Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2007

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A survey carried out for the NHS Information Centre by the National Centre for Social Research and the National Foundation for Educational Research
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This survey is the latest in a series designed to monitor smoking, drinking and drug use among secondary school pupils aged 11 to 15. Information was obtained from 7,831 pupils in 273 schools throughout England in the autumn term of 2007.

Drug use

The prevalence of drug use has declined overall since 2001. For example, in 2007, 25% of pupils said they had tried drugs at least once, down from 29% in 2001. There were corresponding falls over the same period in the proportions of pupils who said they had taken drugs in the last year and the last month. The decline in the prevalence of drug use reflects a fall in the proportions of pupils who have ever been offered drugs over a similar period, from 42% to 36%.

In 2007, 17% of pupils said they had taken drugs in the last year and 10% in the last month. The prevalence of drug use is similar among boys and girls, and increases with age. 6% of 11 year olds had taken drugs in the last year, and 3% in the last month; at the age of 15, 31% of pupils had taken drugs in the last year and 17% in the last month. There are slight differences between ethnic groups. Pupils of mixed and Asian ethnicity are more likely than white pupils to have taken drugs in the last month, though this difference is not seen for drug use in the last year.

As in previous years, pupils are more likely to take cannabis than any other drug; in 2007, 9% of pupils reported taking cannabis within the last year, a proportion which has fallen from 13% in 2001. Sniffing glue, gas, aerosols or solvents is the next most common form of drug use (6% of pupils in the last year), followed by sniffing poppers (5%). The use of other drugs by this age group is rare. Overall, 4% of pupils report having taken one of the eight Class A drugs asked about, though no single Class A drug had been taken by more than 2% of pupils in the last year. Two fifths of pupils (39%) who took drugs in the last year took more than one type of drug.

Most pupils who take drugs do not do so often. A third (34%) of pupils who had taken drugs in the last year said they usually take drugs once a month or more, only 5% of pupils overall. Among those who had taken drugs in the last year, 28% said they had only ever taken drugs once, and a further 31% had taken drugs on five or fewer occasions.

The pattern of drug use varies according to what type of drugs pupils have taken. For example, pupils who have sniffed glue, gas, aerosols or solvents tend to be younger than pupils who have taken other drugs, and there is evidence that much volatile substance use is experimental. Pupils’ first drug use is more likely to be sniffing volatile substances than any other type of drug. Pupils who have taken volatile substances only are more likely than other drug users to say they have only tried drugs once and are less likely to report frequent drug use. A significant minority of pupils whose first drug use was sniffing volatile substances found them at school or home, and most did not feel noticeably different after trying them. This is unlike the experience of those who tried other drugs first; they were more likely to have got the drugs from friends and to have felt some effects – good or bad – as a result of their use.
In contrast, Class A drug use is more common among older pupils. The majority of those who report taking any Class A drugs – for example, cocaine, magic mushrooms, ecstasy or crack – say they take drugs at least once a month, and relatively few have taken drugs only once. Pupils who take Class A drugs are more likely than other drug users to report that they felt good as a result of taking drugs, and are less likely than others to say that they would like to stop taking drugs. At the same time, Class A drug users are much more likely than other drug users to have felt that they needed treatment for their drug use.

As can be expected, there are some differences between pupils’ first experience of drug use and subsequent drug taking. Pupils are more likely to try sniffing volatile substances than other drugs; 44% reported trying volatile substances only at the age they first tried drugs, compared with 25% who had taken cannabis only. Nearly three quarters (72%) of pupils get their first drugs from friends. The most common reason for trying drugs is ‘to see what it was like’ (55%); relatively few pupils try drugs to get high or feel good (18%) or because their friends are taking drugs (17%). The first experience of drug taking is equally likely to leave the pupil feeling good (43%) or no different (44%). Pupils who remember their first experience of drug taking as good are most likely to go on to take drugs again.

Pupils who had taken drugs more than once were most likely to have taken cannabis only on the most recent occasion; 45%, compared with 21% who said they had sniffed glue, gas, aerosols or solvents only and 18% who had taken a Class A drug. Again, these drugs are most likely to have come from friends (74%). The reasons why these pupils are taking drugs are likely to have changed somewhat from the reasons for trying them. 43% of pupils said they took drugs most recently to get high or feel good. Though a significant minority (29%) still take drugs to see what it is like, or because their friends are doing it (17%), an increased proportion (21%) give ‘I had nothing better to do’ as their reason for taking drugs on the most recent occasion. Pupils who have taken drugs more than once are more likely than not to report a good experience on the most recent occasion (63%).

Pupils tend to feel that drug use is not acceptable behaviour within their age group. A minority think that it is OK for someone of their age to try cannabis once (10%), to try sniffing glue (9%) or to try cocaine (3%). They are even less likely to be sympathetic to regular drug use; 6% think it is OK for someone of their age to take cannabis once a week, 4% to sniff glue once a week and 2% to take cocaine once a week. Attitudes change with age, in line with the prevalence of drug use; for example, 13% of 15 year olds think that it is OK for someone of their age to take cannabis once a week, compared with 1% of 11 year olds. Pupils also tend to feel that their parents would (or do) disapprove strongly of drug taking. Most (86%) think their families would try to stop them taking drugs, with smaller proportions thinking their families would try to persuade them to stop (13%), would do nothing (1%) or would encourage them (less than 1%).

