

Ten years of change in French people's perceptions and opinions regarding drugs (1999-2008)

For the 3rd time in ten years, the OFDT is analysing French people's perceptions and opinions regarding legal and illegal drugs, the people who use them, and the public policy implemented on the issue.

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The third edition (1999, 2002, 2008) [1, 2] of the *Enquête sur les représentations, opinions et perceptions sur les psychotropes* (Survey on Representations, Opinions, and Perceptions Regarding Psychoactive Drugs, EROPP)/survey which provides information about representations, opinions and perceptions French people have with regard to psychoactive substances helped review changes in the French population's understanding and opinions related to drugs and the main public policies developed in the last few years. In late 2008 (the survey was conducted from 27 October to 25 December 2008), 2,300 randomly selected people aged 15 to 75 were called at home and invited to express their opinions through a 20-minute questionnaire. The main themes examined by this OFDT survey were perceptions of the dangers linked to the use of psychoactive substances, fears aroused by such substances and opinions on current public policy measures taken or which should be taken in this regard. To avoid making the questionnaire too burdensome, opinions were only asked on five of the most frequently used or well-known substances: two legal substances (alcohol and tobacco)

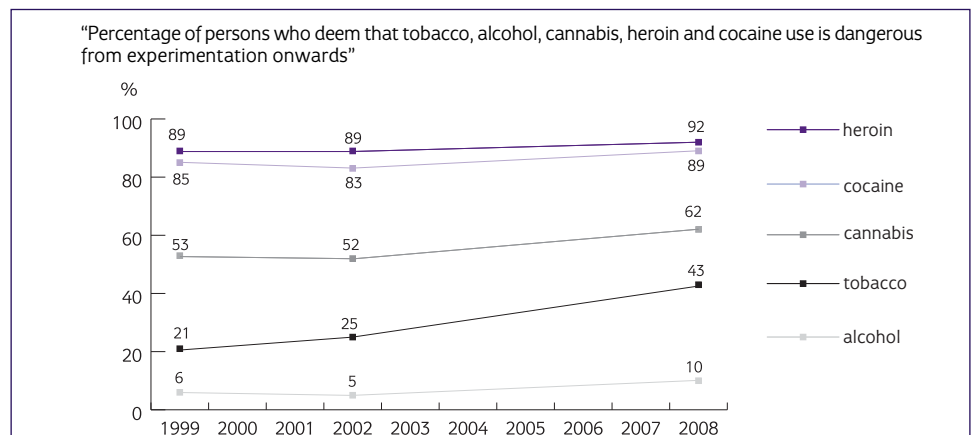
and three illegal drugs (cannabis, cocaine and heroin). This issue of *Tendances* presents the main results with regard to the perceptions of those surveyed of all substances (legal and illegal) as well as their opinions on people who use these substances; it also addresses the surveyed people's views on public policy and, finally, places the various observed changes in a broader context.

Perception of the dangerousness of drugs

French people's perceptions seem to have changed over the last decade - there appears to be more apprehension about psychoactive substances, regardless of their legal status. The order of perceived dangerousness of substances has not changed, but the changes in perception are not the same (Figure 1). The most pronounced changes were perceptions of heightened danger for tobacco and, to a lesser extent, cannabis.

When asked about the dangerousness of the various drugs, legal or illegal, the French tended to rank illegal substances other than cannabis (heroin and cocaine) as more dangerous. Cannabis was ranked midway between these illegal substances and alcohol + tobacco. More of the people surveyed perceived cannabis to be more "dangerous as soon as it is experimented with" than tobacco or alcohol. This is undoubtedly related to the erroneous belief [3] that cannabis use leads

Figure 1: Changes in the perception of the dangerousness of drugs



Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

Table 1 - Perceived dangerousness threshold for different drugs in 2002 and 2008 (%)

%	HEROIN		COCAINE		CANNABIS		TOBACCO		ALCOHOL	
	2002	2008	2002	2008	2002	2008	2002	2008	2002	2008
From experimentation onwards	87	92 ↗	82	88 ↗	51	62 ↗	25	43 ↗	5	10 ↗
Amount on a single occasion	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	15	8 ↘
Occasional use	6	4 ↘	8	6 ↘	12	13	0	12 ↗	1	10 ↗
Daily use	6	4 ↘	8	6 ↘	33	25 ↘	73	44 ↘	77	72 ↘
It's never dangerous	0	0	0	0	3	1 ↘	0	0	0	0

Source : EROPP 2002, 2008 – OFDT

The up/down arrows indicate a significant respective increase/decrease between 2002 and 2008 at a threshold of .05

people to consume more dangerous substances (74% of French people subscribe to this “Steppingstone theory”). At the same time, when asked which substance is the most difficult to give up after beginning to use it (cannabis, alcohol or tobacco), those questioned mentioned tobacco most often (49% in 2008), with cannabis (30%) and alcohol (21%) trailing far behind.

