

ISDUP and EUPC on Prevention of Alcohol and Illicit Drugs Use among Youth via School Policies on Substance Use

A foundation document

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Introduction

This document reviews the scientific evidence for efficacy/effectiveness of School Policies aiming to prevent/reduce the use of alcohol and illicit drugs in underage populations as described in UNODC's International Standards of Drug Use Prevention (ISDUP) updated 2nd edition and in EMCDDA's/EUDA's European Prevention Curriculum (EUPC).

As these documents represent important guidelines for evidence-based prevention work targeting substance use and related harms among children and adolescents, it is essential that the referenced evidence base is accurate and reliable.

This document serves as a reference document (or foundation document) for a shorter and less detailed version in Norwegian. This document is produced as part of project, involving collaboration between the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Public Health Institute (NIPH). In addition to examining the evidence base for effective prevention of alcohol and drug use among youth, which is the focus of the present document, the collaborative project will include also an assessment of suitability for implementation of effective interventions in a Norwegian context.

Description of method employed for the evaluation of the referenced literature

This evaluation focused only on the scientific literature referenced in the ISDUP 2nd updated edition from 2018, as it was considered both more recent and more relevant. Policies designed to prevent and/or reduce tobacco use were also excluded from this evaluation; that is, evaluated were only the reports addressing alcohol and/or drug use. All scientific evidence was evaluated in relation to ISDUP's own definitions and conclusions concerning a given intervention.

Detailed description of the employed evaluation method is provided in several accompanying deliverables, for example, in the foundation document evaluating ISDUP/EUPC evidence for 1. Parenting skills programs/Family-based programs, 2. Prevention education based on social competence/social influence models /School-based programs, and 3. Programs addressing individual vulnerabilities/School-based programs.

School Policies on Substance Use

ISDUP Definition/Overview

The 2nd edition of ISDUP defines these policies as universal policies implemented at school level during early adolescence [1]. The main features of such policies include the rules prohibiting substance use on school premises combined with varied sanctions for those who break such rules, *p.* 23:

“School policies on substance use mandate that substances should not be used on school premises or during school functions and activities by either students or staff. Policies also establish transparent and non-punitive mechanisms to address incidents of use, transforming it into an educational and health-promoting opportunity. These interventions and policies are universal but may include indicated components such as screening, brief interventions and referral. They are often implemented jointly with other prevention interventions, such as skills-based education and/or school-wide policies to promote school attachment and/or supporting parenting skills and parental involvement.”

A total of four reviews ostensibly summarizing studies investigating School Policies was included in the 2nd ISDUP edition; of these, three were newly added in the 2nd updated edition (all focusing on prevention of tobacco use) and one was previously included in the 1st edition. The evidence for effectiveness of such policies (excluding tobacco) is summarized on p. 23 of ISDUP [1]:

“In colleges and universities, some environmental interventions, social norms marketing campaigns and cognitive-behavioural/skills-based interventions might have benefits with regard to the prevention of harmful use of alcohol, with the strongest evidence relating to brief motivational interventions and personalized normative interventions (both computer-based and face-to-face interventions).”

In contrast, the 1st edition describes these policies as “School polices *and cultures*” [2], with an added component of promoting school bonding and commitment among students also during early adolescence, p. 20:

“School policies on substance abuse mandate that substances should not be used on school premises or during school functions and activities by either students or staff. Policies also create transparent and non-punitive mechanisms to address incidents of use transforming them into an (sic.) educational and health promoting opportunities. *Furthermore school policies and school practices may enhance student participation, positive bonding and commitment to school.* These interventions and policies are universal, but may also include selective components such as cessation support and referral. They are typically implemented jointly with other prevention interventions, such as skills-based education or supporting parenting skills and parental involvement.”

