



In Europe

TAKING A STAND

**to Improve Addiction Prevention
and Care Across Europe**

GroupeSOS
Entrepreneurs for common good

**European
position paper**

Current European Context

The European Union's current Drug Strategy (2021–2025) prioritises the development of initiatives that reduce stigma, prevention initiatives tailored to the needs and life experiences of vulnerable groups, and approaches ensuring access to healthcare services through coordinated, cross-sector collaboration between health and social care providers. This strategy is firmly grounded in the EU's founding principles and legal framework – respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, solidarity, the rule of law, and human rights.

Addiction affects every aspect of society. Across Europe, countries are grappling with the emergence of new substances and evolving patterns of addictive behaviour. While anyone can be impacted, people who have experienced adversity – such as poverty, violence, or discrimination – are especially vulnerable. Groupe SOS, which works closely with these communities through its social and healthcare services, recognises that addiction is often rooted in difficult life experiences and must not become a further barrier to inclusion.

Groupe SOS's services adopt a holistic approach, addressing the many factors contributing to vulnerability: housing, employment, health, administrative status, gender identity, and more. They focus on harm reduction, prevention, awareness-raising among professionals, and multidisciplinary support tailored to each individual's needs. This includes outreach work, essential to engage those furthest from the healthcare system.

83,4 MILLION ADULTS

29% of the EU population aged 15–64 are estimated to have

USED AN ILLICIT DRUG AT LEAST ONCE¹

THE EU HAS THE HIGHEST ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION GLOBALLY

(11.3 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15+ per year.)²

OVER ONE-THIRD OF ADOLESCENTS

in the EU report binge drinking, nearly twice the rate of adults³.

In 2020, an estimated

5,800 OVERDOSE DEATHS INVOLVING ILLICIT DRUGS

were recorded across the EU¹.

¹Observatoire Européen des drogues et toxicomanies, Rapport européen sur les drogues, 2022

²Législations nationales et politiques de réduction des dommages liés à l'alcool au sein de l'Union Européenne, Observatoire français des drogues et des tendances addictives, juillet 2020

³Euronews, Consommation excessive d'alcool chez les adolescents, 2024

Groupe SOS operates nearly 50 services supporting individuals affected by addiction. Our core mission is to provide the most appropriate and effective response to each person's unique situation. We do not pass judgement on anyone's behaviour or choices. Our services offer unconditional support, combining healthcare, accommodation, actions promoting social and professional integration, with a strong harm reduction dimension.

FOCUS

What do we mean by « drugs » ?

The term “drug” refers to any psychoactive substance that alters nervous system function – impacting sensations, perceptions, mood, and motor skills – and that may lead to physical and/or psychological dependency. This includes both illegal substances (e.g. heroin, cocaine) and legal ones (e.g. alcohol, tobacco, prescription medications).



#1

EMBEDDING ADDICTION SUPPORT IN A HOLISTIC SOCIAL AND HEALTHCARE PATHWAY

Let us change mindsets to improve addiction care. At national, European, and international levels, punitive drug policies have failed. Far from eliminating drug use, prohibition has led to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of people who use drugs, pushing them away from prevention and healthcare services and worsening their health. A 2023 report by the UN Human Rights Office about the impact of Drug policies on people's rights highlights how stigma and discrimination prevent people who use drugs from accessing the help they need⁴. If we want to improve prevention and care, we must urgently shift public attitudes, placing the right to healthcare at the heart of our response.

This shift includes decriminalising personal use and possession of drugs. In the 1990s, heroin use surged in Portugal. In 1999, one in ten people used heroin, and HIV rates linked to injection drug use were climbing despite repressive policies. Following decriminalisation in 2001, people using drugs have been treated as individuals in need of free healthcare, just like the chronically ill. Within 11 years heroin use halved, drug-related deaths fell to five times below the EU average, new HIV infections dropped eighteenfold. It is important to note that even though use and purchase of drugs for personal consumption are decriminalized, trafficking remains illegal under Portuguese law.

