

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

Annually the government commission a survey of school pupils aged between 11 and 15 years across England to ask them about their drug use, smoking and drinking. Last year they surveyed over 7,000 young people.

This briefing paper is the Drug Education Forum's précis of the contents of the survey and report which we believe will be of use to those developing drug education policy and practice.

The full report can be downloaded from the Information Centre's website at www.ic.nhs.uk.

Drugs

The report defines drugs to include "amphetamines, anabolic steroids, cannabis, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, heroin, ketamine, LSD, magic mushrooms, methadone, poppers (e.g. amyl nitrite), tranquillisers, volatile substances such as gas, glue, aerosols and other solvents, and 'other' drugs (not obtained from a doctor or chemist)".

The number of pupils between 11 and 15 years old saying they have taken drugs has fallen.

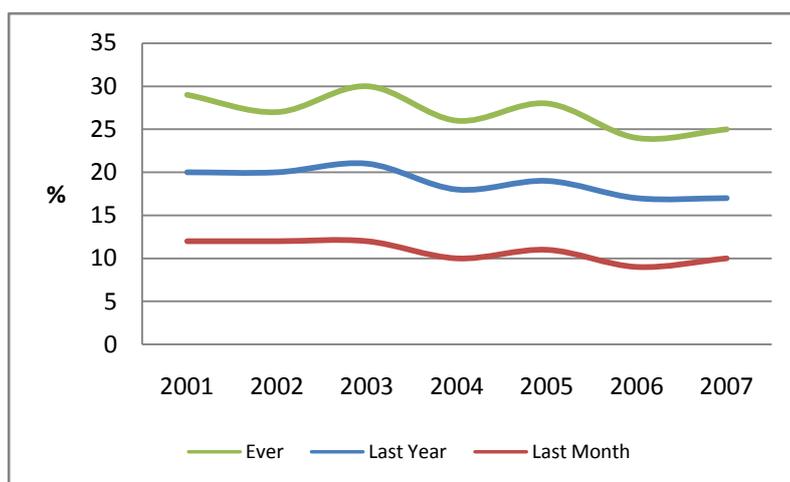


Figure 1: Prevalence of drug taking: 2001-2007

Since 2001, despite variations between years, there has been an overall decline in the proportion of pupils who had ever taken drugs from 29% to 25% in 2007. Over the same period, there have been similar decreases in the proportions of pupils who reported taking drugs in the last year (from 20% to 17%) and the last month (from 12% to 10%).

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Overall numbers

- 75% of pupils say they have never taken drugs
- 17% of pupils reported taking drugs in the last year
- 9% say they have taken cannabis in the last year
- 4% say they have taken a Class A drug in the last year

The minority of young people that take drugs were most likely to have got them from a friend of the same age, and to have taken them on the street, in a park or somewhere else outdoors.

For those who have taken drugs the majority (51%) reported volatile substance abuse as their first experience of drugs.

60% of the pupils that take drugs want to give up either now or in the future [figure 2].

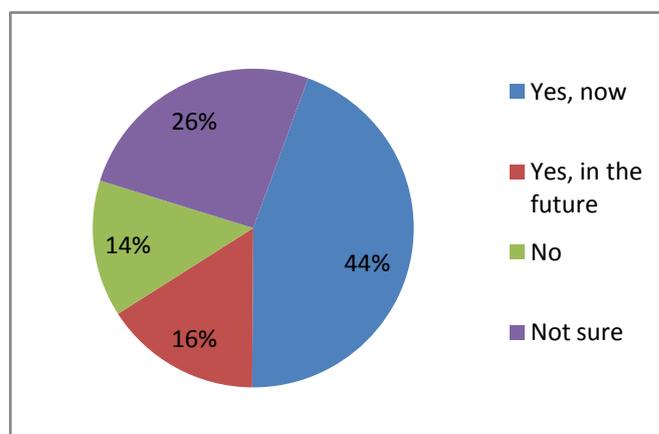


Figure 2: Whether pupils who take drugs would like to give up: 2007

Regular use

- 5% of 11 to 15 year olds say they usually take drugs at least once a month, this rises with age
- 10% of 15 year olds say they usually take drugs at least once a month
- Pupils who had truanted or been excluded from school in the past were more likely to say they usually took drugs at least once a month, and more likely to have taken a Class A drug than those who had not truanted or been excluded.