The increase in the perceived dangerousness of drugs was also seen through harsher opinions on the dangerousness thresholds of use (Table 1). Indeed, the percentage of people surveyed who believed that only daily use is dangerous fell for all substances. Consequently, for heroin and cocaine, the very small minority of French people who perceived only daily use to be dangerous further diminished between 2002 and 2008. For cannabis, the percentage of people believing that it is daily use that creates danger dropped from one-third of French people (33%) to one quarter (25%) between 2002 and 2008.

The harsher opinion was even more evident with respect to tobacco. While in 2002, 73% of French people believed that only daily tobacco use was dangerous, only 44% of people surveyed believed this in 2008; the point at which the substance is considered to be harmful has therefore changed, and more people now believe that occasional use is dangerous.

As for alcohol, even though the numbers have decreased somewhat, a very large majority of those surveyed (72%) continued to state that drinking only becomes dangerous to one’s health when several drinks are consumed per day (the average number of daily drinks above which consumption was deemed dangerous remains at 3.2, as in 2002). Nevertheless, a relative increase was observed in the number of people who think that occasional drinking is harmful to a person’s health, since 10% of people surveyed in 2008 selected “as soon as one drinks occasionally” versus less than 1% in 2002.

Regarding the specific context of road safety, a question in the 2008 survey helped assess the level of the population’s knowledge regarding the dangerousness (i.e., of possibly causing a road accident) of using different substances before driving. Nearly one out of every two people (46%) deemed alcohol consumption to be the most dangerous, followed by cannabis (20%), then medicines for

nerve problems (14%). Those remaining believed that “one is not more dangerous than the others”.

French people’s representations of drug users

The 2008 questionnaire contained new questions on representations of cannabis, cocaine or heroin users, as well as those who consume excessive alcohol. Regardless of the

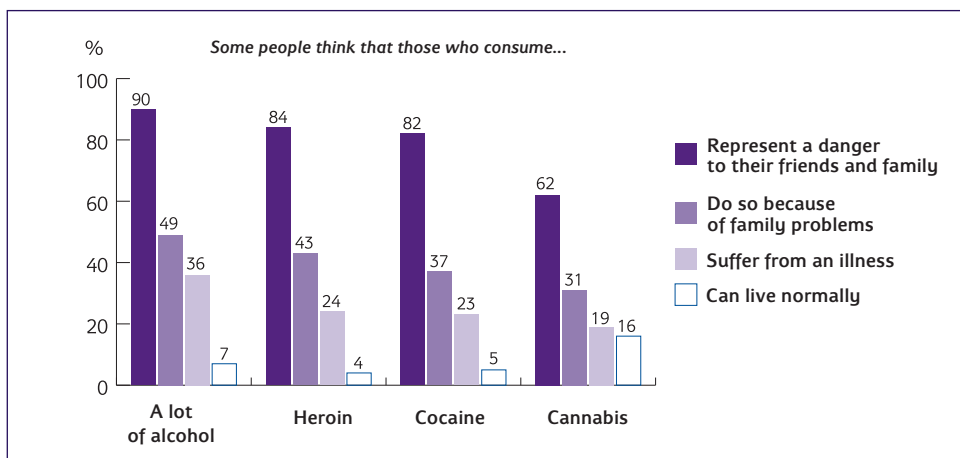
substance, the French agreed that people who use these substances represent a danger to their friends and family. Agreement on this point is particularly marked when compared to other items (Figure 2), even though it was observed that fewer people believed this for cannabis.

