



Bash street kids

The cocaine and ecstasy markets are splitting in two, with young people and students being the major consumers in an expanding industry in cheaper, lower quality products.

Max Daly takes a look at the results of this year's UK-wide drug trend survey

Supermarket-style choices of 'basic' and 'luxury' cocaine are increasingly being sold as the market for the drug continues to grow, according to *Druglink Street Drug Trends 2007*.

Feedback from the survey, carried out among 80 drug services, drug action teams and police forces in 20 towns and cities across the UK found cocaine is being sold on a two tier level in many areas, as street dealers and drug gangs react to a rapidly expanding customer base among teenagers.

The practice further cements the notion that although illegal, Britain's drug market acts like any other. As the market for cocaine expands, so does the choice of product.

More affluent and 'seasoned' customers, as well as those

who take the drug outside the pub circuit are fuelling the demand for higher quality cocaine, usually sold at £50 a gram.

Cheaper, more heavily cut ('bashed') versions of the drug – usually £30 – are available in virtually every area surveyed. The rapidly expanding market in cut-price cocaine is popular among young people, people taking it in pubs, new users and people on low incomes.

In Birmingham, individual dealers are offering their customers a choice of two grades of cocaine – 'commercialised' at £30 a gram and 'Peruvian' at £50 a gram. In Nottingham, the high-end wrap is known as 'rocket fuel'.

"We are seeing the age of first use and of problem use

dropping," says Lewis Smith of Manchester drugs charity Access 2. "The proliferation of cocaine is going mental. It's expediential." Smith says 10 years ago in Manchester most young people started using cocaine when they were around 22. "Now we are seeing many young people start using at 15 and getting into problems with the drug at 18.

He said two different products were being sold to cater for two different markets. "Sometimes it's the same dealer offering two products. What people are getting is more choice."

This has been accompanied by a drop in the actual weight of a 'one gram' wrap – most commonly weighing in at 0.8 and 0.9 of a gram – and a significant fall in the purity of cocaine. The average purity of cocaine seized at street level by police between April and June this year, according to the Forensic Science Service, is now 34 per cent, compared to 54 per cent 10 years ago. The degree to which cocaine is cut with other substances such as the pain relievers benzocaine and phenacetin (see box) after its arrival in the UK is evident from the fact that the average purity of the drug seized by Customs and Excise – 67 per cent – is virtually double that seized by police.

The selling of crack and heroin as one package has become so endemic that in east Birmingham dealers refuse to sell the drug separately

Merseyside Police said in Liverpool the most significant trend over the last year has been the proliferation of low purity cocaine. "We think cocaine is taking some of the market away from ecstasy. There is a lot of low quality cocaine and this appears to be due to many users cutting the cocaine and selling it on again and again."

The two-tier system is also increasingly coming to the fore in the ecstasy market according to the survey, carried out in July and August this year. In some towns and cities, the bottom has fallen out of the ecstasy pill market, with the average street price of a pill in the UK – most commonly sold in batches of 3 to 5 pills for £10 – being £2.40. In Glasgow, where six low quality pills are sold for £10, according to one drug worker "ecstasy appears to be disappearing fast from the market".

Powder and crystal MDMA, as a more expensive option for the more seasoned clubber at an average of £38 a gram, half what it was 10 years ago, are gaining ground on the pill version of the drug, now the preserve of teenagers because of its low MDMA content.

In Birmingham, where crystal and powder MDMA now takes up 35 per cent of the ecstasy market compared to five per cent 10 years ago, drug workers revealed that most 'pills' contain zero MDMA, and are instead made from amphetamine base. As a result, children as young as 15 are taking the hallucinogenic drug ketamine to give them a more ecstasy-like experience. In response to the trend, young people's drug services in the city are increasing the output of harm reduction messages to teenagers around ketamine.

Young people are buying cocaine to mix with other drugs. Across the country, poly-drug use amongst young people – particularly the mixing of alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine (see feature p24) – continues to become increasingly identified by police and drug services. In Blackpool, drug services are reporting that clubbers are taking a cocktail of

drugs made up of ecstasy pills, MDMA, speed and ketamine, as well as a drink dubbed 'liquid cocaine' – champagne, vodka and Red Bull.

Prices across the board have remained relatively stable, as they have since Druglink's street prices and trends surveys began in 2004. Price blips are usually down to individual gangs of dealers saturating an area with cheap drugs to gain a foothold before they hike the prices up again. Previous trends picked up by the investigation over the last three years – increased use of ketamine, combined dealing and use of heroin and crack such as speed-balling, steroid use and the rarity of crystal meth all remain significant in 2007.

The selling of crack and heroin as one package has become so endemic that in east Birmingham dealers refuse to sell the drug separately. In Nottingham, when heroin-only use became stagnant, dealers gave customers free crack. Now, according to David Manley, a consultant at Nottinghamshire Healthcare Trust, 95 per cent of Nottingham's crack users also use heroin.

