

# Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2006

## Summary of main findings

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A survey carried out for The Information Centre for  
health and social care by the  
National Centre for Social Research and the  
National Foundation for Educational Research

# Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2006

This is a summary of the main findings from the latest in a series of surveys designed to monitor smoking, drinking and drug use among secondary school pupils aged 11 to 15. The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) carried out the survey on behalf of The Information Centre for health and social care (IC). Information was obtained from 8,200 pupils in 288 schools throughout England in the autumn term of 2006.

A full report, including detailed survey findings and a description of the survey background and the methodology, is available at <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/sdd06fullreport>

## Smoking

Two fifths (39%) of pupils have tried smoking at least once. The proportion of pupils who have never smoked increased from 47% in 1982 to 61% in 2004 and has remained at a similar level since.

In 2006, 9% of pupils smoked regularly (at least once a week). This has remained at the same level since 2003, and is equivalent to the current target to reduce the prevalence of regular smoking among 11 to 15 year olds to 9% by 2010 (set in the 1998 White Paper, *Smoking Kills*). Girls are more likely to smoke regularly than boys, and older pupils more likely than younger ones. One fifth (20%) of 15 year olds said they smoked at least once a week, compared with only 1% of 11 year olds. Compared with white pupils, black pupils and those of mixed ethnicity were less likely to smoke regularly.

Certain patterns of behaviour were associated with regular smoking. Pupils who had drunk alcohol recently were more likely to be regular smokers than those who had not; regular smoking was also more likely among pupils who had taken drugs compared with those who had not. Pupils who had truanted from school or had been excluded at some time in their lives were also more likely to be regular smokers than pupils who had never truanted or been excluded.

Families were an important influence on pupils' smoking. Those who lived with other smokers were more than twice as likely to smoke regularly, compared with those living in non-smoking households. The proportion of pupils who smoked regularly also increased with the number of other smokers at home. A quarter (25%) of pupils who lived with three or more other smokers were regular smokers themselves, compared with 4% of pupils who lived in a non-smoking household. Although most pupils said their families would disapprove of their smoking, pupils who smoked were more likely to think their families would take a lenient view of their smoking than pupils who did not smoke.

The pupils covered by this survey are all below the minimum legal age for buying cigarettes, currently 16 years old. Nevertheless, about two thirds (65%) of pupils who smoked identified shops as one of their usual sources of cigarettes. There is evidence to suggest that pupils are finding it increasingly difficult to buy cigarettes from shops. The proportion of pupils who had tried (17% in 2006) has fallen since the early 1990s, and pupils who do try to buy cigarettes from shops are increasingly likely to be refused. In 2006, 53% of pupils who had tried to buy cigarettes from a shop reported being refused at least once in the last year,

compared with 29% in 1993. However, it is still the case that pupils who tried to buy cigarettes from shops were more likely than not to be successful; less than a quarter (22%) of those who had tried said they had been refused on the most recent occasion.

A high proportion of pupils who smoke regularly see themselves as dependent on the habit. 69% said they would find it hard not to smoke for a week, and 77% said they would find it hard to give up altogether. Around two in five regular smokers (43%) said they would like to give up.

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

## Drinking alcohol

More than half of pupils aged between 11 and 15 have had at least one alcoholic drink in their lifetimes. This increases with age from 21% of 11 year olds to 82% of 15 year olds. However, the proportion of pupils who have never drunk alcohol has risen in recent years, from 39% in 2003 to 45% in 2006.

About one in five (21%) of pupils reported having drunk alcohol in the last seven days. Boys and girls were equally likely to have drunk alcohol in the last seven days, and the proportion who had done so increased with age from 3% of 11 year olds to 41% of 15 year olds. White pupils were more likely to have drunk alcohol recently than those from minority ethnic groups.

The proportion of pupils who drank in the last seven days has fallen from 26% in 2001. During this period, average consumption among pupils who did drink has remained at broadly similar levels. Among pupils who drank alcohol in the last seven days, boys drank more than girls, an average of 12.3 units a week for boys, 10.5 for girls. The pupils who drank alcohol in the last seven days drank on an average of 1.8 days in the week; about half (49%) of them consumed an average of more than four units on the days they did drink; 22% consumed three or four units; and 28% consumed an average of two units or less.

The patterns of behaviour associated with having recently drunk alcohol (in the last seven days) were not unlike those related to regular smoking. Pupils who smoked regularly were more likely than those who had not to have drunk alcohol recently. Similarly, pupils who had taken drugs were more likely to have drunk alcohol recently than those who had not. Pupils who had ever truanted from school were more likely to have drunk alcohol in the last seven days. However, pupils who had been excluded from school were no more likely to have drunk alcohol than those who had not been excluded.

Pupils are more likely to be given alcohol than to buy it, most commonly by family or friends. However, about half of pupils who said they currently drank also bought alcohol, despite it being illegal to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18. They were most likely to buy alcohol from friends or relatives (20% of current drinkers) or off-licences (18%). Relatively few pupils who drank alcohol bought it from shops or supermarkets (13%) or pubs and bars (7%).

