

Dr David Regis, SHEU's Research Manager has some...

## Good News about Drug Education

In 2003, 'Education and Health' (vol.21 no.3), we reported on a link between lower drug use and usefulness of drug education.

Now we are able to counter recent headlines: "The doped-up generation - drugs and drink grab the young", and, "Kids of today are happier than ever - no wonder, the dope and booze they get through".

The Schools Health Education Unit has been following trends in large samples of pupils from schools using surveys since 1987, and, while there are concerns, there is good news in the figures too.

### Trends

One of our latest publications, 'Trends: Young People and Illegal Drugs 1987-2004' shows evidence of drug education working.

If we look at young people's understanding about the dangers of illegal drugs, we find that many more pupils in 2004 say that amphetamines are always unsafe to use. This is a little misleading, because most pupils in 1987 said that they had never heard of them. But even if we look at just those who express an opinion - that is, the ratio of those who say amphetamines are always unsafe to use to those who say they are safe if used properly - we also see a greater caution in recent years about amphetamines, and some other drugs.

Overall, we can say that young people know much more about different sorts of drugs, they have heard of more types of drug, are able to give a view about their dangers, and are more convinced about the risks of using drugs.

### Offered and taking drugs

Compared with two decades ago, school children are much more likely to encounter illegal drugs - and are much more likely to have taken them.

Looking at young people's encounters with drugs - whether they have been offered drugs, and whether they have used them - we see a dramatic rise in the ten years between 1987 and 1996. In the eight years of data since then (1997-2004), reports of ever having tried drugs dropped significantly, then levels recovered to around the same level as the 1995-1996 peak, wobbling around the 25-30% level for Year 10 pupils.

### Cannabis

The reports of drugs used mainly feature cannabis, and some of the things that are generally true about young people and drugs are not true for cannabis.

Generally, most Year 10 pupils' responses about their knowledge of drugs is either never heard of it, heard of it - but don't know much about it, or always unsafe to use. For cannabis, the single most common response is safe if used properly, with 45% of Year 10 pupils choosing this response.

Generally, as young people get older, they get more certain that a given drug is always unsafe. For cannabis alone, Year 10 pupils are less likely to say that the drug is always unsafe than are Year 8 pupils.

### Other drugs

For offers of drugs other than cannabis, reports of whether they have ever been offered any of the drugs stabilised at just under 30% in 1999 and has remained around

that level since. For offers of cannabis, 1999 was just one point on a rising trend, with about 35% of Year 10 pupils ever having been offered cannabis in 1999, rising to around 45% of them in 2004.

### Refusing offers

The proportion of those young people who say they have been offered a drug can be compared with the proportion who have ever tried it. This gives us a minimum figure for those who have successfully refused an offer of a given drug. For example, just 20% of Year 10 pupils who have been offered ecstasy have ever taken it - which is consistent with the reports of 80% of pupils saying that they think ecstasy is always unsafe to use.

Between 1998 and 2004, the proportion of young people who have ever been offered cannabis rose from less than 30% in 1998 to about 35% in 2000 and to nearly 45% in 2004. However, while the proportion who had ever taken cannabis rose from 20% to just under 30% in 1999, it has remained under 30% ever since. So, even though cannabis has apparently become more available, it's not been used by a higher proportion of young people over the last 5 years.

So, while its far from good news that so many young people are exposed to cannabis, it seems that many of them are willing and able to refuse offers of cannabis (and other drugs) that they get. We know many schools will go beyond the nuts and bolts of drug information to look at social skills like refusing unwelcome offers and resisting peer pressure.

**Trends - Young People and Illegal Drugs: attitudes to and experience of illegal drugs 1987-2004 costs £10 and is available from SHEU ([www.sheu.org.uk](http://www.sheu.org.uk)) Tel 01392 667272 Email:[sheu.org.uk](mailto:sheu.org.uk)**