

TENDANCES

CANNABIS USE IN THE FRENCH ADULT POPULATION IN 2021

ABSTRACT

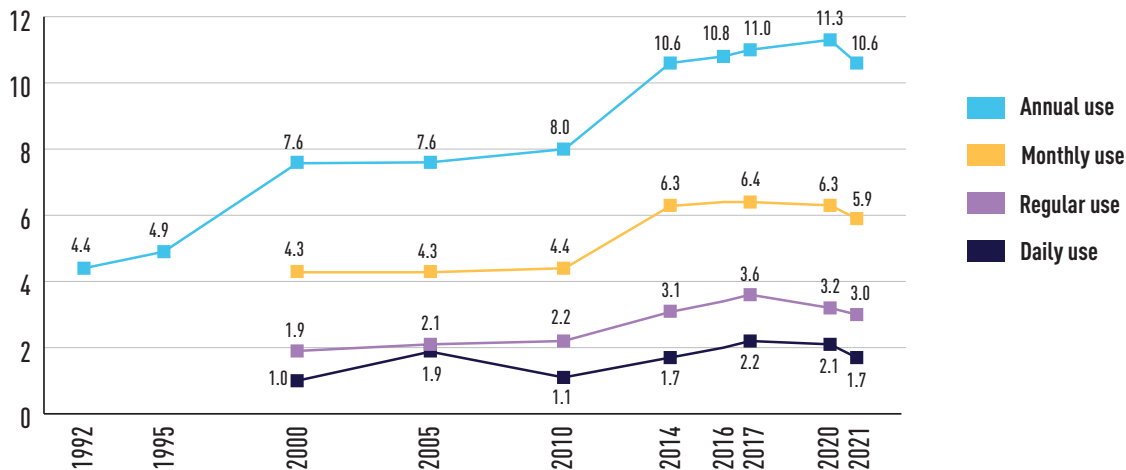
In 2021, the Health Barometer survey conducted by Santé publique France questioned 23 661 adults about their cannabis use. Almost half of them (47.3%) said they had smoked cannabis at least once in their life. While the share of annual users in 2021 (10.6%) has remained stable since 2017, use in the last month, whether regular (3.0%) or daily (1.7%), is down, a decrease mainly driven by the youngest

(18-34 years old). Men were more likely than women to report cannabis use, especially as the frequency of use increases. In addition, the 2021 data confirm a heterogeneous geographical distribution in France, where a North-South divide is still emerging, with higher consumption in regions south of the Loire. The overseas territories continue to show lower levels than in mainland France.

The Health Barometer surveys, initiated in France in the early 1990s by the Comité français d'éducation pour la santé (CFES) and conducted since 2016 by Santé publique France (SpF), ask a sample of adults about their health-related behaviours. In partnership with the French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT), these surveys regularly include a module of questions on the use of illicit psychoactive substances, in particular cannabis, making it possible to observe levels of use for almost 30 years [1].

The 2021 edition of the Health Barometer survey by Santé publique France, administered to 23 661 adults aged 18 to 64 residing in France - including overseas territories - represents an opportunity to present the latest available estimates of levels of cannabis use in France and to review the most recent developments. In addition, since the Health Barometer offers the possibility of studying and breaking down behaviours on a regional scale, a table of cannabis consumption levels by region is presented in a second step.

Figure 1. Evolution of levels of cannabis use between 1992 and 2021, among 18-64-year-olds (in %)



Source: Santé publique France Health Barometers, processed by the OFDT

N.B.: for the definition of the indicators, see Table 1 on p. 2.

Cannabis consumption in metropolitan France

In 2021, almost half of the adult population aged 18 to 64 (47.3%) reported having used cannabis in their lifetime (Table 1). It is the most widely used¹ illicit drug in the population, with 18 million people having used it in their lifetime [2]. In line with an increase in use since the early 1990s, levels of cannabis use rose steadily among adults until 2017: after two periods of marked increases in usage levels (1992-2000 and 2010-2014), the share of current users, i.e., during the last 12 months, has stabilised (for indicator definitions, see Table 1). Thus, in 2021, 10.6% of adults used cannabis during the year, a level comparable to 2017, while use in the last 30 days fell very slightly over the same period, from 6.4% to 5.9% (a statistically significant decrease). More frequent use, whether regular use (ten or more times a month) or daily use, has remained low: the respective figures are 3.0% and 1.7% for adults, compared to 3.6% and 2.2% in 2017.