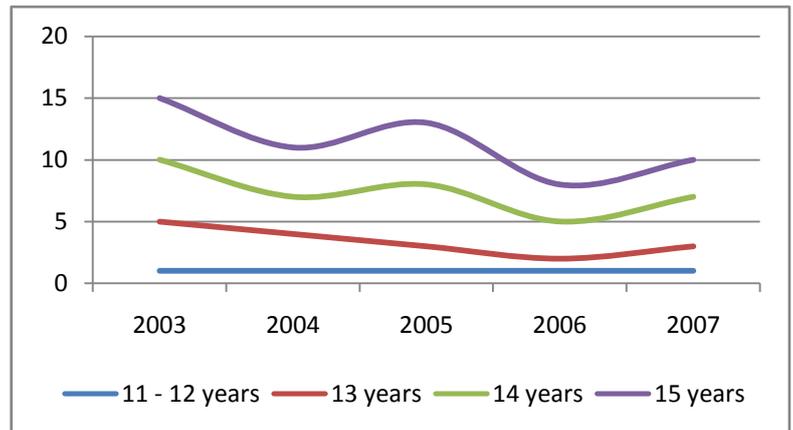


Figure 3: Proportions of pupils who have taken any drugs in the last month, by age: 2003-2007

Young People's Views

The survey found that as in previous years only a minority of pupils thought it was OK for someone of their age to take drugs.

- Almost all pupils thought their families would either try to stop them taking drugs (86%) or would try to persuade them to stop (13%).
- Three fifths of pupils recalled lessons about drugs at school in the last year, and recall of key messages was generally high (for example, 95% said they helped them to think about the risks of taking drugs and 80% said they helped them avoid drugs).

