

Has raising the minimum age for alcohol led to an increase of drug use among 16 and 17 year olds?

Effective January 1, 2014, the legal minimum age for selling alcohol to young people in the Netherlands was raised to 18 years. In addition, minors are not allowed to carry alcohol with them in public areas. In raising the age limit, the Dutch government aims to protect youths against the risks of alcohol use.¹ However, the change in policy raised questions for some people. They feared that minors would more often drink alcohol without supervision and would more frequently use drugs.² For that reason, the Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport asked the Trimbos Institute to study precisely that issue: did raising the minimum age for drinking alcohol impact drug use among 16 and 17 year olds?

In order to research whether raising the age for alcohol use coincided with an increase in drug use among 16 and 17 year olds, Trimbos Institute experts studied data trends in cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamine, and cocaine use among youths in this age group. They compared data on the prevalence of drug use before and after the policy change. In order to better evaluate the prevalence data, researchers compared these with drug use prevalence among other age groups during the same period. If 16 and 17 year olds showed an increase in prevalence, but this increase was mirrored in other age groups as well, then despite increased drug use among 16 and 17 year olds, a possible connection of this increase with the change in law would still be less plausible.

Additionally, researchers interviewed professionals and youths in order to better understand the potential connection between raising the minimum age for alcohol and drug use among youths. Such interviews can offer important qualitative insights that may be helpful in interpreting indications and understanding the answers to the first two research questions.

This study answers the following sub-questions:

1. Is there a notable change in drug use by 16 and 17 year olds in the period after January 1, 2014?
2. Is there a notable change in drug use among other age groups in the period after January 1, 2014?
3. Is it plausible that raising the alcohol age influences drug use among 16-17 year olds?

¹A Dutch government publication on youths and alcohol:

www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/alcohol/inhoud/jongeren-en-alcohol.

² For instance during General Discussion on Drugs in the House of Representatives, January 28, 2016.

Address

Da Costakade 45
3521 VS Utrecht
The Netherlands

Postal Address

PO Box 725
3500 AS Utrecht
The Netherlands

info@trimbos.nl

Phone +31 30 2971 100

Fax +31 30 2971 111

www.trimbos.org

In order to answer these questions, Trimbos researchers used data from the following reports: the *Basic Survey High School Students (Peilstationsonderzoek Scholieren*³), a survey given every four years regarding substance use of school age youths; the *National Survey Prevalence Substance Use 2009*⁴ (*Nationaal Prevalentie Onderzoek Middelengebruik, NPO*); the *Health Survey/Lifestyle Monitor (2014 and 2015)*⁵ (*Gezondheidsenquête/Leefstijl monitor*); and of the *Antenna Studies 2010 and 2014*⁶ (among bar attendees) and 2009 and 2015⁷ (among attendees in marijuana shops), held by the *Bonger Institute of Criminology* in cooperation with *Jellinek* (an addiction care center in Amsterdam). In addition to that, they interviewed 26 professionals and 18 youths. In meetings with experts working in the fields of addiction prevention, law and order, as well as science, and also from the nightlife sector, Trimbos researchers enquired about their recent professional experiences in regard to changes in alcohol and drug use among 16 and 17 year olds. Additionally, these professionals gave their insights on how a potential connection between raising the minimum age for alcohol and an increase in drug use among 16-17 year olds might work in practice. Trimbos researchers went into more detail about their findings by holding interviews with 18 youths who were 16 or 17 year old during the time of the change in law, and who had used ecstasy, amphetamine, or cocaine before they were 18 years old.

- Data of the *Peilstationsonderzoek* showed that cannabis use among 16 and 17 year olds decreased during 2011 and 2015; the same is true for alcohol. Use of hard drugs (ecstasy, amphetamine, and cocaine) remained stable.
- Within the age group of 25 to 44 year olds, there was a minor, not significant, increase in drug use.
- The interviews with professionals showed that fifteen out of the 26 professionals involved are under the impression that there is an increase in drug use among 16 and 17 year olds. Seven of them were of the opinion that they saw a connection with the increased minimum age for alcohol use.
- The interviews with the youths showed no reason for a possible link between increasing the alcohol age and the use of drugs. None of the young people interviewed related that they started using drugs because it was harder to obtain alcohol due to their age.

