

**Secondary Analysis of the  
2003 Young Persons  
Behaviour and Attitudes  
Survey  
(Drugs, Solvents and Alcohol)**

**SMR  
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**Points of view are those of the  
author**



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report presents an analysis of data from the alcohol and drugs modules of the 2000 and 2003 editions of the Young Persons Behaviour and Attitudes Survey. The analysis focused on a review of the 2003 data as well as a comparative analysis of data from both surveys. The project was conducted by Social & Market Research (SMR) on behalf of the Drugs and Alcohol Information and Research Unit within the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

### **Lifetime Prevalence of Drugs, Solvents and Alcohol Use**

Table 1.1 presents drug, solvent and alcohol prevalence rates for pupils in the 2003 survey. Where possible, the prevalence rates are also compared between 2003 and 2000. In 2003, 23% of all pupils had used drugs / solvents, with 60% having used alcohol. Compared with 2000, this represents a statistically significant decrease in the use of illegal drugs, and a statistically significant increase in the use of alcohol. The use of cannabis in 2003 was recorded at 18%, which represents a significant increase on the 2000 figure of 15%. However, in relation to solvents, the proportions of pupils saying that they had used them fell from 16% in 2000, to 10% in 2003. Indeed a similar pattern was recorded for ecstasy, with 4% of pupils having used this drug in 2000, compared with 3% in 2003. In relation to being offered illegal drugs, the 2003 survey found that more than one third of survey respondents (35%) had been offered drugs or solvents, which represents a statistically significant increase on the figure of 30% recorded in 2000.

### **Current Use Of Drugs, Solvents and Alcohol**

Table 1.1. also presents data on current users (last month prevalence) of drugs, solvents and alcohol. Compared with 2000, the 2003 survey shows a significant reduction in the proportion of young people saying that they were current users of drugs / solvents (7.6% compared with 9.7%). Comparison between the two surveys also shows a reduction in the proportions of young people describing themselves as current cannabis (9.2% vs. 9.7%) and ecstasy users (1.1% vs. 1.7%) in 2003, compared with 2000. Note that there were no comparative data to compare the current use of solvents or alcohol between the two survey years.

### **Age First Started Using Drugs, Solvents and Alcohol**

A comparison of the 2000 and 2003 data shows a significant increase in the mean age at which young people first started using drugs (including solvents), with the age increasing from 12.29 years to 12.50 years. Between 2000 and 2003 there were no significant differences detected between the mean ages at which young people first started using drugs only, solvents only, cannabis and ecstasy. However, young people in 2003 were found to be significantly older when they first started using alcohol (11.90 years in 2003 compared with 11.72 years in 2000).



## Knowledge About the Effects and Risks of Alcohol and Drugs

The survey also sought to establish if pupil's knowledge of the effects and risks associated with drug and alcohol consumption had changed significantly. With regard to drugs, 74% of the 2003 sample reported knowing 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' about the effects and risks relating to drugs. This compares favourably with the figure of 70% recorded in 2000. Also in relation to education on drugs and / or alcohol at school, the 2003 survey (82%) recorded a significant increase of 8 percentage points compared with 2000 (74%). Overall 78% of the 2003 sample indicated that they know 'a lot' or 'quite a bit' about the effects and risks associated with alcohol consumption, although there was no comparative figure for 2000. With regard to solvents, the majority (65%) of young people in the 2003 survey reported that they either 'know quite a lot' (30%) or 'know a lot' (35%) about the effects / risks of taking solvents. This question was not included in the 2000 survey, thus preventing a comparison with 2003.

