

## **DRUG USE AMONG ALGERIAN YOUTHS: A FIELD STUDY WITH A GROUP OF INJECTABLE DRUG USERS IN THE ORAN WESTERN REGION**

**Dr. Sidi Moussa Leila<sup>1</sup>, Pr. Heroual Nabila<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Senior lecturer; Faculty of Social Sciences; Abdel hamid Ben Badis, Mostaganem University, (Algeria) Email :[laila.sidimoussa@univ-mosta.dz](mailto:laila.sidimoussa@univ-mosta.dz)

<sup>2</sup>Medical epidemiologist; Faculty of Medicine; Ahmed Ben Bella University Oran1, (Algeria) Email: [heroual@gmail.com](mailto:heroual@gmail.com)

**Received: 05/02/2024**

**Accepted: 28/04/2024**

**Published: 22/05/2024**

### **Abstract**

This study attempts to shed light on the phenomenon of drug use among youth in Algerian society. It focused on an important group that is often not easily addressed, namely injectable drug users, due to their significance and uniqueness. These drug addicts have dealt with various types of drugs and have transitioned to a new stage of substance use, which is typically practised by a specific group. Therefore, we conducted a mixed-methods field study combining quantitative statistical analysis through surveys and qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with drug users. The aim was to understand their social context, describe their experiences with drugs and their methods of consumption, and find out their socio-demographic characteristics.

### **Introduction**

The phenomenon of drug use among youth is considered a serious issue, especially in recent years, as it has become widespread across various age groups. According to the United Nations report for the year 2019<sup>1</sup>, approximately 271 million individuals aged between 15-64 years had used drugs at least once in the previous year, indicating the seriousness of the issue. Consequently, many societies have addressed this phenomenon through different ways such as attempting to treat drug addicts and conducting field studies to understand the underlying reasons for drug use in its various forms and types. This is because drugs can lead to numerous physical and mental health problems for users, as well as impact social relationships within communities, especially within families often leading to conflicts. Drug-using youth may struggle with social interaction due to the psychological and social effects of these substances, which can impair their ability to control their behaviour and focus on their responsibilities, whether in education or employment. For instance, Algerian legislation criminalizes and punishes drug consumption through Law No. 05-23, which amends and

---

<sup>1</sup> The International Drug Report, 2019, United Nations Publications.

supplements Law No. 04-18 concerning drug prevention, psychotropic substances, and suppression of their illegal use and trafficking, especially Articles 12, 13, and 17<sup>2</sup>.

Like many countries, Algeria is suffering from the growing problem of drug use. The National Office for Drug Control and Addiction in its annual report for the first quarter of 2023<sup>3</sup> confirmed a significant increase in drug use and trafficking of all types of drugs. It is noteworthy that youth are the most vulnerable group to drug use according to several studies<sup>4</sup>. This poses a danger to society in terms of its stability and security as youth in Algeria represent two-thirds of the population and its economic strength.

Many scientific studies emphasize that drug use is very risky for individuals' physical and mental health<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of drug use among youth in Algerian society, we conducted a field study in the western region of Algeria with a group of youth who use drugs in various forms, especially those who inject drugs. This is due to the severity and importance of this group, which is difficult to communicate with. Injection drug use leads to the transmission of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C, and these drug users may not be aware of their infection unless they undergo testing, which they often avoid due to social and cultural considerations.

The danger of these diseases lies in the spread of infection among individuals and the significant economic cost of treating them. However, data on injectable drug users in Algeria are insufficient and unavailable. According to reports released from testing centers, 3.4% of injectable drug users are living with HIV/AIDS<sup>6</sup>.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this research is to:

- 1- Identify the factors and circumstances that lead youths to drug use through their expressions.
- 2- Know the socio-demographic features of drug-using youth.
- 3- Determine what extent injectable drug users know about the ways of preventing infectious diseases (such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis).

