

**DRUG USE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS DRUGS  
IN TRAINING CONSCRIPTS OF THE HELLENIC NAVY**

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## **Abstract**

The newly founded Office of Preventive Mental Health of the Hellenic Navy conducted a survey among male training conscripts (N=541) concerning drug use, attitudes towards drugs and drug users, and suggested ways of dealing with the problem. In addition, data were collected regarding: (a) demographic characteristics, (b) attitudes towards military service, and (c) levels of anxiety and depression. The subjects completed a questionnaire which was specifically designed for the study, together with the anxiety (SAS) and depression (SDS) scales of Zung.

It was found that about 30% of the training conscripts have used some sort of illegal drug at least once in their lives. More than 1/4 of them rate themselves as being systematic users. The history of personal exposure to drugs is related to the conscripts' attitudes towards drugs and drug users. The ways of dealing with the problem, suggested by the conscripts, are differentiated as well. Psychological support is given the highest priority while severe punishment is not a popular solution. Drug use significantly correlates with anxiety and depression but not with age or education.

The results stress the need for prevention of drug abuse and psychosocial support to drug-abusing conscripts during their service. In the Hellenic Navy, these roles are attributed to the Office of Preventive Mental Health and the Therapeutic Community of the Salamina Naval Hospital, respectively.

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## Introduction

During the last decades drug use in Greece has become recognized as a major health issue carrying related social, political, and economic problems (Mavreas, Kontea, Malliori, Liappas, Pomini, Sfikaki, Stefanis, 1994). Evidence from a large scale epidemiological study in the general population had shown that since 1984 an increase in the number of drug users had taken place in the adult Greek population. It was also shown that drug use mainly affects males of young age (between 18-35 years) (Kokkevi & Stefanis, 1994).

Drug abuse and/or addiction is known to be related to severe psychosocial complications, such as accidents (Vine & Watson, 1983). Moreover, It has been shown that several aspects of psychopathology are related with drug use-abuse and addiction. Such are personality disorders (Menoutis & Kritikou, 1990; Spotts & Shontz, 1986; Sutker & Allain, 1988) and emotional disorders (Madianos, Gefou-Madianou, & Stefanis, 1994; Rounsaville & Weissman, 1980; Stefanis & Kokkevi, 1986). It has been argued that drug use can often be seen as an effort by the user to alleviate symptoms of emotional disorders (Hekimian & Gerhson, 1968).

Training conscripts of the Hellenic Navy can be considered to be a representative sample of healthy young males in terms of geographic spread, and socioeconomic and educational background. Thus they are a good sample for the study of the prevalence of drug use in that population (Menoutis, Pavlopoulos, Tzemos, Dimitrakopoulos, Georgopoulos, & Larentzakis, 1998). On the other hand, one can presume that a number of conscripts have already been exposed to drugs in a younger age, as shown by Kokkevi and Stefanis (1994). The Hellenic Navy is responsible for the health of its personnel not only because they are placed in demanding positions during their service but also because in Greece the Armed Forces constitute an important socialization agent (Menoutis, 1997). Therefore, careful examination of the problem of drug abuse can lead to measures of prevention being taken and thus promotion of the conscripts' mental health. Since military service is a stressful experience for a conscript (Menoutis, 1997) drug use should also be studied in its relation to emotional disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

The aims of the present study are: (a) To make a preliminary estimation of the levels of illegal substance use during the life of training conscripts of the Hellenic Navy; (b) to measure attitudes of training conscripts of the Hellenic Navy to drugs and drug users; (c) to measure levels of depression and anxiety experienced by the training conscripts; and (d) to relate levels of anxiety and depression to drug use. It is hypothesized that drug users will have high levels of anxiety and depression than non users.

# Method

## ***Sample***

Five hundred and forty-one (541) newcomers of the Hellenic Navy in three training campuses participate in the study. They come from different parts of Greece (57.3% from Athens or Thessaloniki). The age of the subjects ranges from 18 to 39 years (Mn=21.57, Md=20.0, Mo=19.0, s=3.79). Their education varies from Compulsory (16.6%) and Secondary (22.3%) to Technical (37.5%) and University (23.6%). The majority of them (85.7%) live with their parents and only 3.3% are married. The sample can generally be described as «healthy» since conscripts in order to serve in the Armed Forces have passed through medical examinations and those found mentally or physically ill have been deferred or discharged.

## ***Measures and procedure***

The questionnaire used was specifically designed for use in the Hellenic Navy (Menoutis et al., 1998) and consists of three sections: (a) demographic characteristics; (b) frequency of drug use, attitudes towards drugs and drug users, and suggested ways of dealing with the problem; and (c) attitudes towards military service. In addition, the subjects completed the anxiety (SAS) and depression (SDS) scales of Zung (1971).

The collection of data took place in the training campus in July and September 1998. The subjects completed the questionnaires voluntarily in the presence of two conscript psychologists.

