

# Drugs and Young People

## A Briefing Paper

### Downward trend in drug use across all ages

Many people believe that drug use by young people has been rising in recent years. National surveys of young people suggest this is a misconception.

*Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2010* focuses on 11-15 year olds. The *Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey* gives an overview of use by 13 and 15 year olds in Scotland. While *Drug Misuse Declared*, covers 16-24 year olds in England and Wales.

Using these surveys we can build a picture of the trends in use and attitudes occurring within the 11-24 age group.

### Attitudes to drugs

Young people and young adults are overwhelmingly against drug use.

- 67% of 16 to 19 year olds say that it is never okay to take cannabis, and 93% say it never okay to take cocaine.
- Only 8% of 11 to 15 year olds say that it is okay to try cannabis to see what it is like, and even fewer (2%) to take cocaine.

### Trends

Overall, the proportions of young people saying they have ever used drugs use is falling.

In 2001 49.1% of 16-24 year olds had ever taken drugs, by 2010 this had

fallen to 40.1%.

In 2001 29% of 11-15 year olds in England had ever taken drugs and in 2010 this had fallen to 22%.

In Scotland 7% of 13 year olds and 23% of 15 year olds took drugs in 2008 compared to 13% and 33% in 2000.

### School Pupils

While cannabis remains the most widely used illegal drug the proportion of young people who have used it in the last year has fallen from 13.4% in 2001 to 8.2% in 2010.

In Scotland 7% of 13 and 15 year olds had taken cannabis in the last month.

Class A drug use in the last year is down from 4.3% in 2001 to 2.4% in 2010.

- It is important to remember that while proportionally 2.4% is small, this represents over 73,000 school children who took a Class A drug across the England in the last year.

### Young Adults

While cannabis remains the most widely used illegal drug, use in the last year has fallen from 25.9% in 2001 to 20% in 2010.

In 2010, 5.1% had taken a Class A drug in the last year which compares to 6.3% in 2001.

Whilst overall drug use is falling, the use of powder cocaine has risen amongst young adults:

- 0.7% of 16-19 year olds rising to 3.1% in 2010 have used powder cocaine in the last year.
- 1.7% of 20-24 year olds in 1996 rising to 5.4% in 2009/10 have used powder cocaine in the last year.

### Last year by numbers

1,352,000

Young adults (16-24) in England and Wales took drugs last year, of which

441,000

Young adults (16-24) took a Class A drug

293,000

Young adults in England and Wales took mephedrone

382,325

Young people (11-15) in England took drugs last year, of which

250,000

Young people (11-15) took cannabis

73,000

Young people took a Class A drug

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## Legal Highs

For the first time we have some data on newly created drugs (so called 'legal highs'. There have been two recent surveys which give us a picture of their use.

The British Crime Survey found that 4.4% of 16 to 24 year olds report having used mephedrone in the last year—this is the same proportion who say they had used powder cocaine.

In a survey carried out for the European Commission 8.2% of young people in the UK said that they had used new substances that imitate the effects of illicit drugs.

## Risk factors

Research published by the Home Office has identified the following risk factors associated with drug misuse.

### For 10 to 16 year olds:

- serious anti-social behaviour;

- being in trouble at school (including truancy and exclusion);
- friends in trouble;
- being unhelpful;
- early smoking;
- not getting free school meals; and
- minor anti-social behaviour.

### For 17 - to 24-year-olds:

- anti-social behaviour;
- early smoking;
- being in trouble at school (including truancy and exclusion);
- being impulsive;
- being un-sensitive; and
- belonging to few or no groups.

More recently the National Centre for Social Research have published an analysis of vulnerable groups of young people using longitudinal data. They identified the risk factors associated with young people ending up in the substance misuse group as including being female, being disengaged at school and spending time with friends.

## Reading List

- Drug Misuse Declared: Findings from the 2010/11 British Crime Survey, Home Office (2011)
- Risk, protective factors and resilience to drug use: identifying resilient young people and learning from their experiences, Home Office (2007)
- Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2010, NHS (2011)
- Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey, Scottish Government (2009)
- Understanding vulnerable young people: Analysis from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, DfE (2011)
- Youth attitudes on drugs, European Commission (2011)

## Commentary

Talking with someone from outside the drug field about the figures in this briefing paper I was reminded how divergent the public discussion of young people and drugs has been from the trends in what young people say about their own use.

There is no doubt that each of these figures needs to be treated with some caution, we can't tell if young people have exaggerated or minimised their drug use, but if they haven't been truthful then they have been remarkably consistent over the years.

We also need to be absolutely clear that a downward trend is no reason for complacency.

The UK continues to have some of the most serious drug problems in Western Europe, and the consequences are staggering. One only has to meet a family where drugs have been a problem for one of its members or walk through an neighbourhood where drugs are readily available to know this.

Nevertheless, the question that is raised in my mind is why have the trends been consistently downwards over recent years, and how do we continue to support young people to take decisions that are in their best interests when it comes to drugs.

## Parents

One of the most important influences on children's decisions about drugs are the attitudes and actions of parents.

The Nuffield Foundation's Changing Adolescence Programme has been looking at the relationships that parents have with young people and they suggest that there has been an increase in parental monitoring of young people's activities.

## Schools

Ofsted's most recent report on PSHE education makes it clear that, while drug education remains a weaker element of the curriculum, overall there has been an

improvement in the quality of teaching young people to develop their personal and social skills.

## Out of School Provision

International evidence points to high quality programmes being delivered in out of school settings like youth clubs can have a positive impact on risk taking by young people.

## No Magic Bullet

What we can be sure of is that there's not been one single approach that can explain these findings.

In America they have begun implementing a strategy that is a sunblock approach, covering the whole of adolescence rather than single interventions. I believe we should take the same approach in the UK.

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