OUR ACTIONS

At Groupe SOS, we believe everyone affected by addiction should have access to care. Through our addiction prevention, support, and treatment centres (CSAPAs), we help individuals move towards controlled use and a reduction of harm and risk, or even ending consumption depending on their personal goals. Our drop-in harm reduction centres (CAARUDs) provide individual and group support, help to access healthcare and harm reduction, as well as help with housing, rights, and work integration or reintegration. Within all our facilities we advocate for a wider approach to care, by providing addicts with space where they feel secure and care for themselves before tackling their addiction.

We recommend the decriminalisation of all drugs for personal use. Since people who use illicit substances are not criminals, they are individuals in need of care, repressive approaches are ineffective, expensive, and create stigmatisation and exclusion, making it harder for them to access the services they need.



RECOMMENDATIONS :

Encourage all non-coercive approaches to care and treatment for people with addictions.

Defend access to mainstream social and health services for all people suffering from addiction in Europe.

Decriminalize the use and possession of narcotic substances for personal use.

⁴<https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/2314940F.pdf>



#2 STRENGTHENING OUTREACH INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE PREVENTION AND SUPPORT FOR ALL ADDICTIONS

Since 1993, the EU Drugs Agency (EUDA) has supported Member States with reliable data and analysis on drug use and its consequences. Its 2024 report confirms that everyone, everywhere in Europe, can be affected by addiction and associated risks one way or another. The structuring of specialist addiction health services in dedicated spaces is essential, however, these services remain too scarce and under-recognised, limiting their reach and impact.

Young people deserve special attention as adolescence is a pivotal time of exploration, notably with psychoactive substances. These impact the developing brain, making teenagers especially vulnerable to their toxicity and the risk of addiction. Additionally, other behavioural addictions – linked to gaming, screen time, gambling, and sports betting – affect 13 to 18-year-olds. Yet, there are very few accessible counselling and prevention services for this age group. Outreach programmes adapted specifically for young people are therefore more necessary than ever. We must rethink our models to offer young people care and support services that are complementary to specialised settings. “Beyond-the-walls” programmes that reach all categories of people are essential and should be developed to raise awareness and identify early-on risky consumption patterns.

OUR ACTIONS

Groupe SOS leads numerous outreach initiatives, sharing the expertise of our addiction centres. Across France, mobile teams of professionals from CSAPAs and CAARUDs engage people directly within other social services:

- Individuals experiencing homelessness, supported in emergency or transitional accommodation;
- Young people in child protection or juvenile justice services;
- Disabled people and older adults;
- Survivors of violence;
- Perpetrators of violence.



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Raising Awareness in Festival Settings

In order to encourage early identification and open conversation around addictions, we set up accessible prevention stands at festivals open to all. They distribute harm reduction tools (e.g. disposable straws, breathalysers, condoms, measuring cups...) and offer information around products and consumption practices to promote responsible and safer behaviours.

FOCUS

Remotivating Youth With Addiction Disorders Through Employment

Groupe SOS is engaged in a remotivation programme through employment for youth with addiction disorders through the TAPAJ programme (“Alternative Paid Work by the Day”) 5 in Paris, Bondy, and the PACA region. This national social rehabilitation initiative offers young people facing severe precarity and substance use the chance to earn money daily through unskilled, short-term jobs. Paired with conversations around substance use and harm reduction, it provides a broader support.

RECOMMENDATION :

Scale up outreach-based awareness, prevention, and support services, especially for young people, to ensure earlier intervention on addiction issues.

#3 COMMITTING TO A SHARED HARM REDUCTION STRATEGY

Harm reduction policies aim to prevent or lessen the health, social, and psychological risks of drug use. Instead of focusing solely on abstinence, they offer regulating and supportive approaches grounded in users' lived experiences.

A 2023 report from the Correlation European Harm Reduction Network⁶ showed that in 2020, only four countries (Czechia, Spain, Luxembourg, and Norway) met WHO benchmarks: provide 200 sterile syringes per injecting user annually and 40% of opioid users receiving substitution therapy. This highlights the need to strengthen harm reduction initiatives in Europe.

