

# Trends

# Young People & Cannabis

**1987-2005**

Extracts from:

‘Young People and Illegal Drugs into 2000’

‘Trends: Young People and Illegal Drugs 1987-2004’

‘Young People into 2006’

**SHEU**

2006

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# Trends

## Young People & Cannabis 1987-2005

Data from the  
Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire  
from a sample of 448,124 young people  
between the ages of 10-15

SHEU provides a range of services to those involved in the planning, providing and commissioning of health and education services. The Schools Health Education Unit (the Unit) is part of SHEU and has been involved in the collection of robust data about young people's health-related behaviour for over 25 years. Each year the Unit supports surveys in hundreds of communities nation wide and we compile the results from these surveys in our series 'Young People in...'. John Balding began the survey services in the late 1970s and they continue to be very widely used. We are publishing data from the databases that began in 1983 to allow examination of trends.

Our annual survey sample is accidental and not deliberate and is therefore not a representative 'national sample' in a research sense. Our aim is to provide robust figures for the community in which the data are collected and used. With the large samples it comes as no surprise to discover that the Unit's annual data compilations usually match the outcomes of orthodox procedures for the collection of 'national data'.

Please contact us if you would like to know more about our work, or carry out a survey of the young people in your locality.

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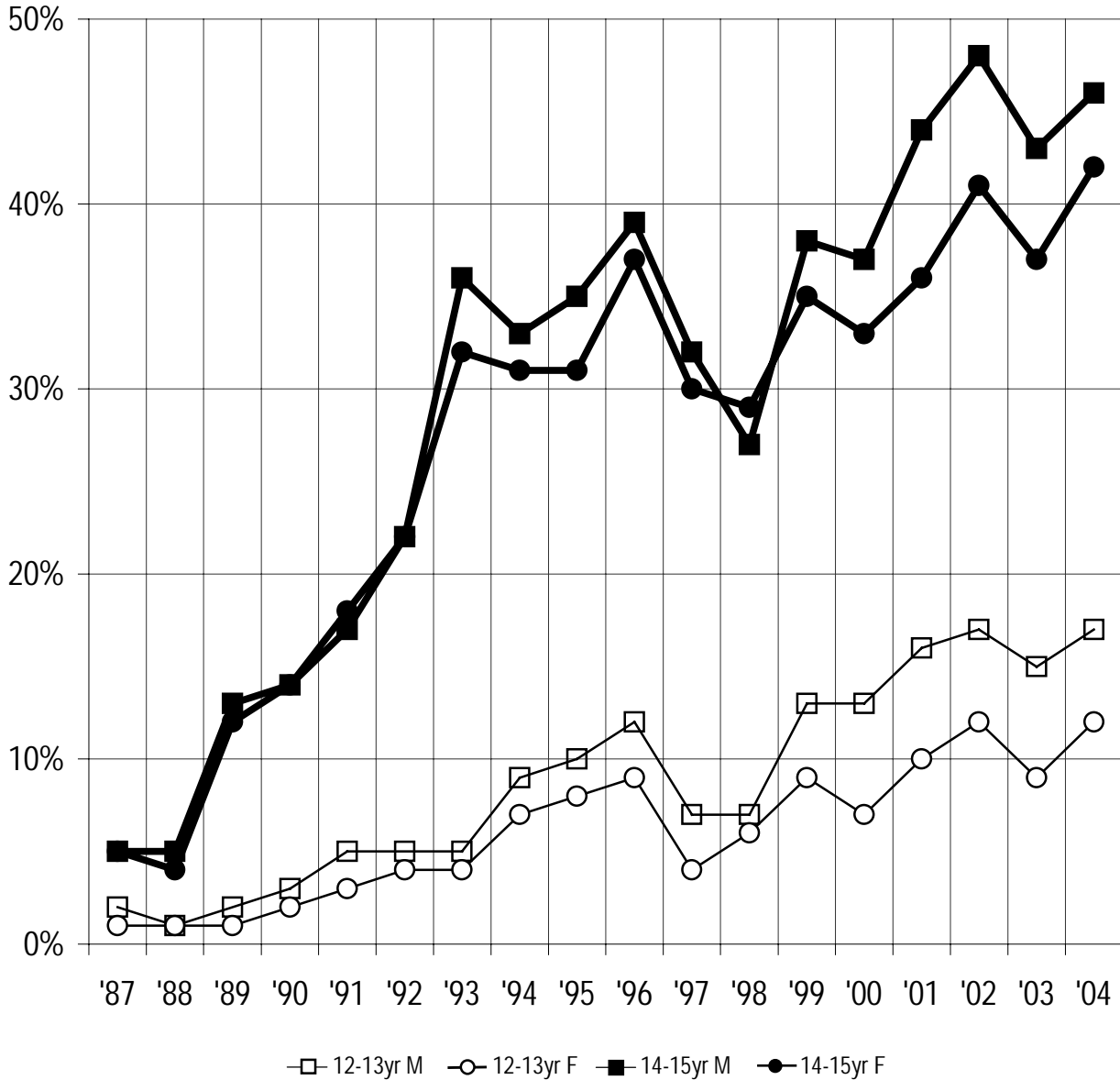
# Have been offered cannabis... 1987-2004



The question in HRBQ version 22 (2002-2005)