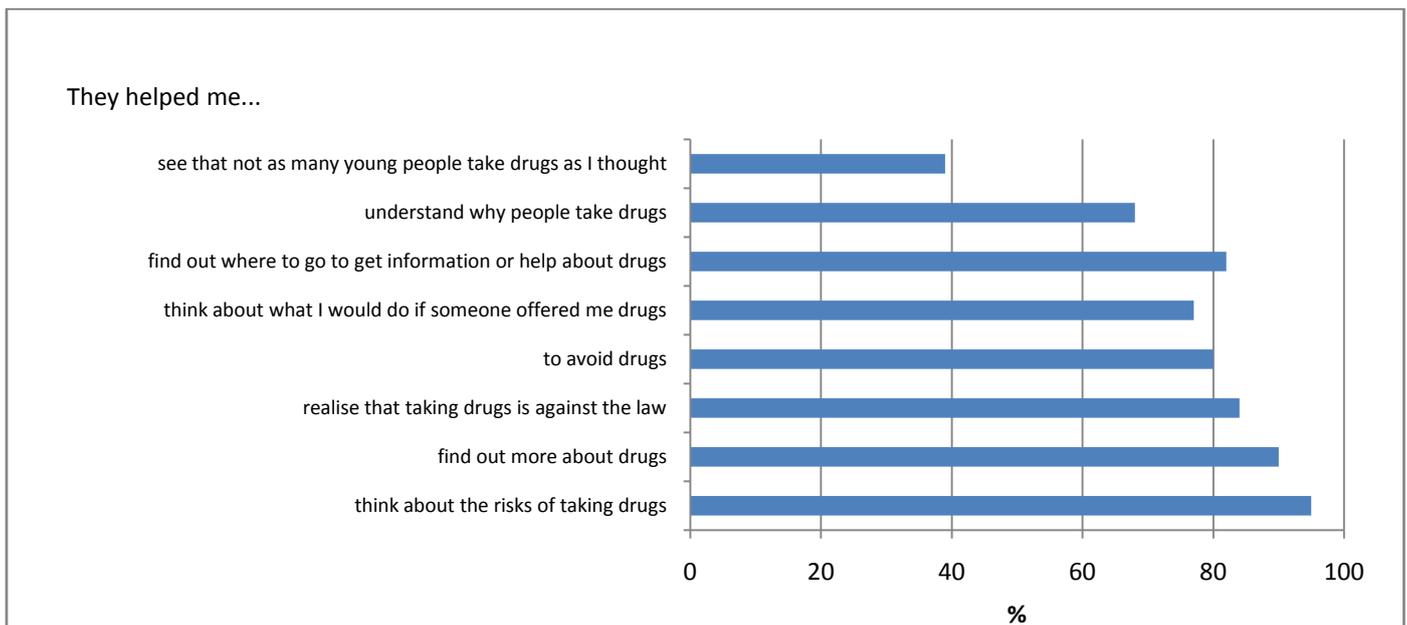


Figure 4: How lessons on drugs helped pupils

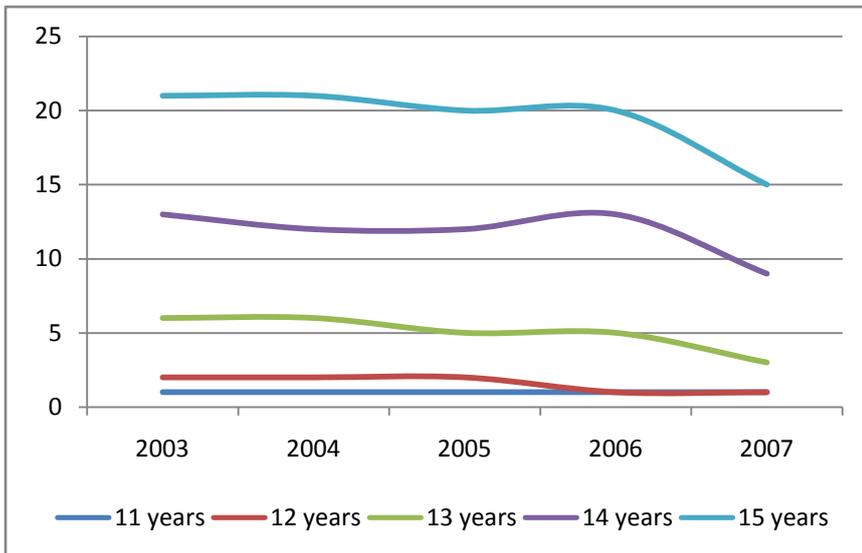
Smoking

There is a long term downward trend in the number of young people smoking in England.

In 2007, 67% of pupils said they had never tried smoking. This is higher than at any time since pupils' smoking was first measured by this survey in 1982.

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Nevertheless:



- 33% of pupils have smoked at least once
- 6% of pupils smoke at least one cigarette a week
- Girls are more likely to smoke than boys, and white pupils are more likely to smoke than Black and Minority Ethnic pupils.

There has been a sharp fall in the numbers of pupils that say they smoke regularly [figure 5]:

The decline in regular smoking was most marked among older pupils.

The proportion of 14 year olds who

smoked regularly fell from 13% in 2006 to 9% in 2007; among 15 year olds, 15% smoked regularly in 2007, compared with 20% in 2006.