# Results

## ***Frequency of drug use***

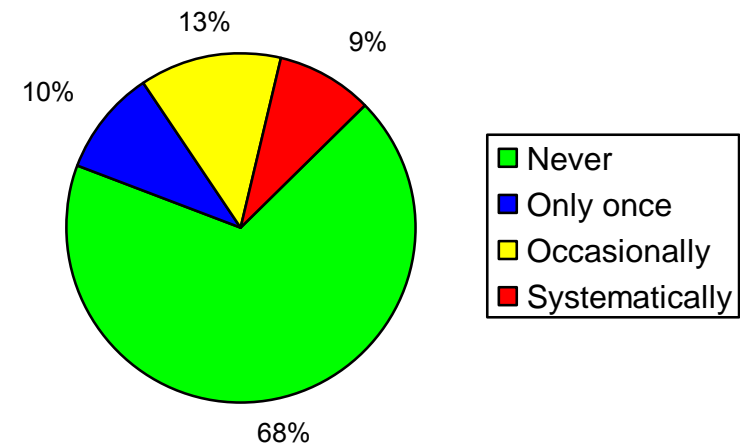
The main finding of the study refers to the frequency of drug use (see Table 1 and Fig. 1). One in three conscripts (33.5%) states that he has used some sort of illegal substance at least once in his life, while 46 of them (8.5%) rate themselves as being systematic users (several times per month/week). Among systematic users, those that report using drugs once or twice a week are almost three times as many as those reporting using drugs once or twice a month. Fifteen subjects (2.8%) did not give an answer.

**Table 1.** *Frequency of drug use*

Drug use	<i>f</i>	Valid %
Never	360	68.4
Only once	51	9.7
Occasionally	69	13.1
1-2 times per month	12	2.3
1-2 times per week	34	6.5
Total	526	100.0

Missing cases: 15 (2.8%)

**Figure 1.** *Frequency (%) of drug use*



## ***Attitudes towards drugs and drug users***

The existence of personal history of illegal substance use is related to attitudes towards drugs (see Table 2). Most drug users differentiate between «soft» and «hard» drugs. This is more obvious as drug use becomes more frequent (only once,

64.7%; occasionally, 88.1%; and systematically, 89.1%). On the contrary, the majority (58.9%) of those who have never used drugs think that all drugs are the same;  $\chi^2(3)=79.2$ ,  $p<.01$ .

**Table 2.** Attitudes towards drugs by drug use

Drug use	Differentiation between «soft» and «hard» drugs	
	No	Yes
Never	<i>f</i> 198	<i>f</i> 138
	% 86.5	% 50.9
Only once	<i>f</i> 18	<i>f</i> 33
	% 7.9	% 12.2
Occasionally	<i>f</i> 8	<i>f</i> 59
	% 3.5	% 21.8
Systematically	<i>f</i> 5	<i>f</i> 41
	% 2.2	% 15.1
Total	<i>f</i> 229	<i>f</i> 271
	% 45.8	% 54.2

**Table 3.** Attitudes towards drug users by drug use

Drug use	Attitudes towards drug users			
	ill	Lawbreakers	Both	None
Never	<i>f</i> 201	<i>f</i> 20	<i>f</i> 99	<i>f</i> 33
	% 70.5	% 57.1	% 79.8	% 46.5
Only once	<i>f</i> 28	<i>f</i> 2	<i>f</i> 12	<i>f</i> 7
	% 9.8	% 5.7	% 9.7	% 9.9
Occasionally	<i>f</i> 39	<i>f</i> 8	<i>f</i> 9	<i>f</i> 11
	% 13.7	% 22.9	% 7.3	% 15.5
Systematically	<i>f</i> 17	<i>f</i> 5	<i>f</i> 4	<i>f</i> 20
	% 6.0	% 14.3	% 3.2	% 28.2
Total	<i>f</i> 285	<i>f</i> 35	<i>f</i> 124	<i>f</i> 71
	% 55.3	% 6.8	% 24.1	% 13.8

Non users think of drug use in a more negative way than drug users do (see Table 3). The majority of those who consider drug users as ill are non users (70.5%). The same pattern is found for those who consider drug users as both ill and lawbreakers (79.8% of them are non users), while the opposite is true for those who consider drug users as neither ill nor lawbreakers (53.5% of them are users);  $\chi^2(9)=52.8$ ,  $p<.01$ .

The majority of attitudes stated by the training conscripts towards military service tend to be rather negative ( $M=2.1$ ) than positive ( $M=0.9$ ) or neutral ( $M=0.5$ ). In addition, the more frequent the drug use, the more negative [ $F(3, 391)=5.35$ ,  $p=.001$ ]

and the fewer positive [ $F(3, 391)=4.92, p<.01$ ] attitudes are mentioned. This difference is found between non users, on the one side, and frequent drug users (occasionally or systematically) on the other (Scheffé).

The ways of treatment of drug users in the Hellenic Navy, as proposed by the conscripts, are the following: Psychosocial support (72.6%) and deferment (50.8%) are clearly the most popular ways, even though the latter is rejected by the majority of users. About one in four subjects adopts a «middle point» (neither strict nor mild ways), such as favorable treatment (28.3%), mild punishment (24.0%) or serve as assistant personnel (25.4%). Inflexible solutions, such as discharge (17.7%) or severe punishment (16.7%) are the least suggested.