More commonly used drugs such as alcohol and cannabis have also been causing concern around the UK. Problem alcohol use among drug users was flagged up by several drug services as a growing issue in the last year. Services in York, Middlesbrough, Cardiff and Birmingham said young people resorted to heavy alcohol use as a substitute if illegal drugs were not readily available or if they had stabilised their drug use. Birmingham HIAH, a young people's alcohol and drug service, has identified a "large increase in the amount of young people stating cheap alcohol as a primary or secondary problem drug, mainly as a cheaper alternative to cannabis and ecstasy if they can't be found." In Glasgow and Manchester, the mixing of alcohol with either diazepam, prescription opiates or cocaine has become "a major problem".

The Iceni Project, a drug treatment service in Ipswich, said it had seen a "steep increase" in people coming in with and parents seeking advice about cannabis-related issues. Between January and March, more than half of all the project's new referrals had problems with cannabis use.

AVERAGE STREET DRUG PRICES: UK 2007	
Herbal cannabis (standard quality) per ounce:	£87
Herbal cannabis (good quality) per ounce:	£134
Resin cannabis per ounce:	£55
Heroin per gram:	£43
Heroin £10 bag: 0.15 gram	£43
Cocaine per gram:	£2.40
Crack cocaine £10 rock: 0.15 gram	£38
Ecstasy pill:	£9.80
Crystal/powder MDMA per gram:	£25
Amphetamine per gram:	
Ketamine per gram:	



COCAINE 'FLAVOURED' POWDER

It's an urban myth that cocaine is cut with talcum powder or rat poison. Most of the substances it is cut with look similar and have a similar effect, but are cheaper for drug gangs to buy than cocaine.

Cocaine being sold on Britain's streets today is considerably less pure than it was 10 years ago at around 30 per cent. According to the Forensic Science Service, the highest quality batch UK police seized between January and March was 90 per cent pure, while the lowest was one per cent.

Reversing along the supply chain, to seizures at ports and airports by Customs officers, the average purity of cocaine seized is 67 per cent, a purity which, unlike police seizures, has remained fairly regular in the last four years. This means that gangs in Britain are increasing their profit margin by adulterating cocaine with other substances.

The most common adulterants in cocaine seized by police are benzocaine, (a pain reliever usually found in mouth ointment), phenacetin (used as an analgesic until scientists suggested it may cause cancer), lignocaine (a local anaesthetic used in dentistry) and caffeine.

Other substances added to cocaine include diltiazem (a drug used to treat hypertension), boric acid (used as an antiseptic, an insecticide and in nuclear fission), procaine (used to reduce the pain from injections), hydroxyzine (used to treat anxiety disorders), tetramisole (a substance used to expel or destroy tapeworms in domestic animals) and the sugars mannitol and lactose.

COKE STATS: COMING UP

- While most drug use has remained stable, the proportion of adults who said they had used it in the last year, according to the government's British Crime Survey has risen from 1.2 per cent in 1998 to 2.4 per cent in 2005/2006. It is estimated that around 2.2 million Brits have taken cocaine powder in their lifetime.
- Since the early 1990s there has been more cocaine seized than heroin by weight, the number of cocaine seizures went up by a factor of four while the price has fallen by around a half.
- Although cocaine is growing in popularity, only a small, but growing, proportion of young people are taking the drug. Two per cent of secondary school children said they had taken the drug in the last year. This figure was just under six per cent for 16-24 year olds. Calls to Frank about cocaine now account for 17 per cent of their phone inquiries, compared to 10 per cent three years ago.
- According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the average price in Europe for cocaine fell by 22 per cent between 1999-2004, taking into account inflation. Global cocaine production is estimated by the UN drugs office to have increased in 2004 to 687 tons, while Europe seizures are up by 36 per cent.
- The total number of fatalities where cocaine/crack cocaine was mentioned in UK death certificates rose from five in 1990 to 171 in 2002, but dropped to 142 in 2003, before increasing to a new peak of 185 in 2004.
- In 2003, some 7,230 individuals were cautioned by the police or dealt with by the courts for drug offences involving cocaine. This was an eight-fold increase on the 1990 figure of 860. The number of occasions on which cocaine was seized within the UK by law enforcement agencies rose five-fold (from 1,636 to 7,744) between 1990 and 2003.
- The price of cocaine in the UK has fallen rapidly over the past decade. In 1990, the average price per gram of powder was £87, but by 2004 this figure had reduced to £53. If the effects of inflation are taken into account, the fall in real terms has been even greater.
- Rates of problematic cocaine use amongst those presenting for treatment for drug dependence showed an almost four-fold increase between 1993 and 2001, from 2,331 to 8,327 episodes.

Cutting coke:

THE DRUG TRAFFICKING EXPERT: ALLEN MORGAN

A lot of dealers out there are selling two commodities. A product which is 'bashed' or heavily cut for £550 an ounce and a decent product for £700 an ounce. It's a very general cocaine market because it's so popular. A lot of people are using it who never have done before because they can afford to. Then you have a more select market, such as journalists, who dabble in it but don't like the rubbish some people are selling now.

