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PROJECT INFORMATION

EPPIC - Exchanging Prevention practices on Polydrug use among youth In Criminal justice systems

The EPPIC project is co-funded by the Public Health Programme of the European Commission. EPPIC is implemented in six countries including Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland and UK.

Background

Young offenders are considered one of the most vulnerable or at risk groups of developing drug problems and are often affected by numerous health problems and social inequalities.

Aims and objectives

- Identify innovative *drug prevention practices* for young people in contact with the Criminal Justice System
- Study the *views of service providers* on preventive approaches for this target group
- Research *trajectories of young people* and crucial turning points in their criminal career / drug career
- Examine the effectiveness of current European drug prevention *quality standards* for young people and facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange across countries.

The EPPIC projects aims to identify principles of good practice on interventions to prevent illicit drug use among young people in touch with the criminal justice system in order to elaborate guidelines and to initiate a European exchange network of relevant stakeholders.

Project partners work towards a better understanding of the culture of law enforcement agencies and their reluctance or willingness to apply non-punitive measures. More knowledge is acquired about the culture of young drug consumers and factors that support voluntary participation in interventions in the context of law enforcement. Finally, we examine the prerequisites for involvement of all stakeholders in active exchange of good practices across Europe.



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Project Partners

Change Grow Live (UK), Aarhus University (Denmark), Eclectica (Italy), European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (Austria), Frankfurt University Institute for Addiction Research (Germany), Institute of Psychiatry and Neurology (Poland).

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Funded by: Third EU Health Programme (2014-2020): Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency (Chafea)

Website address: <https://www.eppic-project.eu>

Progress and summary of reports

Work Packages 4 and 5 (research) have been completed recently. Work Packages 6 and 7 are in progress.

Work Package 4 was dedicated to knowledge exchange on current evidence and practice: A review of published literature was conducted together with a scoping survey to ascertain existing information on substance use among youth in criminal justice systems. Prevention and intervention initiatives were identified, including those evaluated as 'best practice'.

In **Work Package 5** descriptions were produced on selected innovative interventions in each partner country, and interviews were conducted with young people to learn about their drug using trajectories and respective factors of onset, persistence and desistance. This information is used to identify key points for intervention and to obtain perceptions and experiences of interventions to prevent or reduce drug use.

Interventions for the prevention were very broadly defined:

At a simple level, drug prevention may include any policy, programme, or activity that is (at least partially) directly or indirectly aimed at preventing, delaying or reducing drug use, and/or its negative consequences such as health and social harm, or the development of problematic drug use.

This definition covers initiatives in “universal prevention” to prevent and delay onset of use as well as “selective prevention” and “indicated prevention” in terms of treatment and harm reduction.



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Some problems of clients that were identified:

- Deprivation: Social and economic deprivation was emphasised in many interventions as a significant factor in connection with drug use and criminal offending. Deprivation can also refer to restricted access to education, healthcare and employment.
- Problematic drug use: Many interventions recognised drug addiction and drug misuse as the main problem of young offenders, although it was not always perceived as the primary problem to be addressed.
- Social media, peers, social networks: The influence of peers and social media was thought to be a contributing factor in problematic drug use amongst young people.
- Mental health problems: In some interventions mental health problems were perceived to be a consequence of drug use. In others, it was thought that young people used drugs for self-medication of existing mental health problems. Involvement in the criminal justice system was considered a source of anxiety and emotional distress.

Challenges in delivering interventions:

- Funding: Many interventions were funded only on a project basis (3-4 years).
- Secure settings (prison): Uncertainty about the time a young person will remain in custody (especially those on remand); low impact of interventions during short sentences; reluctance to admit drug use in prison settings; motivation of young people to participate in interventions.
- Non-voluntary participation: In some national reports it was highlighted that young people may join a treatment as a means to avoid a prison sentence (e.g. Austria and Germany) which reduced motivation to change behaviour.
- Transition to adult services: In some countries young people remain in youth custody beyond the age of 18 years (when they are considered adults or “young adults”), in other countries they are transferred to adult prisons. This may interrupt ongoing interventions.
- Language: Young people from different ethnic backgrounds have particular difficulties both accessing and benefiting from interventions
- Young person’s involvement: Interventions were unlikely to involve young people in the design or implementation of the interventions, although many thought it was something to aim for in the future.

