

Sedative-hypnotic use among school-aged adolescents in the basque country: gender differences and related factors

Consumo de hipnosedantes entre adolescentes en edad escolar en la Comunidad Autónoma de Euskadi: diferencias de género y factores relacionados

Álvaro Moro Inchaurtieta, Marta Ruiz-Narezo, Alexandra Coto-Castro

Deusto Institute of Drug Dependencies
Faculty of Education and Sport, University of Deusto, Spain

ORCID Álvaro Moro Inchaurtieta: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0167-6048>

ORCID Marta Ruiz-Narezo: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6834-6070>

ORCID Alexandra Coto-Castro: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5252-8639>

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Abstract

The consumption of prescription and non-prescription hypnosedatives has become the only substance consumption that has increased among adolescents in the Basque Country. Our objective in the research was to describe the prevalence, sex differences and factors associated with the consumption of hypnosedatives in adolescents of school age in the Basque Country. An observational study was carried out using the DROGAS Y ESCUELA X Survey on drug use in Secondary Education 2021-2022, which covers drug use among students aged 14 to 18 in the Basque Country. Prevalence of lifetime, last year and last month use of hypnosedatives have been analysed according to sex, as well as inequalities by variables such as place of origin, parents' educational level and family structure. In addition, a comparison of the temporal evolution of consumption over the years (2017-2022) and a comparison with the situation in Spain has been carried out, through the analysis of the ESTUDES survey. These results help to design new strategies and prevention policies in relation to the use and abuse of hypnosedatives among the adolescent population.

Keywords

Hypnosedatives; Adolescence; Prevention; Age; Sex.

— Correspondence:

Álvaro Moro Inchaurtieta

Email: alvaro.moro@deusto.es



Resumen

El consumo de hipnosedantes con y sin receta se ha convertido en el único consumo de sustancias que ha aumentado entre los y las adolescentes de la Comunidad Autónoma de Euskadi. Nuestro objetivo en la investigación fue el de describir la prevalencia, las diferencias de género y los factores asociados al consumo de hipnosedantes en adolescentes en edad escolar en esta comunidad. Para ello, se realizó un estudio observacional utilizando la Encuesta DROGAS Y ESCUELA X sobre uso de drogas en Educación Secundaria 2021-2022, que analiza el consumo de drogas entre estudiantes de 14 a 18 años en la Comunidad Autónoma de Euskadi. Se han analizado prevalencias del uso de hipnosedantes a lo largo de la vida, durante el último año y mes según el sexo, así como las desigualdades en función de variables tales como el lugar de origen, el nivel educativo de los progenitores y la estructura familiar. Además, se ha realizado una comparativa de la evolución temporal del consumo durante los años (2017-2022) y una comparación con la situación de España, a través del análisis de la encuesta ESTUDES. Estos resultados ayudan a diseñar nuevas estrategias y políticas de prevención en relación al uso y abuso de hipnosedantes entre la población adolescentes.

Palabras clave

Hipnosedantes; Adolescencia; Prevención; Edad; Sexo.

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse and addictions continue to be one of society's most relevant problems, even more so in adolescence and youth, fuelling considerable social alarm. This article seeks to examine the consumption of sedative-hypnotics among adolescents in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country and gain insight into the differences according to gender along with the impact that other factors have on such consumption.

Historically, the use of sedative-hypnotics has received limited attention in research compared to other substances, particularly regarding the adolescent and juvenile age groups, with studies typically focusing on adults (Markez, 2020; Meneses, 2020; Gil-García & Cáceres-Matos, 2020) and men (Aróstegui & Martínez, 2018).

Several studies show, in the words of Matud et al. (2017), that drugs for anxiolytic and hypnotic purposes are the most frequently prescribed, with benzodiazepines being the most commonly used. These are indicated for use over a short period to reduce emotional distress. However, the side effects become more pronounced as the treatment continues over time, which is an essential point to consider given the vital stage of adolescence and the fact that this period involves important changes and complexity (González de Audikana et al., 2021; Santibáñez et al., 2020).

Authors such as Bachmann et al. (2016), cited by Pires et al. (2022), among others, report that the use of psychiatric medication in adolescents and young people has increased, highlighting the population between the ages of 15 and 19. Consequently, due to the impact they are observing in this population, several countries have stepped



up their research effort on the growing use of serotonin reuptake inhibitors, utilised for the treatment of diseases like depression (Pires et al., 2022).

