European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

European Web Survey on Drugs: patterns of use

João Matias, Eleni Kalamara, Federica Mathis, Katerina Skarupova, André Noor, Nicola Singleton, European Web Survey on Drugs Group

European Web Survey on Drugs

Introduction

The EMCDDA is currently developing estimates of the size of the drug market in the EU based on data provided routinely to the EMCDDA by National Focal Points. One key component of such market size estimates, for which there is no routine data collection and only limited data available, is the quantities of substances used by different groups of drug users. The data that is available has tended to come mainly from small scale studies of specific heavy user groups, for example of people entering treatment. On the other hand, general population surveys (GPS) generally do not have sufficiently large samples of drug users to provide robust information on amounts.

Objective

The project aimed to develop and test a web survey tool to collect information on the amounts of drugs used by different groups of drug users and to draft guidance for adapting and administering it in different countries. The objective is to assist EMCDDA in the development of a tool that can be offered to National Focal Points with a view to increasing the information available on quantities of drugs used in order to enhance market size estimation at both the national and European level and for use in policy development more widely. If successful, it is anticipated that the range of topics covered would be developed further in the future.

Method

The European Web Survey on Drugs (EWSD) asked about use of cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine and MDMA in 16 countries from 2016 to 2018. Each participant country translated the questionnaire as necessary and devised its own sampling strategy. Individuals aged 18 or more, resident in the participant country, who had used one or more of the drugs covered by the survey in the past 12 months were included in the analysis. Participation was anonymous and voluntary.

The recruitment strategies varied substantially and included: creating dedicated web pages; printing flyers to be distributed in clubs and bars; sharing information about the survey through a variety of different media (for example on student health insurance web sites, magazines, universities, social and counselling services websites, and specific webpages targeting people who use specific drugs, subcultures, and 'psychonauts'); advertising the survey in drop-in and outreach centre premises; offering participants the incentive of entering a lottery; and using paid ads on social networking sites.