**36**      **Have you ever been offered cannabis?**

0 = No      1 = Yes



Have been offered cannabis

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
M 12-13y	2	1	2	3	5	5	5	9	10	12	7	7	13	13	16	17	15	17
F 12-13y	1	1	1	2	3	4	4	7	8	9	4	6	9	7	10	12	9	12
M 14-15y	5	5	13	14	17	22	36	33	35	39	32	27	38	37	44	48	43	46
F 14-15y	5	4	12	14	18	22	32	31	31	37	30	29	35	33	36	41	37	42

## Have been offered cannabis... 1987-2004

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### Observations

- The percentages refer to those responding that they had been offered cannabis. Apart from the obvious difference between the age groups, is it perhaps surprising that the responses from both male and female groups remain so close together? If all things are equal, in relation to the question wording, answer options and question placement, the chart shows a clear upward trend since the late 1980s
- Prior to 1987, our surveys did not include this type of question about illegal drugs but included questions about alcohol and smoking. It would appear that, for these age groups at least, the upward trend started from the early 1990s
- There is one noticeable difference in the profile of the 12-13 year olds. The overall 'shape' of the trend is much less similar to that of the 'taken a drug' chart (page 8). When we look at offers of drugs, either all together or just selecting offers of cannabis, we see that this has risen steadily since 1999. However, use of drugs (again, either all together or just selecting offers of cannabis) seems to have stabilised, and has not followed up the figures for offers
- Up to 48% of 14-15 year old males (2002) and 42% of older females (2004) have been offered cannabis. In recent years, more males than females have consistently reported being offered this drug, but the percentage difference has remained small and never more than 8%
- Figures from the younger group show that up to 17% of males (2002/2004) and 12% of females (2002/2004) have been offered cannabis. Since 1987, more younger males than females have consistently reported being offered this drug although the differences have never exceeded 6%

### Commentary

- Until the late 1990s, this question was worded, with slight variations, as, 'Has anyone offered or encouraged you to try any of the drugs listed in the previous question? If No please tick this box. If Yes please circle the letters below.' (The letters matched the drug list from the previous question)
- In 1999, the questionnaire contained a variety of questions about illegal drugs and cannabis in particular. For example, clients were interested in pupils' responses and reactions when offered cannabis for the first time. From 2000 onwards, the cannabis question became, 'Have you ever been offered cannabis? 0=No 1=Yes.' The following question was, 'Have you ever been offered other drugs on the list in question X?' The figures for the chart opposite have been taken from the answers to the questions above. Although there have been variations in the question wording over the years, the question changes do not tally with the differences seen in pupils' responses. For example, percentages rose and fell in the mid to late 90s which do not correspond with any major question changes
- See page 8-9 for a comparison between being offered and taking cannabis

# Have taken cannabis... 1987-2004



The question in HRBQ version 22 (2002-2005)

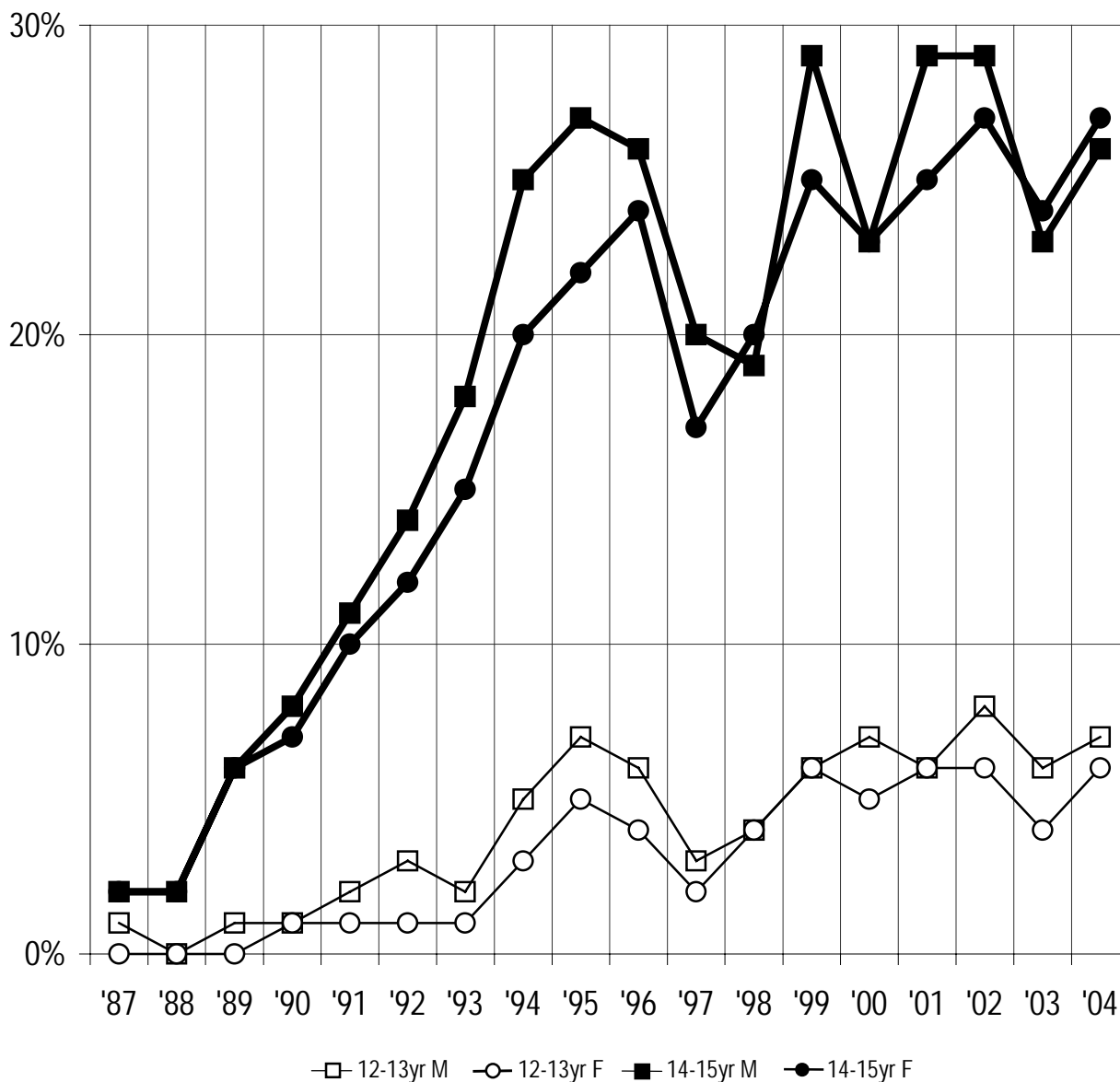
**38 This question is about your EXPERIENCE of these drugs (not prescribed by a doctor)**

