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Prevalence of drug use: key findings from the 2002/2003 British Crime Survey

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The British Crime Survey (BCS) is a large national survey of adults who live in a representative cross-section of private households in England and Wales. In addition to asking respondents about their experiences of crime, the BCS also asks about a number of other crime-related topics. Since 1996, the BCS has included a comparable module of questions on illicit drug use. This Findings examines the prevalence and trends of illicit drug use among 16- to 59-year-olds, with particular focus on estimates for 16- to 24-year-olds.

Key points

- Of all 16- to 59-year-olds, 12% had taken an illicit drug and 3% had used a Class A drug in the last year. This equates to around four million illicit drug users and around one million Class A drug users.
- Cannabis is the most frequently used drug – around three million 16- to 59-year-olds have used it in the last year (11%).
- Levels of drug use among 16- to 59-year-olds have remained stable since 2001/02. This follows rises in Class A and any illicit drug use in the late 1990s.
- People aged between 16 and 24 years are more likely than older people to have used drugs in the last year and in the last month – 28% had used at least one illicit drug in the last year.
- The use of Class A drugs in the last year among 16- to 24-year-olds has remained stable since 1996. Around 8% had used a Class A drug in the last year.
- There have been changes since 1996 in the use of specific Class A drugs among young people. Use of amphetamines and LSD in the last year has decreased and cocaine is the only drug where use has increased. There has been a decrease in ecstasy use since 2001/02.
- Levels of drug use among 20 to 24-year-olds are higher than among 16- to 19-year-olds.
- The majority of people using drugs in the last year had only used one type of drug.

Definitions

'Class A' refers to: LSD, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, heroin, magic mushrooms and methadone.

'Any illicit drug' refers to all 13 drugs listed in Table 1, plus any other unlicensed drugs that may have been taken.

The Government's Drug Strategy has the over-arching aim of 'reducing the harm that drugs cause to society, including communities, individuals and their families'. To achieve this, the Government has set the objective to:

'reduce the use of Class A drugs and the frequent use of any illicit drug among all young people under the age of 25 especially by the most vulnerable young people'.

Currently the main measurement tool for Class A use is the BCS. Additionally, questions have been introduced in the 2002/03 BCS which will be used to monitor changes in the frequency of illicit drug use. Analysis is not possible at this stage, as these were introduced part way through the survey year. Current work is also examining the feasibility of monitoring drug use among vulnerable young people.

Extent of drug use among 16 to 59-year-olds

The 2002/03 BCS estimates that 36% of 16- to 59-year-olds have used one or more illicit drugs in their lifetime and 13% have used a Class A drug at least once. Table 1 shows levels of drug use for different age groups in the last year and last month. For 16- to 59-year-olds, use of any illicit drug in the last year stands at 12% and use of any Class A drug at 3%. Table 2 provides estimates for the number of users of these drugs and shows that around four million people have used an illicit drug in the last year and around one million of these used a Class A drug.

Cannabis is the drug most likely to be used and this is true for all age groups. The 2002/03 BCS estimates that 11% of 16- to 59-year-olds used cannabis in the last year. Cannabis use is highest amongst younger age groups with 26% of 16- to 24-year-olds reporting use in the last year. Use then decreases as age increases, to 15% for 25- to 34-year-olds and 4% for 35- to 59-year-olds. Amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy are the next most commonly used drugs amongst 16- to 59-year-olds, with 2% claiming to have tried them in the last year. For 16- to 24-year-olds the next most commonly used drugs in the last year, after cannabis, are ecstasy and cocaine (both 5%) and amyl nitrite and amphetamines (both 4%). Again, use of these drugs declines with age. For the 25–34 age group cocaine is prevalent at 4%, ecstasy and amphetamines at 3% and amyl nitrite at 2%. For the oldest age group, use of these drugs is extremely low with levels of use around half a per cent or less.

