

Introduction

The growing use of prescription drugs is a global health concern. A ‘pill-popping culture’, where many life issues are seen as problems that can be treated with medication, is becoming more common worldwide, not least in Europe and in Belgium. Simultaneously, there are increasing concerns about the nonmedical use of prescription drugs (hereafter, NMUPD), such as sedatives, opioid-based pain relief medication and prescription stimulants (Inciardi et al., 2007; Griffiths et al., 2014). Surveys note increasing prevalence rates in the US, with the highest rates among young adults aged 18-25 (Faraone et al., 2020). Nonmedical use may occur in the context of polydrug use, self-medication, recreational or enhancement purposes, with or without a medical prescription, but outside of the prescribed medical guidelines (Drazdowski, 2016; Milhet, 2015). Nevertheless, this trend has received little attention in scientific research in Belgium (De Bruyn et al., 2019; Ponnet et al., 2021), as well as in Europe as a whole (Casati et al., 2012).

Currently, most of the studies into NMUPD have been conducted in the US (Drazdowski, 2016) and fewer European studies are available (Casati et al., 2012; Helmer et al., 2016; Holloway & Bennett, 2012; Holloway, Bennett, Parry, & Gorden, 2013; Lehne et al., 2018; Papazisis et al., 2018). Furthermore, these efforts have tended to focus on monitoring prevalence of use among college or public-school students and gathering data on their supply channels and not so much on their perceptions of the use or supply of prescription drugs and associated harms. Against this backdrop, there is a clear need to better understand the young population of users, also taking into account that the drug-taking environment and patterns of drug use may differ greatly from those of other adults, and that young users are at a high(er) risk of adverse health outcomes. In particular, young users’ own perceptions of the use of prescription drugs and associated harms are of particular relevance here, and could provide valuable insights for Belgian policymakers. This study aims to contribute to filling this

knowledge gap by investigating young Belgian people's views on the nonmedical use and supply of prescription drugs in Belgium.

More specifically, we focus on a particular (age) group (18-29 years old) and consider the following groups of prescription drugs: 1) sedatives (e.g. benzodiazepines, z-hypnotics used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders); 2) analgesics (e.g. opioids); 3) stimulants (e.g., medications typically prescribed to treat attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)). These medicines legally require a medical prescription to be dispensed in Belgium. These three groups of medications seem to have been most predominantly associated with non-medical use. We do not take into account over-the-counter drugs (OTC) which can be obtained without a prescription. Furthermore, in this study we use the following definition of 'nonmedical use of prescription drugs': (i) the use of prescription drugs without a prescription (ii) or the use of prescription drugs in ways not intended by the prescriber such as using prescribed medications in higher quantities or manners other than prescribed, or using medications for purposes other than prescribed.

Our study is driven by the following research questions:

- RQ1:** What do young people think about their nonmedical use practices, including types of medications used, settings of use and supply, perceptions of risk and social acceptability?
- RQ2:** What information do young people consult and rely on regarding prescription drugs?
- RQ3:** How has the nonmedical use and supply of prescription drugs been discussed among online communities of (potential) users?
- RQ4:** What measures may help to prevent or reduce nonmedical use of prescription drugs and related harms among young people?

This book starts with introducing the reader to the topic being studied by outlining the study background. In the literature review, we elaborate on international findings on the nonmedical use of prescription drugs and we outline the European and Belgian context. Hereafter, we discuss our research methods and findings. The book finishes with the main conclusions of the study, including concrete recommendations for policy and practice to prevent or reduce NMUPD and its associated harms among young people.