

10% of Year 10 boys have probably used an illegal drug during the previous week

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# Cannabis: getting safer as the years go by?

Ten percent of Year 10 boys and 7% of Year 10 girls have probably taken an illegal drug during the previous week, according to the latest data collected using the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ).

These new facts come from the responses of 37,538 boys and girls in English and Scottish schools, which are currently presented in two of the Unit's recent publications, *Young People in 1997* and *Young People and Illegal Drugs in 1998*.

Other evidence collected using the questionnaire suggests that in the majority of cases the drug concerned will be cannabis.

## The background

We have been collecting information about young people's use and understanding of illegal drugs since 1987. Before that time, in the early days of the HRBQ, there was considerable opposition from teachers and parents to the inclusion of 'drugs' questions because of fears that an enquiry about any behaviour gives it some degree of legitimacy.

There was the further difficulty that the respondents were being invited to report on an illegal activity. Although the questionnaire is

anonymous, and the pupils are assured that the scripts will not be looked at by anyone to do with the school, we were reluctant to ask about current drug use. Instead, they were asked if they had ever tried any of the listed drugs, without distinguishing between distant or recent use; neither did we enquire if their experience was limited to a single experiment or the outcome of more regular use.

To discover how near non-users were to possible sources of drugs, we also asked if they knew of any drug users.

We were still doubtful if even these questions would be generally acceptable to pupils, parents and schools. Their introduction, in Version 11 of the HRBQ, some 11 years ago, took the form of an optional page after the principal and long-standing questions. However, there did not appear to be many problems with them, and so the 'drugs questions' became a full part of the enquiry instrument from Version 12.

It is interesting that we now encounter some survey co-ordinators who wish to *exclude* all but the drugs questions!

Our annual accumulation of data revealed a steadily-increasing percentage of young people reporting the use of one or more illegal drugs.

TABLE 1. The percentage of 14–15 year olds that had experience of any of these drugs (1997 data).

	Boys %	Girls %
Amphetamines	6.0	5.9
Barbiturates	0.8	0.4
Cannabis	27.3	24.9
Cocaine	1.2	0.9
Crack	0.6	0.4
Ecstasy	1.7	2.0
Hallucinogens		
<i>Natural</i>	4.1	2.7
<i>Synthetic</i>	2.4	1.8
Heroin	0.8	0.5
Solvents	3.7	4.5
Tranquillisers	1.6	1.3
<i>Any of these drugs</i>	<i>28.6</i>	<i>27.0</i>

This was documented in our publication *Young People and Illegal Drugs in 1996*. But we really needed information about habitual use and current drug use to fill out the picture, and two new questions addressing these aspects were introduced in 1997.

D15b. Have you ever taken any of the drugs listed in Question D13 on a regular basis?

D15c. How recently have you taken or used any of the drugs listed in Question D13?

The data arising from these questions have given a new dimension to our knowledge of young people and drugs.

### Experience of drugs at 14–15

In this article we pay particular attention to the Year 10 sample.

Table 1 reveals that cannabis is by far the most frequently-encountered drug, with more than a quarter of the sample having tried it. This suggests that it is not too difficult to get hold of.

The bottom line gives the percentage that have tried any of these illegal drugs. These figures are not much higher than the cannabis figures, which suggests that almost every young person in the sample with any drug experience at all will have tried cannabis.

Cannabis, therefore, is of special interest within this group of drugs:

- it appears to be readily available;
- there is little gender difference in its use;
- it is probably most young people's introduction to illegal drugs;
- it is considered less unsafe than most drugs;

- there is appreciable support for its legalisation.

We may add that — unofficially at least — some enforcement agencies regard cannabis use with much less concern than the use of the other drugs in the list.

### How safe? — single drugs

An important component of drug education (including tobacco and alcohol) is the 'personal safety' aspect.

By-passing the question of how knowledge influences behaviour, we collect young people's opinions of the safety of the listed drugs. They may respond as follows:

- have never heard of it;
- know nothing about it;
- consider it to be safe if used properly;
- consider it to be always unsafe.

Table 2 shows the 'always unsafe' percentage responses, once again for the 14–15 year olds.

Barbiturates are seen to be the 'least unsafe'; cannabis is next in perceived safety, while cocaine, ecstasy, heroin and solvents are seen as 'always unsafe' by the great majority of the group.

In this context, we thought it would be interesting to study how perceptions of safety have changed since this question was introduced with the 1991 sample. In Table 3 we compare the percentage of boys that think cannabis, ecstasy, and solvents are 'always unsafe'.

The declining perceived danger of cannabis

	Boys %	Girls %
Amphetamines	42.8	49.5
Barbiturates	23.3	21.1
Cannabis	27.4	30.4
Cocaine	63.5	67.1
Crack	59.1	61.9
Ecstasy	70.6	79.3
Hallucinogens		
<i>Natural</i>	37.4	47.6
<i>Synthetic</i>	51.8	58.7
Heroin	67.4	73.1
Solvents	65.5	66.1
Tranquillisers	35.1	32.7

TABLE 2. The percentage of 14–15 year olds that believe these drugs to be 'always unsafe' (1997 data).