### **Definition of Drugs**

The definition of drugs varies depending on the perspective of them. Therefore, there is no unified or agreed-upon definition of drugs. They can be defined as any substance that affects its consumer's psychological functions, and excessive consumption leads to a state of addiction<sup>7</sup>. The World Health Organization (WHO) uses the term "psychoactive substances"

<sup>2</sup> The Official Journal of the Algerian Republic, Law on Drug Prevention, Psychotropic Substances, and Suppression of their Illegal Use and Trafficking, Issue 32, May 2023.

<sup>3</sup> The National Office for Drug Control and Addiction, Report on Drug Control and Addiction Prevention Activities, Statistical Summary for the First Quarter of the Year 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Many University Studies and Doctoral Theses dealt with the Issue of Drug Use among Youth.

<sup>5</sup> The International Drug Report 2020, United Nations Publications, the Fifth Booklet, Economic and Social Characteristics and Drug Use Disorders.

<sup>6</sup> Bio-behavioural study on STIs/HIV/AIDS among Injectable Drug Users (IDUs) in Algeria. Algiers: ANDS 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Hallis Samir, Drug Control and Addiction in Algeria between Deterrence and Prevention, Research in Al-Risala Journal of Humanities Studies and Research, Volume 1, Algeria, 2022, pp. 317-331.

instead of drugs, which are substances that induce addiction, whether natural or synthetic<sup>8</sup>. Adel El-Damurdash<sup>9</sup> defines drugs in two ways: “Scientifically, they are a chemical substance that causes drowsiness, sleep, or unconsciousness accompanied by pain relief”, and legally, “they are a group of substances that cause addiction and nervous system poisoning and are prepared for distribution, cultivation, or manufacture for purposes determined by law”. In this research, drugs are any substance that leads to individual changes in vital functions, their excessive use causes addiction, and their possession is punishable by Algerian law.

As for injectable drugs, they are drugs that are administered by injection into the vein, such as heroin, cocaine, and other substances.

### **Methodology of the study**

We conducted a field study where we mixed quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative research on a group of youth who inject drugs. We used the snowball sampling technique. Drug users, especially the injectable ones are considered hidden people with whom communication is difficult. It is due to social, religious, and even legal pressures, particularly Law 04-18 and Articles 12-13 of the Penal Code, as well as some healthcare centers that do not deal with drug users due to lack of alternative opioid therapy, and cases of stigma and discrimination in healthcare places<sup>10</sup> despite the existence of a legal arsenal that guarantees the right to access care and treatment for all. Therefore, it was hard for us to reach them without relying on individuals close to them, such as some members of associations trying to assist them to access healthcare, and some individuals who have managed to quit drugs and thus are trying to help others take the same step.

The quantitative study included a questionnaire of 65 individuals (56 males and 9 females) aged between 18 and 45 years during March 2019. Data was collected through a questionnaire containing questions about age, gender, marital status, and other questions about the start and type of drugs used by the youth. The data was analyzed using (SPSS), and descriptive statistics were used in our work.

The qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured interviews after we obtained verbal consent from the participants and ensured the confidentiality of the information. The interviews were in-depth where we focused on the social situations of drug users, their age at first drug exposure, the type of drugs, and how they obtained them. Additionally, we attempted to determine whether these young drug users, particularly those who inject drugs, were aware of the danger of its use to prevent infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

---

<sup>8</sup> Chayeb Draa Midnie et al, The Reality of Drug Addiction in Algerian Society, Research in the Journal of Humanities, Volume 21, Issue 02, Algeria, 2021, pp. 805-821.

<sup>9</sup> Adel El-Damurdash, Addiction: its Manifestations and Treatment, Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature, Al-Ma'arif Series, Number 56, 1982, pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Bio-behavioural Study on STIs/HIV/AIDS among Injectable Drug Users (IDUs) in Algeria. General Directorate for Prevention and Health Promotion, Algeria. 2020, p.20.

This qualitative research was used to clarify some of the behaviours exhibited by drug users that the quantitative methods cannot explain their reasons. It seeks to provide information that can interpret the results of quantitative research. Moreover, the interview will allow us to understand the underlying reasons behind drug users' reluctance to seek treatment at healthcare centers, thus guiding health-related decisions.