In contrast, the majority of people do not perceive drug users as “sick” or as people with family problems, which can be interpreted as a refusal to exempt users from their “share of the responsibility”. Although overall opinion varies little from one substance to another, the idea that the use of a substance can cause family problems or an illness is more frequently accepted for alcohol and less frequently accepted for cannabis.

Heroin users

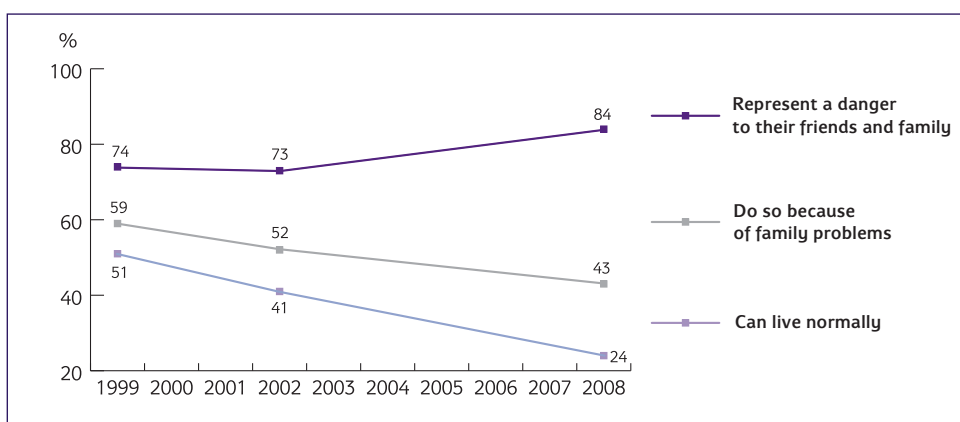
The general population’s value judgments regarding drug users and the population’s opinion on public policy in this area are very closely related. Regarding the “archetypal drug abuser” personified by the heroin user, heroin representations are built on the victim/delinquent duality that is the basis of the 1970 French Drug Law (the legal basis of French public drug policy). Consequently, the large majority of French people approve punishing drug use and for-

Figure 2 - Representations of drug users of various drugs



Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

Figure 3 - Representations of heroin users



Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

cing drug users into treatment in addition to taking a public health-centred approach (prevention, treatment and harm reduction).

Between 1999 and 2008, the proportion of French people stating that they agree with statements that “explain” heroin use from a victimisation perspective (illness, family problems) fell sharply (Figure 3): in 1999, 59% of French people thought that heroin users used this substance due to family problems and 51% thought they did because they “are ill”. In 2008, these values dropped to 43% and 24% respectively. In contrast, the percentage of people surveyed who thought that heroin users “represent a danger to their friends and family” increased from 74% to 84%.

French people’s opinions on public policy...

... with regard to illegal drugs

Concerning illegal drugs, this new edition of the EROPP survey demonstrated French people’s attachment to prohibitive measures (Figures 4 and 5). In 2008, a large majority (85%) was opposed to legalising the sale of cannabis. The response was nearly the same (70%) when asked about a “partial legalisation”, such as legalising the use of cannabis “under certain conditions (while still prohibiting it in certain cases, such as before driving or for minors)”. On these issues, and in agreement with their opinion on the need to improve legal drug control (see below), the opinions expressed by the French have become harsher since 2002.

As for the reasons behind banning the legalisation of the sale of cannabis, the French, when asked, emphasised practical arguments. In their point of view (Table 2), cannabis is prohibited in France “for historical reasons”, and it would be difficult today to do the same for alcohol and tobacco. To the French, it seems inappropriate to legalise cannabis which would “cause as many, if not more problems” than these two legal substances. In agreement with their belief in the “Steppingstone theory”, a similar percentage of French people approves the idea that “legalising cannabis would lead cannabis users to use more dangerous substances”. Other explanations were less universally shared. Hence, there are mixed opinions with regard to the ideas that cannabis is more dangerous, or causes more addiction, than alcohol and tobacco and when citing cultural reasons (cannabis is not part of the French culture).

