



Cocaine™

Snow, skunk and psychonauts

Which substances have been the movers and shakers in the drug market over the last ten years? Max Daly on the rise of cocaine, cannabis farms, internet highs and the rapidly evolving business of selling drugs.

As Britain awoke in the year 2000, with a collective sore head and a feeling that the 'millennium bug' may have been the largest case of mass global nonsense since LSD tattoos, a new era in the drug trade was emerging.

It was a decade that would see significant change in the UK's drug market and an expanding menu of substances available for drug users to pick and mix from. In 2000, the national media was awash with drug stories, while the political landscape seemed to be shifting, with the Blair government having prioritised drugs as a policy issue.

There were some depressingly familiar sounding tragedies: the celebrity Paula Yates, a TV presenter and former wife of Sir Bob Geldof, died of an accidental heroin overdose; while a batch of heroin contaminated with Clostridium bacteria killed 37 injectors in England and Ireland.

The drug testing of offenders was a mere pilot study, Keith Hellawell was in post as the UK's first drug czar, the National Treatment Agency was a twinkle in Jack Straw's eye and the Runcimann Report, demanding a spring clean of Britain's ageing drug laws, caused such a stir that the *Mail on Sunday* declared that the majority of Brits were in favour of decriminalising cannabis.

The British Crime Survey (BCS) showed that cannabis was being used in the last year by more than one in ten Brits. Hallucinogens such as LSD and magic mushrooms were still relatively popular in 2000. In addition, Dr Karl Jansen, writing in *Druglink* magazine, reported that the hallucinogenic anaesthetic ketamine – not on the BCS radar until 2006 – was gaining traction within some areas of UK dance culture.

Crack cocaine and heroin, although limited to a relatively low number of users, reached a peak among those responding to the BCS, both being taken in the last year by 0.3 per cent of interviewees. But there was certainly no evidence of the 'crack epidemic' that both American and British police had predicted for the UK in the 1990s.

But, among the flurry of newspaper headlines on drugs in 2000, there was one substance that was looming large and becoming of an increasing concern to drug agencies and police. Powder cocaine had been slowly edging its way from high society to the mainstream since the mid-1980s. More and more stories appeared in the media to forecast a blizzard of snow. And, by the start of the new millennium, the statistics were starting to bear this out.

The 2000 British Crime Survey revealed that cocaine use had jumped dramatically over the last four years. In 1996, 1.3 per cent of young adults and 0.6 per cent of 16 to 59 year olds had used cocaine in the last year. By 2000, those figures had risen to 5.2 per cent and two per cent respectively.

Cocaine's rising popularity surfaced in the media. In May 2000, *EastEnders* actress Daniella Westbrook was photographed at the British Soap Awards with one giant nostril, instead of two small ones. Westbrook's nasal septum – the wall of cartilage that separates the nostrils – had been eaten away by some intense cocaine snorting.

BY 2001, COCAINE HAD OVERTAKEN BOTH AMPHETAMINES AND ECSTASY – THE BOOM DRUG OF THE 1990S – TO BECOME THE MOST POPULAR RECREATIONAL DRUG IN BRITAIN AFTER CANNABIS

In the same month, *The Observer* ran a hefty piece on the business end of the expanding trade in cocaine, revealing that jailed Liverpool drug baron Curtis 'Cocky' Warren had raked in so much cash from importing cocaine into Britain he had made it onto the *Sunday Times* Rich List.

By 2001, cocaine had overtaken both amphetamines and ecstasy – the 'boom drug' of the 1990s – to become the most popular recreational drug in Britain after cannabis. Indeed, cocaine was to become the major mover and shaker in Britain's drug market between 2000 and 2010, largely at the expense of its cheaper, longer-lasting, but less-glamorous fellow stimulant, amphetamine.

So why the cocaine surge? The dominant factor was the increased accessibility of cocaine on British streets, and this was made possible by two major shifts in the international underworld. The fragmentation of Colombia's cocaine trafficking industry, which until the 1990s had been dominated by the Medellin and Cali cartels, meant that a fresh market away from America had to be found. This turned out to be Europe, and Spain, with its lengthy coast and familiar language, was a natural docking point.