The interview was conducted face-to-face, recorded, and reached 10 interviews, 9 with males aged between 20 and 47 years old, and one female aged 24. The duration of the interviews ranged from one to one and a half hours, depending on the participant's willingness to discuss their situation. We transcribed them after repeated listening and then proceeded with the analysis of each interview individually. It is worth noting that we used the inductive approach which focuses on fieldwork, particularly in the qualitative study, to describe the participants' social experience and ascertain their social reality through the meanings they attribute to their various drug-use practices. Additionally, we explored their social experiences with various social institutions, particularly in the healthcare sector, and whether they were aware of the availability of free testing and treatment for infectious diseases.

### Results of the Study

The quantitative study through the questionnaire allowed us to obtain the following results:

**Table 01: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Drug Users by Injection Oran, (2019)**

Characteristics	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
<b>The age groups</b>				
<20	9	0	09	13,8
<b>20-42-</b>	19	05	24	<b>36,9</b>
<b>25-42-</b>	17	02	19	<b>29,2</b>
30-43-	06	02	08	12,3
>=35	05	0	05	07,7
<b>Educational Level</b>				
<b>No Education</b>	06	00	06	09,2
<b>Primary</b>	18	01	19	<b>29,2</b>
<b>Middle</b>	23	08	31	<b>47,7</b>
<b>Secondary</b>	08	00	08	12,3
<b>University</b>	01	00	01	01,5
<b>Marital Status</b>				
<b>Single</b>	43	07	50	<b>96,2</b>
<b>Engaged</b>	02	01	03	3,6
<b>Married</b>	05	00	05	7,7
<b>Divorced</b>	06	01	07	<b>7,069</b>
<b>Occupation</b>				
<b>Unemployed</b>	33	02	35	<b>83,65</b>

<b>Salaried Employees</b>	11	00	11	<b>7662</b>
<b>Craftsmen/Merchants/ Self-Employed</b>	06	00	06	2.9
<b>Others</b>	06	07	13	92
<b>Financial Situation</b>				
<b>Difficult / Burdened with Debt</b>	42	06	48	<b>9365</b>
<b>Barely making ends meet</b>	11	03	41	91.2
<b>Comfortable</b>	03	00	03	3.6
<b>Type of Residence</b>				
<b>Apartment</b>	39	06	45	<b>69.2</b>
<b>No Stable Housing</b>	01	00	01	1.5
<b>Hotel</b>	01	02	03	4.6
<b>Street</b>	11	00	11	<b>16.9</b>
<b>Other</b>	04	01	05	7.6

During the statistical field study, we dealt with 65 individuals who inject drugs. 84% were males and 14% were females. Around 36.9% of the participants were aged between 20 and 24 years old and approximately one-third of the sample fell between 25 and 29 years old. This explains that 76.9% of the participants were single. Moreover, 47.7% had an educational level equivalent to middle school, and one-third of the sample (29.2%) had a primary education. Furthermore, 53.8% of the participants were unemployed; this puts them in financially difficult situations, with debts reaching up to 73.8%.

These results were confirmed by the qualitative study, particularly regarding the difficult financial situation. Drug users are often obliged to sell some of their properties or even steal. One of the participants affirmed: **"When I need drugs and I don't have money, I can do anything. I have stolen to get drugs,"** a male with 23-years-old and a middle school level. Another one said: **"When I run out of drugs, I sell my phone or borrow money,"** a 24-year-old female with middle school level. In addition, some drug users may end up in prison, as one informant mentioned: **"I have been to prison three times... once for theft and drug trafficking,"** a 27-year-old male with a middle school level.

The social environment surrounding the individual also contributes to early drug use due to the ease of access to them. As stated by one of the respondents: **"I was 16 when I started smoking and later moved on to alcohol. The important thing is that it's all about the group of friends and neighbors. I grew up among them (...) in the neighborhood where I live; for example, some sell it to us"**, 47-year-old divorced man with a primary education level.