**0** = I have never taken this drug

**2** = I have taken during the last year

**1** = I have taken during the last month

**3** = I took this drug more than one year ago



Have taken cannabis

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
M 12-13y	1	0	1	1	2	3	2	5	7	6	3	4	6	7	6	8	6	7
F 12-13y	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	5	4	2	4	6	5	6	6	4	6
M 14-15y	2	2	6	8	11	14	18	25	27	26	20	19	29	23	29	29	23	26
F 14-15y	2	2	6	7	10	12	15	20	22	24	17	20	25	23	25	27	24	27

## Have taken cannabis... 1987-2004

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### Observations

- In one of our longest running questions about drug use we have consistently reported, in the 'Young People in ...' series, that cannabis is by far the most likely drug to be used in young people's experimentations
- However, in 1987-88, 'solvent' use matched cannabis use. Since that time it has remained well below the 10% level
- Experimentation with cannabis is shown to have risen steeply
- We have commented in other publications, 'Young People in 2004' (page xxv) and 'Trends – Young People and Illegal Drugs' (page 11), that our surveys show levels of drug use that are in keeping with the levels seen in other results using other approaches, and also show the same patterns
- The underlying trends for cannabis experimentation suggest that since 1988 more young people, and in particular 14-15 year olds, report taking this drug. It still needs to be emphasised that more than 70% of this age group never report taking cannabis
- It should also be considered that since 1987 less than 9% of 12-13 year olds have reported having a cannabis 'experience' and, despite the slight rise in the trend, the figures describe a very different picture for the two age groups

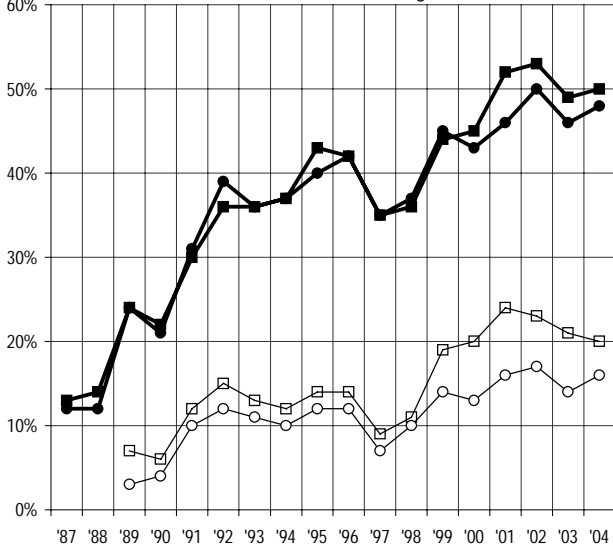
### Commentary

- The question, from version 22, provides 4 answer options. In previous years there were 2 answer options (Yes or No). It should be remembered that data in this report shows those pupils who either responded 'Yes' to taking cannabis or chose one of the answer options that indicates a 'Yes' response e.g. 'I have taken during the past month'
- See page 8-9 for a comparison between being offered and taking cannabis

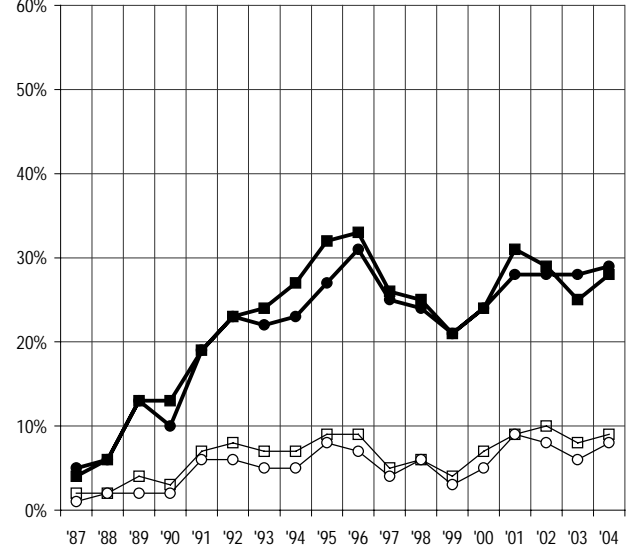
# Offered / taken one drug/cannabis...1987-2004