Table 1 Prevalence of drug misuse (16- to 59-year-olds)

Percentage used	16–24*	25–34	35–59	16–59
Amphetamines				
Last year	3.7	2.7	0.5	1.6
Last month	1.7	0.8	0.1	0.6
Cannabis				
Last year	25.8	14.9	4.3	10.9
Last month	16.2	9.4	2.5	6.7
Cocaine				
Last year	4.7	3.7	0.5	2.1
Last month	1.9	1.5	0.2	0.9
Crack				
Last year	0.5	0.3	0.0	0.2
Last month	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1
Ecstasy				
Last year	5.4	3.4	0.3	2.0
Last month	2.6	1.3	0.2	0.9
Heroin				
Last year	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.1
Last month	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
LSD				
Last year	0.8	0.3	0.0	0.3
Last month	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.1
Magic mushrooms				
Last year	1.7	0.8	0.1	0.6
Last month	0.5	0.1	0.0	0.1
Methadone				
Last year	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.1
Last month	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
Tranquillisers				
Last year	0.8	1.0	0.3	0.6
Last month	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.2
Amyl nitrite				
Last year	4.3	1.5	0.3	1.3
Last month	1.7	0.5	0.2	0.6
Anabolic steroids				
Last year	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.1
Last month	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
Glues				
Last year	0.5	0.0	–	0.1
Last month	0.1	0.0	–	0.0
Any drug				
Last year	28.1	16.9	5.0	12.2
Last month	17.6	10.5	2.9	7.4
Class A				
Last year	8.2	5.5	0.7	3.3
Last month	3.8	2.3	0.4	1.5

Notes: '0.0' estimate is less than 0.5 but not zero, '–' = zero.
*Core and boost data. Source: 2002/03 BCS (weighted data).

Table 2 Estimate of the number of drug users (16- to 59-year-olds)

Number who have used	Best estimate	Low estimate	High estimate
Amphetamines			
Last year	486,000	430,000	549,000
Last month	181,000	149,000	222,000
Cannabis			
Last year	3,357,000	3,212,000	3,508,000
Last month	2,068,000	1,952,000	2,190,000
Cocaine			
Last year	642,000	578,000	714,000
Last month	275,000	234,000	324,000
Crack			
Last year	63,000	44,000	88,000
Last month	28,000	17,000	47,000
Ecstasy			
Last year	613,000	550,000	683,000
Last month	267,000	227,000	315,000
Heroin			
Last year	45,000	30,000	67,000
Last month	27,000	16,000	45,000
LSD			
Last year	79,000	58,000	107,000
Last month	22,000	13,000	39,000
Magic mushrooms			
Last year	179,000	147,000	219,000
Last month	42,000	28,000	63,000
Methadone			
Last year	30,000	18,000	49,000
Last month	17,000	9,000	33,000
Tranquillisers			
Last year	174,000	142,000	214,000
Last month	71,000	51,000	97,000
Amyl nitrite			
Last year	413,000	362,000	471,000
Last month	177,000	145,000	217,000
Anabolic steroids			
Last year	27,000	16,000	45,000
Last month	15,000	8,000	30,000
Glues			
Last year	34,000	21,000	53,000
Last month	6,000	2,000	18,000
Any drug			
Last year	3,764,000	3,612,000	3,923,000
Last month	2,291,000	2,170,000	2,419,000
Class A			
Last year	1,028,000	946,000	1,116,000
Last month	473,000	418,000	534,000

Notes: Numbers have been rounded to the nearest 1,000. See methodological note for technical details on estimates. Source: 2002/03 BCS (weighted data).

People in the younger age group are more likely to use drugs than people in the older age groups. Comparing levels of drug use in the last year for 16- to 24-year-olds against those for 25- to 34-year-olds reveals that young people are more likely to take amphetamines, cannabis, ecstasy, LSD, magic mushrooms, amyl nitrites and glue. Differences are even more apparent when comparing 16- to 24-year-olds with 35- to 59-year-olds. For all drugs, except heroin, methadone, steroids and glue, use was higher for last year drug use for the younger age group.

Similar patterns can be observed for drugs taken in the last month. Use of amphetamines, cannabis, crack, ecstasy, LSD, magic mushrooms and amyl nitrites were higher for 16- to 24-year-olds, when compared with the 25-34 age group. Again, a greater number of differences can be observed for levels of use between the 16-24 and 35-59 age groups. Use of all drugs, except crack, heroin, methadone, steroids and glue, was higher for 16- to 24-year-olds than for 35- to 59-year-olds.

Trends in drug use among 16- to 59-year-olds

Comparing last year prevalence estimates for 16- to 59-year-olds from the 1996 BCS with those from the 2002/03 sweep reveals *decreases* in the use of amphetamines, LSD and steroids.

Over this period, however, there were *increases* in the use of cannabis, cocaine and crack, resulting in increases in Class A and any illicit drug use overall.

