

The normalisation of recreational drug use

In the next two Briefings, Professor David Clark looks at a seminal research study conducted by Professor Howard Parker and colleagues which provided essential insights into British youth culture and the role of drugs and alcohol among adolescents during the 1990s.

Only a small minority of people who try an illicit drug develop a problem. Many people who try an illicit drug do so on one or a few occasions and decide the experience is not for them. Some may use one or more illicit drugs on a periodic basis, while others may use more regularly; but still their use is recreational and controlled.

The use of illicit drugs has increased greatly over the past 20 years, in particular during the 1990s. As an example of this change, a large-scale annual survey by the University of Exeter's Health Education Unit (involving 30,000 children from 150 schools in England and Scotland) revealed that the proportion of 15- and 16-year-olds that reported ever having tried an illicit drug rose from 10 per cent in 1989 to 40 per cent in 1996.

In 1991, Professor Howard Parker and his colleagues initiated a unique piece of research, which tracked a large sample of young people (14 to 18 years old) from the North West of England over a five-year period. The study confirmed the widespread recreational use of illicit drugs, and provided essential insights into British youth culture and the role of drugs and alcohol among adolescents.

This study took place against the backdrop of a 'youth-drugs-crime-danger' message both from media and politicians. When John Major, the then Prime Minister, announced his new drug strategy (Tackling Drugs Together) in a speech to the Social Market Foundation (9 September 1994), he chose 'job-culture' as the soundbite he wanted the media to highlight.

'Tackling Drugs Together' was about offenders and crime, indeed 'no single crime prevention measure would be more significant than success on the front against drugs'.

One premise of the strategy was that young people were 'at risk of drug abuse' and succumb because of peer

pressure. The second premise was that drugs are dangerous and a menace. The third was that because drug use leads to crime, local communities are at risk from drug users.

The war-on-drugs rhetoric of the Tory Government, and the desire to link drugs and crime, was later hijacked by the Labour Party in opposition. It was continued once Labour came into power.

In their book *Illegal Leisure*, Parker and colleagues emphasised that this political discourse has an 'energy' of its own. It promotes public fear and anxiety about crime, drugs and youth,



which in turn it then uses to interfere simplistically, and with apparent public consent, in drugs and criminal justice policy and practice. This process, because it can barely be challenged, thus spins along reinforcing itself.

But this simplistic rhetoric ignored the question as to why the majority of young people try illicit drugs and a significant minority continue to use them regularly.

In trying to understand this situation, Parker and colleagues emphasised that the very nature of adolescence was changing – the context and the conditions in which young people were growing up were very different to generations before.

The research study involved a sample of over 700 14-year-olds being tracked annually for up to five years. Each year, they were asked about their personal and family circumstances, their disposable income, use of leisure, and perspectives on personal and social relationships. They were asked in detail about their use of tobacco,

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alcohol and illicit drug use.

As they matured, more complex issues were pursued, including their attitudes towards drug use and drug users, their assessment of health education they received, and their experiences at parties and nightclubs.

Five annual self-report surveys were undertaken, and 86 interviews were conducted when respondents were 17 years old. Eight co-educational state

secondary schools in the North West metropolitan area of the UK were used. The questionnaires were distributed in the classrooms with teachers absent.

The overall aim of the study was to assess how 'ordinary' young people growing up in England in the 1990s developed attitudes and behaviours in relation to the unprecedented ready availability of drugs, alongside other consumption options such as alcohol and tobacco.

The findings suggested that recreational drug use had become widespread amongst British youth. More than 36 per cent of the sample had tried an illicit drug by age 14, and this increased to 51 per cent by age 16, and 64 per cent by age 18. More than 60 per cent and 90 per cent of the sample had received drug offers at age 14 and 18 years, respectively.

The most commonly tried drugs by age 18 were cannabis (59 per cent tried), amyl nitrites or 'poppers' (35 per cent), amphetamines (33 per cent), LSD (28 per cent) and ecstasy (20 per cent). Only 6 per cent had tried cocaine and 0.6 per cent had tried heroin.

Females were almost as likely as males to have tried an illicit drug by age 18, and there were no differences between youth from working and middle class backgrounds. At age 18, nearly one-quarter of the sample had tried an illicit drug in the past week.

The study also revealed that young people reported many more positive experiences of drug use than negative outcomes.

By age 14 years, 90 per cent of the sample had tried alcohol, with 30 per cent claiming to drink on a weekly basis. This latter percentage rose to 80 per cent in 18 year-olds, with a mean consumption of ten units on the last drinking occasion. At age 18 years, just over a third of the sample were current smokers.

In the follow-up Briefing, we look at the drug journeys that young people in this study took, and explore why adolescent recreational drug use became normalised.

The reader is strongly recommended to read the book, 'Illegal Leisure: The normalization of adolescent recreational drug use' by Howard Parker, Judith Aldridge and Fiona Measham; Routledge, 1998.