

Chapter One

Setting the Scene

One of the main reasons we as a society tend to panic about drugs is our collective fear of the unknown. The best horror filmmakers know the monster that's never revealed is far scarier than the one even the most sizzling Spielberg special effects can produce. And because many people still have little or no knowledge of illicit drugs and their effects, these have grown hideous in the public's imagination.

Up to the late 1980s, very little UK-wide statistical data had been gathered on drugs compared to information available on the use and effects of alcohol and tobacco. However, the situation has been steadily improving and a number of large-scale lifestyle surveys of young people have been established. The most recent of these – together with the latest available British Crime Survey and Scottish Crime Survey figures, which provide an insight into illicit drug use among 16 to 59-year-olds in England, Wales and Scotland respectively – can provide a broad picture of reported drug use today.

Over-16s

The most significant finding revealed by the latest Crime Surveys is that drug use generally has steadily decreased since the mid-1990s.

According to the British Crime Survey (England & Wales) 2007/2008:

- 9.3% of 16-59-year-olds said they had used an illicit drug within the last year; the percentage was 11.2% in 1996.

Of those in the 16-24 age range:

- Use of any illicit drug in the last year fell from 29.7% in 1996 to 21.3% in 2007/08 (attributed to a gradual decline in cannabis use).

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- Frequent use of any drug (defined as using any illicit drug more than once a month in the last year) decreased from 11.6% in 2002/03 to 7.3% in 2007/08.
- Cannabis remains the drug most likely to be used by young people: 17.9% used cannabis in the last year.
- 6.8% said they had used a Class A drug (see chapter 7) in the last year. This reflects a general decrease since 1996. Over the same period there were increases in cocaine use and decreases in the use of ecstasy and hallucinogens.

The Scottish Crime and Victimization Survey (2006) reported:

- Although levels of lifetime drug use in Scotland were broadly similar to those reported in England and Wales in 2005/06 by the British Crime Survey, levels of current drug use were higher in Scotland compared with England and Wales.
- 13% of 16-59-year-olds reported taking one or more illicit drugs in the year preceding the survey.
- 31.0% of 16-24-year-olds had taken any illicit drugs in the past year.
- Current drug use in both the last year and the last month was highest among 16-19-year-olds and declined steadily with age.
- Cannabis was by far the most commonly used drug. 11% of all respondents had used cannabis in the last year. Cocaine and ecstasy were the second most commonly used drugs, having been taken by 4% and 3% of all respondents in the last year. Only 0.5% had used heroin in the last year and 0.4% had used crack cocaine.

Under-16s

But what about the reported drug use of young people under 16? Research has shown that during the period 1987-1995 there was a sharp increase in the number of 11-15-year-olds who reported taking illicit drugs in the UK. Figures rose less dramatically in the second half of the 1990s, stabilised between 2000 and 2003 and had decreased by 2006/07.

Let's look at some of these figures in more detail.

In England*

- In 2003, 21% of pupils aged 11-15 said they had taken illicit drugs within the last year. By 2007, the percentage had dropped to 17%.
- 12% of pupils had taken drugs in the last month in 2003. In 2007, 10% had taken drugs in the last month.
- In 2003, cannabis use in the last year was reported by 13% of 11-15-year-olds; this decreased to 9% in 2007.
- Among 11 and 12-year-olds, misuse of volatile substances was more common than taking cannabis; this was still the case in 2007.
- 42% of pupils had ever been offered one or more drugs in 2003; in 2007, this had fallen to 36%.
- In 2002, 10% of pupils said they were regular smokers; this reduced to 9% in 2003 and to 6% in 2007.
- 25% of pupils drank alcohol in the week prior to the 2003 survey; this reduced by 5% in 2007.

* 'Drug Use, Smoking and Drinking among Young People in England in 2007' - NHS Information Centre Survey by the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR) & the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

In Scotland**

- In 2002, 33% of 15-year-olds and 11% of 13-year-olds reported that they had used drugs within the last year. By 2006, the numbers had reduced to 23% and 7%, respectively.

- In 2006, 10% of 15-year-olds and 4% of 13-year-olds said they had taken drugs only once; 8% of 15-year-olds and 2% of 13-year-olds said they had used drugs once a month, or more frequently.
- Cannabis was by far the most commonly used drug: 11% of 15-year-olds and 2% of 13-year-olds said they had used it in the month prior to the 2006 survey; this showed a substantial reduction since 2002, when the percentages were 21% and 6%, respectively.
- Use of drugs such as heroin and cocaine was very rare.
- In the 2006 survey, of the pupils who reported ever having drunk alcohol (57% of 13-year-olds and 84% of 15-year-olds), 14% of 13-year-olds and 36% of 15-year-olds reported having a drink in the last week. This had reduced from 20% and 43%, respectively, since 2004.
- Between 2004 and 2006 there was an increase in the proportion of pupils reporting they had never smoked: from 59% to 69% of 13-year-olds and 39% to 47% of 15-year-olds. In 2006, 55% of girls said they had never smoked, compared with 61% of boys.

** Scottish Schools
Adolescent Lifestyle
and Substance Use
Survey 2006.

Summing Up

It's clear, then, the commonly-held perception that drug-taking is rife among young people and that they are turning to heroin and crack cocaine at a younger age is simply not borne out by the facts. Around 70% of youngsters under 16 are not using drugs at all and, of those who do use them, the main drugs of choice are alcohol, cannabis and tobacco.

But we should by no means be complacent about this. As we will see in chapter 3, each of these drugs carries risks for young people, whether these are short-term or long-term.

The issue of alcohol and under-16s is of particular concern to professionals involved in drugs education and treatment. According to UK voluntary agency Alcohol Concern, while the number of 11-15-year-olds who drink has dropped in recent years, the mean consumption of those who drink doubled from five units a week in the early 1990s to 10 units in 2004. Despite this, many parents do not take the issue seriously, some telling drugs workers quite openly that they would rather their child used alcohol than drugs. Considering that deaths in the UK as a direct result of alcohol almost doubled between 1991 and 1996 (a total of 8,758 deaths were directly linked to alcohol in 2006, compared to 4,144 deaths in 1991; note that these do not include accidents, violence and suicide as a result of alcohol) – and that alcohol accounts for four times as many deaths as do illicit drugs* – these parents are clearly not grasping the severity of the situation.

The same goes for smoking and young people, which again is tolerated by many parents as a 'less risky' alternative to illicit drugs. Yet, according to the latest estimates, each year around 114,000 people in the UK die from smoking-related diseases.

So to put things in perspective, the substances that are the biggest killers – alcohol and tobacco – are tolerated by our society far more than other drugs. But they are drugs just the same. Please bear this in mind as you read the rest of this book.

Now that we have a general idea of the UK drugs scene today, it's time to tackle some of the biggest obstacles to achieving a better understanding of drugs – the myths.

*A June 2003 report by the UK voluntary agency Alcohol Concern revealed that while 1,498 deaths in 2001 were directly related to drugs, nearly 6,000 deaths in the same year were a direct result of drinking too much alcohol (N.B. this figure does not include deaths caused by accidents, violence or suicide where alcohol is the contributing factor).