Many British crime gangs were

perfectly placed to take advantage of this. During the 1980s, hundreds of UK criminals on the run had relocated to the Costa del Sol as a result of a collapse of the extradition arrangements between Britain and Spain.

With fresh supplies of Colombia's finest arriving by the boatload around the Spanish coast, some criminals decided that moving away from old-fashioned armed robberies and protection rackets into the less risky and more profitable business of drug trafficking might be a good idea. The world's fastest growing cocaine trafficking route seemed too lucrative an opportunity to ignore.

Spurred on by bountiful supply, the price of cocaine on Britain's streets started dropping rapidly. Even at 1998 levels of inflation, a gram of cocaine cost the equivalent of £256 in 1989. In 2001 cocaine was around £70 a gram and now it is around £40 a gram. Falling cocaine prices meant that a drug once seen as the pursuit of the champagne classes, was becoming more accessible to wider society – notably young people and blue collar workers.

Despite the purity of cocaine reaching these shores remaining at about 60-65%, the last decade has seen a dramatic drop in the quality of cocaine being sold at street level. Cocaine seized on British streets has plummeted from an average of over 50 per cent purity at the start of the decade to around 20 per cent in 2010. The slump in purity is down to UK importers cutting cocaine as soon as it passes customs, maximising profit and feeding high demand by cutting good quality imported powder with a new breed of cocaine-mimicking substances such as benzocaine – an anaesthetic used in dentistry.

Over the last decade, police have increasingly come across the large presses that are used by gangs who cut the cocaine and repackage it into blocks to make it look untouched. Typically, and largely as a consequence of a highly fragmented dealing market that developed over the 2000s, the cocaine is then cut all the way down the chain until it reaches the customer. In some cases, police are arresting buyers and sellers with 'cocaine' containing as little as five per cent of the real thing.

Cocaine's short-lasting effects and the fact that the drug has become increasingly adulterated may have, incidentally, made it more palatable to people who want to combine it with Britain's nighttime drinking culture.

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High purity cocaine does not go down too well with large amounts of alcohol, while the relatively moderate highs of heavily adulterated 'charlie' are more suited than ecstasy or amphetamine to drinking in pubs.

The decade has witnessed the demise of LSD as a significant drug on the UK market to virtual obscurity – although there is some evidence that the drug could be set for a comeback. Magic mushrooms experienced a revival in popularity in Britain in the first half of the 2000s, but this was curtailed by an outright ban of all forms of psychoactive fungi – fresh or dried – in 2005. But while traditional hallucinogens fell in popularity, the hallucinogenic anaesthetic ketamine, used to treat US soldiers on the battlefield during the Vietnam war and now more commonly used in veterinary and dental surgery, became the surprise 'boom' drug of the decade.

Ketamine's rise from a niche drug within a handful of free party and clubbing scenes to a staple of the UK drug scene was first detected during the *Druglink Street Drug Trends Survey 2005*. Many drug services and police forces around the UK reported more widespread use of the then legal drug, which became a Class C substance in 2006. Despite the ban, ketamine use continued to increase, with an estimated 125,000 young adults having tried the drug in 2009, compared to 58,000 two years earlier. With its rise in use have come problems associated with injecting, dependence and bladder or urinary tract damage following chronic or longterm use.

Along with ketamine in the 2000s came a host of other substances that added to Britain's recreational drug menu. Like ketamine, the liquid solvent GHB and its precursor GBL moved from relatively low levels of use in small drug-using communities – for example, the gay clubbing scene in London – into the mainstream. And also like ketamine, more widespread use of GHB and GBL raised fresh health issues such as serious dependency and withdrawal from the drug.

Other substances that saw rises in use as the decade progressed included steroids, injected by a new generation of young, body conscious men; an increase in the use and availability of counterfeit diazepam (better known as valium), predominantly as a heroin alternative; and the heroin substitute buprenorphine (brand name Subutex), particularly among current and former prisoners in the north of England.

