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## **SUBSTANCE USE AMONG POLICE CADETS: THE ROLE OF NORMATIVE MISPERCEPTIONS**

Young adults tend to overestimate their peers' substance use habits. We explored whether actual substance use and estimates of usage of others differ among Finnish police students. The eligible respondents were all policing students in Finland in 2009. The prevalence of weekly drunkenness was 8% among male and 1% among female policing students, while the corresponding rates among other polytechnic students in Finland were 26% (male) and 14% (female). Weekly drunkenness was believed to be the norm by 20% of the policing students. The same misperceptions were noted in relation to smoking and drug use. Thus, students greatly overestimated their peers' substance use patterns. A trend towards estimating others' use more realistically when the students got older and had studied longer was noted. Although policing students have an exaggerated picture of the substance use patterns of their peers, their own patterns remain the same or become less severe during studies.

**Keywords:** *normative misperceptions; policing students; substance use*

### **Introduction**

Police work is regarded as being demanding both physically and mentally. Thus the police student recruits are required to be very healthy (e.g. see <<http://www.polamk.fi>>). In Finland recruiting forms also state that 'Applicants must have a lifestyle that

complies with the demands of police work'; for example, arrests for drunkenness are seen as an indication of not being suited to the profession (<http://www.polamk.fi>). As a result, it is likely that when beginning their studies the police students use alcohol less severely than their peers. On the other hand, alcohol use within the police force has been assumed to be rather liberal, although the findings in this regard are not conclusive (Richmont *et al.*, 1998; Reiner, 2000; Lindsay *et al.*, 2008; Ballenger *et al.*, 2010). While on duty, alcohol use is strictly prohibited and the rule effectively enforced. During their time off, however, policemen and policewomen, are 'known' to drink at least as much as the general public. The issue is also widely acknowledged in the police force and also seems to be accepted: 'work hard – play hard'.

A study among college students in the USA (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986) found that young adults tended to overestimate their peers' drinking habits. Since then, a large number of studies have shown that these so-called normative misperceptions about substance misuse behaviours occur in a variety of countries and settings (Wolfson, 2000; Haines *et al.*, 2003; Kypri & Langley, 2003; Lintonen & Konu, 2004; McAlaney & McMahon, 2007; Bewick *et al.*, 2008; Hughes *et al.*, 2008; Page *et al.*, 2008; Franca *et al.*, 2010). These misperceptions cause worry since people are strongly influenced by what they perceive to be the norms of their peer group; a phenomenon that has been studied extensively in psychology following the work of Asch (1951).

How do policing student recruits who use alcohol less severely than their peers develop to become part of a profession thought to be rather severe in its drinking habits? One likely explanation is that the students feel the pressure to conform with the image of the profession, and increase their drinking accordingly. Not only is the 'knowledge' of how a real policeman or -woman drinks likely to affect students' drinking habits, but also the estimates students have of each others' drinking and other substance use habits are likely to have an impact on their own habits, too. If behaviours such as drunkenness are estimated to be more prevalent than they really are, this can make substance use more severe. This is emphasised in a situation where most of the police students live in college dormitories and consequently spend much of their free time together.

The aim of this study was to assess the substance use habits of Finnish police cadets and to study whether actual substance use and estimates of how substances are used among the students differ from one another. More specifically, we will examine

whether police students overestimate their fellow students' substance use patterns and if their substance use becomes more severe as their studies progress.

### **Materials and Methods**

The data were collected from all students studying at the Police College of Finland in June 2009; the number of eligible respondents was 548. The Police College is the only institution offering education and training in policing in Finland and thus the sample was a total sample of all undergraduate policing students in Finland at that time. An online survey was used and the invitation to participate was disseminated via email using Police College mailing lists. This technique has been argued to be an effective data collection approach when researching computer-literate students (Kypri *et al.*, 2004). The survey originated from an English version developed in the University of Bradford and was translated into Finnish by one of the authors. The plan was checked against 'Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences' published by the National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2009). As none of the six criteria necessitating an external review was met, the plan was processed in the College. The study was presented to and received approval from the board of the students' union at the College. Whilst the Director of the Police College made it known that the College had committed to taking part in the study, the invitation email stressed the fact that participation was voluntary and that identification data were not collected. To gain a better rate of participation, anonymous reminder emails were sent approximately one week after the initial invitation.

The questionnaire items were simple and focused on key aspects of substance use behaviours. For alcohol consumption, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they consumed alcohol and how frequently they drank enough alcohol to feel drunk, using response options of not at all (in a month), once a month, 2–3 times a month, once a week, twice a week, 3–4 days a week, 5–6 days a week, and every day. Using the same response options, respondents were then asked to estimate the consumption of their peers (i.e. other students at the Police College). Participants were also asked to indicate through a simple yes or no response whether they had smoked any cigarettes or used any recreational drugs in the last month. A list of recreational drugs was presented to assist recognition: 'cannabis, marijuana, ecstasy (MDMA), coke (cocaine), heroine or speed'. Respondents were then asked to rate the percentage of their peers

whom they felt would have smoked or used recreational drugs in the past month, using response options in 10% increments (e.g. 0%, 1–9 %, 10–19%, 20–29%).

