

# Attitudes on Alcohol and Drinking Patterns among Youth in Serbia

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## SUMMARY

**Introduction** Alcohol is most abused psychoactive substance among youth. Analyzing attitudes on alcohol, patterns and consequences we are getting inputs important for implementing evidence based preventive measures.

**Objective** The aim of this study was to analyze drinking patterns and expectations and alcohol risk perception by gender and region and determine correlation between attitudes and one year prevalence of drinking.

**Methods** The study used data from the European School Survey on Alcohol and Other Drugs, which was then conducted in 2008 in Serbia on a sample of 6,553 students aged 16 years. For data analysis descriptive and analytical statistic were used.

**Results** The results show that nine out of ten students have had at least one alcoholic beverage during life and 5% have at least one alcohol beverage on more than 20 occasions during the last month. Students in Serbia have mainly positive expectations from alcohol, and the strongest potential drinking predictors in the previous year are expectation of having fun and the wish to feel relaxed. According to the participants, drinking 4-5 drinks on weekends (34.6%) is less risky than trying cannabis (52.0%). Boys have experienced problems caused by alcohol drinking more often than girls, while students from Vojvodina have performed badly in school in higher percentage than students from Belgrade and Central Serbia.

**Conclusion** In Serbia, girls drink less and perceive drinking as more risky in comparison to boys, while 16-year-old students from Vojvodina have more positive expectations but also more prominent problems caused by alcohol drinking. Additional education of the young on alcohol risk is recommended.

**Keywords:** youth; alcohol; alcohol abuse; risk perception

## INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders and behavior disorders due to alcohol use represent a serious public health problem since they directly affect health of the drinking population and indirectly health of persons from their environment (family, friends, colleagues from work). The World Health Organization estimates that about 2 billion people around the world use alcohol and more than 75 million have been diagnosed as alcohol abusers or alcohol addicts. Effects of alcohol use are connected with at least 60 different ailments and injuries and cause 2.5 million deaths every year [1]. In some countries in Central and Eastern Europe 16% of the population suffers from some disorder caused by alcohol use [2]. The problem of alcohol abuse among youth exists in almost all countries [1, 2] and 320,000 young people between the age of 15 and 29 years die from alcohol-related causes, resulting in 9% of all deaths in that age group [3].

Results of the 2006 national survey show that in the Republic of Serbia 52.6% of men and 24.6% of women drink alcohol occasionally, and 5.7% men are in the group at high risk of chronic diseases. Among young people aged 12-19 years 25.5% have been drunk at least once and 33.1% of youth aged 15-19 years drink alcohol occasionally. Data show that

60.2% of children and youth in Serbia (aged 12-19 years) do not have socially desirable attitude towards alcohol drinking [4].

There are two basic problems regarding alcohol use among youth; easy accessibility and society's attitude towards alcohol drinking. In our country there are legislations, but also problems in their implementation. On the other hand, cultural attitude towards alcohol is tolerant and it is highly rated in the hierarchy of values and is connected with many social rituals. Youth learn from models and often feel that "alcohol is entry key to the adult world". We should not forget that the onset of experimenting with alcohol often happens during adolescence, the period that represents the most turbulent phase in life. Onset of drinking at age 21 years is positively correlated with the adoption of risky behavior [5], and the young people who start drinking before 15 years of age have increased risk of developing addiction later in life in comparison to those who start drinking after 21 years of age [6, 7].

Alcohol is a legal psychoactive substance in many countries including Serbia, and in that context we may speak of socially acceptable drinking. Alcohol abuse is a general term to define any kind of socially unacceptable drinking, i.e. risky, harmful drinking and alcohol abuse. However, socially acceptable drinking

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is the limit determined by the society for adults above 18 years of age and it is gender and age dependant. Alcohol use in minors under 18 years of age is considered socially unacceptable behavior and in that context it should be considered as alcohol abuse. Determination of attitudes towards alcohol among youth, drinking patterns and their consequences, provides not only a clear epidemiological picture but also significant data needed for effective evidence-based preventive measures.