Comparing last year prevalence estimates for 16- to 59-year-olds from the 2001/02 BCS with those from the 2002/03 sweep reveals no differences between levels of use for any of the drugs examined.

Figure 1 Last year use of drugs among 16- to 59-year-olds

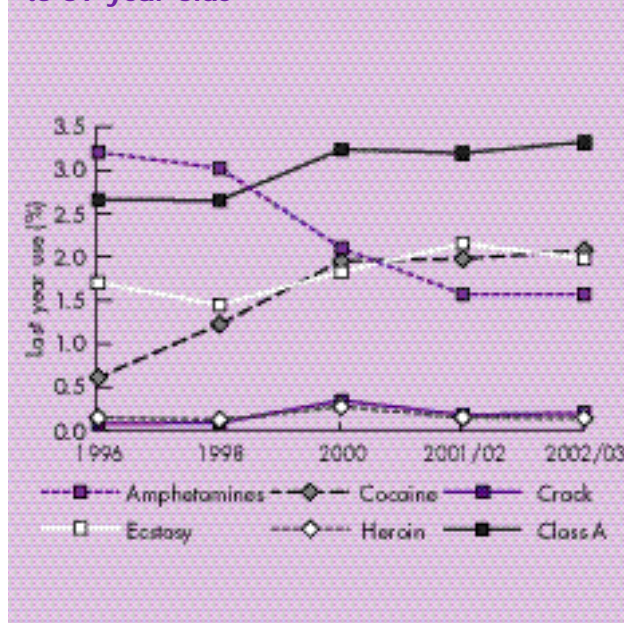


Figure 1 shows patterns of drug use in the last year, between 1996 and 2002/03, for Class A and some of the main drugs for 16- to 59-year-olds.

Number of drugs used among 16- to 59-year-olds

The 2002/03 BCS shows that the majority of drug users have only used one type of drug in the recent past. Around two-thirds of last year drug users and just over three-quarters of last month users have used just one type of drug – most likely to have been cannabis. As the number of drugs used increases, the number of users decrease. Seven per cent of users had used three drugs in the last year and only 3% of those using drugs in the last year had used six or more drugs (Table 3).

Table 3 Percentage using varying number of drugs (16- to 59-year-olds)

Number of drugs used	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Last year	66.0	16.9	7.3	4.8	2.3	2.8
Last month	76.2	12.6	6.0	2.8	1.1	1.3

Notes: Estimates based on users of drugs.
Source: 2002/03 BCS (weighted data).

Trends in drug use among young people

The Government has set the target of reducing last year use of Class A drugs among people aged under 25. To enable precise changes to be measured, since the 2001/02 BCS the number of young people in the sample has been increased (see Methodological note).

It is estimated in the 2002/03 BCS that 47% of 16- to 24-year-olds have used an illicit drug and 17% have used a Class A drug at least once in their lives. Use of Class A drugs in the last year by young people has remained fairly consistent since 1996, when it was estimated at 9%. Figures recorded since then have shown use at 9% in 1998, 10% in 2000 and 9% in 2001/02. In the 2002/03 sweep, Class A use has been estimated at 8% prevalence. However, none of these changes are statistically significant, showing that Class A use has been stable since 1996. Moreover, Class A drug use in the last month has not changed between 1996 and 2002/03, fluctuating between 4% and 5% prevalence.

Comparison of last year prevalence estimates for 16- to 24-year-olds from the 1996 BCS with those from the 2002/03 sweep reveals decreases in the use of amphetamines and LSD. The only drug for which use has increased between these two sweeps is cocaine. For last month use, again, there were decreases in the use of amphetamines and LSD and an increase in the use of powder cocaine.

Comparing last year prevalence estimates for 16- to 24-year-olds from the 2001/02 BCS with those from the 2002/03 sweep again shows a decrease in the use of amphetamines and, for the first time, ecstasy. Levels of use remained stable for the other drugs examined, with no changes. For last month use, ecstasy was the only drug that showed differences in levels of use with a fall in reported use between the last two sweeps.

A recurring theme of the last five sweeps of the BCS has been the decrease in use of amphetamines and LSD. The fall in amphetamine use has meant, for the first time, that amyl nitrite now appears to be more widely used than amphetamines amongst 16- to 24-year-olds. Cocaine use increased between 1996 and 2000 but since then, use has stabilised at around 5% prevalence. Ecstasy use, which has fluctuated between 5% and 7% since 1996, has decreased from a high of 7% in 2001/02 back to 5% in 2002/03.