## Multivariate Analyses (2003 Survey)

Multivariate analyses using the technique multinomial logistic regression were carried out in order to establish the relative salience of a number of potential factors that could affect four types of drug use: 'Solvent only' use; 'Cannabis only' use; the use of Combinations of 'soft' drugs; and, 'Hard' drug use. The potential factors investigated were: Age; Gender; Catholic or not; Protestant or not; Attendance at a secondary or a grammar school; Eligibility for free school meals; Eligibility for public transport support; Education and Library Board; Drug education either at: school; in a youth club-type venue; or at 'other' venues. Analyses were carried out for four levels of frequency of drug use: whether a pupil had *ever* used a drug; used sometime in the last *year*; used sometime in the last *month*; and, used sometime in the last *week*.

'Solvent only' use showed different characteristics in comparison to other types of drug use with 'solvent only' users tending to resemble the general population of non-users more than the other groups. The only characteristic that generally distinguished 'solvent only' users from non-users was that they were more likely to be male. Unlike all other types of users, 'solvent only' users were not significantly older than the general population. The effects of the potential factors on the other three types of drug use were broadly similar across all four levels of frequency of drug use. In general, the patterns were that users in comparison to non-users are: older; male; in secondary schools; eligible for free school meals; *not* eligible for school transport support. These effects were more clear-cut for 'cannabis only' and use of 'soft' drug combinations than for 'hard' drug use.

Location in education and library boards did sometimes exert a significant effect upon likelihood of drug use, but it was difficult to identify a consistent pattern. Taken in combination with the depressant effect of school transport eligibility upon drug use, it may be that the effect of education and library board reflects the rural/urban characteristics of the boards.

The results for the effects of drug education upon drug use were paradoxical. While the experience of school-based drug education was found to lower the likelihood of experimentation with combinations of 'soft' drugs and 'hard' drugs, drug education in youth club-type and in 'other' venues appeared to be associated with *increased* likelihood of drug use, particularly for the users of 'hard' drugs. The reasons for this result may be artefactual, but this cannot be established from the data.

Those who have access to drugs can be considered to be more at risk and for that reason a separate analysis was performed that was restricted only to those who have been offered drugs. Among this group, 'solvent only' users were found to be significantly younger than the general population of non-users. The associations of 'cannabis only' and use of combinations of 'soft' drugs with being older and male persisted, as did the depressant effect of being eligible for free transport. However, the effect of eligibility for free school meals disappeared and the

effect of attending a secondary school was appreciably weaker, indicating that it may be the relatively disadvantaged who are most 'at risk' through exposure to drugs. Exposure to drug education in schools still had the effect of lowering the take-up of drug offers, but the association between experience of drug education at 'other' venues and 'hard' drug take-up persisted.

### **Multivariate Analyses (2003 And 2000)**

Multivariate analyses also were carried out on a merged dataset of the two surveys combined (2003 and 2000). This could not be exactly comparable since the questions about self-assignment of religious identity and eligibility for school transport support were not asked in 2000. An additional variable of 'Year of survey' and 'interaction' variables measuring whether the effects of the potential causal factors had changed over the three-year gap between the surveys were added in.

The results for the multivariate analyses conducted on the merged datasets broadly coincide with the patterns recorded for the 2003 survey on its own. The effects of education and library boards on drug use are consistently stronger in the merged dataset. Since the 'transport support' variable had to be excluded, this change is congruent with the hypothesis that much of the effect of education and library board is in fact a proxy for rural/urban location.

While experimentation with 'solvents only' appears to have declined, experimentation with cannabis on its own and, of more concern, experimentation with 'hard' drugs appears to have risen since the time of the 2000 survey. On a more positive note, however, compared to experimentation, more frequent levels of drug use appear to have remained stable. The paradoxical mixed effects of drug education noted in the analysis of the 2003 data on its own remain when the analysis is extended to include respondents from both surveys.

The multivariate analysis conducted on the merged dataset broadly coincide with the patterns recorded in 2003 on its own. While the use of solvents on their own appears to have declined, use of cannabis on its own and, of more concern, use of 'hard drugs' appears to have risen. However, on a more positive note, the effects of drug education, although mixed, do appear to be more strongly linked with reduced drug use among 2003 respondents compared with those from the 2000 survey.