## OBJECTIVE

Aims of the paper are: 1) to present attitudes of youth in Serbia regarding risks of alcohol use and their expectations from alcohol drinking; 2) to determine correlation between drinking attitudes and drinking patterns; 3) to present consequences of alcohol drinking in the population of 16 years old in Serbia; 4) to analyze attitudes and consequences of alcohol drinking according to sex and region; and 5) to compare outcomes with results of the ESPAD survey in other countries.

## METHODS

The data used were collected through the European School Survey on Alcohol and Other Drugs among young people (ESPAD) carried out in 2008 in Serbia. The survey included a sample of 6,553 students aged 16 years in the first year of secondary school in urban and rural settings in Serbia.

The survey was conducted by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia, Institute of Public Health of Serbia "Dr Milan Jovanović Batut" and research agency Strategic Marketing, with concordance of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia and supported by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Abuse in Lisbon (EMCDDA) and Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN). The survey was a part of the international ESPAD project conducted in more than 40 European countries.

The ESPAD survey used stratified one-stage sample of first grade secondary school students born in 1992. A sample was chosen in order to provide statistically reliable estimates of indicators on the use of alcohol and other drugs in Serbia as a whole, for small and large towns and rural settings and for three regions: Vojvodina, Belgrade and Central Serbia. Besides, the sample provided confident results for three types of school indicators: gymnasiums, vocational professional schools and vocational handcraft schools. Information on the use of alcohol and other drugs were obtained from a self-administered questionnaire designed by the ESPAD and this enabled comparison with results of other countries participating in the project.

Descriptive and analytical statistical methods were used for the analysis of data. Statistical significance testing was performed by variance analysis, chi-square test and logistic regression. SPSS for Windows, version 10.0 was used for data analysis.

## RESULTS

### Drinking patterns

Basic data obtained by the ESPAD survey show that 89.1% of secondary school students in Serbia drank at least once in lifetime one or more alcohol drinks, three quarters of students (75.8%) drank at least one drink in the last 12 months, and more than half of students (52.5%) drank at least one drink in 30 days preceding the survey. A significantly higher number of young men use alcohol during lifetime (40 times and more) and the highest percentage of students who were drinking at least 40 times and more, live in Vojvodina region (23.1%). Around 5% of students in the survey drank over 20 times during the previous month. The analysis of drinking frequency shows a statistically significant difference between sexes based on alcohol use during life ( $\chi^2=418.992$ ;  $p=0.000$ ), alcohol use in the last 12 months ( $\chi^2=340.280$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) and in the last 30 days ( $\chi^2=285.964$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). Statistically significant differences were between regions; Vojvodina region has a statistically much higher frequency of drinking any time during life ( $\chi^2=62.878$ ;  $p=0.000$ ), over the last 12 months ( $\chi^2=74.557$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) and over the last 30 days ( $\chi^2=51.305$ ;  $p=0.000$ ).

Students that try alcohol very often get drunk and this experience had 42.2% subjects during life. Frequency varies between one to several dozen of drinking episodes. Sex differences are most prominent related to a higher frequency of drinking, i.e. 3.4% of boys and 0.3% girls were drunk more than 40 times. One third of students (29.7%) got drunk in the last 12 months (37.5% of boys and 23.0% of girls), and more than 10% of subject got drunk in the month preceding the survey (18.3% of boys and 8.2% of girls). Even third of students (32.0%) had five or more drinks in a row in the last month (so called binge drinking or excess drinking). The highest number of students drank alcohol in the last seven days (33.3%) and in the period of one month to one year preceding the survey (19.9%), while the least number of students said that they drank more than a year ago (6.2%).

### Attitudes towards alcohol

In order to obtain data on students' alcohol-related expectations, one of the questions used was "What is the possibility of the following events happening to you if you drink alcohol?" and five answers in positive and six answers in negative context were obtained. Although answers varied depending on sex and region, generally speaking young people believe that likely or very likely positive things will happen. More than half of the students (56.7%) expect that alcohol will relax them, 54.5% think that they will be more open and friendly, 48.1% think they will be happier, while 46.7% think they will forget problems if they drink. On the other hand, a large percentage of students think it is highly unlikely to get into conflict with police (70.1%) or that they will not be able to stop drinking (70.2%) (Table1).