According to the OEDA (*Spanish Observatory on Drugs and Addictions*), more than 3,000 minors under 18 were admitted for treatment related to abuse or dependence on psychoactive substances in 2019 in Spain (Save the Children, 2022). Moreover, data derived from the Spanish National Health Survey (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2017) mentioned by Save the Children (2021) indicate that in 2017, 1% of children aged 4 to 14 suffered from mental disorders, while 3% exhibited behavioural disorders.

Data collected from a survey on drug use in secondary education in Spain, ESTUDES (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2022), demonstrate that the prevalence of sedative-hypnotic use (with and without prescription) among minors aged 14 to 18 years is 19.6% in a lifetime, 13.6% for the past year, and 7.5% for the past month. This trend has been on the rise over the last few years, reaching its peak in 2021, with the highest prevalence observed since this study has been monitored.

Once the prevalence of consumption in the adolescent population has been established, it is interesting to explore the risk factors (González de Audikana et al., 2021; Santibáñez et al., 2020) that may have an impact on such use and abuse, focusing primarily on specific key situations, which in our opinion are causing the rise of consumption/use in the underage population and, therefore, the risk of abuse to increase exponentially, including suicidal ideation, the growth in mental disorders, and other associated factors, such as the availability of substances and the normalisation of consumption.

- The rise in suicidal ideation among children and adolescents in recent years has led to an increase in treatment with second-generation antidepressants (Oliveira, 2020; Food and Drug Administration (FDA, 2004) in Pires et al., 2022). This trend raises concerns about their widespread use in the medicalisation of problems that could perhaps have been addressed with other approaches, especially if we take into account the contraindications associated with sedative-hypnotics. The National Institute of Statistics (2022) reports that the number of people who took their own lives was the primary cause of death by external causes in Spain in 2021, reaching historic figures of 4,003 deaths, 1.6% more than in 2020. Regarding the age groups of deaths by suicide, 14 minors aged between 5-14 years committed suicide (seven were female and seven were male) in 2020. That same year, 300 adolescents and young people aged between 15 and 29 committed suicide (73 females and 217 males), according to data provided by the Spanish Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2022) and the Suicide Observatory in Spain (Observatorio del Suicidio en España, 2022).
- *Youth mental health problems.* The fact that mental health was included as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 implies that there were already indicators pointing to a critical social matter that needed to be addressed (Save the Children, 2021: p.6). Furthermore, studies such



as that by Pires et al. (2022) show that the pandemic contributed to a surge in the consumption of sedative-hypnotics among adolescents alongside a deterioration in the mental health of this age group, with a rise in depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal ideation. While such increased use is not typically associated with a constant in adolescents' lives, it is necessary to examine the use and abuse of these substances and the factors that drive this behaviour.

- *Other related factors.* As Arostegui and Moro (2020) highlight, some of the factors commonly associated with the consumption of sedative-hypnotics include: 1) self-imposed demands and perfectionism in the academic sphere, 2) low self-esteem, 3) aesthetic pressure, 4) having to look after people in one's environment as well as studying, 5) the first toxic emotional and sexual relationships, based on the idea of romantic love and, 6) situations of gender violence experienced in intimate partner relationships.

Also playing a significant role in this issue is the availability and ease of access to substances considered sedative-hypnotics (Carrasco et al., 2019; Bacigalupe & Martín, 2021) and the normalisation of their use.

Differences according to Gender.

Sedative-Hypnotic Use in Female Adolescents

When it comes to the differences between genders, authors Carrasco et al. (2019) note there are distinctions in the use of drugs like tobacco, alcohol, and

tranquillisers. They report that the difference stems from educational influences, i.e., in generations receiving a gender-based education, the prevalence of consumption among women tends to be lower than their male counterparts and also takes the form of legal, socially accepted substances. However, when education is based on egalitarian models, women's consumption is similar to that of men and may even surpass that of their male peers, as observed in countries such as Spain (Carrasco et al., 2019).

