



The price of a moment of 'joy': how drugs change the lives of young people in BiH and Serbia

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Abstract: Youth drug use in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia should be examined in view of social, family, and psychological factors behind addiction. Based on statistics, scholarly research findings, and an interview to a highschooler, we call for empathy, understanding, and stronger support systems for vulnerable teenagers.

The usage of narcotics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia is still considered a [taboo topic](#). Many people avoid open conversations about drugs and addiction because they do not want to be associated with them. As a result, addicts are often presented in a dehumanising and judgmental way, especially through media and public discussions. This creates negative attitudes toward people struggling with addiction. Although narcotics and their distribution have serious harmful consequences, it is important to remember that behind every addiction there is still a human being with emotions, experiences, and personal struggles.

Teenagers are among the groups most vulnerable to drugs and addiction. At that age, young people are still shaping their identity and are strongly influenced by their

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surroundings, social pressure, and the desire to fit in. This makes high school students especially exposed to the dangers of narcotics.

In BiH, as some statistics indicate, the drug most often used by adolescents is [cannabis](#), with as many as [25 percent of BiH teens](#) either actively using or having at least tried using this opiate. Among these teens, many different sorts of heavier drugs are also present, in lesser quantities but concerning the public opinion nonetheless. In Serbia, the situation seems to be no less dire; in fact, it indicates a worsening trend, especially in more urban surroundings where 10 percent of highschoolers [consume cannabis](#) on a daily basis, while an even larger figure reserves this addiction for weekends. According to a [research paper](#) published by the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research (*Институт за криминолошка и социолошка истраживања*) at the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, among 1287 students in high schools of Belgrade, 17.7 percent of them consume drugs while 14.1 percent distribute drugs.

With these numbers in mind, the right question would be why? Though defeating and seemingly unreasonable, it is very valuable to understand the very reasons behind these negative tendencies among the high school youth in both BiH and Serbia. According to Ivana D. Radovanović, a professor at the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies in Belgrade, one of the major catalysts and entry points for addiction among the youth appears to be mostly the society around these vulnerable teens. In her [paper](#) 'Adolescent peer groups and drug abuse', Radovanović makes a clear argument connecting different social norms among smaller subcultures and groups of peers among highschoolers, which tend to be inclined towards subversive social practices, including the trend of substance abuse among high school students. Additionally, Radovanović pays special attention to peer-related factors and indicates that these factors are inseparable when trying to understand the drug 'culture' and advises further theoretical analysis when tackling this particular issue as it seems to be much deeper than many might believe.

Moreover, our interview with one highschooler in Belgrade, who prefers to remain anonymous, has provided a very human and valuable point of view:

It was a relief, from school, from home, from life... It opened new horizons for me and helped me to forget many problems that my mind has been tangled with. I do have other means of relief, but most of the time, combining them, like for example, singing and playing music together with smoking marijuana or using [mushrooms] gives me a full release. It's something that must be experienced, for me it is ethereal, but for some, like one friend of mine, it might be a terrifying experience that could leave someone traumatized. Some people just aren't cut for that.

This excerpt of our interview shows a very humanizing side of the problem. His addiction to drugs is a result of an enduring struggle with many aspects of life combined with a lack of experience or guidance, as he says, a 'release' from the everyday struggles for which he found no help or aid around him. It is not wishing to 'fit in' or show off, but rather an attempt to find comfort within his own skin. Though

naturally, his way of dealing with these problems is far from optimal, and will, most likely, lead to further complications in life, which this highschooler recognises, his explanation is that he is unable to properly evaluate risks that come with substance abuse.

As the same young interlocutor shared:

Sometimes it is just easier for me to live in the moment. When I first discovered cannabis, I felt like I had a safe place to run to. It shielded me from pressure and my own insecurities and made all the pressure disappear. My family is broken up and never paid much attention to me or whatever I was going through, so I would spend hours being high, sometimes with my friends and we would just enjoy the time together, laughing at each other or trying to find meaning in the tripping. Some say that it is bad for health, and I believe them, but honestly, just a few years ago I didn't know if I wanted to live at all, and now all I think of is just this moment. I don't have any feelings towards what's to come.

Though these statements might sound defeating and very depressing, the matter of fact is that, with proper assistance from different support systems, this teenager could have taken a very different path. With proper dissemination about the harmful consequences of drugs, particularly during adolescence, when [brain development](#) is still ongoing, this teenager could have adopted different decisions. It is the indifference of people and institutions that has greatly contributed to his worldview, ultimately leading to him being disappointed and hopeless regarding his own health and life and, therefore, sending him down the spiral of substance abuse as a last line of defence and as a measure of escape rather than solution. This moment of 'joy' has already taken a slight toll on his overall health, but, psychologically, he sees this as the only way to endure his day-to-day life.

In these diverse cultures of the BiH and Serbian highschoolers, many reasons for drug addiction could be brought to attention. An unfortunate situation in family, a bad group of peers or even some deeply personal problems might incentivise a teenager to partake in substance abuse, and sometimes it might be hard to predict these factors. However, what is of incredible importance to these vulnerable teenagers is that marginalisation must not be nurtured when approaching them, either as individuals or groups of people. As bad as drug addiction can be, it does not indicate that the person who fell under its influence is any less worthy or human than anyone else. Teenagers especially — as a very vulnerable group going through many turbulent events in their lives, trying to adapt and overcome their problems — should be primarily understood and only then helped. A wrong approach to their troubles might alienate them even more from a different and very much less destructive escape route, shoving them even further into addiction and isolation.

From our research and experience through this topic, there are many systematic changes that could be made in order to aid these vulnerable teenagers. However, one of the most important changes perhaps does not regard institutions and other official structures, but it is within society itself. There is no benefit in acceptance towards

addiction and narcotics, but the social exile through looking down upon individuals who succumbed to these carefully engineered substances brings very little positives into societies and communities. A direct, non-judgemental and truly good, spirited approach to a troubled teenager or a person who took a 'wrong turn' in life might help more than expected. It would certainly have more impact than casting these people out of society and (unintentionally) pushing them into communities that will cherish and support their destructive behaviour.