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and practices regarding drug use poses a challenge to the development of effective preventive and therapeutic policies.

In 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported an alarming rise in substance use among youth in Europe, Central Asia, and Canada. According to the *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) study, more than half of 15-year-olds have tried alcohol, while 1 in 5 have used electronic cigarettes. This trend indicates a rapid increase in the use of substances such as cannabis, alcohol, and nicotine. (*World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe*, April 25, 2024)

Illicit drugs can have numerous negative consequences for users. These include adverse health effects such as respiratory problems, cardiovascular diseases, mental health issues, and accidents (*Devlin J. Robert, Henry A. John, 2008*).

The shared use of injection equipment increases the risk of transmitting blood-borne diseases, such as hepatitis C. (*European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction – EMCDDA, 2021*).

Illicit drug use can also lead to death, either directly through overdose or indirectly through fatal drug-related illnesses, accidents, violence, and suicide (*OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development / European Union, 2020*).

## Negative health effects and daily life impact

The negative health effects of drug use can lead to significant problems in the daily lives of individuals who use these substances.

In Albania, although the issue is not yet at alarming levels compared to some other countries, the reported trend of substance use among young people is on the rise. Reports from public health organizations, as well as assessments from non-profit organizations working with youth, suggest that the use of cannabis, alcohol, and synthetic substances is becoming increasingly common—particularly in urban areas and in social or festive settings.

The growing use of substances has notable consequences not only on physical health—such as damage to the nervous system, vital organs, and weakened immunity—but also on mental health. This includes anxiety, depression, loss of concentration, personality disorders, and, in severe cases, the development of long-term mental illnesses.

Furthermore, substance use affects interpersonal relationships, academic or professional performance, and young people's potential to build a stable and sustainable future.

## Factors influencing the initiation and continuation of drug use

Substance use among young people is a multifactorial behavior. Contemporary literature identifies several main categories of risk factors:

### Individual factors:

Curiosity, the tendency to experiment, emotional disorders (such as anxiety and depression), low self-esteem, and the absence of clear life goals.

A wide range of individual factors are known to be associated with school failure, low academic interest and achievement, rebellious attitudes, a sense of exclusion or alienation, low self-worth, and early antisocial behavior (*Elliott D.S. et al., 1985*).

Although psychological (individual) factors are not yet fully understood, a set of personality traits has

been identified that are linked to a high risk of alcohol and drug problems among adolescents. These traits include: lack of empathy for others' feelings, frequent and minor dishonesty, a preference for immediate rather than delayed gratification, and low sensitivity to punishment.

Young people with these personality traits are particularly vulnerable to problems with alcohol, drugs, and other forms of problematic behavior. (*Smith G.M., Fogg C.P., 1978*)

Early experimentation is associated with a higher risk of drug abuse compared to those who begin using substances at an older age. (*C.L. Jones, R.J. Battjes, 1985*)

#### **Family factors:**

Lack of emotional support, family conflict, parents who use substances, or lack of parental monitoring and control.

Family-related factors play a significant role in increasing the risk of drug use among youth. The absence of emotional support from parents, ongoing family conflicts, and the presence of substance-using parents can negatively affect the psychological and behavioral development of young people.

Additionally, a lack of parental supervision is often associated with deviant behavior, including drug use, leaving the young person more exposed to peer pressure and external risk factors.

#### **Social factors:**

Peer influence, group pressure, social marginalization, and unemployment. Substance use is often an attempt to gain acceptance within a social group.

Some risk factors, such as a lack of cognitive and social skills, poor coping abilities, impulse control problems, and high sensitivity to peer pressure, place this group at a higher risk for developing substance use disorders. (*Didden Robert et al., 2020*)

Age is the most consistently linked factor with problematic drug use. Kandel and other researchers have shown that early initiation of alcohol use increases the risk of marijuana use, and that early marijuana use raises the likelihood of progression to other illicit drug use.

Gender is not a strong predictor of adolescent drug use. Differences between male and female drug use have narrowed over the past two decades. These differences are relatively minor and vary by type of drug, usage level, and age.

#### **Socio-economic and cultural factors:**

Poverty, lack of social and healthcare services, stigma, and the absence of structured education on mental and emotional health.

