Reviewer's report

Title: Does lowering alcohol use among Dutch high school students lead to higher use of tobacco and cannabis?

Version: 2 Date: 1 March 2015

Reviewer: Sheryl Hemphill

Reviewer's report:

Using two cross-sectional surveys of almost 4,000 adolescents in a region around Amsterdam, the Netherlands, this paper aims to investigate to what extent behaviour and time trends related to different substances are related to each other and how trends develop in different subgroups. Specifically, the paper aims to examine whether a decrease in the use of one substance leads to an increase in the use of another (i.e., there is replacement of one substance with another), as well as whether lowering alcohol use leads to more drug use and whether the adolescents who stopped smoking drank more alcohol. Trends were examined within subgroups including by gender, age, and education level.

This paper addresses important and interesting questions and potentially has important implications for public health. In general, the paper is well-written and clear to read. I would have liked to see the paper placed within a broader international context (see comments below). I do have more specific comments to follow.

Major compulsory revisions

Background

1. Page 5, can the authors provide some information on the “drug use” policy? (along the lines of what has been provided for tobacco and alcohol).

2. Can the authors include a sentence or two that describe(s) how the results of the current study might inform policy/campaigns beyond the Netherlands/Europe?

Results

The results generally summarise the findings appropriately.

3. Do the authors need to repeat in the text, figures reported in the tables? This seems to be redundant and needs to be revised.

Discussion

4. The Discussion section includes quite lengthy description of the results that were already described in the Results section. It would be more interesting for the reader to spend more time in the Discussion placing this study’s results in context with those of other developed countries around the world. Is use also
declining in other countries who may or may not have similar policies to the Netherlands?

Minor essential revisions

Abstract
5. Line 26, page 2, error in wording “This to study….”
6. Line 35, page 2, change “decrease” to “decreased”.
7. Line 37, page 2, insert “and” after “all ages”.

Background
Overall, this section provides sufficient rationale for the study.
8. Line 85, page 4, delete the second use of “adolescents” in this sentence, it’s not needed.
9. Page 5, lines 93-94, replace “So far it is not studied” with alternative text such as “To date, research has not demonstrated ….”
10. Page 5, line 98, missing the word “in” after “interested”

Methods
The Methods are clearly explained and sufficiently detailed.
11. Page 5, line 107, replace “145.000” with “145,000”.
12. Page 6, line 115, replace “1.854” with “1,854” and “2.088” with “2,088”.
13. Page 6, line 107 add an “and” after “1,854 students”
14. Page 6, lines 123-126, usually include double-quotes around questions asked on a survey. E.g., line 123-124, “What kind of alcohol do you drink?”
15. Page 6, line 128, change “one questions” to “one question”.
16. Page 7, line 132, change “of” to “or” and place comma after “smoking” and remove the comma after “and”.
17. Page 7, line 134, remove “]”.

Results
18. Page 7, lines 149-152 replace “1.854” and “2.088” with “1,854” and “2,088”.
19. Page 8, line 160 (and also on page 9 and 11), usually the “p” in “p-value” is not capitalised.
20. Page 9, line 183, change “student” to “students”
21. Page 9, line 191, suggest you change “stronger” to “larger”.
22. Page 9, line 196, change “all ready” to “already”.
23. Page 9, line 203-204, suggest you change the wording of “being drunk or tipsy” – it does not quite fit with the way the rest of the sentence is worded
24. Page 9, line 205, should this read weekly and ever cannabis “users”?
25. Page 9, section on clustering of substance use, paragraph 1 (lines 211, 212, and 215), ensure that decimals are indicated by “.” instead of “,”.

Discussion

26. Page 11, line 227-229 – have a capital “w” for “What” and ensure there is not an extra space after “clustered” before the “?”.
27. Page 11, line 233, delete “drinking” for “alcohol use in the last month”.
28. Page 12, line 259, replace “contribute” with “attribute”.
29. Page 12, line 261, wording on this line seems unclear especially around “parallels the, in 2006 started,”

30. Table 1 heading – Change “Prevalences” to “Prevalence”
31. Table 1, column 2 heading, change “Totaal” to “Total”.
32. Table 2, heading - Change “Prevalences” to “Prevalence”
33. Table 2, 3, and 4, footnote, change “P” to “p”.
34. Table 4, heading – Change “Prevalences” to “Prevalence” and “not alcohol drinking” to “non alcohol drinking”

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare I have no competing interests.