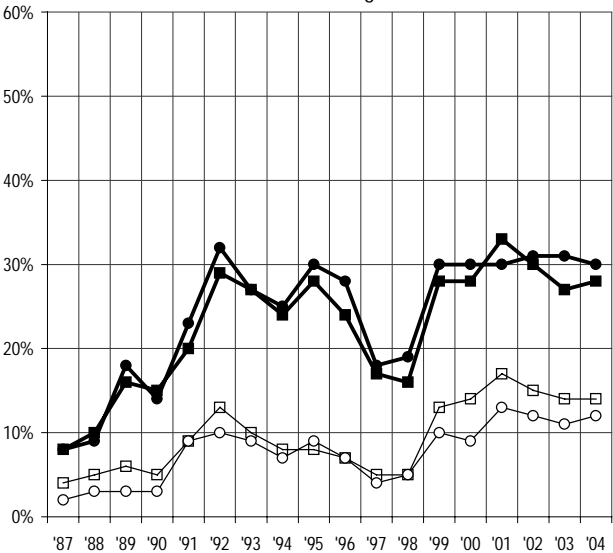
Have been offered at least one of the listed drugs



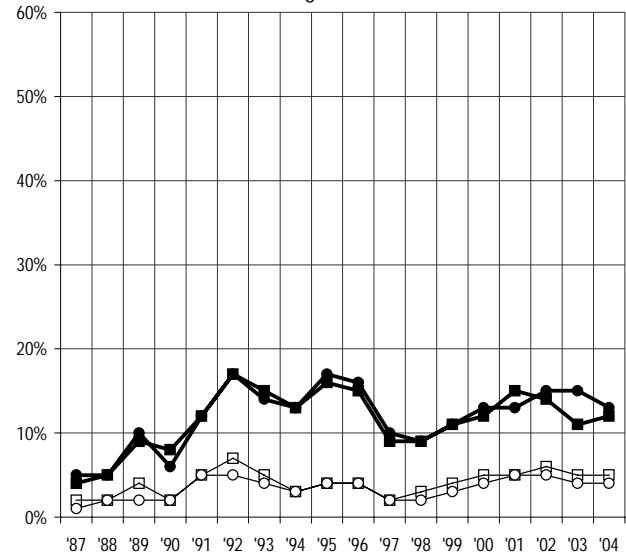
Have taken at least one of the listed drugs



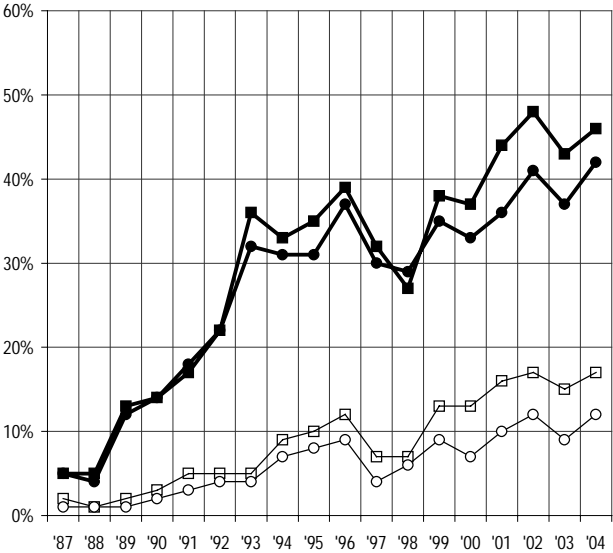
Have been offered at least one of the drugs other than cannabis



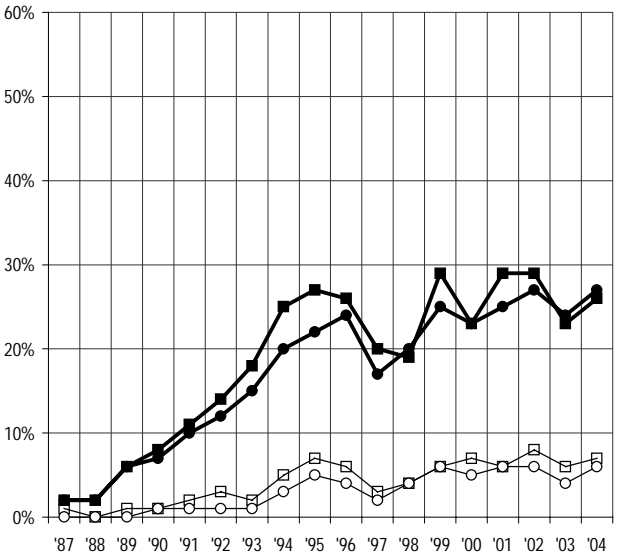
Have taken at least one of the drugs other than cannabis