Regardless of consumption frequency, men continue to report higher levels of consumption than women. While illicit substance use is characterized by strong gender disparities (54.9% of men aged 18 to 64 have already smoked cannabis, compared to 39.9% of women), the differences increase alongside the frequency of use, a constant since use in the general population began to be observed. They thus vary by as much as double with regard to current use (14.2% among men versus 7.2% among women) and are even greater when it comes to regular use (4.4% versus 1.6%), or daily use (2.5% versus 0.9%).

The proportion of cannabis users in the adult population decreases significantly with age, confirming a previous trend [1]: in 2021, cannabis consumption remains generally higher among those under 35. Annual consumption drops from 23.5% of users aged 18-24 years to 2.5% of those aged 55-64 years. Moreover, the average age of current cannabis users continues to increase: it rose from 25.1 years to 32.8 years between 1992 and 2021. This trend is the result of two cumulative phenomena.

On the one hand, the aging of the generations of adults who claim to have been users in the late 1990s – some of whom continue to use – who are currently in their 40s and 50s. On the other hand, the arrival of the generation born in the 2000s, which consumes less than previous age groups: regular use appears to have fallen between 2017 and 2021 among 18–24-year-olds (8.4% versus 6.3%) and among 25–34-year-olds (6.3% versus 4.4%), while it has remained stable among adults over 35 [1].

In addition, the OFDT online survey carried out in 2021 provides a detailed description of users' behaviours, such as the number of joints smoked in one session or the time of day when the first consumption of cannabis takes place (see the box on p. 3).

Regional cannabis use

Levels of cannabis experimentation and use vary across regions (Table 2). While two regions in France (Pays de la Loire and Normandy) show levels comparable to the national averages for all consumption indicators, the other regions show at least one level that is significantly different. Three regions stand out with lower use of cannabis, in particular Hauts-de-France (-8 points less than the national average). Less markedly, the Grand Est, Centre-Val-de-Loire and Bourgogne-Franche Comté regions also show lower consumption profiles, with lower levels of annual, monthly, and daily use. Conversely, Occitania shows the higher diffusion, with a level of use 8 points higher than the French average, followed by Brittany (+5 points), Nouvelle-Aquitaine (+3 points), Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region (PACA) + Corsica (+2 points). Occitania is the only region where all usage indicators are above the metropolitan average. With 4 out of 5 indicators higher than the national averages, the Nouvelle-Aquitaine and PACA regions share a similar profile. The results suggest that cannabis use in mainland France remains geographically divided [4], with regions to the north of the Loire exhibiting lower levels of use and the regions of the south exhibiting generally higher levels.

Table 1. Levels of cannabis use among adults by age and gender in 2021 (in %)

	2017	2021							
	All	All	By gender		By age group				
			Men	Women	18-24 years old	25-34 years old	35-44 years old	45-54 years old	55-64 years old
Lifetime use: use at least one use in the lifetime	44.8	47.3	54.9	39.9	48.0	59.2	57.0	44.7	29.3
Annual use (or current use): at least one use in the 12 months preceding the survey	11.0	10.6	14.2	7.2	23.5	16.1	10.3	6.3	2.5
Monthly use (or recent use): at least one use in the 30 days preceding the survey	6.4	5.9	8.3	3.5	12.7	8.6	6.3	3.4	1.3
Regular use: at least ten uses in the 30 days preceding the survey	3.6	3.0	4.4	1.6	6.3	4.4	3.2	2.0	0.5
Daily use: at least one use per day during the 30 days preceding the survey	2.2	1.7	2.5	0.9	3.3	2.7	1.9	1.0	0.3

Source: Santé publique France Health Barometers, processed by the OFDT

(red, blue): indicates a statistically significant increase or decrease between 2017 and 2021, respectively (Chi² test at 5% risk threshold)

(*): the choice was made here to compare the results with those of the 2017 survey, due to the exceptional context of the 2020 survey in relation to the health crisis (see methodological box).

(**): the 2017 usage levels to which the levels in the table are compared are presented in Tendances No. 128 [1].