***Almost every young person with any drug experience at all will have tried cannabis***

	Cannabis %	Ecstasy %	Solvents %
1991	44.8	34.5	54.5
1992	41.8	49.6	65.5
1993	38.8	61.1	67.7
1994	31.3	57.8	67.7
1995	28.8	61.0	67.6
1996	28.8	70.6	69.7
1997	31.4	69.9	64.7

TABLE 3. The percentage of 14–15 year old boys that believed these drugs to be 'always unsafe', from surveys carried out between 1991–97.

over this 7-year period, and the increased concern about ecstasy, is unmistakable. These changes contrast with the generally consistent danger rating of solvents.

Of the Year 10 boys in the 1997 sample, 52% consider that cannabis is safe 'if used properly', although 16.6% say that they know nothing about it, and 2.6% have never heard of it.

### How safe? – combined drugs

Enforcement agencies are likely to be particularly concerned about:

- the use of 'illegal' drugs other than cannabis;
- the recorded use of more than one drug, one of which could be cannabis.

Analysing the combined Year 8 and 10 data for both genders (15,176 cases) gives the following percentages:

Never tried any drug	83.8%
Tried or used cannabis only	8.4%
Tried or used any other drug	1.5%
Tried or used more than one drug	6.2%

Summing the last two figures, 7.7% of this group of young teenagers might be considered of particular concern.

TABLE 4. The most recent use of an illegal drug (1997 data).

Year	7	8	9	10	11
<b>BOYS %</b>					
In the past 7 days	1.3	1.1	4.6	10.1	15.0
In the past month	0.6	1.0	5.2	5.5	7.1
In the past 3 months	0.4	0.9	2.6	4.4	6.2
In the past 6 months	0.7	0.6	3.1	3.3	4.1
In the past year	0.4	0.9	3.1	3.2	4.8
More than a year ago	0.5	1.0	2.6	2.9	5.1
Never	96.0	94.5	78.8	70.6	57.6
<b>GIRLS %</b>					
In the past 7 days	0.4	0.8	2.7	7.1	11.9
In the past month	0.4	1.1	4.3	6.7	10.0
In the past 3 months	0.3	0.7	2.2	4.4	7.5
In the past 6 months	0.0	0.8	2.4	3.8	3.7
In the past year	0.4	0.3	2.4	2.9	5.0
More than a year ago	0.2	0.8	1.9	2.8	6.5
Never	98.2	95.4	84.2	72.3	55.5

### Regular use of drugs

A new question added to the HRBQ in 1997 identifies young people who have at some time taken any of the listed drugs on a 'regular basis'. The respondents decide for themselves what 'regular' means. The Year 10 percentage 'yes' results are as follows:

Year	7	8	9	10	11
Boys %	1.4	1.7	6.7	11.3	18.9
Girls %	0.6	1.2	4.5	9.8	17.4

This suggests that about 1 in 10 of all the pupils have at some time or another considered themselves a regular drug user.

Setting these values (R) against the percentage that have tried any drug at all (T) gives the following picture:

Year	7	8	9	10	11
<b>Boys %</b>					
R	1.4	1.7	6.7	11.3	18.9
T	4.3	5.2	20.2	28.6	39.6
<b>Girls %</b>					
R	0.6	1.2	4.5	9.8	17.4
T	2.0	4.7	15.6	27.0	42.5

This suggests that *approximately a third of those who have tried any drug at all have at some time considered themselves a regular drug-taker.*

However, it also follows that *two-thirds of the experimenters have not gone on to become regular users.*

Whether or not this is a comforting reflection will depend upon the reader's expectations.

### Current use of drugs

The other new question in 1997 addressed the frequency of drug use. Table 4 shows when they last used any of the listed drugs.

Although the Year 11 data are from a smaller sample, the comparison with the Year 10 percentages is consistent with the previous year groups, and strongly suggests that results for the post-GCSE students, were they available, would show a further increase in recent drug use.

Studying the Year 10 data, we discover that half of the boys and girls with any drug experience at all have used one within the past month. A third of these boys and a quarter of the girls have used a drug within the past week.

## Some 'drug links'

Perhaps it is not surprising to find that *smoking cigarettes* and using illegal drugs go together. The data for Year 10 boys show that:

### *Smoking and drug-taking go together*

- 51% of those who smoke and don't want to stop have used an illegal drug within the past week;
- 3% of those who have never smoked at all have tried an illegal drug.

*Self-esteem* shows little difference with respect to recent drug use when the groups with high and low self-esteem are compared.

However, the *home set-up* does produce some clear differences among the percentages of the Year 10 pupils in our sample that have used a drug within the past week:

	Boys %	Girls %
Live with both parents	7.3	5.3
Live with single parent	16.2	11.0
Live with parent & partner	12.4	10.4
Other	9.7	17.0

### *'Stable' families seem to contain fewer drug users*

The group living with both parents (typically about three-quarters of the young population) record the lowest level of recent drug use.

How can society support parents who may be concerned about drugs?

## Conclusions

- Our most recent analysis of our data, including the new questions about pattern of use, confirm and extend the picture we have from earlier surveys.
- Experimentation is more common than regular use.
- Drug use can be linked to other aspects of lifestyle; neither policy makers nor educators should treat it in isolation.
- Drug use among young people remains a problem for some, but an issue for us all.