Have been offered cannabis



Have taken cannabis



—□— 12-13yr M    —○— 12-13yr F    —■— 14-15yr M    —●— 14-15yr F



## Offered/taken one drug/cannabis...1987-2004 TREND

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### Observations

- The direction of the trend is similar in the charts but in some years, over 50% more young people report being offered drugs compared to those that report taking them
- From around the late 1990s there is a noticeable difference in the percentages. An increasing trend of 14-15 year olds report being offered drugs compared to a fairly stable percentage that report taking them
- The years that show the highest percentage of 14-15 year old females being 'offered' any drug are compared to figures from the same year they reported 'taking' a drug. For example, the ratio for 2002 was 28/50 (28% reported taking any drug and 50% reported being offered it). Thus, in the year reporting the highest percentage being offered a drug, around 1:2 reported taking it compared to being offered it
- It is to be expected that the direction of the trend in the cannabis charts is similar to the other charts. In some years, over 50% more young people report being offered cannabis compared to those that report taking it
- Again from around the late 1990s there is a noticeable difference in the percentages. A dramatically increasing number of older pupils report being offered cannabis compared to a less dramatic trend that report taking it
- The years that show the highest percentage of 14-15 year old females being 'offered' cannabis are compared to figures from the same year they reported 'taking' the drug. For example, the ratio for 2004 was 27/42 (27% reported taking cannabis and 42% reported being offered it). Thus, in the year reporting the highest percentage being offered cannabis, around 2:3 reported taking it compared to being offered cannabis





### Commentary

- It can be seen in the charts, for those offered/taken drugs other than cannabis, that while offers have continued to show a rise from 1998-2004, experimentation with drugs other than cannabis has stabilised at below 20% between 1999-2004. This makes a point about young people's capacity to refuse offers and resist peer pressure. Schools often emphasise not just knowledge about drugs but also social skills, such as being able to escape pressure to participate in a particular action

# What do you know about cannabis, barbiturates, ecstasy, heroin, poppers and solvents... 2004

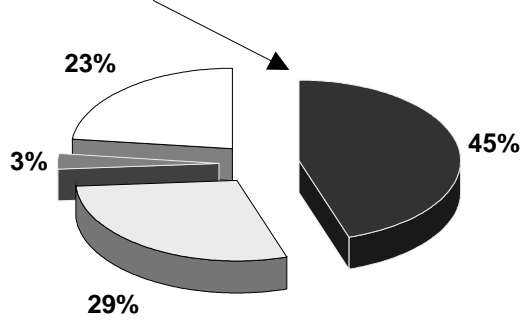
The question in HRBQ version 22 (2002-2005)

**34 What do you KNOW about these drugs?**  
Please choose the nearest answer

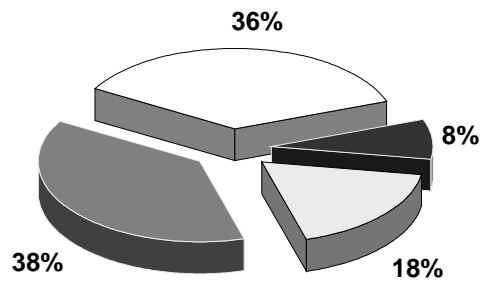
 <b>0</b> = I have never heard of the drug	 <b>2</b> = I think it is safe if used properly
 <b>1</b> = Heard of it, but don't know much about it	 <b>3</b> = I think it is always unsafe

Percentages have been rounded up

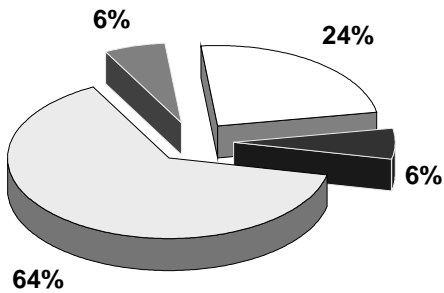
Cannabis – 45% think it is safe if used properly



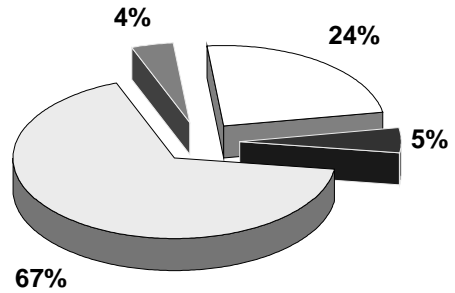
Barbiturates – 8% think it is safe if used properly



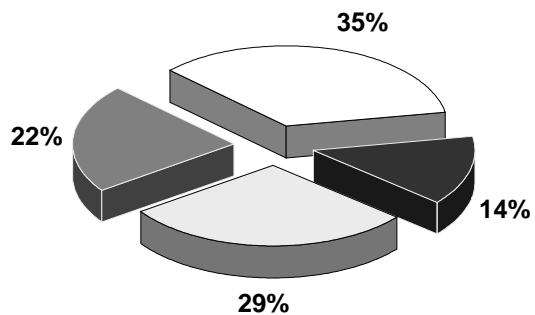
Ecstasy – 6% think it is safe if used properly



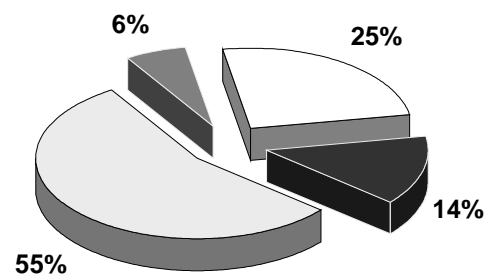
Heroin – 5% think it is safe if used properly



Poppers – 14% think it is safe if used properly



Solvents – 14% think it is safe if used properly



# What do you know about cannabis, barbiturates, ecstasy, heroin, poppers and solvents... 2004

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## Observations

- The charts on the facing page relate to all the responses from 14-15 year olds (Year 10) in 2004 in relation to the featured drugs
- The charts show that 45% think that cannabis is safe is used properly. By comparison, the percentages for the other drugs range from 5%-14%
- The table below shows the largest percentage for each answer option: The largest percentages for each option are: 45% think that cannabis is 'safe is used properly'; 38% 'have never heard' of barbiturates; up to 67% think that heroin and ecstasy are 'always unsafe'; up to 36% have heard of poppers and barbiturates 'but don't know much about them'