Exposure to the product (having used it or even having just experimented with it) caused a real difference in opinion on this subject (see box on page 4). For people who were using or who had at least experimented with cannabis, the reasons given for prohibiting the substance were not the same as those given by people who had never used it. Even though they concurred with other French people on the «historical» argument - and most people agreed on this - they pla-

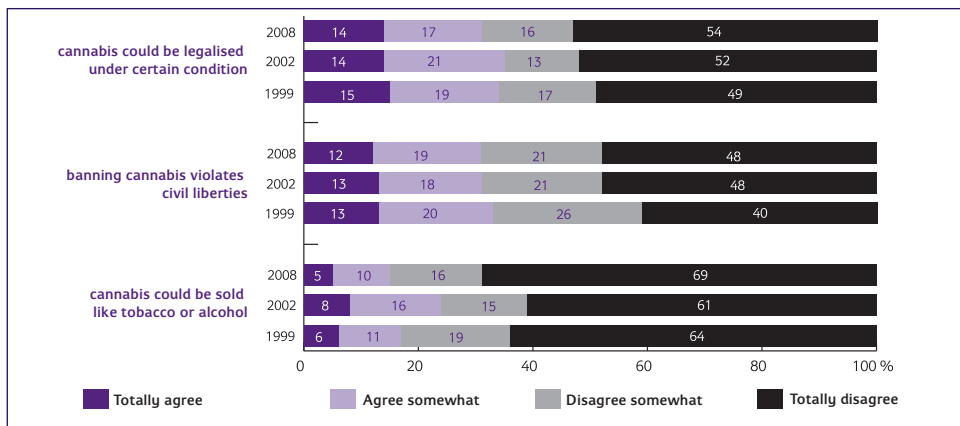
ced more importance on the argument that cannabis is prohibited because it is not a part of French culture. Their opinions were more divided regarding the risk of cannabis causing as many problems as alcohol and tobacco (opinion shared by 59% of those who had experimented with cannabis but no longer used it and by 35% of those who currently use it). The other reasons were rejected by these people for the most part.

The consensus on drug treatment orders

for arrested illegal drug users remained very high (89% in 2008 vs. 91% in 1999). This included arrests for cannabis use. However, this result clearly evokes two contrasting attitudes: some appreciated the coercive aspect, while others liked the fact that such measures help avoid legal proceedings in favour of the therapeutic alternative.

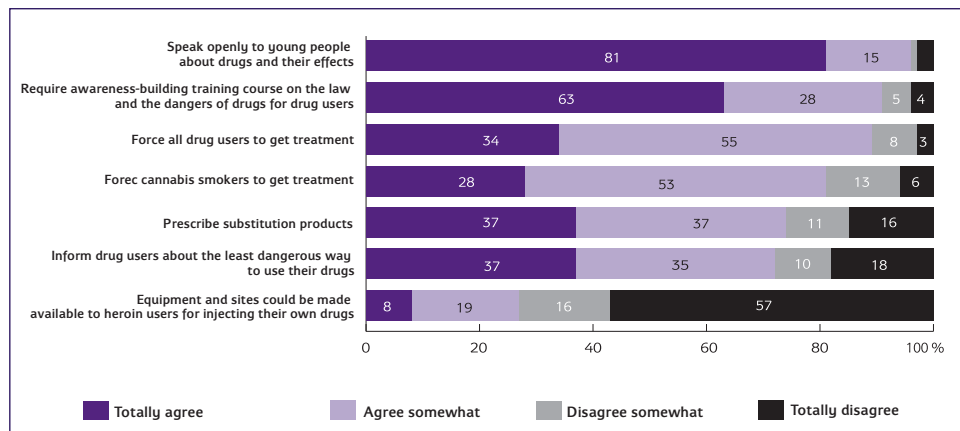
The 2008 survey questioned the French about the “awareness building training courses in the dangers of drug use” for all people ar-

Figure 4 - Changes in the opinion of the French on the legal status of cannabis from 1999 to 2008



Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

Figure 5 - Opinions of the French on the public policies conducted with regard to illegal drugs, in 2008