Statistics from the *Peilstationsonderzoek* clearly show that between 2011 and 2015, drug use among 16 and 17 year olds did not increase. Also the interviews with the youths do not support a possible connection between raising the alcohol age and the use of drugs. However, 15 out of the 26 professionals involved do have the impression that they see an increase in drug use among 16 and 17 year olds; seven of them suspect a connection with

³ *Youth and Risky Behavior 2015. Basic data from survey among youths.* Utrecht: Trimbos Institute. Van Dorsselaer, S., Tuithof, M., Verdurmen, J., Spit, M., Van Laar, M., & Monshouwer, K. (2016). Jeugd en riskant gedrag 2015. Kerngegevens uit het peilstationsonderzoek scholieren. Utrecht: Trimbos-instituut.

⁴ *National Survey Prevalence Substance Use 2009: The basic data.* Addiction Research Institute IVO. Van Rooij, A. J., Schoenmakers, T. M., Van de Mheen, D. (2011) Nationaal Prevalentie Onderzoek Middelengebruik 2009: De kerncijfers. Rotterdam, IVO.

⁵ *Health Survey/Lifestyle Monitor (2014 and 2015).* Gezondheidsenquête/Leefstijlmonitor CBS i.s.m. RIVM en Trimbos-instituut, 2014, 2015.

⁶ *Antenna 2014. Trends in alcohol, tobacco, and drugs among youth in Amsterdam.* Benschop, A., Nabben, T. & Korf, D.J. (2015). *Antenne 2014. Trends in alcohol, tabak en drugs bij jonge Amsterdammers.* Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers.

⁷ *Antenna 2014. Trends in alcohol, tobacco, and drugs among youth in Amsterdam.* Nabben, T., Benschop, A. & Korf, D.J. (2016). *Antenne 2015. Trends in alcohol, tabak en drugs bij jonge Amsterdammers.* Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers.

raising the age for buying and drinking alcohol. These particular professionals, however, had no local data to substantiate their suspicions. This raises the question: what could cause this disparity between the quantitative and the qualitative part of this study? More research needs to be done, but possible explanations could be:

- Normalization of drug use. The *Strategic Exploration of Party Drugs (Strategische Verkenning Uitgaansdrugs)*⁸ stated earlier already that it has become more normal for youths to talk about drug use and to be seen in public under the influence of drugs. This was confirmed by the youths interviewed for this current study. This normalization could lead professionals to more frequently notice that young people used drugs, whereas it did not necessarily mean that more youths actually used more drugs.
- A second possible explanation is that among specific small groups of young people there may be an increase in drug use, which is detected by professionals; this increase, though, is not reflected in the nationwide data.
- Lastly, a possible explanation could be that there is a time frame of 10 months between the time the *Peilstationsonderzoek* collected data (November 2015) and the interviews with professionals. It cannot be ruled out that during this time frame there was an increase in drug use among 16 and 17 year old youths which was not detected in the survey of the *Peilstationsonderzoek*, but which was indeed observed by the professionals.

Despite the fact that the quantitative data has not fully supported by the qualitative data, there is very substantial evidence that in the time frame after January 1, 2014, there has been no significant nationwide increase in the prevalence of drug use by 16 and 17 year olds. We do not consider it likely that the increase in the minimum age for alcohol use led to a nationwide increase of drug use among 16-17 year old youths.

⁸ *Strategic Exploration of Party Drugs 2015*. Utrecht: Trimbos Institute.
Goossens, F.X. & Hasselt, N.E. (2015). *Strategische Verkenning Uitgaansdrugs 2015*. Utrecht: Trimbos-Instituut.