It's the same quantity of cocaine coming into this country with an expanding market, so dealers are making it go further. First it will be adulterated and then when it can't get cut any more it's sold under weight. A gram is never a gram, it's usually 0.8g. The profit has dropped out of cocaine in the sense that if you are providing a good product at its full weight you won't make any profit.

Cocaine now seems to have reached the mass market and it is apparent that in order to meet this increased demand dealers increasingly have to bash the cocaine with adulterants such as phenacetin, lignocaine and caffeine in order to maintain profit margins and to ensure that there is enough to go round.

This fall in the quality of cocaine has led to an inevitable reduction in prices at all levels of supply and now it is not unusual to encounter users who are buying cocaine at prices as low as £30 for a single gram and not just in the major cities, users from small towns are reporting buying cocaine at ridiculously low prices. But it is apparent that there can be considerable disparity in the purity of seizures and whilst it is not unusual to encounter a typical purity in the region of 30 per cent, seizures are increasingly in the region of 20 per cent. Compare this to 2001 when purity levels at street level were typically in excess of 50 per cent.

Recently I have encountered seizures at multi-kilogram level as low as eight per cent, whilst at the other end of the spectrum I have encountered seizures of a couple of grams with purity levels in excess of 50 per cent. Increasingly it is apparent that there is a potential divide between cocaine destined for the 'masses' and the more traditional 'connoisseurs', who are willing to pay a higher price for a higher quality product.

Official valuations based upon figures produced by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) for a kilogram of cocaine can range from £15,000 to £30,000, but in real terms poor quality cocaine can often be purchased at this level for as little as £12,000 per kilogram. Whilst there are a number of factors that can affect drug valuations, it is apparent that in respect of cocaine, this disparity in prices can be explained by the considerable disparity in levels of purity.

This growing divide in the domestic cocaine market appears to be increasingly confirmed not just by official sources but also those closely involved in the distribution of the drug. In a conversation with Andy, a convicted cocaine supplier, he reported that, prior to his conviction he was supplying ounces of cocaine at a variety of prices depending on the customers' needs and quality of the drugs. All business was conducted via mobile telephones with Andy prepared to deliver the drugs virtually round the clock. He confirmed that even when supplying at this level he routinely bashed the drugs that he was supplying.

His prices were typically based on a price of £500 per ounce for standard bashed cocaine and £850 per ounce for a better quality product which, he at least, had not adulterated. "I always had two sorts of coke available. If I was selling to muppets who just want coke at the cheapest price, then I would sell them the £500 gear. But then I had other customers who weren't bothered about the price but wanted decent gear and so I had another batch, the expensive stuff, which I sold for £850 on the ounce, but the quality was loads better. The people who were buying that weren't buying it to bash and sell but mostly wanted decent gear to use themselves and were willing to pay top price for it."

It is clear that cocaine, the one time society 'champagne' drug now transcends all social boundaries and there are dealers out there who are exploiting this two-tier market and catering for both sides of the divide.

■ Allen Morgan MSc is a specialist on drug trafficking networks and cannabis cultivation and provides expert evidence to the courts in drug trafficking cases.

THE COKE DEALER: ADRIAN, 40, NORTH LONDON

"The question isn't, is the coke pure, it's a matter of how heavily it's been cut. At my level where I buy an ounce as and when required, my suppliers wash and repress it to about 80-60 per cent purity - which is as pure as most people would want it. The price is pretty standard at about £1,000, but the purity is the unknown quantity. In many cases it comes down to a matter of trust.

"Youngsters on the street are buying and selling deals at 0.6 of gram washed to a purity of about 20 per cent, it's rubbish. The best you can hope for is 0.8 at around 40-50 per cent, if you want to buy small amounts at source quality you either have to know someone very well or pay a premium."

Dealers have always washed and repressed imported cocaine, but purity being the key selling point, techniques to breathe new life into coke cut to shreds are now being employed further down the distribution networks.

Compressors or mini re-pressers, advertised and once used for compressing cannabis pollen, and available in high street and market head shops for £10, are being used to repackage low quality product to look as if it is straight off the boat.

"It's a gimmick I guess," says Adrian. "Buying your coke in solid form is the thing of the moment. Personally I'd rather buy it in powder form, it's easier for me."

Adrian would class himself among a school of dealers who essentially see it as a hobby, a sideline, and quite separate to the commercial distributors. "The quality of coke you get from your dealer really depends on how much they want you as a customer or who you know. The market is hierarchical, like a food chain. Someone buying cheap street wraps over time will look to buy in slightly larger amounts so get a discount or want better quality coke. If the dealer feels its in his favour, you'll move up the food chain. If he thinks you're an idiot, he'll just change the appearance of what he's selling you."

Interview by Steve Sampson