For purposes of analysing the effect of time spent at the College, the students were divided into two groups: first-year students (113 male, 40 female) and others (143 male, 68 female), most of whom were second-year students. Age-wise, the students were divided into two groups: those who were 24 years of age or under (131 male, 41 female) and those who were older (125 male, 67 female).

## Results

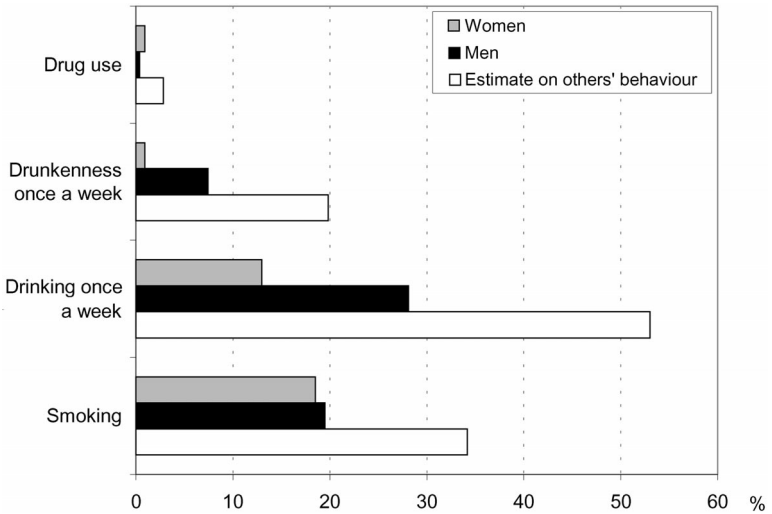
The response rate was 66.4%; altogether 364 students responded to the survey. Smoking was equally common ( $\chi^2$  test,  $p>0.05$ ) among the sexes: 19.5% of men and 18.5% of women responded that they smoked (Fig. 1). Men reported drinking alcohol at least once a week more often ( $p<0.05$ ) than women; the prevalence rates were 28.1% for men and 13.0% for women. In addition, drinking alcohol until drunk was reported more often ( $p<0.05$ ) by men (7.5%) than women (0.9%). No gender difference ( $p>0.05$ ) was observed in reporting recreational drug use; both rates were under 1%.

The estimates by students of the prevalence of smoking among their fellow students (Fig. 1) were, on average, higher than either women's or men's rates of smoking ( $p<0.05$ ); the average estimate of other students' smoking was 34.1%. In a similar way, students' estimates of alcohol usage (53.0%) of their fellow students and weekly drunkenness (19.8%) were higher ( $p<0.05$ ) than the actual prevalence rates. No difference ( $p>0.05$ ) was found between the reported drug use and estimated drug use (2.8%).

Weekly drinking was less common ( $p<0.05$ ) among students who were in their second or later year of study (Table 1). No significant differences were observed between smoking, weekly drunkenness or recreational drug use among students according to their study year. Age was not a significant grouping variable for any of the substance use habits.

Estimated prevalence of alcohol drinking was lower ( $p<0.05$ ) among students in their second or later year of studies. Estimated commonness of drunkenness, smoking or drug use did not differ by study year. Estimates of these habits were not connected to respondent's age.

In gender-specific analysis, similar to data shown in Table 1, the only significant finding was that among female students



**Figure 1** The prevalence rates (%) of smoking, drinking alcohol, drunkenness and drug use among Finnish police students

estimated drinking and drunkenness were both at a lower level among those aged 25 or more compared with younger students.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Substance use among Finnish police students was less severe than among students in other universities and polytechnics in Finland (Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009). The prevalence of weekly alcohol use was 38% among male and 28% among female polytechnic students in Finland: more than 10 percentage points higher than among Police College students. The difference was even more pronounced in the case of drunkenness-oriented drinking: 26% of male and 14% of female polytechnic students in Finland drink to drunkenness once a week or more often (Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009), while the corresponding rates among police cadets were 8% and 1%. Drug use was almost non-existent among the police students, while more than a fifth of other polytechnic students had at least experimented with drugs. Smoking, however, was as prevalent among the police students as the other students. Policing students seem to use alcohol and drugs notably less than other students.

Looking at the estimated levels of substance use, the students believed smoking, drinking and drug use to be considerably more prevalent and severe than they actually were. Policing

**Table 1** The prevalence rates (%) of smoking, drinking alcohol, drunkenness and drug use among Finnish police students by study of year and age

	Study year			Age			chi <sup>2</sup>	p
	First %	Other %	chi <sup>2</sup>	<=24 years %	>=25 years %	p		
Alcohol weekly	29	19	<0.05	27	21		ns	
Drunk weekly	7	4	ns	6	5		ns	
Smoking	18	20	ns	17	21		ns	
Drug use	0	1	ns	1	0		ns	
Estimated others' weekly drinking	60	48	<0.05	55	51		ns	
Estimated others' weekly drunkenness	22	18	ns	27	21		ns	
Estimated others' smoking	35	33	ns	36	33		ns	
Estimated others' drug use	3	3	ns	3	3		ns	
N	153	208		172	192			

students believed weekly alcohol drinking to be the norm; over half of the students thought that their fellows drink at least once a week. This is in sharp contrast with the actual prevalence rates of 28% among men and 13% among women. Weekly heavy alcohol use leading to drunkenness was believed to be the norm by 20% of the students, but the actual rates were 8% among men and 1% among women. The same misperceptions were noted also in relation to smoking and recreational drug use. The students did indeed overestimate the substance use patterns of their peers.