In this sense, it is interesting to mention authors like Bacigalupe and Martín (2021, p.2), who contend that women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with anxiety or depression and, thus, to be treated with sedative-hypnotics. Moreover, this inequality is not explained solely by the physiological differences between the sexes but has a social basis, as underscored by other studies. D'Incau et al. (2011) note that this issue is examined in the social sciences through the theory of intersectionality, which incorporates multiple variables related to the issue and has a sociological origin rooted in gender inequality. In their study, Boyd et al. (2015) observe no differences concerning other individual or structural variables, although they do report that age increases the probability of use/consumption in both sexes.

At the national level, data collected by ES-TUDES (PNSD, 2021) demonstrate that the use of sedative-hypnotics without prescription over the past month was higher among females, rising from 3% to 3.51% among adolescents, and from 1.82% to 2.18% among males, representing an increase from 17% to 19.78% respectively. Meanwhile, data from the 2018 Basque Country Health



Survey on the population aged between 15 and adulthood indicate that women have a 1.86 times higher risk of being diagnosed with anxiety or depression than men and, therefore, of being medicated. This risk is also seen to increase with age (Bacigalupe & Martin, 2021). Further research carried out on an adult population (Matud et al., 2017) reveals the influence of gender and age on the usage of these types of substances, being once again more prevalent among women, particularly as they age.

Regarding the use of these drugs by adolescent women, this is seen to vary significantly, indicating a link between consumption (in both sexes) and parental unemployment. However, no correlations were observed in this research with the variables of age, nationality, and parental education level.

According to Drogomedia (2021), women consume more tranquillisers, sedatives and/or sleeping pills, and antidepressants than men in a lifetime, in the past year, and in the past month. When referring to the average age that aligns with the population under study in this article (15-24 years), the data collected in the Informe Adicciones en Euskadi, 2017 (*Basque Country Report on Addictions*) show that the average age is 17.3 years with a medical prescription, and 16.3 years without one. This article aims to explore the use of the aforementioned sedative-hypnotics drugs among adolescents and young individuals, primarily focusing on female consumption in light of the increase observed in numerous studies (ESTUDES; PNSD, 2021; Drogas y Escuela; IDD, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The tenth edition of the DRUGS AND SCHOOL survey (DROGAS Y ESCUELA) collected information on 6,209 students from 88 state and private schools. The study targeted students aged 12-24 who attended secondary education in the Basque Country during the academic year 2021-22. These students were enrolled in the following different stages:

- From Year 1 to Year 4 of Compulsory Secondary Education
- Year 1 and Year 2 of Sixth form
- Year 1 and Year 2 of Intermediate Vocational Training Cycles
- Year 1 and Year 2 of Basic Vocational Training

Instrument

The purpose of the DRUGS AND SCHOOL survey (DROGAS Y ESCUELA) is to gather data on drug use and other behaviours that can contribute to addictions and problems. This research adopts an epidemiological approach, providing a global overview of the previously mentioned behaviours of the adolescent population transitioning to adulthood.

In this particular edition of the survey DRUGS AND SCHOOL X, other behaviours such as gambling, the use of ICT, anti-social behaviour, and bullying were studied, as well as consumption.

Data were also collected on variables related to consumption and other risk behaviours like school attendance, values, self-esteem, assertiveness, and social inclusion.



The instrument used was a standardised, anonymous, "self-administered" questionnaire completed in writing by all students in the selected classrooms during an ordinary class (45-60 minutes). These questionnaires were available in the two official languages of the Basque Country.

Procedure

The survey was carried out in the region of Basque Country, and the data collection period was from 1 October 2021 to 1 April 2022.

The sampling procedure employed was a two-stage cluster sampling, in which educational centres were first randomly selected (first-stage units), followed by the classrooms (second-stage units). The questionnaire was then distributed to all pupils present in them. The maximum sampling error for a confidence level of 95% was 1.25%.

The collection process was undertaken by a fieldworker who visited the educational institution and explained the rules. He remained in the classroom for the whole duration and then gathered the questionnaires once completed.

Data Analysis

A general analysis was carried out with the main findings on the consumption of sedative-hypnotics among all secondary school students as well as gender inequalities, exploring variables including age, students' place of origin, parental education level, and family structure.