Crack cocaine failed to gain much

traction with British drug users, and remained largely confined within the estimated 330,000 so-called 'problem drug users' in England and Wales, a large number of whom use both crack and heroin. But in 2009, the NTA reported a shift away from what it called the 'Trainspotting generation', amid signs that the number of young people seeking treatment for heroin and crack cocaine addiction in England was falling.

Conversely, the death of the 'club drug generation' has been much exaggerated. The last two years of the 2000s have seen a fresh wave of 'superclubs' being established and more people admitting to last year ecstasy use than in the 1996.

The crystal meth epidemic, falsely heralded by virtually every TV station and newspaper in the land throughout the 2000s, never happened.

Cannabis use, even before an upsurge of media attention around its effects on the mental health of users, has been steadily decreasing over the last ten years. Although the number of people drinking alcohol has reduced, crucially those who are drinking are drinking to more dangerous levels.

In March 2009, *Druglink* published the first-ever investigation into a relatively new legal high that had been creating waves among Britain's online 'psychonaut' communities – online groups who experiment with new drugs and new ways of taking drugs and report back on the results. It revealed that the research chemical mephedrone, seen by users as a legal, cleaner, cheaper and reliably potent alternative to cocaine, ecstasy or speed, was being bought and sold entirely over the internet in the same way people buy new clothes or books – using credit cards, PayPal accounts and DHL.

Mephedrone's subsequent dramatic rise in popularity across the country – from the inner city 'in crowd' to kids in rural backwaters – marked a new era in drug selling over the internet. Until the arrival of mephedrone, which was banned in April following an intense media campaign, legal highs sold over the internet were largely counterfeit over-the-counter drugs or unreliable, largely ineffectual 'copies' of established illegal drugs – often based on caffeine or herbal extracts.

Ten years into the new century, it seems likely that mephedrone and the raft of similar legal highs that are being sold now over the internet have changed the way drugs are bought and sold for good. Not only is the British drug market shifting onto new ground, but as the *Druglink Street Drug Trends Survey* published in 2009 found, it is also

becoming more varied and fragmented – chiefly as a result of a more connected global marketplace. The 2010 survey, set to be published in the September-October issue of *Druglink*, will give an insight into the current trends in the British drug market.

The trade in illegal drugs is beginning to mirror the junk food economy – with an expanding menu of increasingly readily available, cheap, but low quality products being sold to a rapidly less discerning group of customers.

Polydrug use is the buzz word of 2010, with consumers able to mix and match substances such as alcohol, legal highs, cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis, sometimes with serious and unpredictable implications for their health.

Fragmentation also characterised the supply side of the trade over the 2000s. In March 2007 *Druglink* published its investigation into a phenomenon that was changing the face of Britain's drug trade: cannabis farms. It found a staggering number of cannabis farms – three a day – were being unearthed by police. No longer was the cannabis supply down to a handful of major gangs with contacts in Morocco and Amsterdam.

The farms, which varied from suburban bedrooms crammed with 30 plants to rural warehouses kitted out with hydroponics equipment and thousands of plants, meant that for the first time the UK – historically an importer of illegal substances – had become a drug producing nation. The cannabis cultivation explosion, largely driven by Vietnamese gangs producing high yield skunk farms, turned the statistics on their head. In the 1990s, fuelled by a plentiful supply of Moroccan cheap resin, only 11 per cent of cannabis sold in UK streets was grown here. In 2010, that figure now exceeds 70 per cent.

The 2000s has been the decade that has seen a proliferation of drug dealers and drug gangs involved in the trade. Where big cities used to have one or two major drug dealing gangs controlling virtually all drug selling, now they have scores of small organisations working at varying levels in the trade, both with and against other dealing groups.

With police admitting that they are struggling to stem the tide of more traditional drugs such as cocaine and heroin coming into Britain, never mind the impotence of crop eradication efforts in south America and Afghanistan, the accelerating expansion of the drug market onto the world wide web looks a daunting prospect for agencies who are tasked to cut supply to a nation that seems intent on getting high.