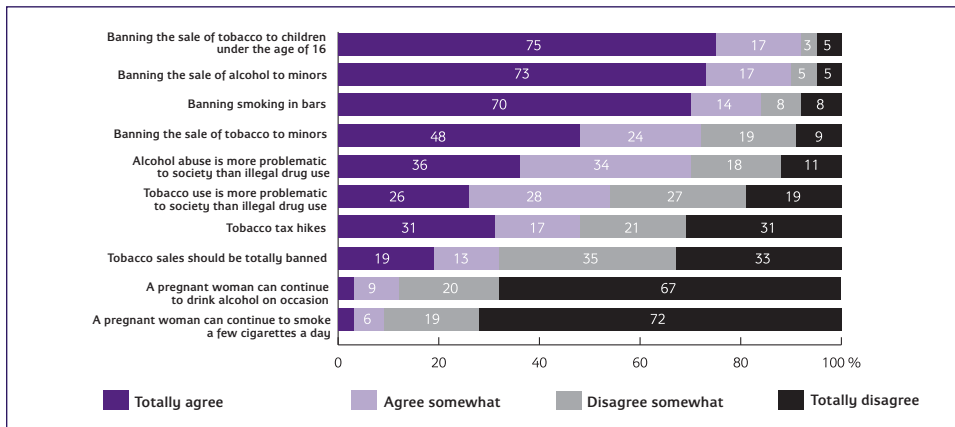
Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

Table 2 - Opinions on the reasons for banning the legalisation of cannabis (%)

Why do you think that cannabis is illegal, but alcohol and tobacco are not? (in%)	Yes	No
It is for historical reasons.		
It would be difficult to ban tobacco and alcohol today.	75,2	23,4
If cannabis were legal, it would cause as many (if not more) problems as alcohol or tobacco.	71,1	27,3
Cannabis use leads to using more dangerous substances.	70,4	27,7
Cannabis is more dangerous than alcohol or tobacco.	53,2	45,2
Cannabis is not part of the French culture.	50,8	46,9
Cannabis promotes alcohol and tobacco dependency.	50,8	46,7
If it were legal, young people would stop using it and use more dangerous substances.	50,7	47,2
Cannabis is a drug, but alcohol and tobacco are not.	34,5	64,0

Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

Figure 6 - Opinions of the French on the public policies conducted with regard to tobacco and alcohol in 2008



Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

rested for drug use or possession. Three out of ten people had heard of this measure, which was implemented less than a year before the survey was conducted. Among these people, a very large majority (nine out of ten) approved of such device.

Regarding the basic principle behind the risk reduction policy - inform drug users about the least dangerous way to use their drugs in order to diminish risks for their health - a large majority of those surveyed (72%) agreed. Nevertheless, fewer people agreed than in 2002 (when 81% shared this opinion). Nearly three-quarters of French people did not believe that a drug-free world is possible (73% in 1999, 74% in 2002, question not asked in 2008). There were also many French people (seven out of ten) who subscribed to the central measure of the risk reduction strategy in France, substitution treatment: more than seven out of ten French people were familiar with such treatments. However, we also observed that fewer people agreed with this strategy in 2008 (more than eight out of ten people were in favour of it in 2002).

This majority of people in favour of risk reduction becomes a minority when more "subject to controversy" forms of risk reduction are considered. Subsequently, when surveyed in 2008, 73% of French people stated that they were against the idea of opening "drug consumption rooms". These people were asked, without providing any other information, to give their opinion on the following: "To prevent health risks, make equipment and sites available to heroin users for injecting their own drugs".

The recent decade's trend towards lower acceptance of risk reduction measures should be compared to the change in the French population's representations of heroin users. Since the French considered heroin users more as being «responsible» for their addiction and less as «victims», they also appeared to be more receptive to a «repressive» approach.

... with regard to tobacco and alcohol

In 2008, the overwhelming majority of French people subscribed to the public health measures adopted in the last few years to apply

stricter controls on tobacco and alcohol products, including those measures that restrict access to these products by minors (Figure 6). For instance, the French are very much in favour of banning the sale of tobacco and alcohol to minors (72% and 90% respectively). This "de-trivialisation" of legal psychoactive substances is particularly evident for tobacco, and even if they remain a minority, one out of three French people goes so far as to believe that tobacco sales should be totally ban-

ned for everyone. Nevertheless, such a consensus on the measures to reduce supply can no longer be confirmed regarding the tax increase.

When asked about the law making alcohol consumption a systematically aggravating circumstance when committing a violent act, more than half of French people (57%) stated being aware of this law, although young people had heard about it less often than older people (49% of people under 25 versus 66% of people over 65). The French overwhelmingly approve of this measure since a very large majority (84%) state that it is a very good thing or a rather good thing.

