



NHS

The
Information
Centre

for health and social care

Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2008

Edited by Elizabeth Fuller

A survey carried out for the NHS Information Centre
by the National Centre for Social Research
and the National Foundation for Educational Research

Summary

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 7,798 pupils in 264 schools throughout England in the autumn term of 2008.

Smoking (Part 2)

A third (32%) of pupils have tried smoking at least once. This proportion has declined since 1982, when more than half of pupils (53%) had tried smoking.

In 2008, 6% of pupils smoked regularly (at least once a week), as in 2007. The prevalence of regular smoking in this age group has halved since its peak in the mid 1990s – 13% in 1996 – suggesting a sustained decline to levels well below the government’s target, set in the 1998 White Paper, *Smoking Kills*, to reduce the prevalence of regular smoking among 11 to 15 year olds to 9% by 2010. Girls are more likely to smoke regularly than boys. The prevalence of smoking increases with age; around one in seven (14%) of 15 year olds say they smoke at least once a week, compared with less than 0.5% of 11 year olds.

This is the first survey in the series to measure the impact of the increase of the minimum legal age for buying tobacco from 16 to 18, implemented in October 2007 as part of the Health Act 2006. In 2008, approximately a year later, 39% of pupils who smoked said they found it difficult to buy cigarettes from shops, an increase of 15 percentage points from 24% in 2006. (This information was not collected in 2007.) There has also been a large drop in the proportion of regular smokers who usually buy their cigarettes from shops, from 78% in 2006 to 55% in 2008. However, regular smokers are more likely to buy cigarettes from other people than ever before (52% in 2008, compared with the previous peak of 42% in 2004).

Pupils’ smoking habits are often influenced by their families. Those who live with other smokers are more than twice as likely to smoke regularly, compared with those living in non-smoking households. The proportion of pupils who smoke regularly also increases with the number of other smokers at home. A fifth (21%) of pupils who live with three or more other smokers are regular smokers themselves, compared with 3% of pupils who live in a non-smoking household. Pupils who live with other smokers are also more likely than pupils who live in non-smoking households to say that their families would take a lenient view of their smoking.

Regular smokers are likely to show signs of dependence on the habit. More than two thirds (69%) reported that they would find it difficult not to smoke for a week, while three quarters (76%) would find it difficult to give up smoking altogether. Almost two thirds (64%) of regular smokers have tried to give up smoking.

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 take drugs compared with those who do not. Pupils who have truanted from school or been excluded at some time in their lives are also more likely to be regular smokers than pupils who have not.

The report also includes findings on patterns of cigarette consumption, beliefs and attitudes, sources of information and school policies concerning adults and children smoking at school.

Drinking alcohol (Part 3)

More than half (52%) of pupils aged between 11 and 15 have had at least one alcoholic drink in their lifetimes. This increases with age from 16% of 11 year olds to 81% of 15 year olds. The proportion of pupils who have never drunk alcohol has risen in recent years, from 39% in 2003 to 48% in 2008.

The proportion of pupils who drank alcohol in the last week has fallen from a peak of 26% in 2001 to 18% in 2008. Similar proportions of boys and girls drank alcohol in the last seven days, and older pupils are more likely to have done so than younger pupils (from 3% of 11 year olds to 38% of 15 year olds). White pupils are more likely to have drunk alcohol recently than Black or Asian pupils.

In 2008, the mean amount of alcohol consumed by pupils who had drunk in the last week was 14.6 units. Boys drink more than girls, and older pupils more than younger ones. (The method used to calculate alcohol consumption changed in 2007 and it is not possible to compare 2008 consumption directly with that measured in 2006 and earlier.)

Most pupils who drank in the last week had done so on one or two days. On the days they did drink, three fifths (60%) drank an average of more than four units.

Pupils are more likely to be given alcohol than to buy it, most commonly by family or friends. However, about half of pupils who ever drink also say they buy alcohol, despite being well below the age when they can legally do so (18 years old). In 2008, pupils who drank were most likely to buy alcohol from friends or relatives (24%) or off-licences (15%). Since the late 1990s, there has been an increase in the proportion who buy alcohol from other people and a fall in the proportion who buy from off-licences. The proportion of pupils who drink who buy alcohol in pubs and bars has also decreased; otherwise there has been little change in where pupils buy alcohol.

Among pupils who drink alcohol, the proportion who drink in pubs or bars has fallen since the late 1990s from 13% in 1996 to 7% in 2008. There has been an increase over the same period in the proportion of pupils who drink who usually do so at home or someone else's home (from 52% to 64%), at parties with friends (from 23% to 33%) or out of doors (from 21% in 1999 to 27% in 2008).

There are differences between the settings in which younger and older pupils are likely to drink. Eleven year olds who drink alcohol are most likely to drink with their parents (64%) or other family members (16%), and are most likely to drink at home (61%). By the age of 15, pupils are most likely to drink with friends of both sexes (69% of 15 year old drinkers). They are less likely than younger pupils to drink at home (37%) and more likely to drink in other locations; 45% drink at parties with friends, 38% in someone else's home, and 34% outside (on the street, in a park or somewhere else).