FIGURE 1. **Promotional video**
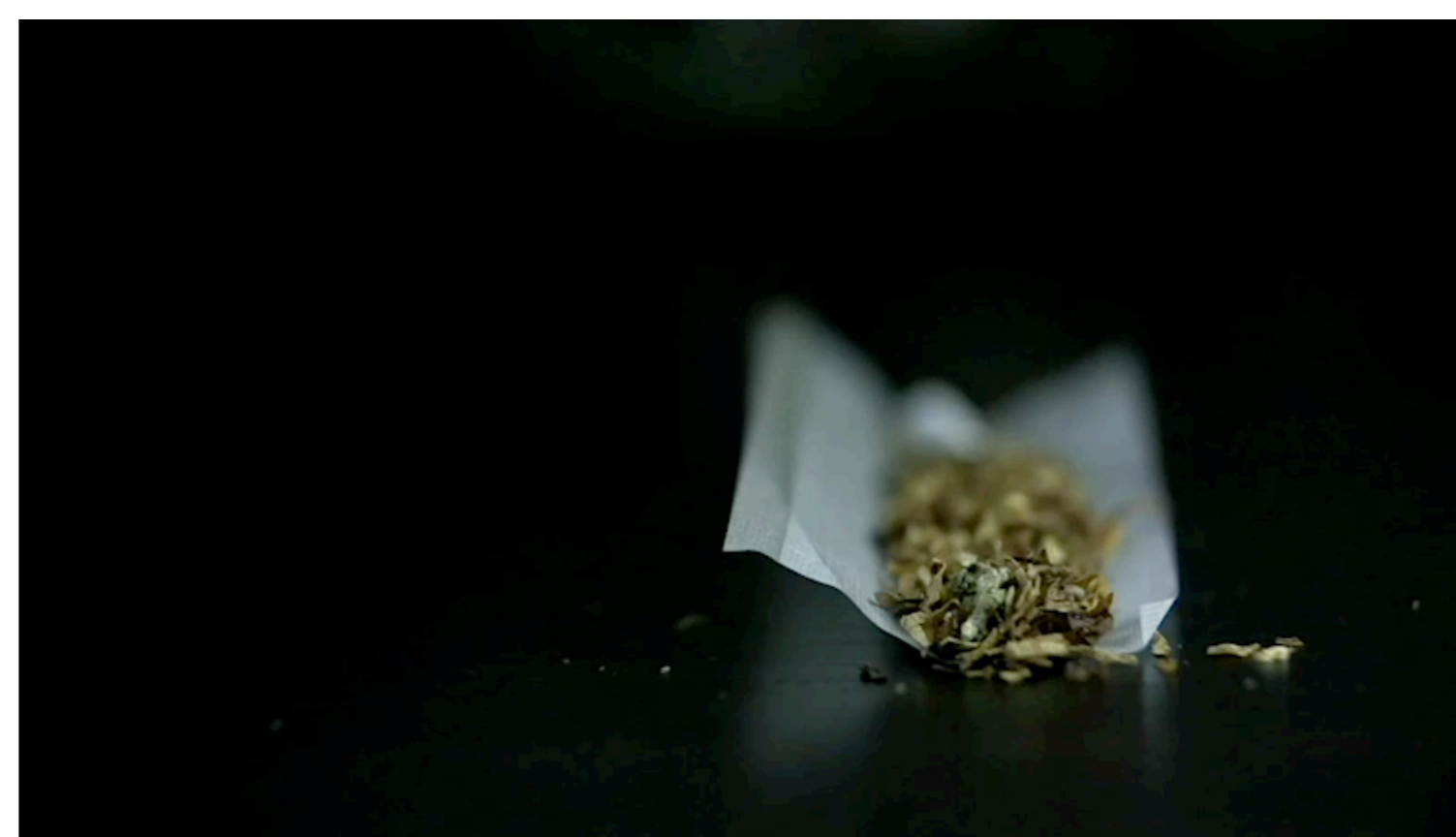
Results

More than 40,000 people completed the survey, with recruitment mostly through social media. Larger samples of users of all drug types than found in GPS were generally obtained. However, the respondent profiles differed markedly between countries, e.g. the proportion aged 18–24 ranged from 30% to 80%. The results relating to use showed both inter-country similarities and differences, e.g. mean daily amounts of cocaine used varied between countries but increases in amounts used with increased frequency of use were similar. Price data showed good external validity.