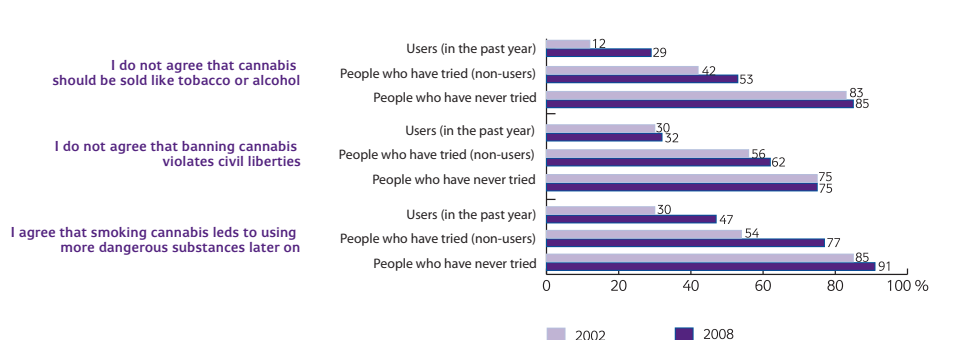
The tobacco and alcohol prevention measures that target pregnant women are also largely understood and approved of by the French: approximately nine out of ten people do not share the opinion that it is possible for women to continue to smoke a few cigarettes per day or drink alcohol on occasion during their pregnancies. Even though all generations combined appear to largely agree on the contraindication for smoking during pregnancy, the alcohol contraindication seems to be less accepted by older generations. Thus, among people under the age of 35, more than 90% stated that they disapproved this last eventuality, while only 86% of people over the age of 35 disapproved.

Factors that contribute to forming opinions

Certain individual or socio-demographic factors contribute to structuring the perceptions and opinions that individuals have on drugs or on public drug policies. Consequently, people in more privileged social environments, people with higher education, working adults and people who have had "some exposure" to substances (i.e., those who use or have already used them) tend to be more "liberal" and tolerant with respect to the substances, and put the substances' dangerousness in perspective. As for illegal drugs, these people are more often favourable to the risk reduction measures than others and less favourable to the prohibition scheme.

Of these individual factors that affect perceptions and opinions, educational level and, above all, exposure to the product, had the strongest influence [2, 4]. Nevertheless, even though "exposure to cannabis" continued to influence opinions in 2008, the effects were less marked than in 2002. Changes in opinion regarding cannabis were primarily due to the changes in opinion of people who had tried and people who use the substance. Subsequently, in 2008, nearly one out of every three cannabis users did not approve of legalising the sale of cannabis.

Figure 7 - Opinions about cannabis as a function of exposure to cannabis



Source : OFDT, EROPP 2008

Conclusions and discussion

The results of the third edition of the EROPP survey highlighted three major changes in the perceptions and opinions of French people with regard to drugs over the last decade.

Firstly, it was observed that the French are more aware of the “dangers of drugs”, regardless of the legal status of the substance.

Secondly, there was some slippage in perceptions about the origin of the phenomenon of drug use, which was considered less as an “external” illness than as an abnormal individual behaviour.

Finally, beyond the widespread agreement with the current public policy implemented in this field, French people’s opinions about future policies tend to be less “tolerant” and “liberal”; in fact, the French are increasingly in favour of prohibitive measures and less open to a risk reduction approach.

Drugs perceived as being more dangerous

The increasingly greater emphasis on the precautionary principle, society’s trend towards less tolerance for any type of risk whatsoever, and the media’s responsiveness to drug-related subjects, can be put forth as the main reasons why the French perceive all psychoactive substances today as being more dangerous. The influence of communication campaigns (for both legal and illegal substances) aimed at the general public in the last few years may also be mentioned as contributing to this perception. Even though the scientific literature in this area deems their impact to be very limited [5], it would appear that representations have changed the most for two substances targeted in particular by media campaigns (tobacco and cannabis¹).

At the same time, we observe that the relative importance of French people’s concerns regarding psychoactive substances is barely affected by the whims of the news. It is rather a question of basic concerns of a personal nature, which remains fairly stable over time. From this point of view, the relative continuity in the media’s alerts to the public on “the dangers of drugs”, by tending both to demonise and to create a certain fascination, maintains this “basic concern” [6].