The 1st edition also included a total of 4 reviews ostensibly summarizing findings regarding such school policies, one of which was transferred to the updated 2nd edition even though this particular review from 2010 [3] focusing predominantly on mental health among college students was rated only as “acceptable” and even though some of the remaining reviews received higher ratings (i.e., “good”) [4] or were Cochrane reviews [5].

A cursory review of the literature included in the 1st edition also raises some questions, such as the inclusion of college student samples/studies in the ISDUP section labeled “early adolescence”. The evidence for effectiveness of *School Policies* regulating substance use was rated as “adequate” in the original ISDUP document (i.e., 2/5 stars evidence for efficacy in preventing substance abuse^a, Table 1, p. 8), but it is somewhat unclear to what extent this rating reflects conflation of *School Polices* and *Culture*.

Studies overview and summary in relation to ISDUP

A total of four reviews were included in the 2nd ISDUP edition, presumably summarizing evidence in support of School Policies on substance use.

Given that the appropriate scientific citations were not provided for the ISDUP 2nd edition and there was no document corresponding to the 1st edition’s Appendix II, Annex V (Summary results of “good” and “acceptable” studies), the best guess of these reviews is as follows:

^a It is unclear whether this reference to “substance abuse” in Table 1 was a typo, or whether this table summarized evidence concerning substance abuse only (and if so, why).

1. **Coppo, A., Galanti, M. R., Giordano, L., Buscemi, D., Bremberg, S., & Faggiano, F. (2014).** School policies for preventing smoking among young people. *The Cochrane database of systematic reviews*, 2014(10), CD009990.
2. **Galanti, M. R., Coppo, A., Jonsson, E., Bremberg, S., & Faggiano, F. (2014).** Anti-tobacco policy in schools: upcoming preventive strategy or prevention myth? A review of 31 studies. *Tobacco control*, 23(4), 295–301.
3. **Hefler, M., Liberato, S. C., & Thomas, D. P. (2017).** Incentives for preventing smoking in children and adolescents. *The Cochrane database of systematic reviews*, 6(6), CD008645.
4. **Reavley, N., & Jorm, A. F. (2010).** Prevention and early intervention to improve mental health in higher education students: a review. *Early intervention in psychiatry*, 4(2), 132–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-7893.2010.00167.x>

Given that the reviews 1-3 addressed primarily tobacco use (not alcohol and other drugs), these reports were not included in the current evaluation. All of these reports were new to the 2nd ISDUP edition. Although the review #4 focused on prevention of mental health problems among older youth (i.e., college-age students), it was evaluated in the section below. This review was also the one included in the original ISDUP document, and was rated as “acceptable” even though the ISDUP’s own summary noted a number of issues (for example, that the basic information such as the number of studies or follow-up times were not reported; Appendix II Annex V, p. cxi).

This report [3] aimed “to review the evidence for prevention and early intervention in mental health problems in higher education students. The review was limited to interventions targeted to anxiety, depression and alcohol misuse.”, p. 132. Considered were primarily systematic and review-of-reviews, and some primary studies – the exact numbers were not systematically reported. Further, “Individual-level and population-level interventions were considered separately.”, p. 134.

Given its focus on anxiety and depression, and on both individual- and population-level interventions targeting college students, it is unclear what the relevance of this review is to universal *School Policies on substance use* administered during early adolescence (as defined in ISDUP). In addition to several individual-level interventions, this review mentions two categories of population-level interventions targeting alcohol misuse among college students: *SNM^b campaigns* (where social norms interventions are delivered via mass media), and *Environmental interventions* (where multiple strategies ranging from “limiting alcohol availability, restricting alcohol marketing and promotion and developing and enforcing policies to reduce alcohol-related harm” may be incorporated). While it is possible that some primary studies from the *Environmental interventions* category reflected school policies on alcohol use, they were neither explicitly mentioned nor directly evaluated in this review. This review provided a narrative summary only, without any descriptions of school policies’ features (e.g., content, implementation, enforcement, sanctions for rule breaking, etc.), summary tables, effect sizes, or strengths of associations reported.

