

### **Labour losing war on child drug use**

THE war on drug-taking by children is having little or no impact, with figures released yesterday showing the problem getting worse in England.

Millions of pounds of government money has been spent in recent years on school programmes to discourage children from drinking, taking drugs and smoking.

But the latest government survey among children aged 11-15 showed one in five took drugs last year, an increase of one per cent on the previous year. A quarter of these children drank alcohol regularly, also a one per cent increase.

Children who drank were taking more than one drink a day. The average amount drunk each week was 9.5 units. Regular smoking fell by one per cent to nine per cent.

The survey of 10,000 children in 321 schools covered a full range of illegal substances, including cannabis, amphetamines, anabolic steroids, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, glue and solvents. Cannabis and "poppers" (amyl nitrate) were the drugs most likely to have been taken.

Drug use rose sharply with age and by the time they were 15, 38 per cent had taken drugs, against 36 per cent in 2002. The number of 11-year-olds offered drugs rose from 16 per cent to 19 per cent.

The Department for Education was given pounds 15.2 million last year for drug education and prevention projects. This has now been cut by pounds 1 million.

"It is unsurprising that the Government is losing the war," said Tim Loughton, the shadow health secretary.

The health department said it was working with the Home Office and the education department to cut child use.

## SCHOOLCHILDREN ADMIT TO COMMITTING CRIMES

ALMOST half of schoolchildren aged 11 to 17 have committed a crime, according to a major study of young people's behaviour.

The survey also revealed the extent of alcohol abuse among youngsters, with four out of 10 students in Year 10 revealing they had "binged" on drink.

Violence, including weapon-carrying and fights, are an "acknowledged part of life" for a significant number of young people, especially boys.

One in five boys aged 15 to 16 admitted attacking someone with the intention of seriously hurting them.

And researchers for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found one in 10 boys aged 11 to 12 admitted carrying a knife or other weapon in the previous year, rising to one in four by Year 11.

"The proportion of young men who felt it was necessary or justified to carry a weapon is a great worry," said co-author Barry Anderson.

"The levels of drinking, too, were a surprise. Young people said drinking was more socially acceptable than smoking, and their parents would be less worried if they knew they were drinking than if they were caught smoking."

The study involved a representative sample of 14,000 secondary school pupils filling in a confidential questionnaire about their involvement in crime, drug use and other problem behaviour.

The authors said such widespread underage alcohol abuse had important implications for street crime, other offending and health, and should not be ignored by parents or the Government.

Researchers identified 17 risk factors which could lead to bad behaviour among youngsters - such as poor parental supervision, bullying, alienation and a low income background. They also drew up a list of six "protective factors" such as strong family bonds and healthy standards.

### **British girls top alcohol league**

British teenage girls rank among the world leaders in terms of obesity, drinking and smoking cannabis, according to statistics compiled by The Economist.

Fifteen-year-olds have the fourth highest obesity rate, are the third biggest users of cannabis and come first for the amount of alcohol they drink. They also watch more television than their age group in most other countries.

The statistics are found in this year's Pocket World in Figures, which draws on official sources from 192 countries from Iceland to the Ivory Coast.

In the section dealing with 15-year-olds, figures show that 2.7 per cent of girls in Britain are obese, the fourth highest in the world behind America, Malta and Canada. Boys of the same age rank joint third with Canada.

Almost one in three 15-year-old girls has used cannabis in the past year, the third highest proportion behind Canada and Switzerland. British boys are fourth.

**For alcohol consumption, British girls come first, with 48.3 per cent drinking weekly ahead of the Netherlands and Denmark. British boys, by comparison, rank third, with 55 per cent drinking alcohol weekly, behind Malta and the Netherlands.**

The figures also show that 29.5 per cent of girls in Britain watch television for four hours a day or more during the week, the fifth highest in the world. British boys rank 11th.

Last year, a report published by the British Medical Association said that the drinking, eating, sexual, drug-taking and smoking habits of adolescents in Britain were responsible for creating a public health timebomb. The BMA has called on the Government to target the special needs of teenagers, saying that they were a group that "missed out" because they were neither children nor adults.

### Health warning as girls overtake boys for binge drinking

TEENAGE GIRLS are now binge drinking more frequently than boys, according to a report published yesterday. It is the first time girls have outstripped their male peers in excessive alcohol consumption.

Experts warned that the rise in young female drinking was an "unprecedented phenomenon" that could threaten the health of a generation of women.

Girls in their teens are being treated for alcohol-related diseases, according to experts, with a girl aged 17 in Liverpool diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver caused by excessive alcohol consumption. Youth workers said that children were turning up drunk to afternoon-activity clubs within hours of the end of school.

Charities accused the drinks industry of "aggressively targeting" women with low-calorie products.