As for the only girl who participated in the interview, she also confirmed that bad companions (girlfriends) were the reason for her smoking and drug use. She stated: **"I was 17 or 18 years old. I lived under pressure before and after my parents' divorce. I started**

smoking, then hashish, and then all kinds of pills (uppers). I could not do without them anymore. After that, I learned how to inject myself, after relying on my friend”, 24-year-old single girl with a middle school level.

**Table 02: Alcohol and Drug Consumption without Injection According to Gender**

	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
Alcohol consumption (Yes)	46	05	51	78.3
Non-injectable drug use (Yes)	38	03	41	64
The frequency of non-injectable drug use				
Daily	17	1	18	<b>2362</b>
Often	11	1	21	<b>4264</b>
Rarely	10	1	11	96.8
Types of non-injectable drugs used				
	38	3	41	<b>68</b>
-Cannabis	03	0	3	4.7
-Indian hemp	06	0	6	9.5
-Marijuana	08	1	9	14.2
-Psychotropic drugs	03	1	4	6.3
-Others				

Concerning the question of alcohol consumption, 78.4% of the participants confirmed that they drink alcohol and 63% of them said that they use various types of drugs. However, 65% confirmed that cannabis is the most commonly used drug due to its easy availability and relatively low cost compared to other drugs.

The majority of the interviewees confirmed that they belong to impoverished popular neighborhoods where they were born, lived, or still live. They mentioned that they faced numerous difficulties throughout their lives preventing them from living a normal life. These difficulties include unemployment, low family income, divorce, housing shortages, and poverty. Some of them were obliged to leave school and start working at an early age. All of these factors contributed to their early involvement in drug use, as stated by one of the informants: **"I started smoking at the age of 10. There were problems between my mother and father and due to housing shortages and other circumstances, some of my siblings and I was pushed to leave the family home. So far, I know nothing about them. Next, I started using Indian hemp, and then I could not sleep without it. After that, I started using pills, and then I reached the stage of injecting drugs because other drugs no longer benefited me"**, 22-year-old male in his fourth year of middle school.

Due to social problems, drug addicts can use anything, **"whatever, even medications meant for patients. God is greater... and anything new we hear about it, I must try it... In the area where I live, I know children aged 7 and 8 who use drugs due to poverty and housing shortages. Even I, when I start thinking, I cannot find a solution other than using drugs to forget"**, 32- year-old male with a middle education level.

**Table 03: Drug Injection Consumption during the Last Six Months and the Frequency of Consumption**

	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
Drug injection consumption during the last six months				
-Yes	34	06	40	% 61.2
-No	22	03	25	% 48.2
The frequency of consumption during the last six months				
Once a day	24	22	24	7.2
Many times a day	29	22	29	2
Many times a week	12	29	14	<b>38</b>
Once a week	04	21	05	19.2
Many times a month	11	24	14	<b>38</b>
Once a month	29	22	29	2

Among the 40 individuals who confirmed their drug consumption through injection during the last six months, 35% of them consume it many times a week. The same percentage (35%) consumes it many times a month. This is because this type of drug is costly. **"It is expensive, so sometimes we collaborate to buy it, and sometimes I work to earn money to buy it, every 15 days"** a 37-year-old single male with a middle education level stated.

On the other hand, another respondent affirmed: **"I only work when I need the drug. I inject it every other day, and sometimes we gather as a group and agree with someone to pay them for one injection because it is expensive"** a 47-year-old divorced male with a primary education level told.

**Table 04: Type of the Consumed Drug**

	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
Cocaine	41	8	49	<b>9863</b>
Heroin	05	2	7	12.7
Subutex	26	3	29	<b>2266</b>
Ecstasy	21	3	24	<b>3662</b>
Crack	04	1	5	7.6

Over the last six months, 65 interviewees confirmed their drug consumption through

injection. The most commonly consumed drugs are as follows: cocaine 75.3%, Subutex 44.6%, Ecstasy 36.9%, heroin 10.7%, and finally crack 7.6%.

**Table 05: Single-Use Syringe Utilization (During the Last Injection)**

	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
Yes	6	3	9	14.8
No	46	6	52	82
Refusal	4	0	4	6.9
Total	56	9	65	122

What attracts attention in the results presented in this table is that 80% of drug users through injection confirmed that they did not use a sterilized syringe the last time they consumed drugs. This indicates the risk of the situation as sharing needles often leads to the transmission of diseases among drug users.

