USE OF LICIT AND ILLICIT DRUGS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALFENAS

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This paper reports the study of drug consumption carried out within the population of undergraduate students from 2 colleges of Alfenas, in the state of Minas Gerais state. Both licit and illicit drugs were studied, including alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, heroin, crack, inhalants, glue, tranquilizers, stimulants, and others.

METHODOLOGY: The research included a wide bibliographical search and the application of a questionnaire to approximately 23% of the students (total of 6500 students).

RESULTS: A total of 1500 students participated in this investigation. The results demonstrated that there was a significant consumption of both licit and illicit drugs. The pattern of drug consumption in the research sample was similar to other investigations conducted in Brazil and in other countries.

DISCUSSION: It was observed that 55% of the university students use drugs. However, the most surprising finding was that most of the students (88%) answered “yes” to the inquiry, “Have you already tried any type of drug, including alcohol and cigarettes?” The students revealed that they had taken drugs even prior to the admission to the university. The results suggest clearly that the university environment does not necessarily represent the starting point for student drug consumption.


During the past few years, the consumption of illicit drugs has been increasing considerably among the young Brazilian population. The precocious relationship between drugs and the consumer can be found in several papers in the literature. Among the several factors that account for the growth of distribution and consumption of drugs in this country include the psychosocial factors of youth that are related to the search for freedom and fast, easy pleasure1-7.

The individuals involved with the sale and distribution of drugs seek high school and undergraduate students. Studies were performed concerning the influence of gender and age regarding the consumption of drugs in Brazil; the authors verified that the male population had greater preference for non-prescription drugs, whereas female users tended to prefer psychotropic medications. With regard to the correlation between cigarette use and alcohol abuse, the authors found greater consumption in the male population, with the consumption of alcohol being more frequent than tobacco use6,7. It was also observed that of 63 people hospitalized for drug abuse, 86% were male, with ages ranging from 12 to 25 years. Except for tobacco and alcohol, marijuana was reported by 66% of the interviewees as the first psychoactive drug used, serving as the starting point for the use of other drugs7. In São Paulo, the incidence of alcoholism is 8 times greater in adult men, but it has grown faster among the women2,3.

Among the main effects caused by drugs such as cocaine, marijuana, LSD, ecstasy, mushrooms, glue, and amphetamines are mydriasis, euphoria and a sensation of well being, hallucinations, delirium, excitement, anguish, anxiety, fatigue, arrhythmia, aggres-
siveness, convulsion, bronchitis, inferti-
tility, thirst, hunger, insomnia, nausea, 
nerval degeneration, renal failure, 
and death. Heroin, however, causes 
drowsiness, pain relief, torpor, miosis, 
alysis, and respiratory and cardiac 
pression19.

From the study of the epidemiol-
ology of the use of volatile solvents 
since 1940, it was concluded that 
use of this drug is restricted to cer-
tain segments of the population, such 
as ethnic minorities of developing 
countries8. However, in Latin America, 
the use of volatile solvents has spread 
and has been increasing in the last 
years, especially among the youth and 
poor children3,8.

Of the 700 people with ages be-
tween 9 and 21 years that were inter-
viewed by the “Instituto Brasileiro de 
Opinião Pública e Estatística 
(IBOPE)”, 65% reported use of narcot-
ics, alcohol, or tobacco. Around 50% 
of these users reported having tried co-
caine, marijuana, and drugs before 15 
years of age, and 75% used alcohol 
and cigarettes before this age21.

Studies carried out with 116 pa-
tients assisted by the Hospital das 
Clínicas, Faculty of Medicine, Univer-
sity of São Paulo between 1984 and 
1988 indicated a considerable increase 
in the use of cocaine use in the last 2 
years of the 1988 indicated a considerable increase 
ity of São Paulo between 1984 and 
Clínicas, Faculty of Medicine, Univer-
sity of São Paulo, heroin was considered the sec-
ond most frequently used drug by the 
yses, ahead of marijuana and co-
caine, according to research con-
ducted by the Institute of Psychology 
of San Francisco University. Alcohol 
associated with another drug was in 
first place13. With regard to violence, 
a medical study conducted by the Fed-
eral University of São Paulo revealed 
that in the general population, a larger 
number of violent acts are related to 
alcohol and cocaine drug addicts23.

Among students of middle school 
from Distrito Federal, involving a sam-
pling of 1448 students, a question-
naire was administered that revealed 
the prevalence of the use of drugs in 
the following order: alcohol (67.2%), 
cigarettes (28.7%), inhalants (13.9%), 
marijuana (6.1%), and cocaine (1.8%), 
which was used mainly by males12. In 
a study of 370 drug users in Belo 
Horizonte, the most frequently used 
drug was marijuana19.

In greater São Paulo in a study of 
1069 university students, it was veri-
ified that in first place was alcohol use 
(82%), followed by tobacco (39%), in-
halants (28%), marijuana (26%), medi-
cations (17%), and cocaine (10%). A 
greater probability of single male mari-
juana users, with a high socioeconomic 
level, who smoked tobacco and used 
marijuana for the first time between 13 
and 17 years old, was also observed15.

