

This article, kindly reproduced from 'YoungMinds Magazine' shows the results from three research reports which support the view that drug misuse among young people may well have peaked.

Steve Flood is Editor of *Young Minds Magazine* which is published every two months. Subscriptions cost £25 per annum (6 issues). YoungMinds is a unique national charity working to promote the mental health of children and young people.

Tel: 020 7336 8445

Fax: 020 7336 8446

Email: magazine@

youngminds.org.uk

Web: www.youngminds.org.uk

Steve Flood

Drug misuse among the young may have peaked

The ONS survey found no increase, from the previous year, in the numbers of young people having used illegal drugs.

The ONS survey is broadly in line with findings from SHEU research.

Levels of drug misuse among young people may well have peaked, latest Government figures suggest, a finding which Ministers will be keen to interpret as an early sign that Drugs Czar Keith Hellawell's ten year strategy to reduce drug misuse is on course to succeed.

A national survey of levels of drugs, alcohol and tobacco use among more than 9,000 11-15 year olds in England, has found that cigarette smoking fell between 1998 and 1999, use of illegal drugs increased only marginally, and alcohol consumption remained the same.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey which was commissioned by the Department of Health, found no increase from the previous year in the numbers of 11-15 year olds who admitted to having used illegal drugs in the month preceding the survey - 1 in 14 young people said they had done so.

There had been a slight increase (from 11 to 12%) of those who said they had used drugs at any time during the previous 12 months, but the increase was not statistically significant. However, ONS says there was a significant rise - from 13 to 15 per cent - of those who had used drugs at some point in their lives.

Among both boys and girls, the survey found marked variation according to age. Only one in a hundred 11 year olds said they had used drugs in the last year, but nearly a third of 15 year olds (30 per cent) had done so. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to have used drugs within the previous 12 months (13%, compared with 12%).

Not surprisingly, cannabis is by far the most popular illegal drug - 11 per cent of pupils said

they had used it during the previous year. The next most commonly used substances - glue, gas and poppers - had each been used by only 1 in 50 young people.

However, many more young people said they had been offered drugs than had tried them, with over a third having been offered at least one type of drug. Boys were more likely to have been offered drugs than girls (36% compared to 33%).

While cannabis was the drug which young people said they were most likely to have been offered, 16 per cent said had been offered stimulants (a group which includes cocaine, crack, ecstasy and amphetamines), and five per cent had been approached with offers of heroin or methadone.

The ONS survey is broadly in line with findings published earlier in the year by the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU), which produced an annual analysis of young people's illegal drug use since 1987, based on the Unit's Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire.

According to the SHEU research, the percentage of young people who have tried an illegal drug peaked in 1995-96, and may have even come down since then. The SHEU's latest survey found that 21 per cent of today's 14 - 15 year olds said they had tried an illegal drug at some point in their lives.

However, the SHEU study also supports the ONS survey's finding that many more young people have been offered drugs. It found that nearly 4 out of 10 14 - 15 year olds (39%) knew where to get hold of illegal drugs, 58 per cent knew a drug user and 44 per cent had been

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offered an illegal substance at least once.

Further support for the view that drug misuse among young people has peaked came at the beginning of June with publication in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ 2000; 320:1536) of the results of a separate study.

Martin Plant and Patrick Miller from the Alcohol and Health Research Centre in Edinburgh, carried out a survey of 2,500 15-16 year olds attending private and state schools across the UK in 1999. They concluded that most forms of drug use had fallen since 1995.

They also found some marked regional variations, with young people in Northern Ireland reporting greater use of glues and solvents and young Scots being more likely to have used cannabis and amphetamines.

"Among girls, there had been a fall from 40 to 33 per cent of those who had used illicit drugs. Boys showed a similar decline - 39.5 per cent in 1999, compared to 45 per cent four years earlier".

Plant and Miller described the reductions in drug use since the mid-1990s as "striking", even if they do eventually turn out to have been temporary.

A full report of the ONS study, which the Government plans to repeat every two years to monitor the effectiveness of its policies to reduce drug misuse among the young, will be published in the autumn.

Young People and Illegal Drugs into 2000 costs £8.50 from the SHEU, Renslade House, Bonhay Road, Exeter EX4 3AY (Tel 01392 667272).