^b SNM = Social Norms Marketing, where “Social Norms interventions are based on the rationale that many problem drinkers overestimate the alcohol consumption of others while underestimating their own and may also underestimate the risks”, p. 137.

The 2nd edition of ISDUP summarizes evidence from this article in this manner, p. 23 [1]:

“In colleges and universities, some environmental interventions, social norms marketing campaigns and cognitive-behavioural/skills-based interventions might have benefits with regard to the prevention of harmful use of alcohol, with the strongest evidence relating to brief motivational interventions and personalized normative interventions (both computer-based and face-to-face interventions).”

Similar to other sections summarizing interventions aimed at preventing substance use in children and adolescents, there is again a disconnect between the ISDUP’s definition/description of the *School Policies on substance use* and the nature of evidence presented. In this case -- while adequately summarizing the Reavley & Jorm (2010) review -- ISDUP describes findings concerning individual-level and personalized interventions aiming to reduce harmful alcohol use among college students as evidence pertinent to the universal school policies prohibiting substance use among younger adolescents. That is, not a single component of the interventions described in Reavley & Jorm (2010) is a match to ISDUP’s own parameters and definitions.

Finally, there was no connection between ISDUP’s description of *School Policies* (e.g., school mandates prohibiting substance use on school premises or during school events, mechanisms employed to implement/enforce such mandates, as well as mechanisms employed to address transgressions) and Reavley & Jorm (2010) report. No effect sizes or duration of observed effects (if any) were reported either.

Evidence from The European Prevention Curriculum (EUPC)

In EUPC, these programs are mentioned as part of Chapter 6, under a more general overview of *School-based and Workplace-based prevention*. Specifically, EUPC Table 12 (Types and efficacy of school-based prevention interventions, p. 101) mentions *School policy and culture* as a Universal/General population intervention with adequate (2-star) rating [6]. In this regard, EUPC aligns more closely with ISDUP’s 1st edition, such that it notes the possible effects of school *culture* in addition to *school policies* on students’ substance use.

Further, EUPC also appears to include universities and colleges under the general “School-based prevention” section in Chapter 6. In this section, the relevant policies are in fact described under *environmental prevention*, p. 102:

“*environmental prevention* -- developing reasonable, clear and consistently enforced policies targeting the use and sale of all substances, including alcohol and tobacco, on and near school grounds and at all school-sponsored events.”

As such, descriptions provided in Chapter 6 are more congruent with terminology used in Reavley & Jorm (2010). In terms of younger students, EUPC on p. 104 simply notes that:

“Students can familiarise themselves with their school’s policies concerning psychoactive substances and the consequences of infractions.”

In fact, what is described in ISDUP under *School Policies on Substance Use* section is largely described as part of EUPC Chapter 7 on *Environmental prevention*. Specifically, EUPC underscores the importance of comprehensive of *School policies on substance use* in promoting

healthy learning environments and healthy development of young people. These policies are meant to reinforce societal disapproval of substance use among youth, and are described in detail in EUPC (pp. 118-120):

“School policies related to substance use are an integral and vital part of a comprehensive approach to prevention interventions. Unfortunately, they are often developed in a casual and unsystematic manner, viewed as a ‘box ticking’ exercise and so forgotten about among the school’s manual of policies. School policies should therefore include actions that can be implemented across the school with relative ease and that demonstrate a coordinated and comprehensive response to substance use within the context of promoting health and well-being.”

In addition to description of such policies’ rationale and common structure, this section includes a set of recommendations concerning policy clarifications and implementations. For example, EUPC notes that (*italics added*), p. 119:

“Policies *should* specify the range and types of substances they include”;

“The policy *should* also make clear the types of substance-related incidents that will be punished”;

or

“Policies *should* also be clear about who — families and law enforcement authorities — will be notified concerning an event related to use, possession or sale, and at what point in the process. These policies *should* also specify clear, and consistently enforced, consequences for violations by students. These policies *should* not be punitive in nature but, instead, aim to keep students in school even if they use substances.”