The latest findings were included in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, which published its third report on teenage behaviour yesterday.

British teenagers are among the heaviest drinkers in the study, which looked at the habits of 15 and 16 year olds in 35 European countries.

It found that 29 per cent of British girls in that age group admitted to "binge drinking" three or more times in the previous month, compared to 26 per cent of boys. Binge drinking was defined as having five or more drinks at the same sitting.

Only Irish teenagers had higher rates of binge drinking than the British counterparts, while in France, 7 per cent of girls and 13 per cent of boys indulged in similar behaviour.

Binge drinking among British boys fell 7 per cent between 1999 and 2003, but the rate among girls rose 3 per cent.

Girls in Britain drink more spirits, wine and alcopops than boys, the study found - a trend which is matched only by Ireland and the Isle of Man.

Professor Martin Plant, a professor of addiction studies at the University of the West of England, said: "Girls are now outdoing boys in drinking and that really is a rather nasty trend. What we are seeing in Britain is something quite unprecedented. It is something that has been going on since the late 1990s and that has to be worrying for a whole cohort of women and girls."

While France, Germany and other Western European countries are at the bottom of most tables for the amount of alcohol drunk and the frequency of drunkenness among teenagers, the UK has remained at the top alongside impoverished former eastern bloc countries.

About four of 10 British girls admitted to drinking spirits at least three times in the previous month, compared to 21 per cent of Italian girls and 17 per cent of those from Norway.

Mr Plant said that the "laddette" culture and the fact that drinks companies were sponsoring programmes such as Friends and Sex and the City which appealed to young women were part of the problem. He added: "We also have completely

feckless and irresponsible cheap drinks promotions which have led to a culture where people's sole motivation for going out at night is to compete over how much they can drink."

Mr Plant also criticised the Government, saying it had failed to announce a single target to cut drink problems. Geethika Jayatilaka, the director of policy and public affairs at Alcohol Concern, said: "It is particularly worrying that girls have overtaken boys. Glamorous [drink] advertising needs to be stopped."

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## Drink and drug use high in teens

Britain's teenagers are among the heaviest drinkers and drug-users in Europe, research has found.

A survey of 15 and 16 year-olds found 26% of boys and 29% of girls in the UK had indulged in binge drinking at least three times in the previous month.

And 42% of boys and 35% of girls admitted they had tried illegal drugs at least once.

The survey, by the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD), focused on 35 countries.

The research, based on 2,000 young people in the UK, confirmed that the problem of excessive drinking now seems worst among girls. When the survey was last carried out in 1999, binge drinking was more common among boys (33%) than girls (27%).

For the purposes of the study, binge drinking was classed as having more than five alcoholic drinks in a row.

The research also found that 23% of boys and 16% of girls had used cannabis in the last 30 days.

Nearly one in 10 teenagers said they had used illegal drugs other than cannabis.

Researcher Professor Martin Plant, of the University of West of England, said teenagers in the UK were among the most likely to abuse alcohol and drugs - and to suffer the health effects.

He said: "One of the big problems is that vast numbers of young people who engage in these behaviours believe that they are completely invulnerable.

"They don't have any concept that there is a real risk here, but sadly these risks are not simply things that come along much later in life, these things afflict young people, and increasingly young people."

## Poor parenting

Professor Plant said many parents did not know where their teenage children went in their spare time, and did not try to impose any kind of restrictions on their behaviour.

"I know raising teenagers can be extremely tough, but my concern is that vast numbers of British parents seem to have just given up trying."

He said teenagers had more money than in the past, and a greater choice of establishments in which to drink. Measures had also increased in size.

Geethika Jayatilaka, of Alcohol Concern, said: "Low pricing, a lack of standardised proof of age schemes and poor enforcement makes it easy for unscrupulous retailers to sell to underage kids.

"This needs to change if we are to turn the tide in the longer term on problem drinking in young people."

Paul Burstow, Liberal Democrat health spokesman, called the report "deeply

worrying".

"It adds to the growing body of evidence that teenage binge drinking in Britain is out of control. The number of children turning up in hospital because of alcohol is shocking.

"The government's alcohol strategy fails to get to grips with the binge culture, which is putting the lives and health of so many teenagers at risk."

Government response

Home Office Minister, Caroline Flint, said tackling alcohol and substance misuse by young people was a top government priority.

She said a raft of measures had been introduced, including on-the-spot fines for selling drink to under-18s, and an information campaign on the dangers of drug use.

"Although it is worrying to see relatively high levels of cannabis use by British schoolchildren compared to other European countries, this report shows that the vast majority of children do not take drugs.

"The government is determined to protect young people, but also to send a strong message that drugs and alcohol misuse will not be tolerated."

