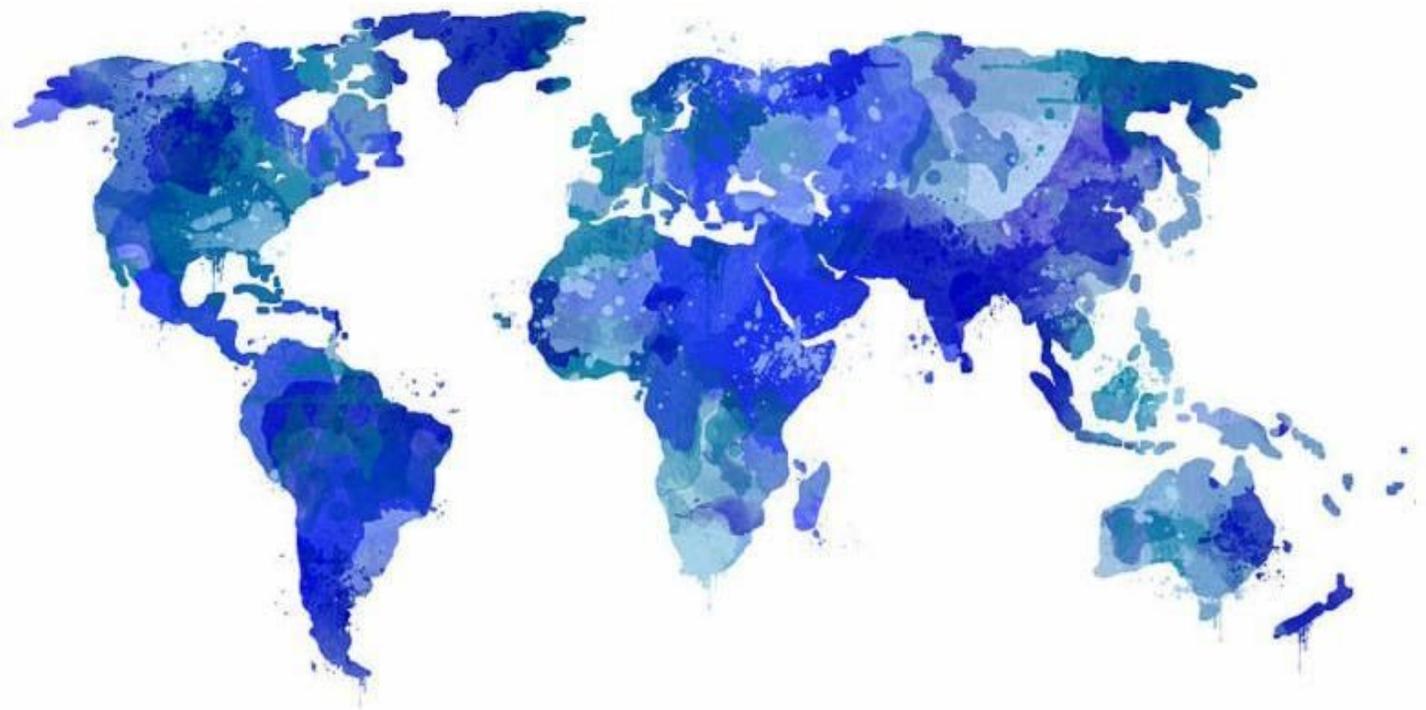


## Teen Alcohol and Other Drug Use Worldwide: A Prevention Perspective



### Observations from FCD Prevention Specialists

In 42 years, [FCD](#) has spread our prevention mission to schools in over 70 countries and 40 United States, reaching more than 2.5 million students. Through that breadth of experience, FCD Prevention Specialists have gained a [unique insight](#) into global alcohol and other drug trends and the perceptions that children around world hold about those trends.

In many cases, initial perceptions of use seem to be exaggerated. For instance, students may say, "everyone's doing it" about a particular drug. However, using the evidence-based [social norms approach](#) to prevention, when Prevention Specialists break down the actual numbers

with kids, and allow them to discuss the healthy reality, many concede that their peers are most likely making healthy choices not to use.

For this e-Journal, FCD Prevention Specialists offered their observations from the 2017-2018 school year to help paint a picture of international drug trends.

## The Big Picture: What's Trending

While most students in middle and high schools worldwide choose not to use, among the minority who do, data from the [FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey](#) consistently finds that alcohol and nicotine are the most prevalent drugs.

Students are also curious about cannabis. They tend to ask FCD Prevention Specialists a lot about marijuana and its psychoactive properties and addiction potential during our Intensive Student Education seminars. These conversations, however, are not an indication that most students are using the drug. In fact, the most recent FCD data findings show that, among the 89,000 students around the world who have taken our survey since 2009, 77% report they have never used marijuana.