The rates of substance usage are presented in three different time frames that are typically collected: lifetime prevalence, in the past year, and in the past month. Furthermore, a comparison of consumption was undertaken

through surveys on drug usage and other addictions at a national level (ESTUDES, 2021).

RESULTS

Under the classification of sedative-hypnotic drugs, we find a wide variety of pharmaceutical products to treat various conditions. Three possible situations are considered within these types of consumption: when a doctor diagnoses a condition and prescribes a specific usage, when the substance is obtained in an unauthorised manner without the corresponding medical prescription, and lastly, a broad category to gain insight into the overall general consumption without differentiation.

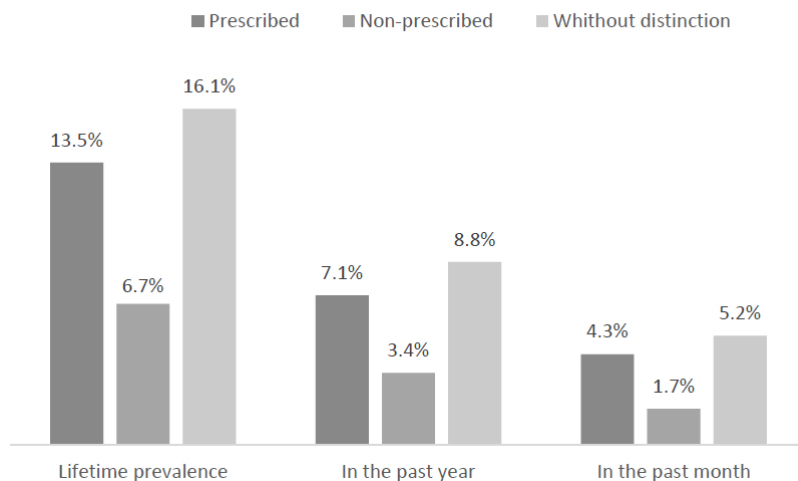
As illustrated in Figure 1, the difference between prescription and non-prescription usage is indeed significant, with prescription use always exhibiting higher values: 13.5% of secondary school students have received some form of treatment with sedative-hypnotics, while 7.1% have done so in the past year, and 4.3% have done so in the past month.

A notably lower percentage of students are found to engage in unauthorised use, with 6.7% of students having done so in a lifetime, 3.4% having done so in the past year, and a mere 1.7% in the past month.

When it comes to the prevalence of use by gender, the first point to note is that, with the exception of what occurs with all legal and illegal substances, the use of sedative-hypnotic is more common among female students than their male counterparts (Figure 2). This situation can be observed across all time frequencies and in all circumstances of usage (prescription and non-prescription). Particularly noteworthy is the average four percentage point difference in prescription use.

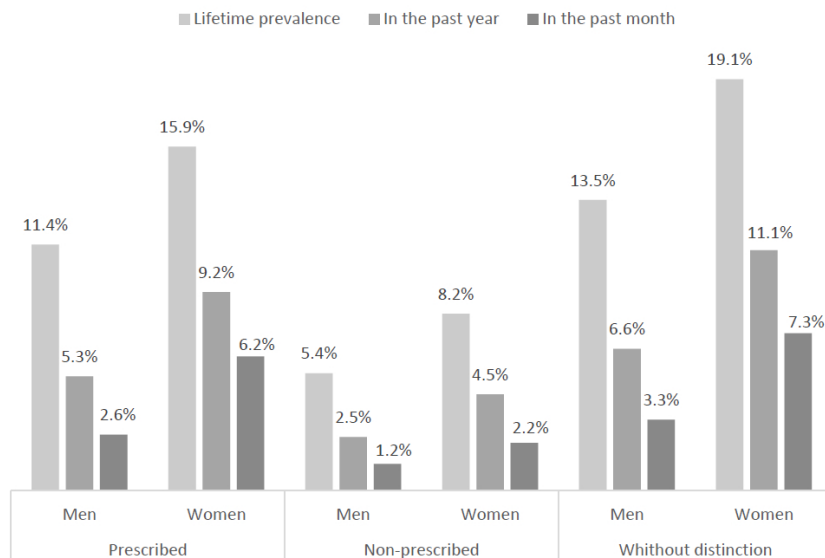


Figure 1. Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use



Note: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Gender



Note: Own elaboration.