For more information see the [WP5 CROSS NATIONAL REPORT Part 1](#)



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Report on drug- and crime trajectories

Interviews with young people were conducted to study drug use trajectories in relation to criminal activities. Overall, 193 interviews with young people were conducted to learn about significant factors of onset of drug use, persistence and desistance over the life course.

Interviewees primarily related the onset of drug use to cannabis that was consumed in an everyday context where smoking cannabis is largely taken for granted, therefore first drug use was not even related to specific motives. All interviewees found access to cannabis easy, especially in peer groups. This is common to all participant countries, including Poland, where, however, a significant number of first experiences are not related to cannabis but to New Psychoactive Substances and amphetamine.

Early drug consumption is rooted in a combination of social milieu, opportunity and sheer curiosity or inquisitiveness appeared to have led young people to their first encounter with drugs. This mindset resembled the concepts of “edgework” and risk-taking (cf., Lyng 1990, 2008). Together with easy access to synthetic drugs in cultures of night-time leisure activities this mindset of thrill-seeking presented fertile grounds for persistence in drug consumption.

There were some extreme cases in the sample, predominantly refugees, with a myriad of severe personal problems in life, having experienced domestic violence and violence at school and suffering migration traumata. For these people drugs had become a means of self-medication to find relief from mental strain.

In the cross-national report further risk factors such as individual traits, family, peers, school and neighbourhood and community effects are discussed. Also, life events that helped decrease drug consumption such as taking up employment, personal support by parents or partners in terms of drug-free relationships are mentioned. In general, young people in in-patient facilities reported high satisfaction with the treatment.

Entering the criminal justice system may result in different patterns. In some cases imprisonment reduced the consumption of drugs mainly because of reduced availability but also due to fear of getting caught and losing benefits. However, it was also found that the time in prison often meant just an interruption of consumption without any sustainable effect.

Interestingly, out-patient interventions and treatment such as psychotherapy were rarely mentioned as a trigger for desistance. Rather, free will was mentioned as crucial if people wanted to give up on drugs.

For more information see the [WP5 Cross-national report on trajectories](#)



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Next work steps

Work Package 6 is dedicated to guidelines for good practice and quality standards in the criminal justice system. This particularly refers to collecting and reviewing existing guidelines (WHO, UNODC, and national guidelines of good practice) and discussing amendments that better fit our target group of young offenders together with experts and relevant stakeholders within national member networks in the partner countries. Draft guidelines will be tested regarding criteria such as acceptability, transferability, usefulness, cultural and context appropriateness.

Work Package 7 will discuss cultural appropriateness and transferability of interventions identified in the partner countries with regard to different policy systems, different cultures and different national or local circumstances. The project will identify factors facilitating or impeding translation of best practices across different contexts. Again, these issues will have to be discussed in expert workshops and with additional stakeholders such as policy makers and relevant practitioners in the fields of drugs and criminal justice in each partner country.

Announcements – Dissemination activities planned for 2019

Meetings with professionals / stakeholders / experts panel in partner countries:

- Workshops in all partner countries
- UK: 4 workshops (community meetings): Edinburgh, Sandwell, Sheffield, London
- PL: National Conference of Drug Prevention and National Practitioners Dissemination Day
- AT: Meeting with advisory group + practitioners

Scientific journal publications – special issues:

- Drugs and Alcohol Today (DAT)
- DRUGS: Education, Prevention and Policy (DEPP)

Planned presentations at international conferences:

- Bonn (20-22 March 2019): 10. Europäischen Konferenz zur Gesundheitsförderung in Haft (Workshop, AT and GER)
- Aarhus (14-16 Aug. 2019): Nordic Youth Research Symposium: Narrowing paths - transgressive routes. Youth in changing times: New forms of inequality, risk and resistance (DK)
- Ghent (16-17 Sept. 2019): European Society of Prevention Research Conference (AT)
- Ghent (18-21 Sept. 2019): European Society of Criminology Annual Conference (AT)
- Lisbon (23-25 Oct. 2019): Lisbon Addictions (UK, IT)



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