The biggest trend FCD has seen recently is the increased presence of [electronic cigarettes, also known as vapes](#). Vapes can be used discreetly, because they are often small, look like other tech gadgets, and lack the strong odor of tobacco cigarettes. As a result, some school communities have reported adolescents vaping on campus. Many students have a low perception of risk when it comes to e-cigarette use, because some vape promotions and enthusiasts make unsubstantiated health claims about these drug delivery devices. Most vape e-liquid contains nicotine, which is highly addictive, especially among adolescents. These liquids may also contain an array of other chemicals proven to cause cancer and other serious illnesses. Other vape juices contain THC, a major psychoactive chemical in marijuana. Regardless of the makeup of a particular vape, when it comes to substance use, especially among developing children and teens, we know that all use equals risk.

## Trends by Region

### ***South America***

During 2017-2018, FCD Prevention Specialists working in South America heard students in that region identify alcohol, tobacco cigarettes, and cannabis as the most commonly used substances in their communities, and sometimes by their peers. Some students spoke of a strong cultural connection with drinking in the region. This self-reported circumstance, in addition to a drinking age of 18 in many countries in this part of the world, support findings from the *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey*, which consistently show that South America has higher youth alcohol use levels compared other areas in the world where the drinking age is at least 21.

FCD students in South America also demonstrated curiosity about cannabis, speaking about news stories covering the legalized recreational use of marijuana in some U.S. states.

### ***Europe***

In Europe, alcohol remains the most commonly reported substance used by adolescents. Some teens in FCD classrooms in Europe also reported use of tobacco cigarettes. Data shows in Europe, compared to the United States, adolescents tend to engage in both heavier and more frequent drinking.

### ***Africa***

According to the United Nations, Africa has the highest proportion of young people under the age of 25 in the world, at 60%. Alcohol use remains the most common substance among adolescents in FCD schools in Africa. Other substances students may be exposed to include khat, a stimulant made of a plant whose leaves are usually chewed, and cannabis. UN data shows the use of tramadol, a powerful opioid painkiller, is on the rise in some parts of Africa.

### ***Middle East***

FCD visits schools in Middle Eastern countries like Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Religious factors and very strict laws around alcohol use in these and other countries can be a deterrent, or protective factor, for students against teen use, and in fact, teen alcohol use is relatively low in the Middle East compared to other regions of the world. However, in some cases student use of tobacco products like cigarettes, hookah/shisha, and a powerful tobacco product known as dokha, is higher here than in other areas.

### ***Asia***

Across Far East and Near East Asia, adolescents can access alcohol and tobacco when laws lack strict enforcement. Some FCD students in India and Bangladesh identified the use of cannabis as trendier in their societies than alcohol. Some school communities in Thailand identified inhalants like nitrous oxide, ankle spray, and aerosol deodorant as popular substances. The latter two can be sprayed on a person's clothing around the neckline and inhaled deeply to produce a brief high.

## Protective Factors

The above information paints the broad brushstrokes of international drug trends. However, it's important to emphasize that [students at FCD schools worldwide continue to make healthy choices about alcohol and other drug use](#). We know that protective factors can help young people make healthy choices through adulthood. These protections include:

- Sports, hobbies, and other activities
- Clear limits, expectations, and consequences by adults
- Surrounding themselves with friends who make healthy choices
- Conversations about substances with trusted adults
- Family and school connectivity
- Understanding how a young, developing brain works.

## What Adults Can Do

Today, technology, pop culture, and word of mouth allow adolescents to get information about drug trends quickly and easily, but sometimes not accurately. That means parents, teachers, and other adults have the challenge of keeping up-to-date and remaining vigilant. [The more adults know](#), the more informed their conversations with adolescents can be. This, too, can be a powerful protective factor.

FCD international data shows that adolescents dramatically overestimate peer substance use. And, if their perception of substance use is exaggerated, teens may make risky choices aligned with these inaccurate, unhealthy beliefs. Just because kids may think, "everyone is doing it" doesn't mean that is the reality.

Here are some useful resources for strengthening these conversations with students:

- FCD's internationally-minded e-Journals: <https://tinyurl.com/y7ffg9q3>
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: <http://www.nida.nih.gov>
- Partnership for Drug-Free Kids: <http://www.drugfree.org/>
- European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs: [www.espad.org](http://www.espad.org)
- Monitoring the Future: <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/>
- FCD partner, the Stanford Tobacco Prevention Toolkit (includes vaping/e-cigarette information): <http://med.stanford.edu/tobaccopreventiontoolkit.html>
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Let's work together to keep the conversation going!

## References

World Drug Report 2018, Division for Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations publication, Sales No. E.18.XI.9. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/wdr2018/>

*[FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey](#)*

## About the Author

**Jennifer Bragg** is a former FCD Prevention Specialist and an award-winning television producer and communications specialist. She has worked in news offices in Washington, D.C.; Beijing; Nairobi; and Moscow. She also has been a freelance writer and editor for online media and the voice of English-language learning materials for Chinese students to improve their listening comprehension. Jennifer holds a B.A. in International Studies from Elmira College, and an M.A. in International Journalism from City University London. Jennifer speaks French, German, and Mandarin Chinese.