A regression model was used to determine the correlation between alcohol expectations and drinking in the last 12 months, period in which the majority of students drank for the last time. The Pearson's correlation coefficient and multiple linear regression model for drinking prevalence in the last 12 months show a higher correlation of positive expectations in case of drinking alcohol in comparison to negative expectations. The strongest potential predictor among expectations were expectancy to have fun as well as expectancy to forget problems, to feel happy, more open and friendly (Table 2).

Students estimated the risk of the use of certain legal and illegal psychoactive substances. According to results, drinking four or five drinks almost every day the subjects (51.4%) consider equally risky as smoking one or more cigarette packages daily (51.3%), trying cannabis (52.0%) and ecstasy (51.5%). Drinking of 4-5 drinks every weekend is considered by the students as less risky compared to previously stated behavior patterns (Table 3).

More than 50% of students think that alcohol influences traffic and other accidents, family problems and relationships, violence and crime, as well as health and financial problems. However, a large percentage of students think that influence of drinking on these problems is "little", especially to financial problems (11.1%), relationship problems (9.0%), health problems (7.5%), violence and crime (7.2%). The largest percentage of students thinks that drinking large quantities of alcohol has a great influence on family problems (63.2%).

## Consequences of alcohol use

Problems caused by alcohol use in the last 12 months were divided into four categories: individual problems (poor school performance, accident or injury, hospital treatment or emergency call), problems in relation to environment (serious problems with family and friends), risky sexual behavior (regrets due to sexual intercourse, sexual intercourse without condom) and delinquency (fight, victim of theft or robbery, problems with police). In the last 12 months, as the consequence of drinking, every tenth student had accident/injury at least once, approximately the same percentage participated in a fight (11.4%), and 4.6% of students had problems with the police. 10.5% of students had problems with parents, 9.4% with friends, and 10.6% had school problems due to drinking. Drinking alcohol caused hospitalization of 3% of students and 1.7% of them were theft victims. Students' replies are significantly different according to sex and region, and boys experienced problems due to drinking more often than girls. The difference is especially noticeable between boys and girls who had unprotected sexual intercourse (12.2 vs. 2.7%), participated in fight (20.7 vs. 3.6%) and had problems with police (10.0 vs. 1.9%). Although a higher percentage of students from Vojvodina region experienced consequences of drinking in comparison to students from Central Serbia and Belgrade, these differences are not statistically significant except for poor school performance (Table 4).

**Table 1.** Positive and negative consequences "likely" or "very likely" to appear by gender and region

Consequences	Gender			Region				Total (%)	ESPAD average (%)
	Male (%)	Female (%)	p	Vojvodina (%)	Belgrade (%)	Central Serbia (%)	p		
Feel relaxed	59.9	56.8	<0.01	62.9	61	55.3	/	58	53
Feel happy	48.9	49.9	/	52.7	50	47.9	/	49	53
Forget my problems	52.4	44.8	<0.001	51.6	47.2	47.63	/	48	48
Feel more friendly and outgoing	59.4	53.5	<0.001	59.7	56.9	54.5	/	56	58
Have a lot of fun	62.7	56.4	<0.001	63	58.4	58.1	<0.01	59	67
Get into trouble with police	25.5	14.8	<0.001	18.6	22.1	19.4	<0.001	19.7	20
Harm my health	35.3	34.3	<0.001	33.6	31.3	36.4	<0.01	34.7	43
Not be able to stop drinking	19.5	12.5	<0.001	16.7	12.1	16.6	<0.01	15.7	16
Get a hangover	41.2	37.4	<0.001	40.9	37.9	38.8	<0.01	39.1	42
Do something I would regret	38.7	34	<0.001	36.5	36.6	35.9	<0.01	36.2	39
Feel sick	35.5	37.1	0.308	36.3	38	35.8	<0.01	36.4	35