1. Lifetime use is the indicator used to measure the spread of cannabis.

The prevalence of cannabis use in the overseas territories in 2021 was significantly lower than the metropolitan average, ranging from -9 points in La Réunion to -25 points in French Guiana, where the level of use is twice as low as in mainland France. On the other hand, in the West Indies as in French Guiana, 30% of users have used cannabis during the past 12 months, compared to just over 20% in mainland France. Similarly, around 40% of consumers over the year have smoked cannabis regularly (10 times or more in the month), compared to 25% in mainland France. This result suggests a higher polarisation of cannabis use in these territories, including a large proportion of the population who do not use cannabis (more than 70% of non-users) alongside a large proportion of users whom indulge in regular consumption. La Réunion, despite a lower level of use, stands out with a consumption profile similar to that observed in mainland France.

Conclusion

The results of this 2021 edition of the Health Barometer survey by Santé publique France concerning the use of cannabis show:

- declining use among younger generations;
- increasing number of users over 35 reporting consumption;
- a lower proportion of users in the overseas departments and regions than in mainland France but characterised by more frequent and intensive consumption;
- regions in the southern half of France exhibiting higher levels of use.

Table 2. Levels of cannabis use among 18-64-year-olds in mainland France and overseas departments and regions (in %)

	Lifetime use	Annual use	Monthly use	Regular use	Daily use
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (n = 2 345)	49.4	10.3	5.9	2.8	1.7
Bourgogne-Franche-Comté (n = 767)	44.0	7.9	4.5	1.9	0.7
Brittany (n = 1 061)	52.3	11.3	4.6	2.4	1.2
Centre-Val de Loire (n = 709)	41.4	9.8	5.8	1.7	0.5
Grand Est (n = 1 550)	45.0	8.4	4.1	2.2	1.1
Hauts-de-France (n = 1 582)	38.8	9.8	5.5	2.7	1.3
Île-de-France (n = 3 440)	45.9	11.2	5.8	2.6	1.5
Normandy (n = 924)	45.7	10.5	6.2	3.3	1.7
Nouvelle-Aquitaine (n = 1 684)	50.5	11.9	7.1	3.9	2.1
Occitania (n = 1 632)	55.1	12.9	7.4	4.4	3.0
Pays de la Loire (n = 1 191)	46.6	10.2	5.0	2.9	2.0
Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur + Corsica (n = 1 413)	49.7	11	7.1	4.1	2.7
Mainland France (n = 18 298)	47.3	10.6	5.9	3	1.7
Guadeloupe (n = 1 174)	26.0	8.5	5.7	3.5	2.3
French Guiana (n = 1 342)	22.5	6.8	4.3	2.7	2.1
Martinique (n = 1 172)	29.9	9.4	6.8	3.6	2.3
La Réunion (n = 1 675)	38.6	9.8	5.3	2.7	1.9

Source: Health Barometer 2021, Santé publique France, processed by the OFDT

(red, blue): indicates a higher and lower level, respectively, than the metropolitan level (Chi² test at the 5% risk threshold). The tests for the mainland France and the overseas departments and regions are carried out by standardising the structure of the population according to socio-demographic characteristics.

Note: the numbers from Corsica are too small to allow a separate statistical analysis (n=59), which is why the respondents were included with those from the PACA region.

This new estimate of consumption levels in the adult population comes after two atypical years, marked by the health crisis linked to Covid-19 and several lockdowns of the population which have had an impact on collective well-being and mental health [5, 6], but also on substance use behaviours [7], even if the latter impact is still poorly understood. The results of the Health Barometer survey

Quantities of cannabis consumed among users: results of the 2021 OFDT online survey

Between 26 June and 12 July 2021, the OFDT carried out an online survey of 2 587 drug users, including 2 447 cannabis users during the year (2 208 of them having specified, in addition, the number of joints smoked on a typical day of consumption). Particular attention was paid on specific sub-populations such as frequent cannabis users. Despite a methodology that does not guarantee the representativeness of the population observed [3], the survey provides additional information that is often difficult to observe in surveys undertaken among the general population.

