

## Myth 3 - Everybody is using drugs

It is very common for youth to think that the use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs among their peers is much more common than it actually is. Most of the youth, all over the globe, tend to overestimate the number of their peers that have experimented with, or are using, harmful substances.

This fact sheet helps you to understand why the myth ‘everybody is using drugs’ exists and how it maintains within your peers. Further, some examples of data on actual percentages of drug use in different regions all over the world are presented.

### How does this myth influence the behaviour of my peers and me?

Beliefs such as this one on ‘everybody is using drugs’ can significantly influence one’s own decisions and determinate the attitudes towards using substances. What one thinks is normal and accepted among friends and peers, often looks like something normal or even desirable.

In prevention science, this phenomenon is referred to as ‘social normative beliefs’. A perception of drug use as something normal and common among peers increases the likelihood of drug use. It might be caused by the wish to gain social acceptance, or form fears of experiencing social sanctions, such as exclusion, by the peer group.

### How can we break this myth?

Research shows that addressing these social normative beliefs by giving youth accurate information on the prevalence of drug use among their peers is effective for preventing future drug use.

→ For example, students could be provided with information on rates of drug use among their age group from national survey data,

→ or, students could be supported to conduct a small study of them to find out actual substance use rates, for example in their school.

This gives youth the opportunity to compare their own estimation on drug use with actual prevalence rates and to find out that in most of the communities it is by no means a norm or common behaviour, and that in order to be ‘just like everybody else’ it is better to stick to healthy lifestyles. Based on this the youth can then be encouraged to discuss the reasons why their peers either stay away from, or experiment with, drugs, and the reasons why they themselves estimate substance use among their peers the way they do.

## How common is drug use among youth in my region?

There is plenty of information available online on drug use in different regions, collected by international surveys:

- ✓ The UNODC World Drug Report provides a global overview as well as regional trends in drug use. It shows, for example, that 17.9 per cent among the youth population, aged 12-17 years, reported using any illicit substances during the past year in 2012. Out of the general population, aged 15-64, the corresponding figure was 5,2 per cent, and drug use was reported to be the highest among those in their late teens or twenties.

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr2014/World Drug Report 2014 web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr2014/World_Drug_Report_2014_web.pdf)

- ✓ The World Health Organisation (WHO) conducts a global school-based survey on young people’s health behaviour. It provides fact sheets on the situation in 86 countries, showing for example that in Senegal between 1.4% to 0.8 % and in Thailand between 6.1% to 1.3 % of students have tried drug use, at least once. Is your country included? <http://www.who.int/chp/gshs/factsheets/en/>
- ✓ The European School Survey ESPAD studies alcohol and drug use in the European countries among 15-16 year old students. The 2012 report shows, for example, that 17% of the students had tried cannabis at least once in their life, while 6% had tried any other illicit drug. According to the same report, use of cannabis during the past 30 days was claimed by 8% of the boys and 5% of the girls. <http://www.espad.org/>
- ✓ HBSC is a cross-national study by WHO Europe gaining insight into young people's well-being, health behaviours and the social context, including also substance use, in 43 countries across Europe and North America. <http://www.hbsc.org/>
- ✓ The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides data on alcohol and drug use among youth in US. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/alcoholdrug/>