**Table 2.** Multiple regression models for prevalence of last year drinking among first year secondary school students and their drinking expectations

Independent variables	r	p*	$\beta$	t	p
Feel relaxed	-0.369	0.000	-0.163	-9.487	0.000
Get into trouble with police	0.034	0.006	0.024	1.486	0.137
Harm my health	0.052	0.134	0.078	4.540	0.000
Feel happy	-0.315	0.000	0.028	1.506	0.132
Forget my problems	-0.294	0.000	-0.061	-3.473	0.001
Not be able to stop drinking	-0.024	0.000	0.031	2.176	0.030
Get a hangover	-0.122	0.000	-0.062	-3.718	0.000
Feel more friendly and outgoing	-0.337	0.000	-0.062	-3.344	0.001
Do something I would regret	-0.105	0.000	-0.061	-3.662	0.000
Have a lot of fun	-0.407	0.000	-0.246	-12.875	0.000
Feel sick	0.063	0.000	0.147	8.421	0.000

\* sig. p correlation coefficient

**Table 3.** Students' risk perception of using some psychoactive substances

Usage	No risk	Slight risk	Moderate risk	Great risk	Do not know	Total
Cigarettes occasionally	16.0	28.9	28.6	17.9	8.5	100.0
Smoke one or more packets of cigarettes per day	7.8	11.7	21.9	51.3	7.3	100.0
Have four or five drinks nearly every day	3.7	9.1	27.2	51.4	8.5	100.0
Have four or five drinks every weekend	6.7	16.1	30.8	34.6	11.7	100.0
Try cannabis	6.2	11.9	16.0	52.0	13.8	100.0
Cannabis occasionally	3.6	7.3	18.7	56.5	13.9	100.0
Cannabis regularly	2.3	2.2	6.1	76.8	12.6	100.0
Try ecstasy	3.2	8.2	19.8	51.5	17.3	100.0
Ecstasy regularly	1.9	1.4	4.5	78.0	14.2	100.0

**Table 4.** Percentage of students that experienced at least once in lifetime problems caused by own alcohol use by sex and region

Experienced problems		Gender			Region				Total (%)
		Male (%)	Female (%)	p	Vojvodina (%)	Belgrade (%)	Central Serbia (%)	p	
Individual	Performed poorly at school or at work	13.4	8.4	<0.001	12.9	9.4	10.3	<0.01	10.7
	Accident or injury	16.2	8.1	<0.001	14.1	11.7	10.9	/	11.9
	Hospitalized or admitted to an emergency room	4.2	1.6	<0.001	3.1	3	2.6	/	2.8
Relationship	Serious problems with friends	10.9	8.5	0.001	10.7	8.9	9.3	/	9.6
	Serious problems with parents	13.7	8	<0.001	12.4	9.1	10.4	/	10.6
Sexual	Engaged in sexual intercourse you regretted the next day	8.4	1.9	<0.001	4.5	4.6	5.2	/	4.9
	Engaged in sexual intercourse without a condom	12.4	2.8	<0.001	8.3	5.8	7.3	/	7.3
Delinquency	Physical fight	20.7	3.6	<0.001	13.1	11.6	10.9	/	11.5
	Victimized by robbery or theft	2.5	1	<0.001	2.7	0.9	1.5	/	1.7
	Trouble with the police	10	1.9	<0.001	3.1	3	2.6	/	5.6

## DISCUSSION

Alcohol is the most widely spread psychoactive substances used among adolescents worldwide, although percentage of youth who have ever used alcohol varies between countries, from 32% in Zimbabwe to 99% in Wales [8]. Lifetime drinking prevalence in all countries included in the ESPAD survey in 2007 was between 66 to 97%, and the ESPAD average is 90%.