Figure 2 shows the changes from 1996 to 2002/03 for Class A and the other main drugs, in the last year, for 16- to 24-year-olds. Table 4 gives estimates of the number of 16- to 24-year-olds using illicit drugs.

Figure 2 Last year use of drugs among 16- to 24-year-olds

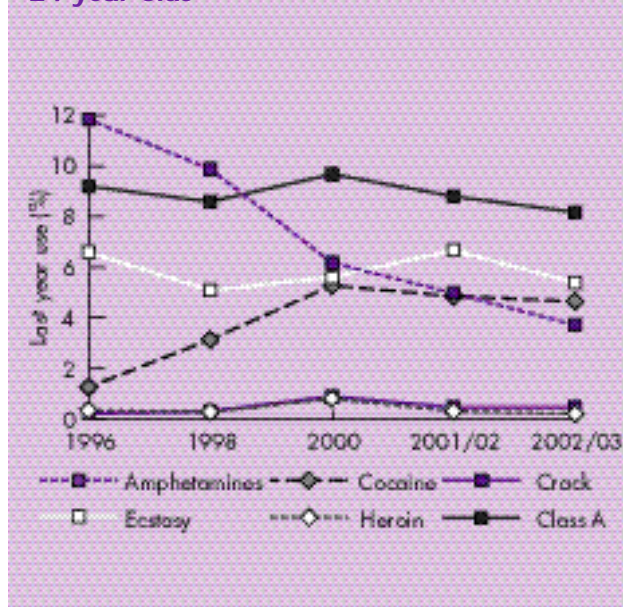


Table 4 Estimate of last year drug users (16- to 24-year-olds)

Number who have used	Best estimate	Low estimate	High estimate
Amphetamines	216,000	179,000	259,000
Cannabis	1,497,000	1,457,000	1,588,000
Cocaine	270,000	229,000	317,000
Crack	27,000	16,000	46,000
Ecstasy	312,000	268,000	363,000
Heroin	12,000	6,000	27,000
LSD	49,000	33,000	72,000
Magic mushrooms	99,000	76,000	130,000
Methadone	9,000	3,000	22,000
Tranquillisers	47,000	31,000	70,000
Amyl nitrite	247,000	209,000	293,000
Glues	29,000	17,000	47,000
Any drug	1,629,000	1,608,000	1,723,000
Class A	474,000	419,000	534,000

Notes: Numbers have been rounded to the nearest 1,000. See Methodological note for technical details on estimates. Anabolic steroids have been excluded due to low prevalence. Source: 2002/03 BCS. Core and boost sample (weighted data).

Some interesting observations can be made when splitting the 16- to 24-year-age group into 16–19 and 20–24. This has the advantage of highlighting differences between the two age groups, and showing whether either of the two age groups may be skewing the overall estimates.

Estimates from the 2002/03 BCS show that for the majority of drugs, the 20 to 24 age group has higher levels of use (Table 5). Those in this age group are more likely to have tried amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, LSD and tranquillisers than those in the younger age group. The exception is for glue. Those in the younger age group are more likely to have tried glue in the last year than those in the older age group. Glue has traditionally been seen as a drug used by people in their early to mid-teens and this may be because younger people find glue easier – and cheaper – to obtain than illicit drugs.

Prevalence of Class A use among 16- to 24- year-olds was estimated at 8% for last year use. When this is examined for the two age groups, use among 16- to 19-year-olds is 6% and use for 20- to 24-year-olds is substantially higher at 10%.

Last month use of cocaine, ecstasy and tranquillisers was higher among the older age group than the younger age group. Class A use overall is therefore higher for 20- to 24-year-olds than for 16- to 19-year-olds.

Table 5 Prevalence of drug use (16- to 24-year-olds)

