

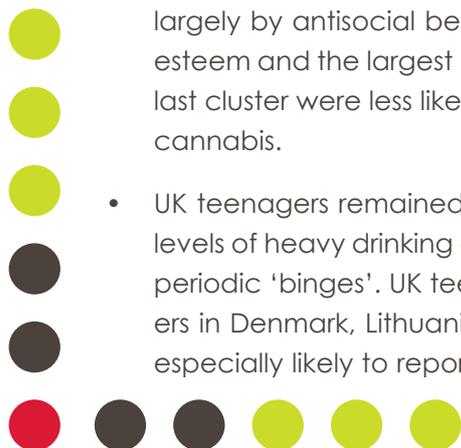
The 1999 European School Survey Project on Alcohol & other Drugs (ESPAD).

Introduction

The use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs by young people has long been a major cause for concern. In 1995 researchers in the UK and 22 other European countries joined forces to collect comparable survey data related to the drinking, smoking and drug using habits of 15-16 year old school students. The success of this initial venture led to the conduct of a second survey in 1999. This involved research teams in a total of 30 countries. As during the 1995 survey, all the teams used a standardised core questionnaire to collect information from representative samples of school students. The UK part of this exercise was carried out by Martin Plant and Patrick Miller of the Alcohol & Health Research Centre, Edinburgh. A summary is presented of findings from both the UK survey and from the international report on the 1999 exercise. The 1999 European School Survey Project on Alcohol & other Drugs (ESPAD)

Findings

- The 1995 survey had shown that UK teenagers reported some of the heaviest levels of periodic heavy drinking and intoxication amongst those in any of the countries surveyed. UK teenagers were also the heaviest users of illicit drugs.
- The 1999 survey obtained information from 1,361 girls and 1,280 boys attending 223 state and private schools in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This showed that illicit drug use among UK teenagers had declined since 1995. Even so, 33.0% of girls and 39.5% of boys had used some form of drug, most commonly cannabis. There were, however, few overall changes in patterns of alcohol or tobacco consumption involving UK teenagers. Overall, only 6.2% of those surveyed had never consumed alcohol. Most, 72%, had at some time been intoxicated. There were some regional variations. Girls in Northern Ireland were much less likely than other UK girls to have ever consumed alcohol, to drink heavily or to have been intoxicated. Boys in Northern Ireland were only slightly below the levels of other UK boys with respect to these experiences. Illicit drug use was most commonplace among boys in Scotland and least commonplace amongst those in Wales. Among girls, drug use was most commonplace among those in Scotland and least commonplace among those in Northern Ireland.
- Heavy drinking among UK teenagers was associated with heavy smoking, drug use, and with other factors. The latter included coming from a single parent background, truancy from school, poor relationships with parents and lack of parental knowledge of the teenager's whereabouts on Saturday nights. This last variable bore the strongest relationships to substance use.
- There appeared to be three discernible clusters of heavy cannabis users: the smallest characterised largely by antisocial behaviour, the next by poor interpersonal relationships, depression and low self-esteem and the largest by the belief that life was stable and that Society's rules should be obeyed. The last cluster were less likely than the first two to be involved in the heavy usage of illicit drugs other than cannabis.
- UK teenagers remained (together with young Danes and Finns) amongst those reporting the highest levels of heavy drinking and intoxication. Drinking in these countries had often been concentrated into periodic 'binges'. UK teenagers reported high levels of problems caused by alcohol. Even so, teenagers in Denmark, Lithuania, Russia and Finland reported even higher levels. Oddly, UK teenagers were especially likely to report that they anticipated positive, rather than negative effects from consuming



alcohol. The same was true of teenagers in countries in which heavy drinking and intoxication were relatively commonplace. An exceptionally high proportion, a fifth of UK teenagers, also reported that they smoked tobacco every day. The level of lifetime experience of illicit drug use reported by UK teenagers was the highest amongst respondents in any of the 30 countries studied.

Implications

- It is clear from this study that UK teenagers reported what, by international standards, were high levels of experience with alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. In other words, the UK has a serious problem, in spite of the evident decline in drug use among 15-16 year olds between 1995 and 1999.
- The extent of heavy drinking, daily smoking and at least the occasional use of cannabis suggest that these behaviours are firmly established as normative among teenagers throughout the UK.
- ESPAD findings suggest that the youthful use of alcohol and other drugs reflects long-standing and deeply rooted national traditions. Moreover, avoidance of heavy and problematic use (especially by girls) is associated with family structure and parental child rearing practices, especially those involving the exercise of control by the parents.
- Serious work needs to be done to identify ways of reducing harmful or potentially harmful drinking, smoking and illicit drug use among UK teenagers. Future initiatives in this area should be carefully evaluated and evaluation should be built into the intervention/policy process.
- In spite of the fact that many teenagers drink, smoke and use illicit drugs in ways that are at least potentially harmful, very few seek the help or support of specialist agencies for alcohol and other drug-related problems. Ways need to be found to identify, contact and help those who are experiencing problems due to their heavy or inappropriate use of alcohol and other drugs.

Further Information

Past attempts to discourage youthful heavy drinking, smoking or illicit drug use appear to have had little effect. Some evidence even suggests that some major past initiatives have been ineffective or even counterproductive. Clearly, far more should be done to facilitate the avoidance by young people of illegal or potentially risky behaviour. Future initiatives should be evidence-based, since there is no need to repeat all of the mistakes of the past.

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