As pupils grow older, the context in which they drink changes. Eleven year olds who drank alcohol were most likely to drink with their parents (55%) or other family members (29%), and most likely to drink at home (62%). By the age of 15, pupils who drank were most likely to drink with friends of both sexes (66%). They were less likely than younger pupils to drink at home (34% of 15 year olds who drank) and more likely to drink in other locations; 40% drank at parties with friends, 37% outside (on the street, in a park or somewhere else), and 35% in someone else's home. Relatively few pupils of any age who drank (9%) reported that they did so in pubs or bars.

On balance, families were more likely to steer pupils towards sensible drinking than to discourage them from drinking altogether. Around half of pupils (53%) said their families didn't mind them drinking, as long as they didn't drink too much. 45% of pupils said their families didn't like them drinking. (Additionally, a small minority said their families let them

drink as much as they liked.) Attitudes changed as pupils grew older; among 11 year olds, 67% said their families didn't like them drinking, compared with 32% whose families didn't mind them drinking within limits. By the age of 15, 71% of pupils thought their families didn't mind them drinking sensibly, and the proportion who said their families didn't like them drinking declined to 26%. Pupils' own behaviour tended to conform with their families' views. 75% of pupils who had never drunk alcohol said their families wouldn't like them to drink. In contrast, 80% of those who had drunk alcohol in the last week said their families didn't mind them drinking, as long as they didn't drink too much.

A fifth (20%) of pupils said they had been drunk in the last four weeks, although their definitions of drunkenness are likely to include a range of states from mild tipsiness to full-scale incapacity. Older pupils were more likely to report having been drunk; 37% of 15 year old boys and 47% of 15 year old girls had been drunk at least once in the last four weeks, compared with 5% of 11 year old boys and 4% of 11 year old girls. Some pupils actively try to get drunk; among those who had drunk alcohol in the last four weeks, about a third (35%) had deliberately tried to get drunk.

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

## Drug use

In 2006, 35% of pupils reported that they had ever been offered drugs, a decrease from 42% in 2001.

The prevalence of drug use had also declined since 2001. In 2006, 24% of pupils said they had ever used drugs, and 17% had taken any drugs in the last year. In 2001, the corresponding proportions were 29% and 20%. Pupils were most likely to have taken cannabis in the last year (10%, an overall decrease from 13% in 2001). 5% of pupils had sniffed glue or other volatile substances in the last year and 4% had taken poppers. Other drugs had been taken by less than 2% of pupils in the last year. The proportion of pupils who had taken any Class A drugs in the last year has stayed at around 4% since 2001.

The proportions of pupils who had taken drugs increased with age. Although boys and girls were equally likely to have taken drugs in the last year, boys (10%) were more likely than girls (8%) to have taken drugs recently (in the last month). Black pupils and those of mixed ethnicity were more likely than white pupils to have taken drugs recently.

Recent drug use was associated with regular smoking and recent drinking. Pupils who had been excluded also had an increased risk of recent drug use compared with pupils who had not, and the same was true of pupils who had truanted from school compared with those who had not.

The proportions of pupils who took drugs at least once a month (4%) was lower than in recent years. Older pupils were more likely to say that they usually took drugs at least once a month; 8% of 15 year olds said this, compared with 1% of 11-12 year olds.

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

## Smoking, drinking and drug use

These findings show a consistent pattern of differences between the prevalence of smoking, drinking and drug use; drinking alcohol is the most prevalent of the three and is also seen as more acceptable for pupils in this age group by parents and pupils themselves.

Pupils are more likely to have ever drunk alcohol (55%), than to have smoked (39%) or tried drugs (24%). By the age of 15, 89% of pupils will have done at least one of these things.

Less than half of pupils who tried each of these had done them recently; 21% of pupils had drunk alcohol in the last week, 12% had smoked in the last week and 9% had taken drugs in the last month.

While more than half of pupils felt that their parents would take a tolerant attitude towards their drinking (55%, although in most cases only as long as pupils didn't drink too much), just 2% thought their parents would tolerate their smoking. (Parental attitudes to drug use were not asked about in 2006.) Similarly, when asked about what was OK for someone of their age, 56% thought drinking alcohol was OK to try once and 36% thought it OK for someone of their age to drink alcohol once a week. Smoking was less acceptable; 37% thought it OK for someone of their age to try smoking once, and 18% thought it was OK to smoke once a week. Different types of drug use were asked about separately. Cannabis was considered the most acceptable, but even so, just 9% thought it OK for someone of their age to try cannabis once and 5% OK to take once a week.

The proportions of pupils who smoke, drink alcohol or take drugs each increase with age. There are no consistent patterns of behaviour according to sex or ethnicity. If a pupil smokes, drinks alcohol or takes drugs, he or she is more likely to do one of the other two as well. Pupils who have truanted from school at any time are more likely to smoke regularly, and to have drunk alcohol or taken drugs recently. Regular smoking and drug use are also more prevalent among pupils who have been excluded from school, compared with those who have not.

The report also includes findings about sources of helpful information about smoking, drinking and drug use, and a comparison of schools' policies.

### **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. NatCen has approximately 300 staff and a national panel of over 1,200 interviewers complemented by 200 nurses who work on health-related surveys.



### **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.