For the first time, the survey explored the relationship between pupils' home context and whether they drink alcohol. Pupils are more likely to drink if they live with other people who do; for example, the proportion of pupils who have drunk alcohol in the last week increases from 5% of those who live in non-drinking households to 31% of those who live with three or more people who drank alcohol.

Pupils are also more likely to drink alcohol if they believe that their parents are tolerant of their drinking. Around half of all pupils (53%) say their families don't mind them drinking, as long as they don't drink too much. 46% of pupils say their families don't like them drinking. 5% of those who say their parents would disapprove drank alcohol in the last week, compared with 28% of those who think their parents don't mind them drinking within limits and 59% of those who say their families let them drink as much as they like. 80% of pupils who say their parents would disapprove have never drunk alcohol.

Pupils who drink alcohol are likely to get drunk, at least sometimes. 17% of 11 to 15 year olds said they had been drunk in the last four weeks. Not only are older pupils more likely than younger ones to drink, if they do they are more likely to get drunk; more than half (63%) of 15 year olds who drank alcohol in the last four weeks were drunk at least once. Some

pupils actively try to get drunk; among those who had drunk alcohol in the last four weeks, a third (33%) had deliberately tried to get drunk.

Pupils are becoming less tolerant of drinking and drunkenness among their peers. For example, in 2008, 36% agreed that it was OK for someone of their age to drink alcohol once a week, compared with 46% in 2003. Over the same period, the proportion who thought it OK for someone of their age to get drunk once a week also fell, from 20% to 12%.

The patterns of behaviour associated with having recently drunk alcohol (in the last seven days) are not unlike those related to regular smoking. Regular smokers and recent drug users have an increased likelihood of having drunk alcohol in the last week. Recent drinking is also associated with experience of truancy or exclusion from school.

The report also includes findings on pupils' patterns of drinking, attitudes and beliefs, sources of information and school policies concerning alcohol.

Drug use (Part 4)

The prevalence of drug use has declined since 2001. In 2008, 22% of pupils said they had ever used drugs, 15% had taken any drugs in the last year and 8% had taken drugs in the last month. In 2001, the corresponding proportions were 29%, 20% and 12%. Pupils were most likely to have taken cannabis (9.0% in the last year, down from 13.4% in 2001). 5.0% of pupils had sniffed glue, gas or other volatile substances in the last year and 2.9% had sniffed poppers. Other drugs asked about had been taken by less than 2% of pupils in the last year. Overall, 3.6% of pupils had taken any Class A drugs in the last year; this has remained at a similar level since 2001.

The proportion of pupils who have taken drugs increases with age. As in previous years, boys and girls are equally likely to have taken drugs in the last year, but boys are more likely than girls to have taken drugs in the last month.

In 2008, 33% of pupils reported that they had ever been offered drugs, a decrease from 42% in 2001.

Recent drug use is associated with regular smoking and recent drinking. Pupils who have been excluded also have an increased likelihood of recent drug use compared with pupils who have not, and drug use is also higher among pupils who have truanted from school compared with those who had not.

The report also presents findings about pupils' awareness of individual drugs, patterns of use, drug use among vulnerable pupils, attitudes and beliefs, sources of information and school policies on drug use.

Smoking, drinking and drug use (Part 5)

Pupils aged 11 to 15 are more likely to have ever drunk alcohol (52%), than to have smoked (32%) or tried drugs (22%). By the age of 15, 86% of pupils will have done at least one of these.

Around a third of pupils who have ever smoked or drunk alcohol or taken drugs will have done so recently; 18% of pupils have drunk alcohol in the last week, 9% have smoked in the last week and 8% have taken drugs in the last month.

The survey sample represents an estimated population of around 3.1 million young people aged between 11 and 15 in England. It is estimated that in 2008 around 190,000 young people in this age group were regular smokers, around 550,000 had drunk alcohol in the last week, around 250,000 had taken drugs (including glue, gas and other volatile substances) in the last month and around 460,000 had taken drugs in the last year.

Several factors are consistently associated with smoking, drinking and drug use. Whether

pupils smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs is related to whether they have done one of the other two. Smoking, drinking and drug use are also all associated with increased age, truancy and exclusion from school.

Less than half (46%) of pupils report that their families disapprove of their drinking alcohol. In contrast, 98% of pupils who expressed a view say their parents would disapprove if they smoked.

11 to 15 year olds are also more likely to think that smoking is less acceptable than drinking for someone of their own age. 57% think drinking alcohol is OK to try once and 36% think it is OK to drink alcohol once a week. In comparison, 34% think it OK for someone of their age to try smoking once, and 14% think it is OK to smoke once a week. Getting drunk or taking drugs are seen as still less acceptable.

The report also presents findings about sources of helpful information and schools' policies in relevant areas.

About the National Centre for Social Research

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) is an independent institute specialising in social survey and qualitative research for the development of public policy. Research is in areas such as health, housing, employment, crime, education and political and social attitudes. Projects include ad hoc, continuous and longitudinal surveys, using face to face, telephone and postal methods; many use advanced applications of computer assisted interviewing.



About the National Foundation for Educational Research

The National Foundation for Educational Research has been engaged in educational research since 1946 and is an independent foundation with charitable status. The Foundation undertakes research and evaluation for local and national agencies, in the government, commercial and charitable sectors. The research programme is concerned with all aspects of education and training, a major part being concerned with the public education system.



for health and social care