The reason for needle-sharing among drug users according to the interviews: The interviewees stated that they do not care about cleaning or replacing needles for several reasons. Firstly, drug injection is often not planned. When a friend obtains a certain dose, they share the cost and the drug itself. This is because it is so costly, and merely thinking about cleaning or changing the needles triggers instability such as fears of losing the euphoria. Some of them believe that cleaning the needles might reduce the amount of the drug, so they avoid anything that might affect their pleasure. They emphasized that getting the drug helps them forget everything else.

**“We share one needle between us, especially if we don't have enough money. But sometimes, if we have enough of the drug, each one can use his needle”** He added **“In the situation where I am struggling to get the drug, I do not think about diseases. All I care about at that moment is getting the dose. Diseases like germs and cancer exist”**, 26 years old divorced male stated.

Another participant asserted: **“When you get the dose and we call each other on the phone, even if you are asked to bring a needle, you do not think about it because the important thing is to get the pleasure that would be lost by searching for the needle. At first, I did not change the needle, but now I do”**, a 37-year-old single male with a middle education level.

On the one hand, drug users only think about obtaining the drug for pleasure or what they call "rachka". On the other hand, a drug user who shares the cost of the drug cannot ask for a needle change due to the trust found within the group. If one member is suspected of having a disease, they will be expelled from the group, which cannot be done among drug users, unless the user is financially capable of using alone. Regarding needle cleaning, the following table confirms the results we mentioned before.

**Table 06: Cleaning the Used Syringe**

	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
Yes, always	4	1	5	16.1
No, never	0	1	1	4.9
I do not know	20	4	24	77.3
Refuse to answer	1	0	1	4.9
Total	25	6	31	122

16.1% of the interviewees expressed that they always clean the used syringe during drug use. However, the rest of the sample (83.8%) either do not clean it or do not know if they clean it due to the effects of the drug. **"When you inject drugs, you cannot do anything for 20 minutes. You stay seated and lose the ability to move or do anything"**, a 32-year-old single male with a high school education level.

**Table 07: Why Single-Use Syringes Are Not Used**

	Men	Women	Total	Percentage %
I do not know where to find them	1	1	2	3.85
I do not know the benefit of single-use	18	0	18	34.62
I feel embarrassed to buy single-use syringes	5	2	7	13.46
So expensive	1	0	1	1.92
I do not think about it	17	3	20	38.46
Refused to sell to me	4	0	4	7.69

This table highlights various factors influencing the non-use of single syringes among respondents, including lack of awareness about their benefits and availability, embarrassment, cost concerns, and occasional refusal from sellers, underscoring the complexity of needle-sharing behaviours in drug users.

## Discussion of the Results

In this research work, we attempted to uncover the circumstances of drug injection among a group of young people who agreed to answer our questions, whether through surveys or interviews. Dealing with this group was not easy, as approaching drug addicts was challenging due to their marginalized and stigmatized status in Algerian society. They are considered a deprived group in terms of rights. They are socially isolated from their families and surroundings because of religious and legal prohibitions on drugs, as well as the social stigma attached to being labelled as deviants, which leads to avoidance and punishment.

Possessing a single syringe could simply expose them to accusations, legal proceedings, and police pursuit, potentially resulting in imprisonment. Therefore, they prefer to be hidden so that most of the field study, both quantitative and qualitative, was conducted late in the day.

The sample being used was predominantly males (86%) compared to females. The majority of young drug users are aged between 20-30 years old which is a critical stage in their lives. Therefore, the start of drug use during this stage has negative consequences on the social life of the users and the economic life of society. Young drug users confirmed that cigarette smoking is the initial stage of drug use, and then they move to imitate their friends and experiment with the various drugs due to social influences and the ease of access to drugs, especially in impoverished neighborhoods where most of those interviewed reside. Regarding injection drug use, everyone confirmed that it occurs at a later stage owing to its expensive price. Most drug users do not have stable jobs, and they are obliged to sell their properties to pay for drugs or get into conflicts with their families because of money.