While this section offers many examples of elements that *should* be included in a comprehensive school policy, the scientific foundation for such recommendations remains unclear as only one report was cited: EMCDDA (2018b), *Environmental substance use prevention interventions in Europe*, Technical Report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

[Additional evidence from the EUDA Best practice portal/Xchange Prevention Registry](#)

Additional literature search aiming to identify interventions based on *School Policies on Substance Use* was performed using the EUDA Best practice portal, Xchange Prevention Registry -- “...an online registry of thoroughly evaluated prevention interventions”.

The first search selected only programs administered in “school” settings rated as “beneficial” in relation to outcomes specified as “substance use”, “alcohol use”, and “use of illicit drugs”. This search returned no programs in relation to “substance use” and 2 hits (Unplugged and GBG) in relation to “alcohol use” and “use of illicit drugs”. These programs are not reflective of *School Policies*, and were also reviewed previously.

The second search expanded the initial criteria to include such programs rated as “Likely to be beneficial”. This search returned no programs in relation to “substance use” and two hits (School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project (SHAHRP)/Steps Towards Alcohol Misuse Prevention Programme (STAMPP) - life skills training to reduce alcohol use and harms, and IPSY - life skills training with discussions on school context and learning climate) in relation to “alcohol use” and “use of illicit drugs”. Again, neither of these programs are reflective of *School Policies on substance use*.

These “school”-based searches were performed without any restrictions on the age group, risk factors, or country.

Because EUPC largely described *School Policies on substance use* as part of its *Environmental prevention* section, additional searches were performed including this terminology.

The first search selected only programs administered to youth “ages 15-19” in “environmental” settings rated as “beneficial” in relation to outcomes specified as “substance use”, “alcohol use”, and “use of illicit drugs”. These searches resulted in zero hits.

The second search expanded the initial criteria to include such programs rated as “Likely to be beneficial”. These searches also resulted in zero hits.

[Additional evidence from the EUDA Best practice portal/Evidence Database](#)

Additional literature search aiming to identify relevant interventions was performed using the EUDA Best practice portal, Evidence Database – “This database gives you access to the latest evidence on drug-related interventions. The information is based on systematic searches is updated regularly”.

The first search defined “policy” as the key search term and selected only programs targeting “young people” rated as “beneficial” in relation to the desired outcomes specified as “reduction in substance use”. These search criteria resulted in zero hits.

The second search expanded the initial criteria to include such programs rated as “Likely to be beneficial”. These searches also resulted in zero hits.

Identical searches were performed with “environmental” instead of “policy” entered as the key search term; again, both searches retrieved zero results.

[Summary conclusions](#)

There was only one review from 2010 presented in ISDUP’s 2nd edition section on *School Policies on Substance Use* during early adolescence. Not a single feature of the interventions described in this 2010 review is a match to ISDUP’s definitions/descriptions of *School policies*. More importantly, this 2010 review also does not touch upon any of the key elements of such policies, as it describes neither the content of such policies, nor the implementation/enforcement mechanisms. Consequently, it is unclear how this review focused on prevention of mental health problems among college students can inform our conclusions concerning the effectiveness of school policies on young adolescents’ substance use.

While EUPC provides a substantial theoretical framework as well as the description of *School Policies* (both university and lower level) on substance use, this was primarily done as part of the chapter on “Environmental prevention”. As such, there is again a disconnect in terminology and framing, with “school policies”, “environmental prevention”, and also “cultures” and “norms” frequently mentioned in the same context.

In sum, these documents do not provide any concrete evidence as to the efficacy of policies regulating alcohol and other drug use on school premises, or evidence as to the possible

variations in efficacy of such policies across differing contents, implementation, or enforcement modes.

References

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