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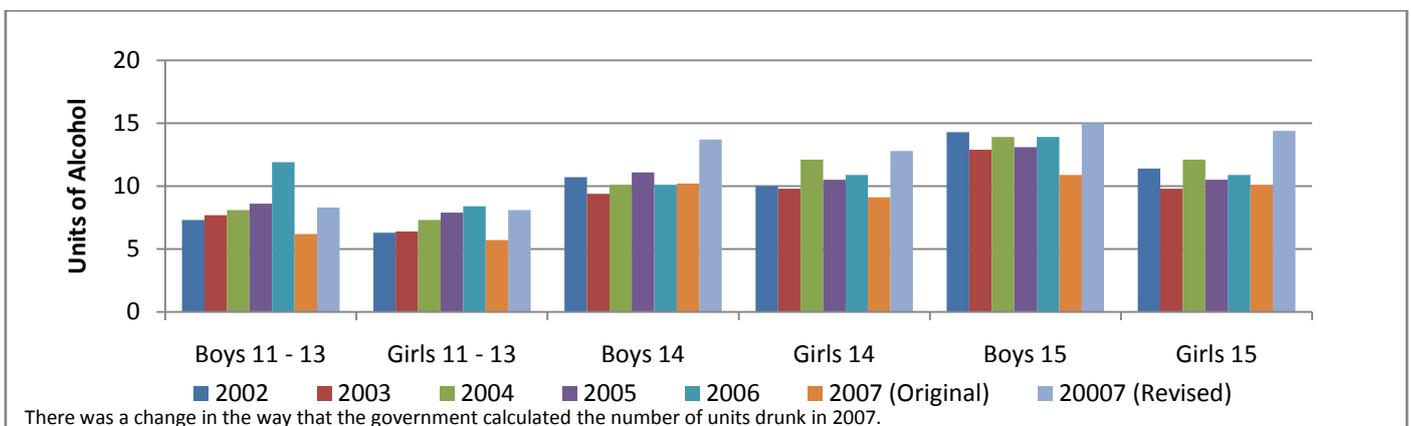
Figure 5: Proportion of pupils who were regular smokers by age: 2003 - 2007

Pupils classified as regular smokers smoked an average of 44.1 cigarettes a week, approximately six a day.

Alcohol

Overall numbers:

- The proportion of pupils who have never drunk alcohol has risen since 2003, from 39% to 46% in 2007
- Over half of 11 to 15 year old pupils had drunk at least one alcoholic drink in their lifetimes
- One in five pupils (20%) had drunk alcohol in the last seven days, a proportion which has declined from 26% in 2001
- 15% of pupils said they usually drank at least once a week, down from 20% in 2001. This figure rises with age (32% of 15 year olds compared with 2% of 11 year olds)
- Pupils who drank in the last week consumed an average of 12.7 units in 2007, equivalent to over six pints of normal strength beer or nearly one and a half bottles of wine. (Figure 5 shows the changes over the last 6 years. NB there has been a change in the way that units are calculated in 2007.)



There was a change in the way that the government calculated the number of units drunk in 2007.

Figure 6: Mean alcohol consumption in the last week by pupils who had drunk, by year, sex and age

The increasing concern amongst policy makers about the minority of young people that have serious problems with alcohol is reflected in the commentary on this survey.

Very few young people die from the direct effects of alcohol, but many more die from the indirect effects such as accidents, suicide and violence. There is evidence that, although small, the numbers of children admitted to hospital with diagnoses of conditions primarily caused by alcohol consumption, are increasing significantly.

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The report also recognises that a number of experts express the view that there is no such thing as safe use of alcohol amongst this age group.

Issues about accuracy are also addressed by the authors who say:

Measuring drinking among 11 to 15 year olds presents similar but not identical challenges to surveys of adults. First, pupils' recall of their drinking may be inaccurate; this is a generally acknowledged problem for all surveys measuring alcohol consumption. Second, most children's drinking is in informal settings, and the quantities they drink are not necessarily standard measures. Finally, the survey method limits the amount of detail that can be recorded about the alcoholic strength and quantities drunk, so that, to convert actual drinks into units of alcohol consumed, it is necessary to make consistent assumptions about the strength and size of each type of drink.

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Smoking, drinking and drug use

The report examines the “prevalence of each, and exploring overlaps between them”. It also explores pupils' attitudes, the sources of information they find helpful, and schools policies on teaching and responding to smoking, drinking alcohol and drug use.

- Pupils between the ages of 11 and 15 were more likely to have drunk alcohol at least once (54%) than to have smoked (33%) or tried drugs (25%). Less than half of those who had ever smoked, drunk alcohol or taken drugs had done so recently.
- Television, parents and teachers were most likely to be seen as helpful sources of information on smoking, drinking and drug use. Pupils were least likely to have gained helpful information from helplines.

While regular smoking, drinking and drug use remain a minority activity, across a whole population this can mean several hundreds of thousands of pupils.

It is important to note that these are not separate groups of young people.