Demographic variables such as age, ethnicity, race, and socio-economic status have been examined for their influence on adolescent alcohol and drug use.

Socio-economic status alone is not strongly correlated with substance abuse. Substance abuse and addiction affect all income and socio-economic groups.

### **Consequences of drug use among young people**

#### **- Impact on mental health**

Drug use is closely associated with mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and psychosis. Substances like cannabis, amphetamines, and LSD (Lysergic acid diethylamide – a highly potent hallucinogenic substance) have short-term effects on perception and mood, but prolonged use increases the risk of developing psychotic disorders.

According to a study conducted by Ngjela J et al. (2025) on the assessment of stress levels among university students, it was found that negative emotional states—such as nervousness, frustration, and stress—often contribute to the initiation of drug use among young people (*Ngjela et al, 2025*).

Recent studies report that early cannabis use may negatively affect brain development, causing problems with memory, concentration, and emotional regulation. Drug use also increases social withdrawal

and the risk of suicide attempts, particularly when combined with untreated depression. Adolescence is a critical developmental period for the brain and body. Changes in brain development cause adolescents to exhibit increased impulsivity, which may lead to risky behaviors with long-term consequences. (Steinberg, Laurence, et al., 2018)

### - Impact on physical health

Chronic substance use negatively affects the central nervous system, cardiovascular system, liver, and lungs. Substances like cocaine and amphetamines significantly increase the risk of heart attacks, cardiac arrhythmias, and vascular damage.

Drugs administered via injection carry a high risk of severe infections such as hepatitis B/C and HIV. Moreover, combining substances (e.g., drugs + alcohol) is associated with unpredictable and often fatal effects.

Physically, problems with sleep, chronic fatigue, and lack of concentration are common effects, which impact not only health but also daily academic and social functioning. The lack of access to support services or rehabilitation structures is a critical gap that hinders the recovery of young people.

The mixing of drugs can have serious and unpredictable consequences for the user's body and mind. Additionally, drugs impair users' judgment, leading them to take greater risks, such as engaging in unprotected sexual activity. This increases the risk of contracting hepatitis, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007).

### - Social and professional impacts

Drug use significantly impairs the social and professional functioning of young people, leading to:

**Loss of family and social connections:** Individuals become isolated and lose the trust of family and friends.

**Academic decline and school dropout:** Substances impair cognitive performance and concentration.

**Difficulty in gaining or keeping employment:** Due to lack of motivation and psychological challenges.

**Involvement in crime and violence:** To finance drug use or due to impulsive behaviors following substance intake.

In Albania, data show a clear link between substance use and involvement in violent incidents, social conflict, and legal issues. Society still heavily stigmatizes individuals with addiction, which hampers their recovery and reintegration into the community.

Drug use is associated with tangible consequences in family relationships, academic decline, and withdrawal from social activities. This dimension of impact is particularly relevant in the Albanian context, where family and social structures remain essential in shaping youth identity.

The significant drop in social participation and lack of connection with rehabilitation institutions highlight the need for a functional referral system and an increase in community capacity to address this issue in an intersectoral manner.

### Study Methodology

The aim of this study is to assess the level of knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and practices of young people in Tirana regarding drug use, and to identify the contributing factors and the effects of substance use on their mental health, physical well-being, and social/professional life.

### Study Objectives:

- To evaluate the level of young people's knowledge about drugs and their health and social consequences.

- To identify the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of young people towards drug use.
- To describe current drug use practices within this age group.
- To highlight personal, social, and environmental factors that influence the initiation or continuation of substance use.
- To analyze the impact of drug use on mental and physical health, and on young people's social/professional life.
- To provide recommendations for preventive and educational interventions tailored to the needs of youth.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What is the level of awareness among young people in Albania about drug use and its effects?
2. What are the dominant attitudes and perceptions among youth regarding the use of narcotic substances?
3. How widespread is drug use among young people, and what are the most common practices?
4. What are the main reasons that lead young people to start using drugs?
5. What are the most frequent mental, physical, and social consequences of drug use in their lives?

### **Research Design:**

This study was conducted using a quantitative research method, through the use of a structured questionnaire. The data was collected from young individuals aged 18 to 25 years in the city of Tirana. The questionnaire was developed with reference to relevant international literature on the topic (including materials published in PubMed) and was distributed online via Google Forms.

