



Common myths about drugs among youth and teenagers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract: Three common myths about drug use among teenagers in Bosnia and Herzegovina — ‘everyone uses drugs’, ‘occasional use is harmless’, and ‘addiction is easily controlled’ — are examined by drawing on semi-structured interviews and secondary research to challenge each misconception, with insights on the role of peer influence and misinformation.

Adolescent drug use is a significant public health concern in Bosnia and Herzegovina and throughout the world, as emblematically highlighted by [EUDA](#) in 2024 and [WHO](#) in 2024. Beyond actual prevalence, young people's attitudes and beliefs about drug use are critical in shaping behaviour. According to [WHO](#), teenagers form opinions about drugs through media exposure, peer pressure, social environments, and factual knowledge. Adolescents are at a stage characterised by curiosity and a strong desire to belong, which makes them

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more vulnerable to misinformation. The normalisation of drug-related myths can lead to an underestimation of physical, psychological, and social risks, and therefore to more dangerous decision-making.

Cannabis remains the most widely used illegal substance among European youth. [ESPAD data](#) show that roughly 14 percent of students report to have used an illicit drug at least once, and that teenagers' perception of risk is frequently lower than warranted. Higher substance use has consistently been linked to lower perceived risk, especially for cannabis. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, adolescent drug use is equally a serious concern, as stressed by [Zenic et al.](#) in 2016. However, the country lacks comprehensive and current monitoring systems, as emphasised by [Avci](#) in 2025, meaning that young people often rely on peers and social media as their primary information sources. This creates fertile conditions for myth-making.

This post therefore addresses a key question: what are the common myths about drugs among teenagers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and how do these myths shape their perception of risk? To explore this, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with young people from Sarajevo alongside a review of secondary sources. The interviews aimed to surface young people's attitudes, experiences, and beliefs, and to ground the analysis of the misconceptions discussed below in real voices.

Myth 1: 'Everyone uses drugs'

The belief that drug use is widespread, that 'everyone does it', is one of the most common myths among the young people we spoke with. This is a normative misperception: people overestimate the prevalence of a behaviour among their peers and adjust their own attitudes accordingly. [Paediatricians](#) show that teenagers in the US and Europe are significantly influenced by perceived social norms. Drug use may appear far more common than it actually is because of its visibility in certain social settings, parties, peer groups, and online platforms, rather than because it reflects majority behaviour.

Our interviews from Sarajevo reflect this dynamic clearly. Filip observed that many young people are regularly in contact with active drug users and come to view it as something normal that 'everyone' does, whether or not they use themselves. Sanin linked the perception directly to social media and the normalisation of drug-related content online. Amina described the interpersonal mechanism:

one person talks positively about it, 'persuading' you to try it, which is a very common way among younger people, especially during high school.

Nedim noted that observing others inflates perceptions of how many users there actually are, even while some respondents pushed back by pointing out that many of their peers actively and knowingly avoid drugs. [Studies](#) confirm that

teenagers consistently overestimate peer substance use, and that this overestimation, compounded by media and peer pressure, reduces perceived risk and encourages experimentation.

Myth 2: 'Occasional use is harmless'

A second prevalent myth is that occasional use, especially of substances perceived as 'lighter', carries little or no risk. This belief rests on the idea that certain drugs are 'safe' in moderation and that infrequent use does not produce serious negative effects. [Mariani and Williams](#) challenge this directly, showing that even infrequent drug use can have harmful consequences, particularly during adolescence, when brain development is still ongoing, as highlighted by a recent [study](#) as well as [WHO](#).

Our interviews in Sarajevo confirmed that this myth is present, though young people interpret it differently. Nedim had heard arguments that occasional use is harmless in peer contexts where such behaviour is normalised. Amina reflected:

Since my high school days I've often encountered young people talking about it as something normal, it is perceived as normalising from person to person, which very often leads to others being drawn into using the same substances.

Witnessing others use drugs without obvious immediate consequences reinforced the myth among some respondents. Others disagreed entirely, calling the idea harmful and misleading. A recurring point in the interviews was the distinction between 'lighter' and 'heavier' substances: even respondents who accepted the myth for some drugs acknowledged that stronger substances substantially raise the risk of addiction and long-term harm. European monitoring data, for example [EMCDDA](#) in 2018 and [Mesic et al.](#) in 2013, support the finding that selective experience, peer pressure, and limited knowledge of long-term effects together sustain risk-minimisation myths.

Myth 3: 'You can always stop'

A third significant misconception is that drug use can be readily controlled and stopped at will. This belief assumes that people retain full agency over their behaviour and can avoid addiction through willpower alone. [Research](#) shows, however, that addiction is a complex process that progressively impairs brain function and judgement, making sustained control increasingly difficult over time. During our interviews, Filip described how occasional users can gradually lose control over frequency and quantity in ways that are difficult to recognise in the early phases. Interview responses also showed that observing others who appear to manage their use reinforces the belief that control is personally achievable, an assumption that ignores individual differences and the unpredictable nature of substance use. Enis highlighted that more addictive substances can quickly produce dependency even when initial use feels manageable. Underestimating

the risk of dependency leads young people to engage in risky behaviour under the assumption they can exit at any time. Dispelling this myth is therefore central to building a realistic understanding of addiction and its consequences.

Opposing views and challenges

Experts broadly agree on the dangers of drug use and the importance of correcting misinformation, as stressed by [Avci](#) in 2025. However, [Rowe, Donnan and Bishop](#) caution that overly strict or fear-based prevention messages may increase adolescent curiosity rather than deter use. [Shonkoff & Phillips](#) suggest that open, balanced discussion about drugs and their effects may be more effective than framing all drug use as uniformly and catastrophically dangerous. This view holds that giving young people accurate, differentiated information builds better decision-making capacity than blanket prohibition messaging. Despite these differing approaches, most professionals agree that misinformation remains a serious risk, particularly for adolescents who are most likely to underestimate consequences.

Looking ahead

Our findings show that drug use among youth in Sarajevo is shaped not only by its actual prevalence but by how it is perceived and understood. The three myths examined — namely that 'everyone uses drugs', 'occasional use is harmless', and 'addiction can always be controlled' — are rooted in peer influence, social media normalisation, and selective personal observation. Even where young people are aware of risks, misinformation continues to shape attitudes and behaviour, as researchers such as [Harrison et al. in 2024](#) as well as [Shonkoff and Phillips in 2000](#) have well documented.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where access to up-to-date official data is limited and young people depend heavily on informal sources, addressing these myths is especially urgent. Effective prevention approaches should combine interactive education, open discussion, and critical thinking skills, and should involve communities, schools, and civil society organisations in delivering accurate, trustworthy information to young people.