At the Schools Health Education Unit [SHEU], we often look to see how groups of vulnerable young people are doing relative to their peers in our data sets.

We were recently prompted to look at young people who are young carers, who have special educational needs, who are attending Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), or who are in Special Schools. The numbers from PRUs and Special Schools who completed any of our questionnaires are small, and they may not have answered the same set of questions, so this analysis is rather patchy. We looked in particular at their use of substances: tobacco, alcohol and other drugs. The questions we asked of young people about these topics included:

23. Smoking: Which statement describes you best?
   Answer       Value
   I have never tried smoking          0
   I have tried smoking once or twice  1
   I used to smoke, but I don't know   2
   I smoke occasionally (less than once a week) 3
   I smoke regularly but would like to give it up 4
   I smoke regularly and don't want to give it up 5

We looked at two criteria from this question: the 'ever tried' group (1-5) and the 'regular smokers' group (4-5).

35. Have you ever had an alcoholic drink (a whole drink, not just a sip)?
   Answer       Value
   Yes           1
   No            0

Here we were interested in the 'Yes' group.

17. If you ever drink alcohol, do your parents/carers know?
   Answer       Value
   I never drink alcohol              0
   My parents/carers always know     1
   My parents/carers usually know    2
   My parents/carers sometimes know  3
   My parents/carers never know      4

From this question, we looked at anyone who gave any but the first response (1-4).

Lastly on alcohol:

13. Have you had an alcoholic drink (more than just a sip) in the last 7 days?
   Answer       Value
   No            0
   Yes           1

And again we were interested in the 'Yes' response.

We asked two linked questions about drugs:

25. Have you taken any drugs to get high (not medicines, tobacco or alcohol)?
   Answer       Value
   No            0
   Yes           1

Young people answering 'Yes' were asked for more detail:

26. This question is about your EXPERIENCE of these drugs (not prescribed to you by a doctor)
   [A list of drugs is given here]
   Answer       Value
   I have never taken this drug         0
   I have taken during the last month   1
   I have taken during the last year    2
   I took this drug more than one year ago 3

From these two questions, we found the most recent occasion that a young person had used drugs, if at all.

Results

The results we see in our 2016 data set (Table 1 next page). Overall, we can see a higher likelihood of substance experimentation or use if the young people are classified as being vulnerable in any of the ways we looked at. For example, young people who say they are young carers are more likely to be current or recent users of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.
But the picture is not absolutely flat: for alcohol, we that some criteria show a difference but not others. Also, some of the differences are small, and achieve statistical significance (not shown) only because of the large sample numbers involved (all the differences for the Young Carers and SEN Pupils groups are statistically significant at p<0.001).

Lastly, we haven't tried to take account of confounding variables like poverty; it may be the poverty is associated with a greater likelihood of being a smoker and of being a young carer, and that's what is causing the apparent association.