Regarding the age variable, sedative-hypnotics generally tend to have the same pattern as other substances, with an increase in consumption up to the age of 18. However, if we examine data in a disaggregated manner (Figure 3), we find that the increase in consumption among female students is more pronounced than that of their male peers throughout adolescence and early youth.

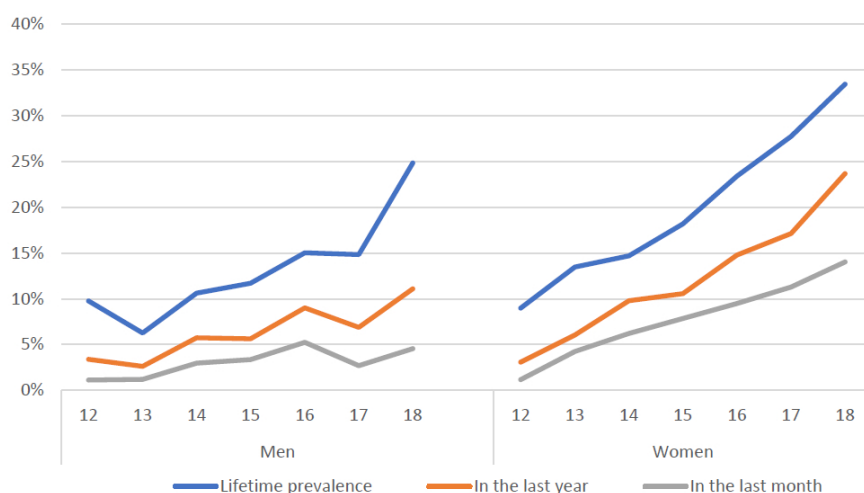
In relation to the students' origin, after gathering data on the birthplaces of their parents, we have been able to identify native and immigrant backgrounds, both first-generation (born abroad) and second-generation (born in Spain, but with both parents of foreign background).

This distinction is relevant when analysing students from an educational point of view, given that they have distinct profiles with specific characteristics. These include the

difficulties that may be involved when using a different language at home from the one spoken at school and in the street, as well as the fact that the families of students of immigrant background have a lower level of economic and socio-cultural resources than the average, which would affect not only the educational process and results (Valdés et al., 2020) but also a higher prevalence of consumption.

Thus, the results of the consumption of sedative-hypnotics among students based on their migrant origin (Figure 4) show a greater prevalence of consumption among students of immigrant background, especially those within the first generation (foreign-born). Similarly, the same occurs among both sexes, although it is notable that in the case of females, the differences are greater in the prevalence of consumption among the different origins of the student body (native and foreign).

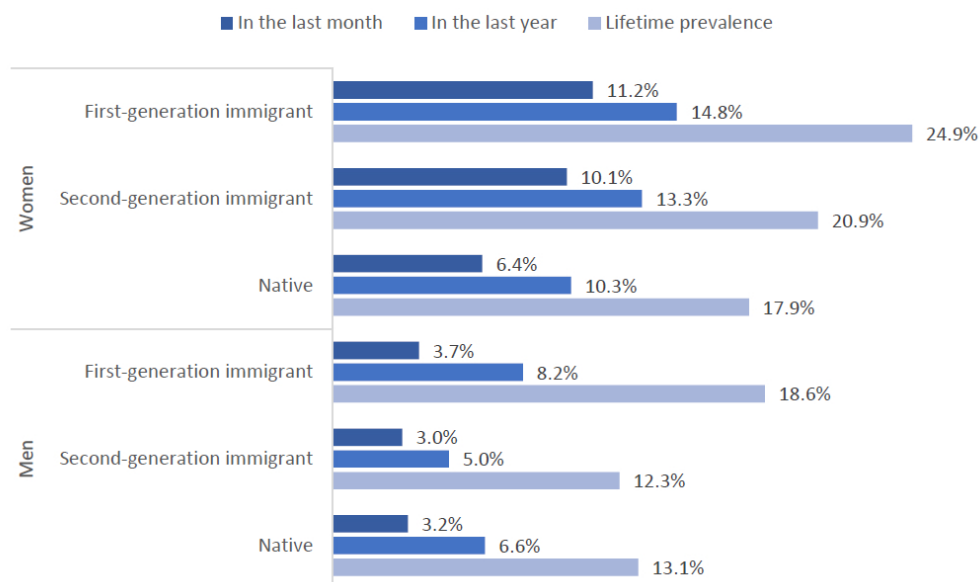
Figure 3. Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Age and Gender



Note: Own elaboration.