The current study was conducted 
with the objective of verifying the in-
cidence and prevalence of licit and il-
licit drugs in the university population 
from the city of Alfenas, Minas Gerais, 
and the implications for the city in this 
context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

General characterization of the loca-
tion where the studies were conducted.

The city of Alfenas, located in the 
state of Minas Gerais, was chosen be-
cause of the large number of students 
in relation to the total population 
(above 10%), in addition to its tradi-
tion as a college city since 1914. It is 
also a magnet for high school students 
and possesses an active night life. 
Currently, a total of 30 graduate-level 
courses are held in Alfenas.

Data Collection

The students were interviewed be-
tween the months of May and October 
of 1999. Students of both genders were 
from the university classes of the city 
of Alfenas, with the age group ranging 
from 18 to 25 years.

Sampling

Among a total of 6500 students, 
with 5620 students from the Univer-
sity of Alfenas and 880 from the 
School of Pharmacy and Dentistry of 
Alfenas, 1500 questionnaires were dis-
tributed, registering a sampling of 
23% of the total university population 
of the city. These questionnaires were 
divided proportionally among each 
institution, course, and period of 
enrollment and were distributed ran-
donally among the students of each 
class, in agreement with the protocols 
established for sample stratification, 
and then were tabulated in percent-
iles24. After answering the question-
naire, students placed the results in an 
envelope, which was then sealed. The 
questionnaires did not contain any 
type of personal identification. Each 
questionnaire contained 26 items re-
lated to whether the university student 
had already used any drug, the age and 
school level when the student used the 
drug for the first time, the drug type, 
the continuity of the use, and other in-
formation (Addendum I).

RESULTS

From a total of 6500 resident uni-
versity students in the city of Alfenas, 
1500 were interviewed. Of these, 12% 
answered that they had never used
drugs. The remaining students (88%) answered affirmatively that they had already used licit or illicit drugs. From this total, 92% had used before the entrance to the University, with 14% first using before 12 years of age, 45% first using between 13 to 15 years of age, 33% between 16 to 18 years of age, and 8% after 18 years of age (Fig. 1).

The most commonly used drugs were alcohol, tobacco, and other inhaled drugs, with marijuana being consumed by 17% of the interviewees (Fig. 2).

At the time of the interview, the interviewed population used the following drugs, in decreasing order: alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, inhalants, and other drugs, on a smaller scale (Fig. 3).

Another important factor observed was the type of the student’s living arrangement. Forty-eight percent answered that they lived in fraternity houses, 22% in hotels or similar, or with colleagues, 19% with relatives, and 11% live alone (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

Alfenas is a city located in the south of Minas Gerais, where 2 different college institutions exist - a private one, the University of Alfenas (UNIFENAS) and a public one, the School of Pharmacy and Dentistry of Alfenas (EFOA) - with a total university population of approximately 6500 students.

It is known that a paradigm related to the student population, mainly the university student, exists with regard to the use of legalized and illicit drugs. Therefore, of 6500 Alfenas college students, 1500 were interviewed, and 12% affirmed that they had never used any type of drug up to the moment of the research.

It was verified that among the students who answered affirmatively that they had used drugs before, about 92% had used before admission to the university, especially alcohol and tobacco. This is information of great relevance, since it demonstrates that the university is probably not the starting point for the use of drugs. Of these 92%, 14% affirmed that they had tried drugs before the age of 12, 45% between 13 and 15 years of age, 33% between 16 and 18 years of age, and only 8% after the age of 18.

These data revealed that most of the university population had tried some type of drug even before reaching the legal civil age (78%), which attests to the great susceptibility of adolescents to drugs. Previous data revealed the need for the establishment of preventive programs against the use of drugs in school institutions, with the objective of educating adolescents with regard to the dangerous effects of drug use.

Some studies conducted in the university environment and among high school students have demonstrated the dissemination of illicit drugs, revealing marijuana in first place, followed by cocaine and inhalants. In the present study, we found that the use of illegal drugs occurred among the interviewees who had used mostly inhaled drugs (31%), followed by marijuana (17%). However, among the drugs investigated in this study, the percentage who used alcohol and tobacco was substantially larger than that for all the other drugs, 83% and 38%, respectively. It could be concluded that the fact that these drugs are legal considerably facilitates their use. With regard to this matter, the U.S. Food Drug Administration (FDA) has recently recommended that tobacco should be considered an illicit drug, since it possesses substances that can cause addiction.

With regard to the current use of drugs, 45% of the interviewee population answered affirmatively to the questionnaire including the use of alcohol and tobacco. The most consumed drug was alcohol (48%), followed by tobacco (24%), marijuana (16%), and in fourth place (9%), inhaled drugs. Most of the students who used multiple drugs used alcohol and tobacco, marijuana and tobacco, alcohol and marijuana, or the 3 drugs together. Seventy-one percent (71%) of the university interviewees affirmed that they consider alcohol and tobacco as real drugs, and 50% of the total interviewees declared that they were against the maintenance of the legal status of the substances.