### **Ethical Considerations:**

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was uploaded to Google Forms and did not require participants to provide their names or personal identifiers. Furthermore, prior to filling out the questionnaire, it was clearly stated that the data collected would be used exclusively for research purposes. This ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, in accordance with ethical research standards.

### **Study Results**

From the analysis of this study, data were collected and valuable conclusions were drawn regarding the knowledge, attitudes, and practices concerning drug use among young people aged 18–25 in the city of Tirana.

Below are specified some of the most important findings from the analysis of the collected data:

The questionnaire was completed by 517 individuals, of whom 86.7% were female and 13.3% were male. It was distributed electronically through a link created on the Google Forms platform. The data were collected from the 18–25 age group.

- **Level of knowledge about drugs:** According to the collected data, 82.8% of participants stated that they have knowledge about drug use and its consequences, while 17.2% expressed that they do not have knowledge about this issue.

- **Consequences of drug use:** In response to the question about the most well-known consequences of drug use, 38.1% of respondents mentioned mental health damage (such as depression, anxiety, etc.), 15.5% physical health damage (heart, liver problems, etc.), while 33.3% emphasized drug addiction as the most important consequence. In addition, 5.2% mentioned social and legal disorders as possible

consequences, while only 7.9% of participants stated that they are not sure about the consequences of drug use.

- **Sources of information about drugs:** The data show that 88.4% of respondents received information in school regarding the risks associated with drug use, while 11.6% stated that they did not receive information on this topic during schooling.

- **Evaluation of the information received about drugs:** According to the collected data, 55.7% of the participants in the study stated that the information they received about drug use was useful and informative. On the other hand, 29.2% think that the offered information needs improvement, 9.5% declared that they did not pay attention to this information, while only 5.6% emphasized that they did not receive information about drug use.

- **Participation in awareness activities:** In response to this question, % of young people stated that they had participated in educational activities for raising awareness about drug use, while 54.5% emphasized that they had not participated in such activities.

- **Sources referred to for information about drugs:** When asked what are the most common sources young people receive information about drugs: 27.7% specified that they received this information in schools, 4.8% received it from their parents, 24.4% received information from online sources, 4.4% from their friends, 22.2% from social media, 4.1% from traditional media (television, radio, etc.), and 12.4% specified that they do not have specific sources (this information may be received from various directions).

- **Drug use among young people:** According to the responses, 88.8% specified that they have never used drugs, and 11.2% have used them.

- **Reason for drug use:** Based on the responses collected, 10.4% of young people specified curiosity as the main reason for drug use, 2.1% used due to peer pressure, 3.3% were influenced by stress or personal problems, 2.9% specified entertainment as the main reason, 4.3% specified other reasons, and 77% responded that they have not used.

- **When young people most often use drugs:** 4.3% specified that they use drugs most often during parties or social events, 1.7% use them when they feel stressed or sad, 2.1% specified personal desire as the reason. 91.7% responded that they do not use drugs.

- **Effects of drug use:** In response to the question of whether they have experienced any negative physical or psychological effects from drug use; 3.3% responded that they have experienced, and 7.2% have not experienced any negative physical or psychological effects. Meanwhile, 89.6% responded that they have not used drugs.

- **Seeking help for drug use:** In response to the question of whether they have sought professional help for drug use, 6% of the young people who participated in the study responded that they have not sought professional help for drug use, and only 1.9% have sought professional help. 92.1% responded that they have not used drugs.

- **Reasons for seeking help:** From the responses collected through the questionnaires, the reasons influencing the decision to seek help were: 4.6% specified health reasons, 1.2% family pressure, 2.3% negative impact on professional/academic life, 1.4% specified other reasons. 90.5% responded that they have not used drugs.

- **Impact of drug use on mental health:** In response to the question of whether drug use affects the mental health of individuals who consume it, 81.2% responded positively, and 18.8% specified that drug use does not affect the mental health of individuals who use it.

- **Consequences of drug use:** From the collected responses, it resulted that 34.8% of the participants think that drug use reduces productivity in daily life, 17.8% specified lack of concentration, 25% the

presence of aggressiveness, 6.6% the presence of violence, and 15.9% specified being unsocial.

