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Vulnerable pupils and substance use : an analysis of SHEU survey data

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.

Table 1
Vulnerable pupils and substance use: Schools Health Education Unit's 2016 data

	All	Y8	Y10	From pupil questionnaires			From pupil questionnaires			By type of institution	
				Young carer			SEN			PRUS	SPECIAL SCHOOLS
				No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes		
Ever smoked	20%	10%	31%	22%	28%	35%	16%	23%	23%	57%	21%
Valid N	27,925	15,324	12,601	11,141	1,217	799	11,097	1,127	998	30	34
Regular smoker	3%	1%	5%	3%	6%	8%	2%	4%	5%	20%	9%
Valid N	27,925	15,324	12,601	11,141	1,217	799	11,097	1,127	998	30	34
	All	Y8	Y10	Young carer			SEN		PRUS	SPECIAL SCHOOLS	
				No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure			
Ever alcohol	30%	21%	41%	28%	25%	28%	33%	38%	44%	.	
Valid N	15,193	8,116	7,077	9,127	1,161	655	1,309	190	27		
Ever alcohol 2 (from parent supervision question)	20%	14%	27%	20%	21%	23%	16%	17%	17%	32%	10%
Valid N	42,734	23,840	18,894	22,279	2,798	1,621	14,260	1,568	1,268	65	66
Alcohol last week	13%	7%	22%	15%	13%	18%	11%	13%	17%	17%	5%
Valid N	27,791	15,570	12,221	14,935	2,219	1,206	5,513	413	466	48	21
	All	Y8	Y10	Young carer			SEN			PRUS	SPECIAL SCHOOLS
				No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes		
Never taken	94%	98%	88%	94%	93%	91%	94%	91%	92%	80%	85%
During the last month	3%	1%	6%	3%	4%	5%	3%	5%	4%	10%	9%
During the last year (not in the last month)	2%	1%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%	4%	
More than one year ago (not in the last year)	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	6%
[Incomplete]	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%			4%	
[Taken drugs to get high, no detail provided]	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%		0%		
Valid N	35,634	19,977	15,657	19,350	2,480	1,428	9,577	867	919	50	34

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.

Education and Health

The journal, published by SHEU since 1983, is aimed at those involved with education and health who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of young people. The journal is online and open access, continues the proud tradition of independent publishing and offers an eclectic mix of articles.

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