Globally, percentage of Serbian secondary school students who have tried alcohol (89.1%) is the same as in the peer group throughout Europe. The frequency of drinking in our country is lower in comparison to some countries in the region (Croatia, 93%), but higher compared to Scandinavian data (Norway, 77%). The prevalence of alcohol drinking in the last 12 months in Serbia is 78% and does not differ from the frequency of drinking in other countries. The frequency of drinking in the last 12 months is higher among boys. The average ESPAD frequency of drinking 40 and more times in the last 12 months was 14% for boys and 8% for girls, while in our country this difference is even higher (18.6% boys vs. 4.8% girls). Alcohol use in the last 30 days in Serbia (54%) is somewhat lower than the ESPAD average (61%). The analysis of the ESPAD data (excluding Serbian data) shows that there is a strong correlation between different variables that describe the

frequency of drinking, such as frequency of drinking in the last 12 months and in the last 30 days ( $r=0.93$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) [9].

Alcohol use is one of the major public health problems in the USA. Approximately 50% of boys and girls up to 15 years of age drank at least one alcoholic drink. This percentage rises with age and up to 21 years of age; nine out of ten young people have been drinking [10]. Drinking prevalence decreases during life (42%), during the last year (29.7%) and during the last month (12.9%) in Serbia, somewhat lower compared to the ESPAD average (half of subjects were drunk at least once during lifetime, 39% during the last year and 18% during the last month). In Serbia, like in the majority of countries worldwide, boys drink more often in comparison to girls [2]. Other researches confirm these sex related differences (no matter the research period, frequency of drinking is higher among men) [11-14].

Adolescents' attitudes towards risk related to usage of psychoactive substances are often closely related to the frequency of use. Insight in adolescent' attitudes about the risks of psychoactive substance use may help to apply current and target group adjusted information on certain substances and their effects [15]. In his research, Sjornberg states that alcohol consumption is related to risk perception, but that alcohol is estimated as big risk for population as a whole, while considered one of the smallest



individual risks. On population level drinking is the most frequent explanation people give to explain prevalence of violence [16]. Questions of risk estimates are important ones [17, 18] and implications of individual and general risk estimates are different and question of risk estimate on population level is especially important for community activities. Adolescents know that there is a relationship between risk behavior and negative consequences, but certain researches have shown that adolescents with risky behavior are not fully aware of dangers and negative health outcomes [19]. As with other risk factors that influence commencement of psychoactive substances abuse, risk perception associated to these forms of behavior varies according to sex, age and type of psychoactive substance [15]. Female think of alcohol drinking as more risky compared to men [20], and Serbian data concord to similar studies.

It is important to underline that young people are not aware enough of dangers caused by drinking few drinks in a row, which can be seen from the following data: 6.7% of students think that this does not represent any risk, and only one third of students consider it a big risk (34.6%). The fact that more than half of the students (51.4%) consider drinking four to five drinks a day highly risky as is smoking of package of cigarettes (51.3%) or smoking cannabis (52%) is worrying. In comparison to the ESPAD average it can be concluded that adolescents in Serbia are less aware of risks related to drinking compared to their peer group from other European countries where 61% of students consider drinking four to five drinks a day highly risky. Data from studies in the USA where only 40% of young people aged 12 to 19 years considers drinking four to five drinks once or two times per week highly risky confirm previously stated data [21].

One of possible explanations why students get involved in risky behavior is that positive expectations outweigh possible negative outcomes. Fromme K. et al. [22] pointed out a stronger correlation of positive outcomes with risky behaviors in comparison to negative expectations that confirm our results. Other researchers identified correlation between alcohol expectations and drinking patterns [23], and found positive expectation as especially important [24] that confirmed the predictor of drinking as stronger one in the last year in Serbia compared to negative expectations.