Drug taking is associated with other hazardous behaviours; the odds of having taken drugs in the last year and in the last month increase with the frequency of smoking and the amount of alcohol drunk in the last week. Pupils who have been excluded from school or who have played truant also have a greater likelihood of having taken drugs. The approach pupils’ families take is also associated with whether or not they have taken drugs. The more lenient pupils perceive their families to be about drug taking, the greater the odds are that they will have taken drugs within the last year and within the last month.

The report also includes information findings on pupils’ awareness of individual drugs, drug use among vulnerable pupils, whether and why pupils refuse drugs, beliefs about drug use among their peers, and teaching and other school policies concerning drug use.

**Smoking**

There has been a long-term decline in the proportion of pupils who have tried smoking, from 53% in 1982 to 33% in 2007.

In 2007, 6% of pupils said they smoked regularly (at least once a week). This is down from 9% in 2006, and at the lowest level ever measured by this survey. Girls (8%) are more likely
than boys (5%) to be regular smokers. The proportion of regular smokers increases with age, from 1% of 11 year olds to 15% of 15 year olds. Pupils from most minority ethnic groups are less likely than white pupils to smoke regularly.

Regular smokers in this age group smoke an average of 44.1 cigarettes a week, approximately six a day.

Certain patterns of behaviour are associated with regular smoking. Pupils who have drunk alcohol recently are more likely to be regular smokers than those who have not; regular smoking is also more likely among pupils who have taken drugs compared with those who have not. Pupils who have truanted from school or have been excluded at some time in their lives are also more likely to be regular smokers than pupils who have not.

The report includes further information about pupils’ smoking in the last week.

**Drinking alcohol**

The proportion of 11 to 15 year olds who have never drunk alcohol has risen in recent years, from 39% in 2003 to 46% in 2007. More than half of pupils aged between 11 and 15 have had at least one alcoholic drink in their lifetimes. This increases with age from 20% of 11 year olds to 81% of 15 year olds.

There has been a corresponding decline in the proportion of pupils who have drunk alcohol in the last seven days. In 2007, one in five (20%) of pupils said they had drunk alcohol in the last week; this is similar for boys and girls. The proportion who have drunk in the last week increases with age from 3% of 11 year olds to 41% of 15 year olds. White pupils are more likely to have drunk alcohol recently than those from minority ethnic groups.

Since 2000, average consumption among pupils who did drink has varied from year to year with no clear pattern. In 2007, average consumption was lower than in 2006.

The method of calculating pupils’ alcohol consumption in units has been revised this year in line with other surveys. Using the revised method of calculating consumption, pupils who drank alcohol in the last week consumed an average of 12.7 units, equivalent to over six pints of normal strength beer or nearly one and a half bottles of wine. Boys tend to drink more than girls and older pupils than younger ones.

Recent drinking is associated with other risky behaviours. Smokers and pupils who have taken drugs have increased odds of having drunk alcohol within the last week. Pupils who have a history of truancy or exclusion from school are also more likely to have drunk alcohol in the last seven days.

The report includes further information about the frequency of pupils’ drinking, and types of alcohol drunk.

**Smoking, drinking and drug use**

These findings show consistent differences between the prevalence of smoking, drinking and drug use and how these behaviours are viewed; drinking alcohol is the most prevalent of the three and is also seen by pupils as most acceptable.

Pupils are more likely to have ever drunk alcohol (54%) than to have smoked (33%) or tried drugs (25%). By the age of 15, 88% of pupils will have done at least one of these things.

Less than half of pupils who have tried any of these will have done so recently; in 2007, 20% of pupils had drunk alcohol in the last week, 10% had smoked in the last week and 10% had taken drugs in the last month. Overall, 29% of pupils in this age group reported any recent smoking, drinking or drug use, including 4% who had done all three recently.

The proportions of pupils who smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs each increase with age. There are no consistent patterns of behaviour according to sex or ethnicity. If a pupil
smokes, drinks alcohol or takes drugs, he or she is more likely to do one of the other two as well. The odds of all three behaviours are increased if a pupil has truanted from school at any time or been excluded from school.

The survey sample represents an estimated population of around 3.1 million young people aged between 11 and 15 in England. In England in 2007, it was therefore likely that around 200,000 young people aged between 11 and 15 were regular smokers, around 640,000 were likely to have drunk alcohol in the past seven days, around 300,000 were likely to have taken drugs (including glue and other volatile substances) in the last month, and around 540,000 were likely to have taken drugs in the last year.

The report also includes findings about sources of helpful information about smoking, drinking and drug use, and a comparison of schools’ policies.
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