Paradoxically, it seems that even though drugs were perceived as being more dangerous

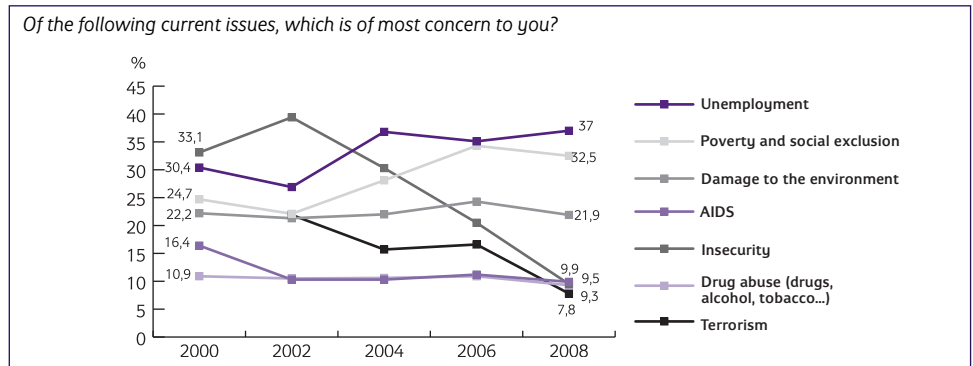
than in past surveys, the damage they can cause did not trigger comparatively more concern among the French (Figure 8).

Drug use: a question of individual responsibility

French people’s opinions on the reasons behind drug use should be put in the more general perspective of their representations of health issues. Health is one of the two most important things in life (the other being fa-

mily) for nearly one out of every two French people [6]. The same proportions of French people consider that their health depends firstly on their own behaviour. Although a large majority of the people surveyed believe that the information campaigns of recent years on addiction risks tend to moralize, they accept the messages being conveyed [7]. Emphasising each person’s responsibility is well integrated in an individualist vision of existence which advocates empowering people and in which everyone would be the master of its future..

Figure 8 - Changes in perceptions of risks and safety



Source: IRSN, Baromètre sur la perception des risques et de la sécurité (Barometer on perception of risks and safety)

Main French legal or regulatory changes regarding drugs from 2002 to 2008

The trends regarding public policy from 2002-2008 come from the 2004-2008 and 2008-2011 « Combating Drugs and Drug Addiction » Government Action Plans in conjunction with the 2007-2011 Plan for treatment and prevention of addictions.

Since 2002	Policy of implementing regular price increases for tobacco (average price of a 20-cigarette pack of the best-selling brand of cigarettes [Marlboro]): € 3.60 in 2002 versus € 5.30 in 2008) by raising taxes on cigarettes.
Law of 31 July 2003	Ban on selling and giving away tobacco (and "tobacco products", such as rolling paper) to minors under the age of 16.
Law of 3 February 2003	Law No. 2003-87 making driving under the influence of narcotics an offence punishable by up to two years imprisonment and a € 4,500 fine.
Decree of 25 March 2003	Tougher health warnings required on cigarette packaging
Public health law 2004	Law No. 2004-806 of 9 August 2004 regarding public health policy: risk reduction is acknowledged in the law.
Interministerial Circular of 23 September 2004	Implementation of consultations jeunes consommateurs/clinics for young users intended for young users of psychoactive substances and their families.
16 November 2006	Publication of the French decree stipulating the conditions for applying the ban on smoking in public places starting on 1 February 2007, then on 1 January 2008.
1 February 2007	Ban on smoking in the workplace and on public transport.
Law of 5 March 2007	Heavier sentences alcohol-related or drug-related violent offences against the person (considered as an aggravating circumstance).
Law of 5 March 2007	Extension of the measure of mandatory treatment to all stages of the criminal procedure for people addicted to alcohol and for illegal drug users.
Decree of 26 September 2007	Creation of awareness-building training courses focusing on the dangers of the use of narcotics products, this being both compulsory and paid for by the offender (up to a maximum of €450) to be attended within six months for all persons arrested for drug use or possession in France.
1 January 2008	Extension of the ban on smoking in public places to so-called "social" places: cafés, hotels, restaurants, discotheques, and casinos.