It has been determined that in many countries where negative expectations are predominant, the prevalence of alcohol use and drinking is lower. In order to obtain a review of expectations i.e. to establish the predominance of positive or negative expectations in comparison to other countries' average values, we calculated the index for Serbia according to methodology used by other countries in the ESPAD survey [9]. For each positive consequence larger than the ESPAD average one point was given to a

specific item, and in the same way points were given for negative consequences (least expected consequence i.e. inability to stop drinking was excluded for balance). Negative points for each country were deducted from positive points and the result was index value. This means that the result could be a positive or negative number or zero. The index for the Republic of Serbia determined in this way for the purpose of this article was zero. Based on this it may be stated that the Republic of Serbia is among the countries where positive expectations are equal to negative ones (also in Bulgaria, Yermenia and Slovakia). The countries where positive expectations prevailed were United Kingdom, Ukraine, Finland and Check Republic, while in Italy and Romania students most often think of negative outcomes. Many of the countries with negative expectations related to drinking are at the same time countries with less prevalence of drinking compared to the average.

The most frequent problems caused by alcohol use among 16 year olds were problems regarding relationship with environment in Europe [9] and in Serbia. Compared to other countries that participated in the ESPAD, Serbia together with Switzerland, Slovenia, Portugal, Poland, Monaco and Belgium is in the group of countries with the lowest score of problems caused by drinking. The highest score (10) has Bulgaria where results for each of experienced problems were above the average.

## CONCLUSION

Globally, drinking patterns among Serbian students do not differ much in comparison to the ESPAD average. According to analyzed indicators in our country, statistically significant percentage of adolescents drinking are males, and students from Vojvodina region drink more often in comparison to students in Central Serbia and Belgrade.

Adolescents in Serbia are less aware of drinking risks in comparison to their peers from other European countries, and we are in the group of countries with a relatively lower number of problems associated with alcohol drinking in this population group. Females think alcohol drinking is more risky compared to males, and students from Vojvodina region have more positive expectations, but also significant consequences caused by drinking.

Adolescents' attitudes on risks related to psychoactive substances use are mostly reversely equal to the frequency and quantity of psychoactive substance consumption i.e. prevalence rises when adolescents think that drinking will lead to positive effects (fun, relaxation, self-esteem). It is crucially important to provide precise information on alcohol and drinking effects to youth, adjusted to their age and in an acceptable way. A striking gender-related difference indicates the need for more intensive work with males on the prevention of alcohol abuse and addiction.

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## Ставови у вези с алкохолом и обрасци пијења међу младима у Србији

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### КРАТАК САДРЖАЈ

**Увод** Алкохол је психоактивна супстанца коју млади најчешће користе. Утврђивањем ставова у вези с алкохолом међу младим људима, образаца и последица пијења, добијамо значајне податке ради примене што делотворнијих мера превенције које су засноване на доказима.

**Циљ рада** Циљ истраживања је био да се прикажу обрасци пијења алкохолних пића, очекивања и ставови младих људи у Србији о ризичности пијења према полу и региону, те утврди веза између ставова и образаца пијења.

**Методе рада** У раду су коришћени подаци из Европског школског истраживања о употреби алкохола и дрога међу младима које је обављено 2008. године у Србији на узорку од 6.553 ученика узраста од 16 година. За анализу података коришћене су методе дескриптивне и аналитичке статистике.

**Резултати** Резултати показују да је девет од десет ученика у Србији бар једном током живота пило, а око 5% ис-

питаника је у последњих месец дана пило више од двадесет пута. Млади у Србији имају углавном позитивна очекивања од алкохола, а најјачи потенцијални предиктори пијења у претходних годину дана су забава и жеља да се осећају опуштеније. Испиање четири-пет алкохолних пића викендом ученици сматрају мање ризичним (34,6%) од пробања канабиса (52,0%). Проблеме изазване пијењем младићи су искусили чешће него девојке, а лош успех у школи због злоупотребе алкохола чешће су имали ученици из Војводине.

**Закључак** У Србији девојке мање пију и сматрају пијење алкохолних пића ризичнијим него младићи. Шеснаестогодишњаци из Војводине имају позитивнија очекивања, али и израженије последице услед пијења. Младе је потребно додатно едуковати о ризику који носи пијење алкохола.

**Кључне речи:** млади; алкохол; злоупотреба алкохола; перцепција ризика