Pupils who reported that they had recently smoked, drunk alcohol or taken drugs were most likely to have done one of these only; 17% of pupils had done one, but only one, of these things. Drinking alcohol, but not smoking or taking drugs, was most common (12%). 6% had done two of these things recently and 4% had done all three.

The likelihood of pupils having combined recent smoking, drinking or drug use increased with age. Older pupils were more likely than younger pupils to have recently done all three, but even among 15 year olds this was reported by a minority (8%).

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The report makes a clear link between these behaviours and exclusion or truancy.

Pupils who had truanted from school had odds of smoking, drinking and drug use that were between two and three times the odds for pupils who had never truanted. Similarly, pupils who had ever been

excluded from school had increased odds of regular smoking (odds ratio=3.77), drinking alcohol in the last seven days (odds ratio=1.31) and taking drugs in the last month (odds ratio=1.68).

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Young People's Views

Young people have a relatively accurate view of their peers' drug use, this isn't the case with smoking (where 44% estimated that half or more smoke) or drinking (64% of pupils thought that about half or more people their age drank alcohol).

In their responses, to where they get helpful information on drugs, alcohol and tobacco young people's top three were television, their parents and teachers; the least helpful were helplines, radio and FRANK.

Girls found newspapers and magazines to be considerably more helpful than boys did, which is perhaps an indication of a gender segmented print media. There was a similar gender difference in the views on friends, with more girls thinking they found their friends helpful than boys.

Looking at the information by age [Figure 6] some sources appear to become more helpful as the pupils grow older – friends, FRANK, the internet, siblings and TV in particular. Amongst adults teachers also are seen as more helpful as pupils grow up, as do other adults in a school setting. However, both the police and GPs are seen as less helpful by older pupils than younger ones.

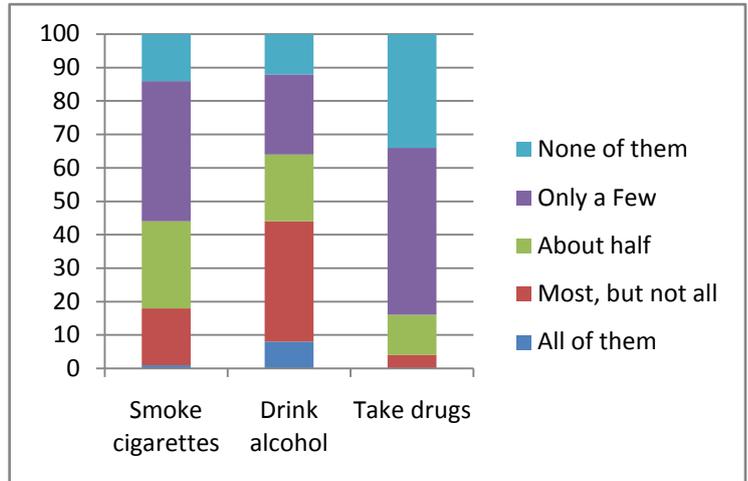


Figure 7: Perceived number of people of pupil's age who smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs

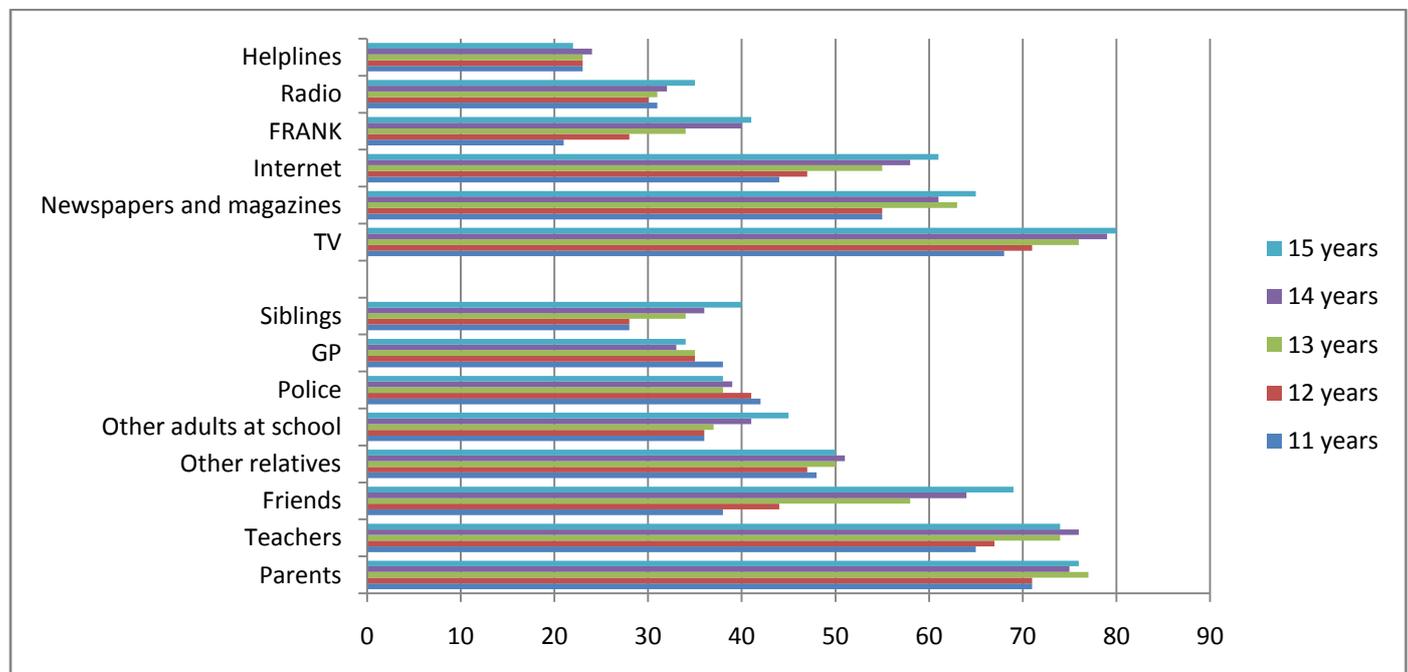


Figure 8: Sources of helpful information about smoking, alcohol and drugs, by age

School polices

Increasingly schools appear to be involving pupils and parents in their policies on drugs.

All schools said that they taught pupils about drugs, alcohol and tobacco and nearly all (96%) had a policy on teaching children about these. Most schools had updated their teaching policy either in the last year (40%) or one to two years ago (39%). The Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) co-ordinator contributed to the policy in almost all schools (99% of those with a policy). Other teachers (90%), school drug advisors or the local authority (88%), head teachers (86%) and governors (85%) were also likely to have contributed. Schools are encouraged to develop and review their policies in accordance with the 'Whole School' approach, involving not only staff, but pupils, parents, governors and the wider community. 57% of schools invited pupils to contribute to policies, while parents contributed in 42% of schools.

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Information from other sources

There have been a number of other recent reports which add to our understanding of young people's views and use of drugs.

- Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study: [Inequalities in Young People's Health](#), the World Health Organisation (read our précis [here](#)).
- [Trends in Deaths Associated with Abuse of Volatile Substances 1971 - 2006](#), St George's University of London.
- [Young People and Drugs among 15 to 24 year olds](#), Flash Eurobarometer, European Commission (read our précis [here](#)).

The Drug Education Forum is the umbrella body for national organisations committed to improving the effectiveness and profile of drug education in England.

Members: Adfam, Alcohol Concern, Association of Chief Police Officers, Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Care for the Family, Children in Crisis, The Children's Society, Clubs for Young People, Children's Safety Education Foundation, the DrinkAware Trust, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, Drug Education Practitioners Forum, Drugline, DrugScope, Hope UK, Life Education Centres, Local Government Association, Mentor UK, NASUWT, National Association of Youth and Community Education Officers, National Children's Bureau, National Health Education Group, NSCoPSE- the National PSE Association, NSPCC, National Union of Teachers, National Youth Agency, PSHE Subject Association, Re-solv, the RCN school nurses forum, Secondary Heads Association, Tacade, and Voice - the union for education professionals.