ESPAD began in 1995 with a survey of 15 and 16 year-old school students in 26 European countries.

The survey was repeated in 1999 with 30 countries taking part.

Story from BBC NEWS:

### **13-Year-Old Convicted of Drink-Driving**

Road safety campaigners have reacted with shock after a 13-year-old boy was convicted of drink-driving.

The teenager was given a breathalyser test after being chased by police through the streets of Salford, Greater Manchester, in a stolen Ford Mondeo on November 1.

The boy, who cannot be named for legal reasons, pleaded guilty at Salford Magistrates' Court to drink-driving, aggravated vehicle taking and driving with no insurance.

He is thought to be Britain's youngest-ever convicted drink-driver, and despite his age has already been disqualified from driving twice before.

Brigitte Chaudhry, of road safety charity Roadpeace, said: "It is shocking that someone so young could put other people's lives at risk as well as his own.

"We would like to see such people supervised properly by the schools and parents so that they are not able to do things like this.

"I have never heard of anyone so young being convicted of drink-driving. Drinking alcohol so young is one thing but stealing a car and driving it as well is both shocking and worrying."

Inspector David Murtagh, of Greater Manchester Police, said: "I have never heard of anyone this young being prosecuted for drink driving.

"This is a persistent young offender who engages in anti-social activity in his community. Those who commit these types of crime can expect intensive and robust attention from my officers."

The case was adjourned to Salford Magistrates' Court on January 6 for sentencing.



### Teenagers to help tackle under-age drinking

Undercover squads of teenagers are to be sent into pubs, clubs and supermarkets to identify premises selling alcohol to under-age drinkers, under plans due to be announced by ministers today.

After a four-year review of policy, the government will publish a national alcohol strategy to combat an epidemic of binge drinking that is costing the nation pounds 20bn a year.

Hazel Blears, Home Office minister, will call on the drinks industry to clean up its act by halting "irresponsible promotions" such as happy hours when prices are cut to encourage maximum consumption.

The manufacturers will be told they are themselves drinking in the last chance saloon and will face a statutory clampdown if they do not volunteer reform.

David Blunkett, home secretary, had been urging Tony Blair to include in the document a list of sanctions that would be introduced if the firms failed to co-operate, including powers to fix prices in city centres and charging landlords for policing. But the prime minister, with backing from the Treasury and the culture department, feared this could be interpreted as anti-business. A leak of Mr Blunkett's proposals in the Sunday Times yesterday may have served the purpose of motivating the manufacturers more efficiently, and he was said to be happy with the outcome last night.

The leak said he wanted powers to fix alcohol prices in city centres to curb excessive drinking, even though it might break competition law.

He wanted a compulsory levy on pubs and clubs worth an average pounds 10,000 a year to pay for up to 30,000 extra police officers. And he hoped to instruct councils to refuse new licences to premises unless the applicants could prove they would not increase antisocial behaviour.

Instead Ms Blears will announce a tightening of existing controls. She will urge the police to step up action against teenage drinkers and their suppliers and will ask local authorities and the drinks industry to co-operate. The Home Office will consider how to legitimise entrapment of suppliers by sending youngsters under 18 to buy alcohol.

She wants city centre marshals to police problem areas and late-night bus stops where violence flares.

The plan is based on a scheme in Manchester where 100 civilian public protection officers have been brought in to supplement 20 police patrolling the city centre, creating a safer environment.

The government will encourage manufacturers to introduce better labelling of alcohol levels in drinks, but that would be voluntary at this stage. Further measures might emerge in a public health white paper later this year on which John Reid, health secretary, is consulting.

The strategy document today will note that nearly 40 million people in Britain consume alcohol - more than 90% of the adult population. The market exceeds

pounds 30bn and generates one million jobs. Excise duties on alcohol are worth pounds 7bn a year. Over half the adult population drinks within sensible guidelines. But almost one in three adult men and one in five women exceed the guidelines.

Drinkers under 16 are consuming twice as much alcohol as 10 years ago and are more likely to get drunk earlier than their European peers.

In the UK, binge drinking accounts for 40% of all men's drinking sessions. Up to 150,000 hospital admissions a year are alcohol-related and alcohol abuse is estimated to cost the NHS pounds 1.7bn a year.

There are 1.2m incidents of alcohol-related violence and 97,000 cases of drink driving, costing up to pounds 7.3bn a year. Up to 17m working days are lost annually due to alcohol-related absence, costing up to pounds 6.4bn a year, the government will say.

The charity Turning Point called on ministers to do more to tackle a chronic lack of treatment for alcohol abuse. Lord Victor Adebawale, its chief executive, said: "We are fighting a losing battle. The advertising budget alone for beers, wines and spirits is three times the amount spent on treating alcohol dependency - enough to fund 170,000 detox places."

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