1. Numerous anti-tobacco campaigns were conducted between 2002 and 2008. They especially focused on the composition of cigarettes, the manipulation of young people by tobacco manufacturers, and the issue of passive smoking. Several measures were also taken to back up the ban on smoking in public places. With respect to cannabis, the main strategy was the "le cannabis est une réalité"/cannabis is a reality campaign of 2005, which was repeated in 2006.

Users: less compassion, less indulgence

The French express less compassion and less indulgence towards drug users, whom they deem to be more “accountable” than “wronged”. Furthermore, the idea that drug users are dangerous to others is gaining ground. Therefore, subscribing to a strategy that gives priority to the reduction of the risks and damages related to drug use is losing strength, even if the foundations of this strategy remain accepted for the most part.

These changes in French public opinion are founded in a more global development of our contemporary societies. In opinion surveys similar to the EROPP Survey that have been conducted in other westernised countries (England [8], Scotland [9], and Australia [10]), the trend was the same. Regarding the issue of the legal status of cannabis, a “hardening” of opinion can be observed in all countries, and especially among the young population. Prohibitive measures related to alcohol and tobacco were also supported with, in England and Scotland as in France, limited support with regard to the prospect of increasing taxes to make these substances less accessible. The relative weakening of support for risk reduction is also observed in England and Scotland to the same extent as in France. Subsequently, the idea of providing clean syringes to IV drug users lost 12 percentage points in Scotland between 2001 and 2009 (from 62% to 50%). In contrast, support for risk reduction measures in Australia strengthened in the last few years. The authors of the Australian survey observe that support for this type of measure increases when the rationality and objectives are clearly presented and explained.

In the wake of the “de-trivialisation” of tobacco?

Even though the “public safety vs. public health” issue still divides public figures with respect to the drug problem, France has been committed for nearly 20 years in transforming this question into a sanitary question [11]. Therefore, perhaps we can suggest that even though changes in public opinion on drugs in the last decade was probably influenced by “drug policies”, they may have been even more strongly affected by “health policies”, which increasingly focus on individual behaviours. The prevention campaigns that target individuals tell them that they should engage in more physical activity, eat better and eat less, stop smoking, and of course, refrain from using drugs. The social dimension and related factors become secondary.

Hence, it would be appropriate to think that the change in perceptions and opinions regarding tobacco have played a leading role. Indeed, it is the anti-tobacco communication campaigns that have most caught the attention of the French in the last few years [7]. Along with other measures (price hikes, the ban on smoking in public places, health messages on packaging, advertising restrictions), they formed a strategy that aims to “de-trivialise” tobacco: change the social norms regarding tobacco use by modifying social representations of tobacco and tobacco users [12]. A large part of the success achieved in the fight against tobacco use is due to such a strategy, which appears to be effective but, for some, can raise ethical questions regarding the possible stigmatisation of users by the campaign [13].

Following the example of surveys conducted in 1999 and 2002, the IPSOS research company conducted EROPP 2008 by telephone and computer (CATI). However, in contrast to the two preceding editions, which were based on a quota samples, a random sample was employed this time based mainly on the 2005 experiment with the Baromètre santé/Health Barometer survey conducted by the INPES (Institut national de prévention et d'éducation pour la santé/National Institute for Health Education and Prevention). Two representative samples were organised: one with people who had a landline telephone and one with individuals who only had a mobile phone. The landline sample underwent a two-tiered survey; household selection came first, using the method of incremental, directory-listed telephone numbers (this method helped “retrieve” ex-directory numbers, numbers that do not receive calls from telemarketers and unbundled numbers). Then, individuals were selected from households using the KISH method. With respect to the “Mobile only” sample, random numbers were generated in accordance with the market share of the three largest mobile phone operators in France. Only people aged 15-75 who spoke French and lived in a household could participate. The survey was conducted from 27 October to 25 December 2008. In total, 2,304 people aged 15 to 75 (including 369 “Mobile only” people) agreed to answer. The overall rate of refusal was 44%. Adjustments were made using 2006 census data on the following variables: sex, age group, profession, “UDA” area (five major geographical areas) and household size.

We would like to thank Stéphane Legleye, who took part in designing and implementing the EROPP survey, Kelly Hery from IPSOS, and all of the IPSOS interviewers, who demonstrated real interest in the survey.

Comment: we did not indicate “NSP” (“ne sait pas”, or “don’t know”) responses. We decided not to take them into consideration since their impact was negligible.

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