FIGURE 2. **Forms of cannabis used in the last year by participants in a web survey who reported use of the drug**
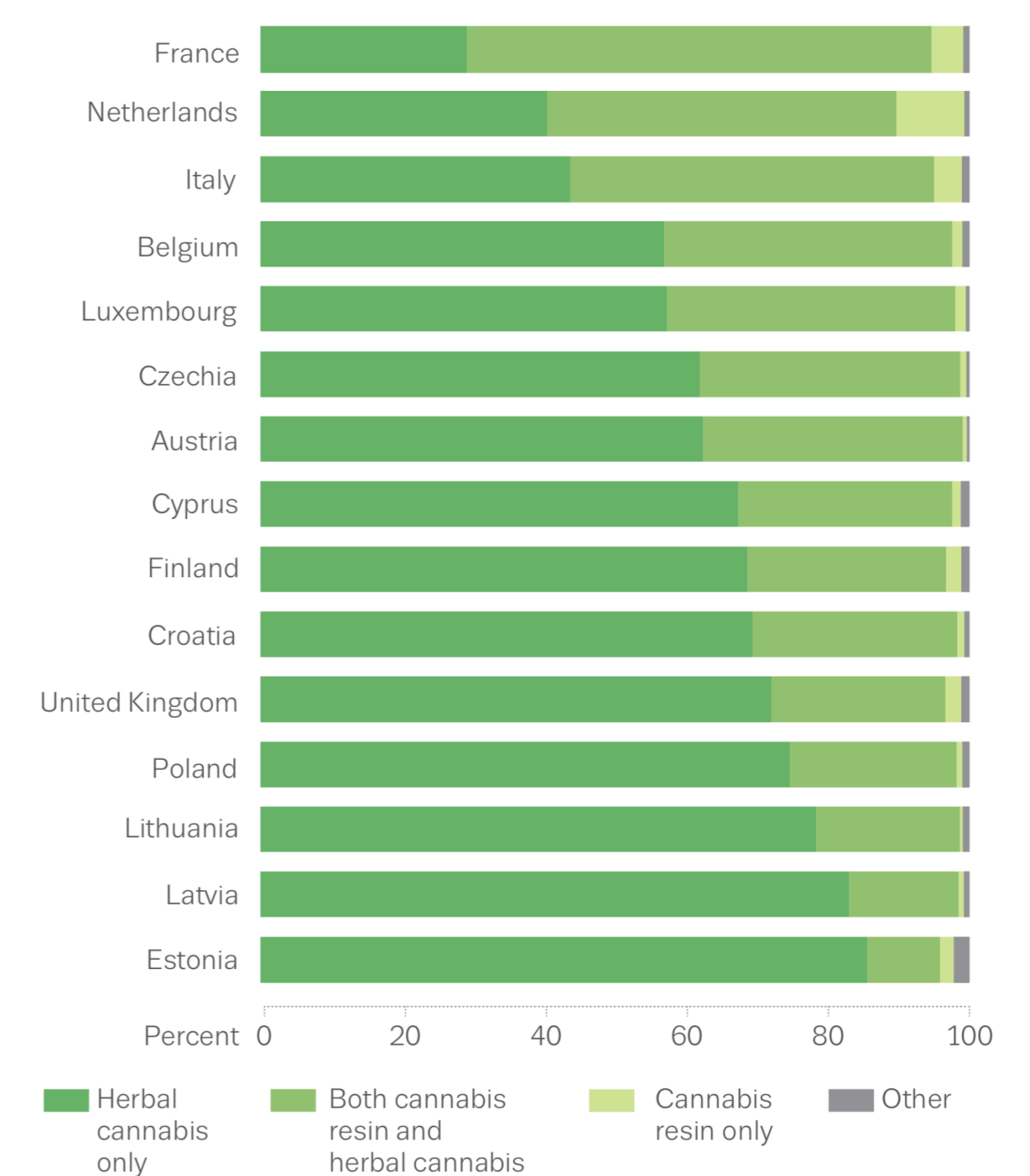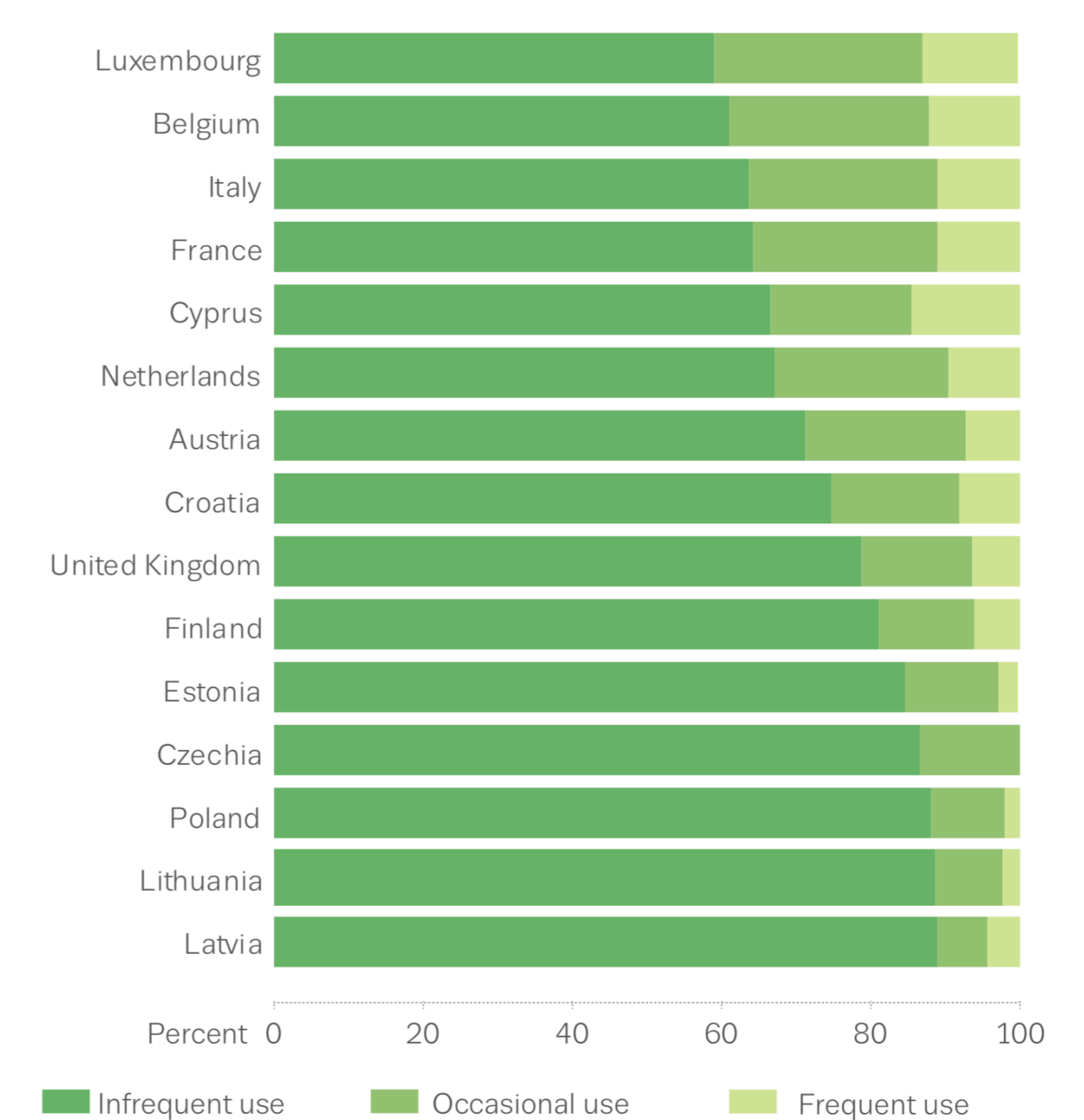

FIGURE 3. **Frequency of cocaine use among participants in a web survey who reported use of the drug in the last year**

Conclusions

Web surveys offer the possibility of collecting information from large numbers people who use illicit drugs quickly and cheaply and can fill important gaps in our knowledge of patterns of use, particularly by recreational users. However, they also have limitations. Standardising questionnaires and approaches to data cleaning and analysis facilitates comparisons between countries but obtaining comparable samples may be challenging. Multinational surveys need to balance standardisation of methods with responsiveness to differing country contexts; our collaborative model does this.

Sources:
http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/activities/european-web-survey-on-drugs
João Matias, Eleni Kalamara, Federica Mathis, Katerina Skarupova, André Noor, and Nicola Singleton. "The use of multi-national web surveys for comparative analysis: Lessons from the European Web Survey on Drugs." International Journal of Drug Policy (2019).

info@emcdda.europa.eu   emcdda.europa.eu