Getting a job is an essential factor for a natural life; however, most drug users do not have jobs because they lack the necessary qualifications, with 76.9% having education levels between primary and middle. On the other hand, many participants mentioned that they have been jailed, which in itself is a barrier to employment. Additionally, this group of people is known to lead nocturnal lifestyles, making it difficult for them to maintain steady occupations. According to them, they face numerous pressures that they cannot handle, such as early mornings, noise, and work-related issues. Drug users typically turned to substance use as a means of escaping problems they could not cope with.

As for the types of drugs consumed by the participants, they were numerous and different. When individuals enter the realm of drug use and subsequently become accustomed to it, they become open to experimenting with anything to maximize pleasure and euphoria for as long as possible. Drug users stated that they consumed cannabis, marijuana, hallucinogenic pills, as well as cocaine, Subutex, and Ecstasy. During their period of drug use, they do not think about contracting diseases because, in their view, drug use and addiction are diseases. The idea of contracting infections or other serious diseases does not cross their minds when they are under the influence of drugs. According to the drug users, even if they have the desire to quit and attempt to distance themselves from the drug scene, their social circumstances often lead them back to the same situation. Additionally, the healthcare facilities that assist them in quitting drug use are not easily accessible. Furthermore, we must not forget that drug users suffer from social marginalization and exclusion. Therefore, convincing them to quit drug use requires both the willpower of the users themselves and significant effort from the social environment to which they belong.

## Conclusion

It is important to say that the results of this study cannot be generalized except to the sample that was under investigation. However, these results remain significant, especially the ones of the interviews with drug users through injection. Through our examination of their social reality and our use of the phrases they used to express their situation in Algerian society, it confirms that they need support on several levels, including medical support in order to raise awareness about the dangers of injection drug use. They also need to be conscious of the danger and necessity of individual needle use due to the risk of infectious diseases such as viral hepatitis and HIV.

This can be achieved through awareness campaigns targeting drug users as well as health institutions and centres, especially to encourage the reception of this group away from practices that deter drug users from approaching them, such as mistreatment and long waiting times. Health centres should deal with them differently based on their social composition, which prevents them from mingling with other patients and their inability to wait long for medical examinations.

Drug users by injection are considered a hidden group and they prefer not to appear in public, so they must be dealt with cautiously, away from discrimination and social stigma, which hinders their ability to receive help to quit drug use and live normal lives.

## References

- 1- The International Drug Report, 2019, United Nations Publications.
- 2- The Official Journal of the Algerian Republic, Law on Drug Prevention, Psychotropic Substances, and Suppression of their Illegal Use and Trafficking, Issue 32, May 2023.
- 3- The National Office for Drug Control and Addiction, Report on Drug Control and Addiction Prevention Activities, Statistical Summary for the First Quarter of the Year 2023.
- 4- Many University Studies and Doctoral Theses dealt with the Issue of Drug Use among Youth.
- 5- The International Drug Report 2020, United Nations Publications, the Fifth Booklet, Economic and Social Characteristics and Drug Use Disorders.
- 6- Bio-behavioural study on STIs/HIV/AIDS among Injectible Drug Users (IDUs) in Algeria. Algiers: ANDS 2020.
- 7- Hallis Samir, Drug Control and Addiction in Algeria between Deterrence and Prevention, Research in Al-Risala Journal of Humanities Studies and Research,

Volume 1, Algeria, 2022, pp. 317-331.

- 8- Chayeb Draa Midnie et al, The Reality of Drug Addiction in Algerian Society, Research in the Journal of Humanities, Volume 21, Issue 02, Algeria, 2021, pp. 805-821.
- 9- Adel El-Damurdash, Addiction: its Manifestations and Treatment, Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature, Al-Ma'arif Series, Number 56, 1982, pp. 10-11.
- 10- Bio-behavioural Study on STIs/HIV/AIDS among Injectable Drug Users (IDUs) in Algeria. General Directorate for Prevention and Health Promotion, Algeria. 2020, p.20.