Cannabis	largest %	safe if used properly (only drug for which this is true)
Barbiturates	largest %	never heard of it
Heroin/Ecstasy	largest %	always unsafe
Poppers/ Barbiturates	largest %	heard but don't know much about it

- In 2004 it is not easy to say if young people have changed their perceptions of safety of these different drugs, but we are very confident that the response of year 10 pupils are now more sanguine than in previous years
- We commented in 'Young People in 2004' that there is around a 10% difference between the Year 8s (up to 38%) and the Year 10s response (up to 28%) to the dangers of cannabis
- In previous years we have consistently noted that as pupils get older fewer think that cannabis, compared to the other listed drugs in the questionnaire, is always unsafe

## Commentary

- In the 'Young People in 2004' book we report the figures from those pupils that respond, 'I think it is always unsafe', to the question 'What do you know about these drugs'.
- We can say that although the answer options changed, the ratio of response to 'always unsafe' remains consistent and the young people's responses to the relative safety of drugs has not changed with heroin, ecstasy, cocaine and crack being thought most risky

# Ratio of believe that amphetamines, barbiturates, ecstasy and cannabis are always unsafe/safe... 1991-2004



The question in HRBQ version 22 (2002-2005)

**34 What do you KNOW about these drugs?**

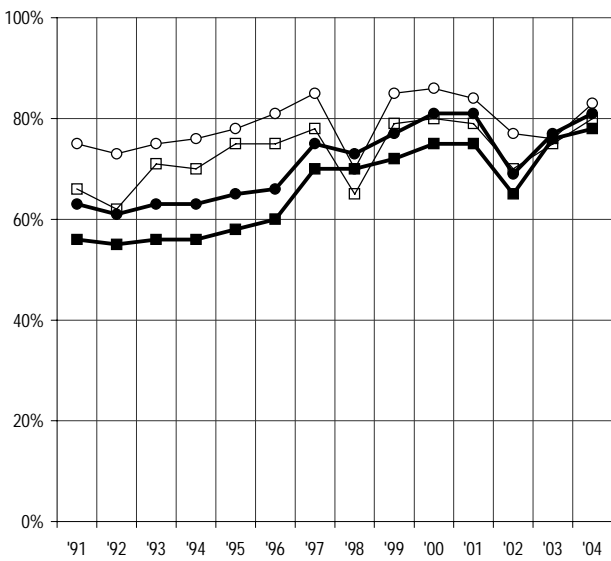
0 = I have never heard of the drug

2 = I think it is safe if used properly

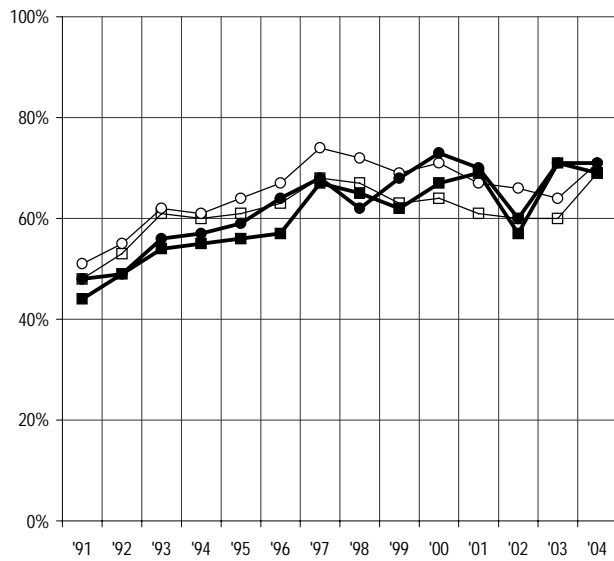
1 = Heard of it, but don't know much about it