Figure 4. Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Students' Place of Origin and Gender



Note: Own elaboration.

In terms of the parental education variable (maximum) presented in Figure 5, the use of sedative-hypnotics among male students is fairly similar, while in the case of female students, it is found to be higher among those whose parents have completed secondary education compared to the data observed for the remaining levels of education.

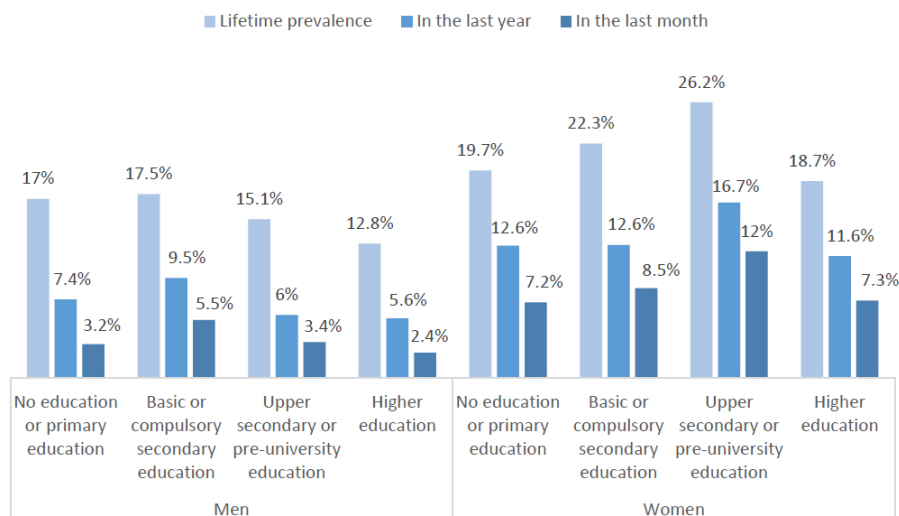
For family structure, the prevalence of sedative-hypnotics use was analysed in relation to the type of household in which the students live. As can be seen in Figure 6, the findings show that although consumption among male students is similar, the highest rates in the main categories among females are those living with one of their parents and

a new partner, followed by those living with only one parent.

Finally, changes in the use of these substances have been measured in comparison to the previous edition of Drugs and School IX (2017) survey. The trend shows a continuous rise in all the time intervals analysed (Figure 7), and notably, this increase is always more pronounced in females, especially in their frequency of use over a month or year. Given that this progression could be attributed to the SARS-CoV-19 pandemic and that the measures taken have played a role in this increase, it will be necessary to observe whether this consumption is reduced over time or continues to grow.

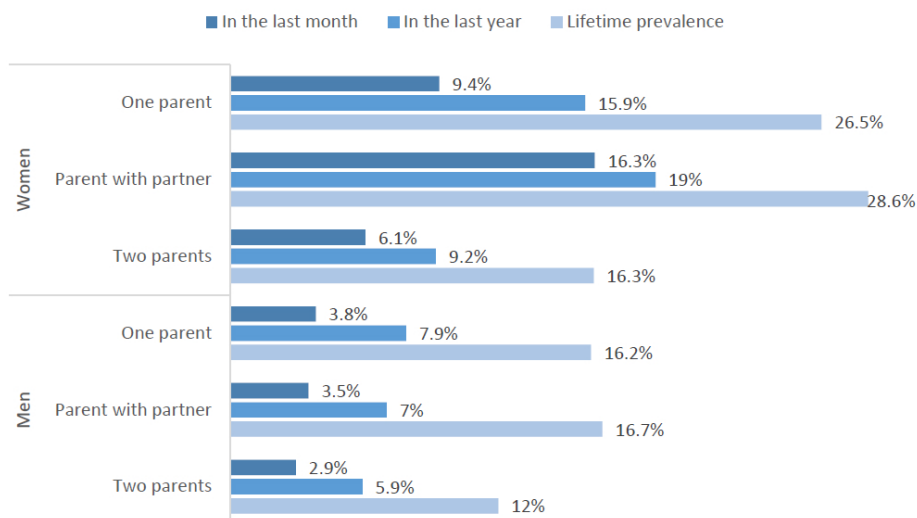


Figure 5. Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Parents' Highest Level of Education and Gender