Fig. 1 - Percentile distribution in relation to age (in years-old) of those students who had used drugs for the first time.
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Fig. 3 - Percentile distribution of the drug type that the students use presently.

Fig. 4 - Percentile distribution of the type of the university students living in Alfenas.

Fig. 2 - Percentile distribution of the drug type that the students had already made use before.
It was observed that 52% of the interviewees were female and 48% were male, with 15% from Alfenas and the remaining students originating from several different regions of Brazil, demonstrating a great heterogeneity of the student population of Alfenas, and serving as an indicator of the existence of different habits and cultures among the students.

With regard to the place where the interviewees reside in Alfenas, 48% answered that they live in fraternity houses, 22% in hotels or similar, or with colleagues, 11% live alone, and 19% reside with their relatives. These data demonstrated once again that most of Alfenas university students are coming from other cities, as has been previously described.

In college cities like Alfenas, the increased use of marijuana and cocaine among the students may have 2 explanations: increase of availability and the visibility in society. The media also exerts a great influence in worsening the current picture that has developed among the students. The theme takes evidence in several television programs that insist on showing youth in scenes using and defending the legalization of marijuana.

The existence of a private and a federal university that now attract more than 7000 college students could explain the increase of drug consumption in Alfenas. However this study clearly demonstrated that the use of such drugs had begun before admission to the universities.

Therefore, the “drug problem” in Alfenas, according to the students answers, would not be tied to the existence of the universities, but indeed to a global conjuncture of other factors related with the present times.

**CONCLUSION**

The present research revealed that the consumption of drugs in the city of Alfenas exists, but it is less than what was believed by the local population. The obtained data revealed important information concerning the time period of the first experience with drugs. Most of the students had already tried drugs in their hometown prior to the entrance at the university. It can be concluded that the university itself is not serving as a nucleus for the promotion of the first use of drugs. It was also observed that the most used illicit drugs were marijuana and inhalant. The consumption of alcohol and tobacco was quite high among the student interviewees. Presently, approximately half of the men and a third of the women use some type of drug, including alcohol and cigarettes, associated or not with other drugs.

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**RESUMO**


Este trabalho relata um estudo sobre o consumo de drogas realizado em uma população de estudantes em duas universidades na cidade de Alfenas, no estado de Minas Gerais. Tanto drogas lícitas como ilícitas foram consideradas, incluindo álcool, tabaco, maconha, cocaína, heroína, crack, inalantes, cola, tranquilizantes, estimulantes, entre outras.

**METODOLOGIA:** A pesquisa incluiu uma vasta revisão bibliográfica e a aplicação de um questionário em cerca de 23% dos acadêmicos (total 6.500).

**RESULTADOS:** Um total de 1.500 estudantes participaram desta investigação. Os resultados demonstram que há um consumo significativo de tais drogas. Entretanto, o padrão do consumo de drogas na amostra foi seme-
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...a outras investigações realizadas no Brasil e em outros países.

DISCUSSÃO: Foi verificado que 55% dos universitários realmente utilizam drogas. Entretanto, o achado mais surpreendente foi que a maioria dos estudantes (88%) que responderam “sim” à indagação “Você já experimentou algum tipo de droga, incluindo álcool e cigarros?” espontaneamente revelaram que consumiam tais drogas, porém antes da admissão na Universidade. Este resultado sugere claramente que o ambiente universitário não representa necessariamente o ponto de partida para o consumo de drogas.


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16. Have your parents used drugs before or do they currently use them?
   Yes ( ) No ( ) I don’t have knowledge ( )

17. What’s your relationship with the drugs?
   I use frequently and I don’t want to leave them ( )
   I use frequently and I want to leave them ( )
   I don’t use, but I have wish for them ( )
   I use eventually ( )
   I live in function of the drugs ( )
   Other ( )

18. Do you easily obtain the drugs that you consume?
   Yes ( ) No ( )

19. How do you get the money for the drugs?
   I work ( )
   I make small thefts ( )
   I take my parents’ money ( )
   Sells personal objects ( )
   I obtain from another sources ( )

20. Do your parents have knowledge that you are a drug user?
   Yes ( ) No ( )

21. Do you maintain dialogue with your parents about
   Yes ( ) No ( )

22. Do you have siblings that make use of drugs?
   Yes ( ) No ( )

23. What is the location where does he frequently make use of drugs:
   In its own house ( )
   In the school ( )
   In the streets ( )
   In the friends’ house ( )
   In bars and night-clubs ( )
   Other ( )

24. Are you aware of the risks that the drugs offer to your health?
   Yes ( ) No ( ) In terms ( )

25. Do you intend of using drugs?
   Yes ( ) No ( ) In terms ( )

26. Do you agree with the legalization of the drugs?
   Yes ( ) No ( ) In terms ( )

Obs.: In case if you want to make any comments, please write in this space:

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