Percentage used	16–19	20–24	16–24
Amphetamines			
Last year	2.9	4.6	3.7
Last month	1.8	1.5	1.7
Cannabis			
Last year	24.6	27.2	25.8
Last month	15.3	17.1	16.2
Cocaine			
Last year	3.0	6.4	4.7
Last month	1.3	2.5	1.9
Crack			
Last year	0.4	0.5	0.5
Last month	0.1	0.3	0.2
Ecstasy			
Last year	4.0	6.9	5.4
Last month	1.9	3.3	2.6
Heroin			
Last year	0.1	0.3	0.2
Last month	–	0.3	0.1
LSD			
Last year	0.4	1.4	0.8
Last month	0.2	0.4	0.3
Magic mushrooms			
Last year	1.3	2.2	1.7
Last month	0.5	0.4	0.5
Methadone			
Last year	0.1	0.2	0.1
Last month	–	0.2	0.1
Tranquillisers			
Last year	0.3	1.3	0.8
Last month	0.1	0.7	0.4
Amyl nitrite			
Last year	4.2	4.3	4.3
Last month	1.4	2.0	1.7
Anabolic steroids			
Last year	0.0	0.2	0.1
Last month	–	0.1	0.0
Glues			
Last year	0.9	0.1	0.5
Last month	0.2	0.0	0.1
Any drug			
Last year	26.8	29.5	28.1
Last month	16.7	18.6	17.6
Class A			
Last year	6.1	10.4	8.2
Last month	3.0	4.8	3.8

Notes: '0.0' estimate is less than 0.5 but not zero, '–' = zero. *Core and boost data. Source: 2002/03 BCS (weighted data).

Number of drugs used among 16- to 24-year-olds

The 2002/03 BCS estimates that 62% of 16- to 24-year-old drug users had used only one drug in the last year and nearly three-quarters had used just one drug in the last month (Table 6). This is slightly lower than the overall figure for 16- to 59-year-olds. Use of two drugs is also slightly lower than for 16- to 59-year-olds for both last year and last month use. Conversely, a higher percentage of young users have used more than two drugs in the last year and last month than 16- to 59-year-olds in general, resulting in 4% having used six or more drugs in the last year and 2% in the last month.

Conclusion

This study underlines the strong relationship between drug use and age highlighted in past research, with drug use peaking among younger people in their early to mid-20s. However, while age may be one of the strongest factors associated with drug use, other factors such as gender, ethnic origin and geographical location also need to be taken into account. The relationship between some of these factors and drug consumption has been explored elsewhere (see Aust and Condon, 2003; Aust and Smith, 2003).

Identifying which social factors influence drug use helps policymakers understand which individuals are more likely

Table 6 Percentage using varying number of drugs (16 to 24-year-olds)

Number of drugs used	1	2	3	4	5	6+
Last year	62.3	16.6	8.7	5.5	3.2	3.6
Last month	73.9	11.7	7.1	4.1	1.2	1.9

Notes: Estimates based on users of drugs. Source: 2002/03 BCS. Core and boost sample (weighted data).

to fall into higher risk categories for drug use and ensures that service providers can target their efforts at those most likely to need them. One area where existing research is less able to provide assistance concerns changing patterns in drug use. This Findings describes a number of increases in the use of drugs such as cocaine, along with decreases in the use of amphetamines and LSD. Why have these increases and decreases occurred? One way to look at this question is to think about demand and supply factors. Demand factors might include changes in fashion around drugs and in having the money to buy drugs. Supply factors might include increases in the availability of specific drugs and decreasing prices. Future research needs to explore these factors more closely and try to understand the relationship between them.

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Methodological note

The 2002/03 BCS has a nationally representative sample of 36,479 adults living in private households in England and Wales. The response rate was 74%. Of the total achieved sample, 24,604 respondents were eligible to complete the self-completion drugs module. Subtracting the 1,002 respondents who refused to take part and a further 16 respondents for methodological reasons, this gave a final sample size of 23,586. The 2002/03 BCS also included an additional sample of 16 to 24-year-olds. The response rate for the youth boost was 75%. The total number of 16 to 24-year-olds from both the core and booster sample was 4,292. See Bolling et al. (2002) for more information.

The BCS has moved from a biennial to a continuous survey. The reporting period has moved from a calendar to a financial year. The BCS has adopted 'calibration weighting', which is designed to adjust for known differentials in response rates across age, gender and regional sub-groups. This weighting has been applied to sweeps from 1996 onwards. All estimates in this Findings have incorporated calibration techniques; thus some estimates vary slightly from those previously published. The impact of calibration weighting on estimates remains relatively constant over consecutive sweeps: on average 'ever use' estimates increase by a 0.5 percentage point, 'year use' by 0.2 and 'month use' by 0.1. See Simmons (2002) for more information.

Two-tailed significance tests were carried out at the 5% level. Estimates of the number of users are based on 95% confidence intervals (calculated using a logit transformation where proportions were less than 0.2 or greater than 0.8). The figures are calculated using population estimates provided by The Office for National Statistics. A design factor of 1.2 has been used throughout.

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