The number of police students was rather small for conducting further analysis, such as on the effect of year of study and age. Only one substance use pattern changed significantly during studies: weekly alcohol use became less common after the first study year. Among other polytechnic students, drinking and drunkenness generally remain at the same prevalence level among men and both use patterns increase among women along with increasing age (Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009). Police cadets seem to use less alcohol than their peers to start with and the gap in substance use patterns appears to widen as the studies progress. All in all, it is safe to say that the police cadets' substance use patterns did not become more severe during their studies.

Looking at estimated patterns of substance use, a trend towards seeing the situation more realistically along with increasing age and study time can be noted. However, even in the case of the only statistically significant reduction in estimates, weekly alcohol drinking, the estimated commonness remained far above the actual prevalence.

It is interesting to note that although policing students have an exaggerated view of the substance use patterns of their peers, their own patterns remain the same or become less severe during their studies. This finding is even more significant bearing in mind that young adults generally increase their substance use when starting university (Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002; Lanza & Collins, 2006). The evidence for changes in alcohol consumption as students progress through their studies, however, is quite mixed. Earlier work in the USA found that female students reduced their alcohol intake as they moved through college, while men maintained the same level (Klein, 1994). Recent work in the UK (Bewick *et al.*, 2008) found that alcohol consumption was heaviest in students' first year of studies and that the consumption decreased in the second and third years.

The police cadets are all exposed to actual working environments at police stations and districts as a significant part of their

studies, starting from the second year. No research has been published on alcohol use among Finnish police officers, unfortunately. It is possible that, as in Norway (Sterud *et al.*, 2007), alcohol consumption among police officers in Finland is actually less severe than the results from, e.g. Australia (Richmont *et al.*, 1998) and the USA (Ballenger, 2010), lead us to believe. Our results are reasonable and understandable if we assume that excessive use of alcohol is not part of the police culture in Finland. Students at the beginning of the training may believe that liberal consumption of alcohol is a norm in the field, but soon discover that the assumption is not true.

The total alcohol consumption per capita (over 15 years of age) in Finland has been around 10 litres of pure ethanol per year, a relatively high European figure (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2010). In 2009, the prevalence of weekly alcohol drinking among 15–64-year-old Finnish men was 48%; among women the prevalence was 38% (Helakorpi *et al.*, 2009), significantly higher than among polytechnic students (Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009) and especially higher than the results presented in this article. Twenty-four per cent of Finnish men and 14% of women report drinking until drunk at least once a week (Helakorpi *et al.*, 2009), figures very close to the rates among polytechnic students (Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009), but significantly higher than the policing students. Not only do police cadets drink less than their peers, but also significantly less than the general adult population.

Although the number of respondents was small in the sense of detecting statistically significant relationships, it must be remembered that the sample was actually a total sample of all police cadets at the time. The response rate of 66% was considerably higher than the tendency in higher education; among Finnish polytechnics students the rate was 47% (Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009). As our study is a cross-sectional one, we cannot deduce anything about actual trajectories of substance use during studies but only compare students in different stages of training. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the results of this study are not directly comparable with those from the Kunttu and Huttunen study. The survey was also subject to the usual reliability issues of self-reports, for example, how truthfully the respondents answered the questions. We have no reason, however, to believe that policing students would be less truthful than other students. It has been shown that adults tend to underreport their alcohol use, possibly to conform to societal expectations of controlled drinking. However, young people have been shown to



report their alcohol use quite reliably (Lintonen & Rimpelä, 2001; Lintonen *et al.*, 2004), possibly because it is perceived to be the norm (Lintonen & Konu, 2004). These methodological studies were conducted after arguments stating that, because of experience of social norms, young people overreport their alcohol use in order to conform. Overreporting own use would diminish the difference between estimated use of others and the true level of use, whereas underreporting would exaggerate the difference. Given the age-range of the students in the present study, it does not seem likely that significant underreporting of own use exists. This probably does not apply to drug use, however, at least within the police; thus the true prevalence rate of recreational drug use may be higher than reported here.

The methodological issues cannot, however, significantly challenge the findings that police cadets are much less severe in their substance use than other students at the same educational level, or the fact that their substance use does not increase during studies. It is noteworthy that this can be seen despite the findings that the students estimate their peers' substance use to be much more severe than their own. It would be interesting to study how the substance use patterns develop after the studies when these students actually start working in the police force.

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