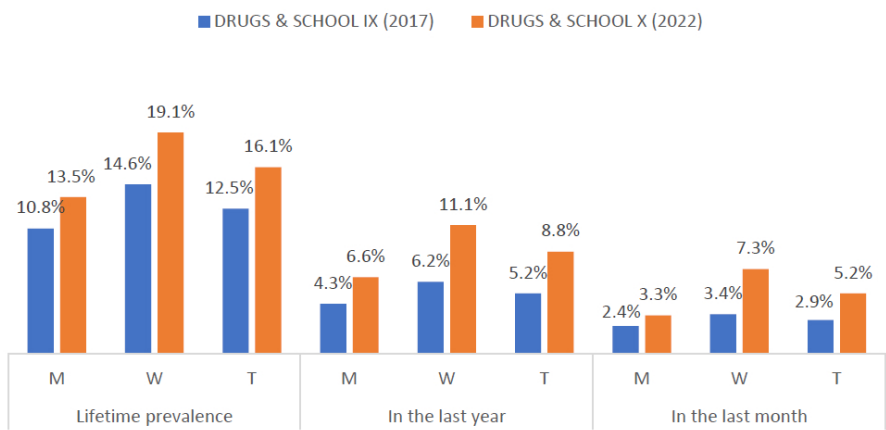
Note: Own elaboration.

Figure 6. Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Family Structure and Gender



Note: Own elaboration.

Figure 7. Progression in the Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Gender (2017-2022)



Note: Own elaboration.

Lastly, data from the state research ESTUDES (2021) were compared with a sample of similar characteristics from Drugs and School X (Figure 8). According to the data collected in ESTUDES (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2022), the frequency of sedative-hypnotic consumption (with and without medical prescription) among minors aged 14 to 18 is 19.6% (lifetime prevalence), while in the case of the Basque Country, this prevalence (also with and without prescription) is found to be slightly lower in the last year. Above all, this difference is more considerable in women, with five percentage points less consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

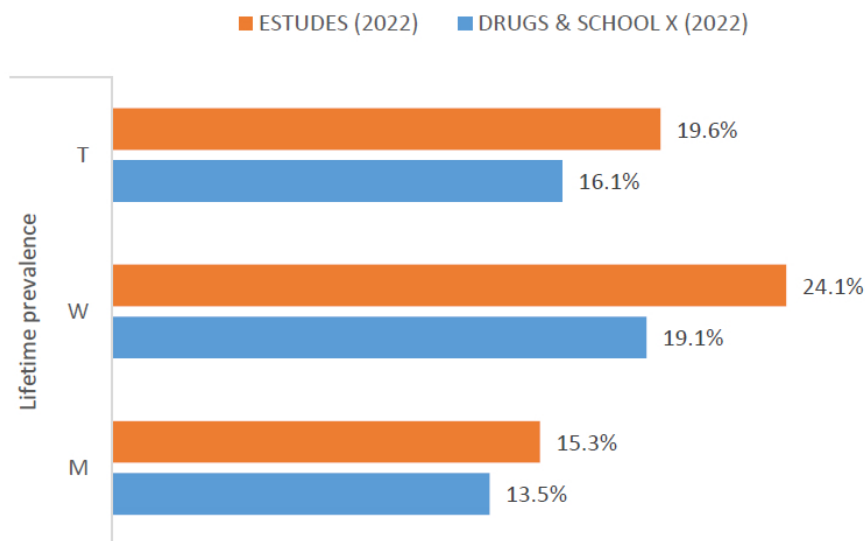
After exploring the results, we can observe that one of the most prominent characteristics of sedative-hypnotic drug use during

adolescence is the greater prevalence in females than in males. In this sense, women show a distinct profile of consumption, which is demonstrated in all the variables examined above. It is important to highlight that, with age, there is a more significant increase in consumption compared to men, with a notable upward trend in women from age 15 onwards. Likewise, this difference is more pronounced in consumption prescribed by medical providers as well as in the instances of use without a prescription, and it is also more significant across all the time intervals analysed.

