

To: Horizontal Working Party on Drugs of the Council of the European Union

OPEN LETTER FROM THE UNAD YOUTH COMMISSION:

RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF ENHANCE PROTECTIVE MEASURES AGAINST DRUG USE

The UNAD Youth Commission was established in 2017 and comprises a dozen professionals under the age of 35 from various entities of the Addiction Care Network. This network consists of over 200 NGOs in Spain that intervene in the field of substance and behavioural addictions through a shared model of addiction care.

As young professionals in the Spanish addiction care association, we call for a review of social policies to enhance protective measures against drug use. Present discourses and approaches to risk factors concentrate only on individuals and their behaviour, disregarding the influence of environmental and social factors on their living conditions and, therefore, their conduct.

These are difficult times for young people. The cost of living has risen due to the impact of the Ukraine-Russia conflict on the economy. Inflation in the European Union is currently at its highest levels since the introduction of the euro¹. Today's youth is a generation accustomed to uncertainty, with all the advantages and disadvantages that this entails. They have experienced the coronavirus pandemic from 2020 to 2023 and the economic crisis that followed the 2008 recession. In 2022, temporary contracts have become increasingly prevalent among young people aged 15-29 in some European countries, reaching almost a 40%, according to Eurostat². Meanwhile, access to quality affordable housing has become more complex due to rising rents on the open market and stagnating investment in social housing³.

The concept of constructing an exciting life project is hindered by socio-economic instability and the challenge of pursuing long-term goals. Therefore, adopting a more short-term mentality may seem like a more realistic option. In addition, the increase in misinformation has led to a decrease in critical thinking skills. This has resulted in a reduced perception of the risks associated with drug use, particularly with regards to certain consumption practices.

Drug use trends among young people aged 15-34 on the continent have been increasing since 2016 for almost all substances, including cannabis (up 2.2%), cocaine (+0.3%), MDMA (+0.2%), and amphetamines (+0.4%)⁴. At the same time, data on mental health problems among younger age groups is also worsening. According to an OECD report in 2022, the incidence of depression among young people in Europe has doubled⁵.

The behaviour of young people responds to the reality in which they live. The use of drugs, whether legal or illegal, is seen as an option that should not be criminalised. Instead, it should be approached from a broader perspective. Prevention, as a tool to reduce vulnerability to substance use, will always be the first line of action aimed at de-banalising drug use and the problems it can generate. However, this work requires an impact on the social issues surrounding this reality. Preventing and reinforcing protective factors extends beyond substance information.

For this reason, the UNAD Youth Commission proposes reinforcing a series of action lines to strengthen protective factors against possible drug use.

1. The maintenance and promotion of a solid and articulated care network for addiction treatment and prevention, with specialised and connected resources to respond to the demands of any person without access barriers.
2. The adoption of a community approach when dealing with social problems, particularly those related to substance use, to address the full complexity of each case.
3. The promotion of accessible, varied, and attractive leisure activities for underage populations in both urban and rural areas to encourage a healthy lifestyle and reduce the risk of problematic drug use during this important stage of life development.
4. The impact of policies that are not strictly social, such as those related to housing or work, have a significant impact people's life projects. These policies can either promote stability or lead to instability, which may increase or decrease the likelihood of risky behaviour.

The articulated prevention of the program En Plenas Facultades (Fundació Salut i Comunitat⁶)

En Plenas Facultades (EPF) is a project of the Fundació Salut i Comunitat that began in 1999. Its aim is to provide information and counselling to Spanish university students aged 18-25 on drug prevention, risky sexual behaviour, and promoting healthy habits. The project is taking place at a critical time when professional teams are identifying new experiences and needs that may lead to the initiation or consolidation of drug use. Therefore, the project is committed to promoting health education, prevention, protection, and care for young people as an essential responsibility.

The EPF's preventive interventions are based on three main lines: training, awareness raising, and dynamising prevention through young student health agents among their peers. This approach strengthens community action for health and the development of personal skills. The interventions are based on four strengths:

- 1) The promotion of a Peer Education network to encourage healthy habits among students.
- 2) The involvement of trained students in the creative process of preventive interventions.
- 3) The triple role of students as learners, active agents/multipliers of the preventive message, and future sensitised professionals.
- 4) The use of the university structure that facilitates access to a large number of students.

Therefore, it has become a widely accepted practice to prevent health issues by combining the efforts of the third sector, universities, and public institutions at national and regional levels. This approach involves a community-based and comprehensive understanding of health, as well as an innovative methodology in which young people are active agents of change.

The project reaches a potential population of around 295,000 students and has been evaluated in seven Spanish universities using a quasi-experimental pre-post design, achieving positive results in increasing knowledge and predisposition of youth towards a healthy lifestyle. Approximately 80% of participants became health agents, and their knowledge about drug abuse and sexual risk behaviours increased from 5.29 to 7.31 points out of 9 in 2019-2020.

The Icelandic prevention model: Planet Youth⁷

Planet Youth is a primary prevention programme for youth health and well-being. It aims to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors related to substance use. The programme is based on the 'Icelandic Prevention Model' (IPM), which is a community-based and articulated approach. The IPM has been proven effective in reducing substance use in Iceland over the past twenty years and can be replicated in other national contexts.

The programme is supported by evidence of positive outcomes when working with the local community in four settings: family, peers, school environment, and out-of-school time. The five guiding principles are:

- 1) Applying a primary prevention approach to improve the social environment.
- 2) Emphasising community action and embracing public schools as the natural focus of neighbourhood/area efforts to support the health, learning, and life success of children and adolescents.
- 3) Engaging and empowering the community to make practical decisions using local, accessible, and high-quality data and diagnostics.
- 4) Bringing together scientific researchers, policy makers and members of the local community to form a cohesive team dedicated to solving complex social problems.
- 5) Creating customised solutions to address the scope of the issues, prioritising long-term interventions and initiatives to mobilise adequate community resources.

The aim is to enhance the social environment and provide young people with sufficient resources and community support to lead fulfilling lives. This can be achieved by increasing opportunities for participation in organised leisure activities. IPM is intended to promote healthy individual choices by default, resulting in a greater population impact than individual-level programmes can typically achieve.

The programme evaluation indicates a significant decrease in the use of substances among Icelandic adolescents from 1998 to 2018. Specifically, there was a 36% reduction in binge drinking in the past month, a 21% decrease in daily smoking, and a 10% decrease in cannabis use (ever).




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