

Believers consume fewer drugs than atheists

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Credit: Keystone

Young Swiss men who say that they believe in God are less likely to smoke cigarettes or pot or take ecstasy pills than Swiss men of the same age group who describe themselves as atheists. Belief is a protective factor against addictive behaviour. This is the conclusion reached by a study funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Karl Marx said that religion was the opium of the people. New figures now suggest that religion plays a role in preventing [substance misuse](#). A research team led by Gerhard Gmel from Lausanne University Hospital has shown in the journal *Substance Use & Misuse* that, in Switzerland, fewer religious [young men](#) consume addictive substances than men of their age group who are agnostics or atheists.

At the army recruitment centre

For their study on substance use in Switzerland, Gmel and his colleagues interviewed almost twenty-year-old men at army recruitment centres in

Lausanne, Windisch and Mels between August 2010 and November 2011. The researchers have now evaluated the 5387 questionnaires completed by the young men. Based on the responses, the scientists split the young men into five groups: the "religious" believe in God and attend church services, the "spiritual" believe in a higher power, but do not practice any [religion](#), the "unsure" do not know what to believe about God, the "agnostics" assume that no-one can know whether there is a God or not, and the "atheists" do not believe in God.

The researchers found that these groups deal differently with addictive substances. Among the 543 religious young men, 30% smoked cigarettes daily, 20% smoked pot more than once a week and less than 1% had consumed ecstasy or cocaine in the past year.

Among the 1650 atheists, 51% smoked cigarettes, 36% smoked pot more than once a week, 6% had consumed ecstasy and 5% cocaine in the past year. The three groups that lay between these extremes were in the mid-range both regarding their religious beliefs and the consumption of addictive substances.

A protective influence

For Gmel, these figures indicate that research into [addictive behaviour](#) should not only consider risk factors, but also protective factors. The results of his study show that belief is a protective factor when it comes to the consumption of addictive substances. Whether the differences between the groups can be attributed to the ethical values of the young men or to social control in the environments in which they live, remains unanswered.

The Cohort Study C-Surf

On average, young people in Switzerland consume [addictive substances](#) more often than people of the same age-group in other European countries. The Cohort Study C-Surf (Cohort Study on Substance Use Risk Factors) is seeking to find the causes as well as appropriate means of prevention. C-Surf is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Under the leadership of Lausanne University Hospital (CHUV) and the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine of the University of Zurich (ISPMZ), C-Surf is studying the behaviour of young men in a longitudinal study lasting at least ten years.

More information: Gmel, G. et al. (2013). Religion Is Good, Belief Is Better: Religion, Religiosity, and Substance Use Among Young Swiss Men, *Substance Use & Misuse*. [DOI: 10.3109/10826084.2013.799017](https://doi.org/10.3109/10826084.2013.799017)

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