Alcohol remains a neglected area in harm reduction. It is responsible for 1 in 11 deaths in the WHO Europe region and is linked to over 200 health conditions, including several cancers⁷. Despite this, the EU has the world's highest alcohol consumption rate, and both users and professionals often lack the tools to manage its risks. It is vital to extend harm reduction principles to alcohol to limit its health and social harms.

OUR ACTIONS

We promote all available efficient harm reduction tools: risk information, sterile supplies, usage guidelines (non-sharing of supplies, injection points), access to opioid substitution therapies, and health and social support (employment, housing, etc.). In Marseille, Groupe SOS manages six injection kit vending machines, making us the PACA region's largest provider of sterile materials.

Recognising the added risks of outdoor consumption, we advocate for on-site, supervised use within all accommodation settings for the vulnerable, not just addiction-specific facilities. For example, at La Minoterie, our emergency shelter in Marseille, we manage residents' alcohol use at an in-house bar. This reduces clandestine drinking in bedrooms and public spaces and enables open conversations with trained professionals to lift stigma and promote safe consumption.

Lastly, through its non-profit Santé!, Groupe SOS works to rethink and improve harm reduction support for alcohol users. Santé! is a genuine social engineering apparatus that develops practical support protocols for professionals and users alike, in order to strengthen prevention and consumer support in the field.



European text

*The EU Drug Action Plan (2021–2025), Strategic priority 7, action 46 calls for “continue to reduce drug-related deaths and non-fatal overdoses (including the role played by poly substance use), by **introducing, maintaining and where needed enhancing measures** to reduce fatal and non-fatal overdoses (...) including: **(i) opioid agonist treatment, including take-home naloxone programmes; (ii) supervised drug consumption facilities; (iii) innovative approaches***

RECOMMENDATIONS :

Accelerate information about and distribution of opioid overdose antidotes (naloxone-based) to all European health professionals and at-risk individuals and make them accessible to all.

Support and showcase harm reduction initiatives, including sterile kit distribution and supervised consumption spaces, across all EU Member States.

⁶ https://correlation-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023_CEHRN_Monitoring_Executive-Summary_FR.pdf
⁷ «Redéfinir l'alcool : l'appel urgent de l'OMS pour que l'Europe repense la place de l'alcool dans la société.», octobre 2024

About Groupe SOS

Groupe SOS is a non-profit organisation committed to fostering social cohesion. It develops associations and social enterprises, united by their social and environmental commitments.

Its initiatives are structured around two main priorities:

- Managing non-profit facilities dedicated to youth, healthcare, vulnerable individuals, and the elderly
- Preparing for a sustainable and inclusive future through initiatives for ecological transition, regional revitalisation, responsible businesses, and access to culture.

Secular and non-partisan, it promotes a genuine social vision focused on the common good.

With 26,000 employees, 2 million beneficiaries each year, and a presence in 50 countries, Groupe SOS demonstrates that large-scale impact is both desirable and achievable in building a fairer and more inclusive future.

In Europe

Groupe SOS is committed daily to initiatives and projects that contribute to the development of the Social and Solidarity Economy in the European Union.

With over a hundred projects carried out with more than 85 European organisations from 19 countries, Groupe SOS demonstrates its ability to build strong connections across Europe. Its projects are supported by over 15 European funding programmes, including Erasmus+, Creative Europe, the New European Bauhaus, and the FAMI, ESF+, and ERDF funding programmes. Thanks to EU support, Groupe SOS and its partners lead diverse, impactful, and innovative initiatives, such as vocational training and professional integration projects, activities aimed at improving support for people with disabilities and promoting the social integration of migrants through sports.

Through its partnership network and innovative projects, Groupe SOS is resolutely committed to making the Social and Solidarity Economy a catalyst for social progress in Europe.



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Crédits pictures :

*Photos taken by Groupe SOS teams within its establishments,
associations, and social enterprises*

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