3 = I think it is always unsafe

Amphetamines

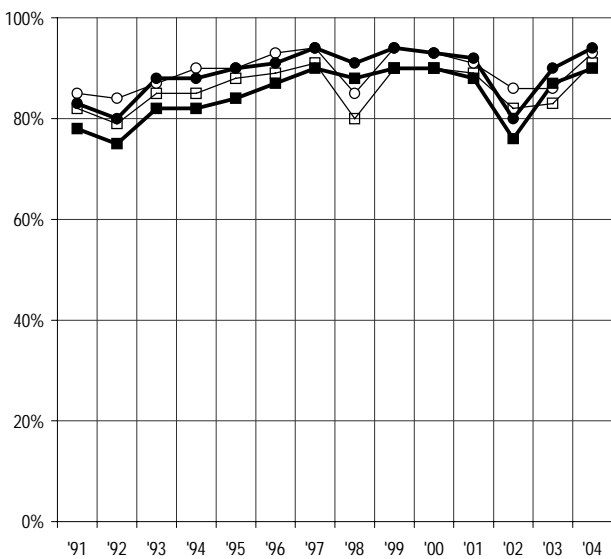


Barbiturates

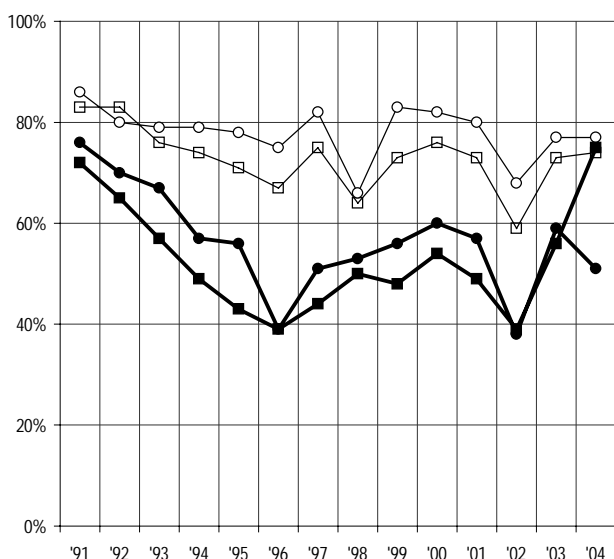


□ 12-13yr M    ○ 12-13yr F  
 ■ 14-15yr M    ● 14-15yr F

Ecstasy



Cannabis



# Ratio of believe that amphetamines, barbiturates, ecstasy and cannabis are always unsafe/safe... 1991-2004

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## Observations

- When we look at the ratio for amphetamines of those choosing 'always unsafe' over those choosing 'safe if used properly':
  - the fraction of young people those thinking amphetamines are always unsafe has increased relative to those thinking they are 'safe if used properly', particularly among younger pupils
- We can also see a convergence between the different age/sex groups, so that the points cluster together in later years
- Cannabis holds a unique position in the list of drugs for all sorts of reasons, and this is another example. Uniquely, Year 8 pupils are much more convinced about the dangers of cannabis than are the Year 10 pupils; perception about the dangers of cannabis seem to have declined overall since 1991
- Perceived dangers of barbiturates and ecstasy have increased relative to those who judge them 'safe if used properly'

## Commentary

- All this is a testament to the efficacy of drug education, which has both informed young people about different drugs, led to a greater awareness of the dangers of drugs, and reached down into younger age groups
- Ironically, over the last 15 years science has been able to show much more evidence about the dangers of cannabis and there are now more potent varieties available

## **‘Young People and Illegal Drugs into 2000’ – notes on cannabis**

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- *Safety of drugs in 1999*: Asked how safe or unsafe they thought illegal drugs were, 50% of 12-13s and 35% of 14-15s thought cannabis was always unsafe. This compares with respective values of 60% and 70% for cocaine, 62% and 78% for ecstasy, and 50% and 68% for solvents.
- *Regular use of drugs in 1999*: About 8% of the 14-15s said that at some point in their lives they had used cannabis regularly. Of the other drugs, only amphetamines and solvents had been used regularly by 1% or more of the sample.
- *Obtaining drugs in 1999*: We asked the young people if they knew where to obtain different illegal drugs. Of the 12-13s, 18% knew where to obtain at least one of them. For the 14-15s, 39% knew where to obtain one of them, and 25% knew of a source of cannabis.
- *Offers of drugs in 1999*: When asked if they had ever been offered an illegal drug, 16% of the 12-13s and 44% of the 14-15s said they had. The figures for offers of cannabis were: 12-13 year olds Males 12% Females 9% 14-15 year olds Males 37% Females 35%
- *Offers of cannabis in 1999*: What happened the first time these young people were offered cannabis? Of the 12-13s, 14% of the males and 13% of the females accepted. Of the 14-15s, 29% of the males and 28% of the females accepted. For the 14-15s, the strongest reason for accepting was curiosity, and the strongest reason for refusing was fear of getting into trouble with their parents.
- *Legalising cannabis in 1999*: If cannabis were made legal, 12% of the 14-15 males and 7% of the females said that they would use it more often. However, most of these young people also said that they currently use cannabis anyway. Only 3% of the non-users say that they would start using cannabis if it were made legal.

'Young People into 2006' – extract from page 72

# Beliefs about drugs

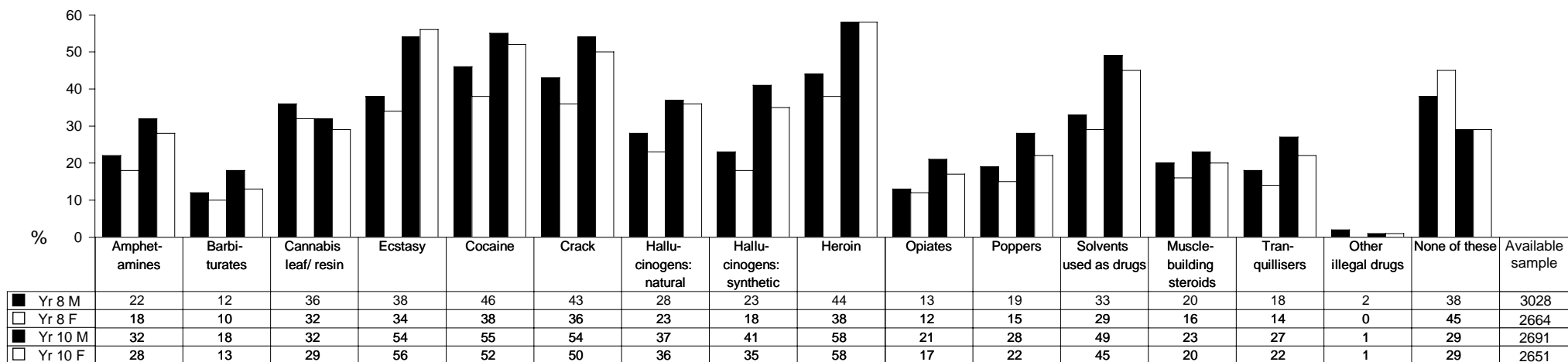
As pupils get older fewer think that cannabis is *always unsafe*