### ***Levels of anxiety and depression***

**Table 4.** *Levels of anxiety by frequency of drug use*

Drug use	Levels of anxiety (measured by SAS)			
	Normal	Low	Medium	High
Never <i>f</i>	231	46	18	10
%	71.7	62.2	45.0	66.7
Only once <i>f</i>	31	9	5	2
%	9.6	12.2	12.5	13.3
Occasionally <i>f</i>	43	11	4	1
%	13.4	14.9	10.0	6.7
Systematically <i>f</i>	17	8	13	2
%	5.3	10.8	32.5	13.3
Total <i>f</i>	322	74	40	15
%	71.4	16.4	8.9	3.3

**Table 5.** *Levels of depression by frequency of drug use*

Drug use	Levels of depression (measured by SDS)			
	Normal	Low	Medium	High
Never <i>f</i>	148	72	53	27
%	76.3	61.0	58.9	64.3
Only once <i>f</i>	14	13	11	4
%	7.2	11.0	12.2	9.5
Occasionally <i>f</i>	19	23	15	3
%	9.8	19.5	16.7	7.1
Systematically <i>f</i>	13	10	11	8
%	6.7	8.5	12.2	19.0
Total <i>f</i>	194	118	90	42
%	43.7	26.6	20.3	9.5



Mean scores of anxiety and depression as measured by SAS and SDS scales, respectively, fall marginally within the normal levels according to the criteria of Zung (1971):  $M_{SAS}=44.4$ ,  $s=11.8$ ;  $M_{SDS}=52.4$ ,  $s=13.0$ ). Systematic drug users score higher than non users or occasional users in both the anxiety and depression scales (Scheffé);  $F_{SAS}(3, 447)=10.54$ ,  $p<0.001$ ;  $F_{SDS}(3, 440)=4.08$ ,  $p<0.01$ .

Moreover, systematic drug users score significantly more frequently within the pathological levels of anxiety [ $\chi^2(9)=36.34$ ,  $p<0.01$ ] and depression [ $\chi^2(9)=19.58$ ,  $p<0.05$ ]. It is worth mentioning that anxiety and depression of occasional drug users is comparable to non users rather than to systematic users (see Tables 4 and 5).

## Discussion

The results of the present study show a very large portion of the sample (33.5%) to report having used illegal substances at least once in their lives. This percentage is larger than that found in 1993 by Kokkevi and Stefanis (1994) among males aging 18-35, i.e. similar range to that of the sample of this study. It should be clarified at this point that the sample of the present study mostly resembles that of the 18-24 years of age group of Kokkevi and Stefanis (1994) since 82.8% of the present sample is falling within the age range of 18-24. If the sample of this study is broken into age groups (18-24 and 25-35 years of age) the percentages of participants reporting drug use at least once are almost double the percentages found by Kokkevi and Stefanis, i.e. 30.8% and 35.9%, respectively. This cannot be due to the fact that the sample of the present study is serving the Navy since participants are trainees have only joined the armed forces two or three weeks before testing.

These differences should be taken very seriously as our sample has been screened for serious physical and mental conditions and thus can be considered «healthy». On the other hand, Kokkevi and Stefanis (1994) used a randomly selected sample probably thus including participants from clinical populations.

It seems, therefore, that it can safely be argued that there exists a large increase in self-reported drug use since 1993 at least among young males aging 18-35 years. An increase that is even larger than that found by Kokkevi and Stefanis (1994) between 1983 and 1993. The levels of reported drug use found in the present study are also dramatically larger than reported drug use among conscripts of the Hellenic Navy in 1992 (Menoutis, 1997).

The attitudes of the sample towards the differentiation between soft and hard drugs seem to support the reliability of the drug use measure. The results show that most reported users differentiate between «soft» and «hard» drugs and this becomes more obvious as the frequency of drug use increases. The majority of the reported non users think that all drugs are the same.

Levels of anxiety as measured by the SAS (Zung, 1971) are found to fall marginally within normal levels. Levels of depression as measured by the SDS (Zung, 1971) are found to fall slightly above the normal levels. This can be explained by the fact that training conscripts are in the process of adaptation to a novel social environment very different from that of civilian life (Menoutis, 1997). It is also argued that the first and last two months of the military service are those during which conscripts are in the highest risk for emotional disorders (Menoutis, 1997).

Reported drug users are found to score significantly higher than non users on the SAS and the SDS. Also, systematic drug users score significantly more frequently within the pathological levels of anxiety and depression even though both scores are generally elevated in the sample. These results support the existent evidence about drug use being related to emotional disorders (Madianos et al., 1994; Rounsaville & Weissman, 1980; Stefanis & Kokkevi, 1986).

It must be noted that, due to the preliminary nature of the present study, matters that are related to the use of specific substances were not investigated. However, the results of this study show that matters of illegal substance use can be reliably examined within the Armed Forces and thus more detailed research should be conducted in the future.

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