- **Society's perception of drug use:** From the responses received, it resulted that 32.3% think society perceives drug use as very negative, 28.4% mostly negative, 28.6% neutral, 3.3% mostly positive, and 7.4% very positive.

- **Importance of education and awareness:** From the study data, it was concluded that 59.4% think that education and awareness can influence the prevention of drug use, 36% responded that they are not sure whether education and awareness can influence prevention, and only 4.6% specified that education and awareness do not influence the prevention of drug use.

- **Activities for drug prevention:** From the study data, it was concluded that 26.3% of the young people who participated in the study specified that in the environments where they study or work, activities for preventing drug use are organized, 28.2% responded that there are no such activities, and 45.5% specified that they are not informed whether such activities take place in their school or work environments.

- **Awareness campaigns:** In response to the question of whether awareness campaigns help increase information about the risks of drug use, 57.1% of participants specified that they do, 7.5% responded that these campaigns do not help, and 35.4% specified that they have no information.

- **Parental involvement in education:** From the data collected in the study, it resulted that 75.4% think that parents should be more involved in educating and informing children about drugs, 3.7% think they should not be involved, and 20.9% had no opinion on this issue.

- **Ways to prevent drug use:** In response to the question of what are the most effective ways to combat drug use among youth: 17.2% specified educational programs in schools, 13.2% awareness campaigns in the media, 33.8% greater support from families, 11.8% after-school activities and programs, 24% responded that they had no opinion.

## **Discussion**

An insufficient level of knowledge about drugs and their consequences, especially regarding “soft” substances such as cannabis, which is widely perceived as harmless.

Mixed attitudes and perceptions, where some young people show tolerance toward drug use, often linked to peer influence and lack of critical information.

Practical experience with drugs is concentrated in the 15–20 age range, appearing as experimental behavior that may later turn into repeated use.

The most common motivating factors include curiosity, peer pressure, psychological stress, and lack of family support.

Mental health impacts include increased anxiety, depression, and psychotic symptoms, while physical effects are related to sleep disorders, fatigue, and loss of concentration.

Social and academic consequences include withdrawal from social activities, reduced school performance, and deterioration of relationships with family.

## **Recommendations**

### **- Early identification and intervention**

Timely detection and treatment of drug use during adolescence is vital to avoid negative consequences on brain development, interpersonal relationships, and academic achievement.

Research shows that most adults with substance use disorders began using during adolescence or early adulthood. This underlines the importance of early action to prevent escalation of the problem.

### – Behavioral therapies

Therapies led by professionals help adolescents avoid drugs, improve social skills, and replace risky behaviors with positive activities.

This is achieved by offering incentives for abstinence, developing skills to resist and refuse substances, coping with triggers or cravings, replacing drug use with constructive and rewarding activities, improving problem-solving skills, and facilitating interpersonal relationships.

### – The role of family and community

Family support and community interventions are essential for recovery.

Teachers, parents, and mentors can play a key role in guiding and supporting youth.

### – Education and awareness

Informative campaigns in schools and media, parent training, and the use of positive role models to raise awareness.

Development of educational programs in high schools and universities that specifically address the types of drugs, short- and long-term consequences, and ways to stay away from risk.

Evidence-based awareness campaigns, including the use of social media, digital platforms, and positive role models.

Involvement of parents and caregivers in trainings and seminars to improve their ability to identify and support at-risk youth early on.

### – Community-based prevention

Youth centers with counseling services, teacher and psychologist training to identify risk signs.

Development of youth community centers with counseling and career guidance services, where young people can receive support for emotional and social challenges.

Training of teachers, school psychologists, and community nurses to recognize warning signs and intervene in a timely manner.

### – Health and social policies

Increased access to mental health services, inter-institutional cooperation, and support for scientific research.

Expanding access to mental health and rehabilitation services, especially for youth and families with limited resources.

Creating a referral system between schools, health centers, and civil society organizations to ensure an integrated and effective approach.

Supporting further scientific research to monitor trends, identify new risk factors, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing interventions.

### General Conclusion

Drug use among youth represents a complex challenge that requires close cooperation between the education system, health services, families, and youth communities themselves.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in the Albanian context and highlights the need for a more structured, sustainable, and locally sensitive approach.

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