## What do you know about these drugs? Response to 'Always unsafe'

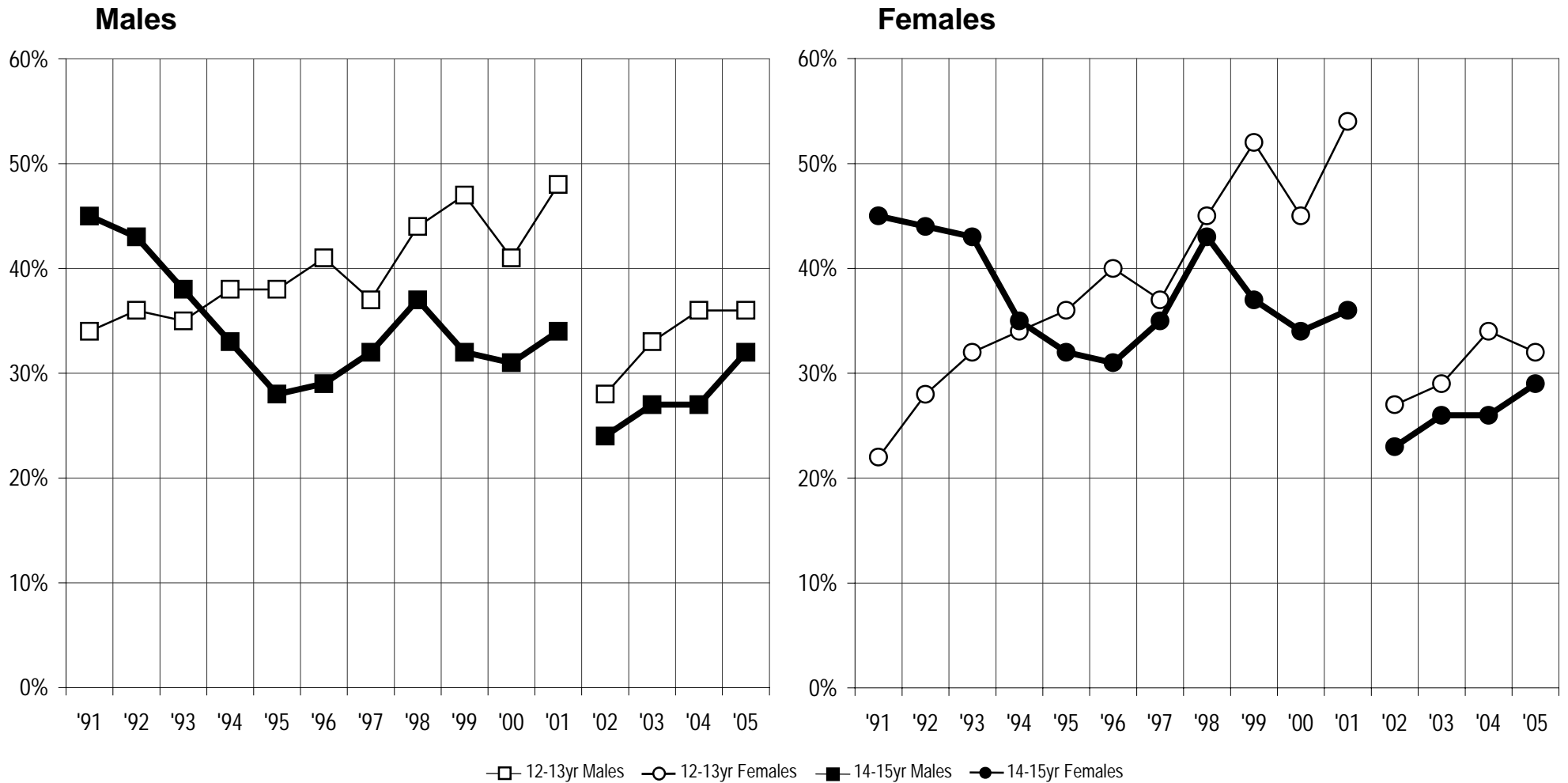
1. There is around a 4% difference between the Year 8s and the Year 10s response to the dangers of cannabis, and, uniquely, it does decline with age. Up to 38% think that cannabis is *always unsafe*.
2. More older females than males think that ecstasy is *always unsafe*.
3. Up to 58% think heroin is *always unsafe*.

## Comments

1. The format of this question has changed in recent years from that used in the past in the following response options: *Never heard of them; Know nothing about them; Safe if used properly*, and *Always unsafe*. Thus it is not easy to say if young people have changed their perceptions of safety of these different drugs, but we are very confident that the response of year 10 pupils are now more complacent than in previous years.
2. We report responses to *Always unsafe* and can say that the relative safety of drugs has not changed with heroin, ecstasy, cocaine and crack being thought most risky.



# Belief that cannabis leaf/resin is 'always unsafe' – new for this report



Before 2002 there were 3 response options to the question.  
 From 2002 there were 4 response options.  
 This has affected the percentage response but not the overall trends.