The distinct characteristics of female consumption are also reflected in the fact that there is less homogeneity within the group of women since, based on several aspects examined, it can be concluded that there is a higher prevalence of consumption among the following women:



Figure 8. Comparison of the Prevalence of Sedative-Hypnotic Drug Use by Gender



Note: Own elaboration.

- Adolescents of migrant origin
- Adolescents with parents who completed secondary education
- Adolescents living with one parent and a new partner, and single-parent families

Although consumption in the Basque Country is lower than in Spain as a whole, it has risen steadily over the last five years across all the time intervals analysed. Moreover, it should be underscored that this increase is also consistently higher in women, particularly when it comes to consumption during the past year and the past month.

According to the data collected by the Basque Government (Drogomedia, 2021, p.8) based on González de Audikana (2019) and OEDA (*Spanish Observatory on Drugs and Addic-*

tions (2019), symptoms of anxiety are the most frequent during adolescence, with episodes of panic and phobias appearing at a very early age. While not all these adolescents are regularly medicated for these conditions, many end up being medicated due to other associated triggers, which mainly include relationship problems, reported and linked to a high level of violence, especially of a psychological nature. Likewise, problems related to self-imposed demands and other issues in the academic sphere, as previously described by Arostegui and Moro (2020), are relevant factors in this process, also showing conformity with what has been evidenced in other articles such as Vega et al. (2004), D'Incau et al. (2011), and Boyd et al., among others. Furthermore, it has also been found that girls begin taking on the role of provider or carry out domestic chores at an early age, thus experiencing considerable



added pressure that drives such consumption, not to mention the role that the normalisation of substance consumption can play in behaviours of use and abuse (Carrasco et al., 2019; Bacigalupe & Martin, 2021).

Several studies also align with the Basque Government (Drogomedia, 2021) in pointing out that many of these problems, which are of a very social nature (D'Incau et al., 2011), have been dealt with exclusively from the standpoint of health. Consequently, these young women often felt misunderstood and even "invaded or mistreated" by professionals who did not delve into their problems or situations and who quickly resorted to prescribing medication.

Taking into account the specific characteristics related to the user's gender would allow us to better address the problem, and to develop guidelines and projects for prevention and intervention for the safe use of adapted medications (Clark, 2015).

In addition, we stress the importance of focusing on the needs of young adults given the social changes that have taken place in Spain, leading to the notable rise in the use of sedative-hypnotics in the population, especially among young women. It is also essential that the approach is multidimensional, multidisciplinary, and complex, taking into account not only the characteristics or needs of the healthcare sector but also incorporating social and psychological needs.

The data collected in this article concerning the growth in the incidence of mental health disorders and suicidal ideation in children and adolescents are closely related to the increase in the prevalence of sedative-hypnotic drug use. All of this is a clear indication that a preventive approach is needed from childhood

onwards and, when necessary, intervention in cases considered serious.

Therefore, focusing on prevention, early detection, and access to the public health system (including mental health care) is key. Also essential are targeted interventions in suicide prevention and the reduction of overmedication, together with other psychological-educational efforts that can influence minors.

In this sense, it is also worth evaluating potential intervention alternatives for adolescent girls, already known as good practices (Arostegui et al., 2020, Romo-Avilés, 2020), such as referral to specialised resources with ongoing monitoring, in addition to a psychological assessment and subsequent psychiatric referral if medication is deemed necessary. It is also vital to always promote other alternatives, including sport, psychotherapy, or socio-educational intervention, using connection and empathy as key components of the intervention process. Furthermore, the gender perspective should be included in the interventions carried out, taking into account the specific characteristics of the problems and the structure (society) in which they develop.

Finally, it is important to stress that promoting young people's well-being and quality of life calls for the involvement of all agents and professionals, not only from the health field but also from psychological, social, and educational domains, among others. This participation is essential in order to, as Romo-Avilés (2020) stated, comprehend the discomfort and specific situation of each woman (and man) who may be using or abusing substances since knowing their discourse and their particular personal situation allows for a more complex, holistic, and tailored approach to be developed to meet their needs.



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