Current users declare that they smoke 1.8 joints on average on a typical day of consumption, an amount that increases sharply with the frequency of use: from 0.8 joints for occasional users (i.e., those who do not smoke every month) to 4.1 joints on average for daily smokers. Males smoke more joints per day of consumption than females (2.1 versus 1.5), a difference mainly explained by the greater proportion of daily use among men: at similar frequency of use, gender differences vanish. Similarly, the age of respondents does not affect the average number of joints smoked when accounting for the frequency of use.

Most consumption takes place in the evening, with half of users smoking their first joint after 8 p.m. Daily users, on the other

hand, tend to consume earlier in the day. Thus, a third of daily users (31%) consume before noon, the proportion being only 3% among occasional users.

Furthermore, an estimate of the total number of joints smoked over the course of a year reveals that approximately two-thirds of cannabis joints are consumed by daily users.

Average number of joints smoked on a typical day of use by gender and frequency of cannabis use

	All	Men	Women
Annual users (n = 2 208, 100%)	1.8	2.1	1.5
Annual users excluding monthly users (n = 437, 20%)	0.8	0.9	0.6
Monthly users excluding daily users (n = 1 417, 64%)	1.6	1.7	1.4
Daily users (n = 354, 16%)	4.1	4.2	3.8

Source: 2021 Online Cannabis Survey, OFDT

show that, despite the decline observed among young adults, the levels of annual cannabis use remained generally stable between 2017 and 2021.

Although cannabis use is still the doing of the younger generations (more than 40% of adolescents aged 17 had already used it in 2017 [1]), our results suggest an increase in older users. This differentiated evolution of levels of use according to age groups underlines the importance of taking into account the generational dimension of cannabis use. In the absence of major changes in substance use behaviours, a continued increase in the age of cannabis users, a growing number of whom are approaching their forties and fifties, is to be expected. Echoing the general population surveys, the OFDT has therefore planned a qualitative survey of regular cannabis users in 2023, aimed at better understanding the contexts and motivations of these adults continuing or resuming cannabis use.

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Méthodologie

■ 2021 Health Barometer Survey

This survey was conducted by telephone by the Ipsos Institute between 11 February and 15 December 2021, based on randomly generated landline and mobile phone numbers. A total of 31 033 people aged 18 to 85 (24 514 in mainland France and 6 519 in 4 overseas territorial communities (Guadeloupe, Martinique, La Réunion and French Guiana) responded to the entire questionnaire, including 23 661, aged 18 to 64, who responded to the cannabis module (18 298 in mainland France). Due to a reduced time frame for administration, the 2021 survey unfortunately did not make it possible to inquire about the use of other illicit drugs, limiting the possibilities of conclusions as to any changes in recent illicit substance use behaviour.

In 2020, Santé publique France also conducted a Health Barometer survey which included data on cannabis use [8]. However, due to the particular nature of the sample (interruption during the 2 months of lockdown in March 2020) and its smaller size, it seemed preferable to compare the data for 2021 with those of the 2017 Health Barometer whose methodology remained perfectly comparable.

■ 2021 Online Cannabis Survey, OFDT

The OFDT carried out an online survey in the summer of 2021 among 2 587 drug users, including 2 447 annual cannabis users (half of whom were daily users) recruited on a voluntary basis via advertisements on Facebook. It offers the opportunity, via a set of detailed questions, to closely observe cannabis users' behaviours [9]. However, due to the survey methodology used, caution should be exercised regarding the possibility of generalising the results observed, which do not offer sufficient representativeness. Indeed, in the absence of probability sampling, these online surveys lead to significant bias in the selection of respondents. It may be, for example, that it is those most involved in cannabis consumption who overwhelmingly decide to respond to the survey. To limit representativeness biases, the OFDT survey has thus been adjusted based on the spread of users for the 2021 Barometer so as to respect the share of daily users according to age group, crossed with gender and region.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Eric Janssen (OFDT), Alex Brissot (OFDT), Viêt Nguyen Thanh (SpF) and François Beck (SpF) for their support and proofreading.

Ours

Tendances

Director of publication: Julien Morel d'Arleux / Editor in chief: Ivana Obradovic.
Review Committee: Karine Gallopel-Morvan, Virginie Gautron, Fabien Jobard, Aurélie Mayet.
Graphic designer: Frédérique Million / Documentation: Isabelle Michot.
Translated in English by Global Voices supervised by Anne de l'Éprevier.