

Geoffrey Pearson, Michael Shiner

# Head counting

## Two polls of public opinion

Two MORI polls of public attitudes to drugs show that the British view may not be what policymakers and researchers imagine

**E**arlier this year the report of the Police Foundation's Independent Committee of Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 made numerous recommendations on the reform of Britain's drug laws.<sup>1</sup> It received widespread press coverage on the theme, 'Britain needs a vigorous national debate on these matters'.

Less mention was made of the findings of two MORI polls commissioned by the Committee, which investigated public attitudes to drugs.

Little is known about public attitudes towards drug use in Britain. Occasionally surveys have asked whether people think cannabis should be legalised. These tend to show a steady increase in tolerance to cannabis use, especially among younger people.

Larger issues remain unexplored, such as perceptions of health risks associated with different drugs or what influences someone's decision whether or not to use an illicit drug.

The Independent Committee felt that, 30 years after the Misuse of Drugs Act had been framed, they should attempt to discover public attitudes to drugs and drug laws in Britain.

To what extent does the law help to

prevent harmful drug use? Do people think that drug laws are necessary, or is drug use considered a personal decision? How do people assess the risks associated with drug use?

Two surveys were commissioned from MORI, who reported on their findings. We also conducted a detailed secondary analysis of the survey data for the Independent Committee.

One was part of MORI's Omnibus survey comprising a nationally representative quota sample of 1,645 adults aged 16-59 years.<sup>2</sup> The other involved 3,529 children and young people aged 11-16 years.<sup>3</sup> The surveys covered a wide spread of issues, including health and the perceived harmfulness of different drugs.

### Health and law

People in Britain take drug problems seriously – two-thirds of adults said drugs laws are not tough enough. A similar majority did not think that drug use is a private matter beyond the law. Even so, two-thirds of adults felt the police were powerless to stop people taking drugs. They gave health issues as the reason most likely to deter drug use.

But drugs were not simply lumped together. Though a majority want stronger laws, one-half of adults

agreed the law should be changed so that it is not against the law to use cannabis. Slightly more than one-third disagreed, the remainder (13 per cent) neither agreed nor disagreed. A slight majority appears to favour some form of 'de-criminalisation' of cannabis, while a firm majority disapprove of other illicit drug use.

A question asking 'what should be the highest priorities for the police' further emphasised the relative unimportance of legal controls on certain forms of drug use. Respondents were asked to nominate three priorities out of a list of 11 crimes.

Heroin dealers and sexual assaults on women were clear priorities, mentioned by two-thirds or more. One-third mentioned assaults, racial violence and drink-driving. The lowest priority included heroin users (8 per cent), cannabis dealers (8 per cent) and vehicle theft (4 per cent). Cannabis use was regarded as the very lowest priority, mentioned by less than half of a per cent.

Apart from the low priority afforded to both cannabis use and cannabis dealers, the distinction between heroin use and heroin dealers is interesting. Presumably heroin use is seen as a health matter.

**Geoffrey Pearson** is Wates Professor of Social Work, Goldsmiths College, University of London; and was a member of the Independent Committee.

**Michael Shiner** is a Research Officer in the Public Policy Research Unit, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Figure 1: Drugs rated as 'very' or 'fairly' harmful, age 11-16 years (percentages)

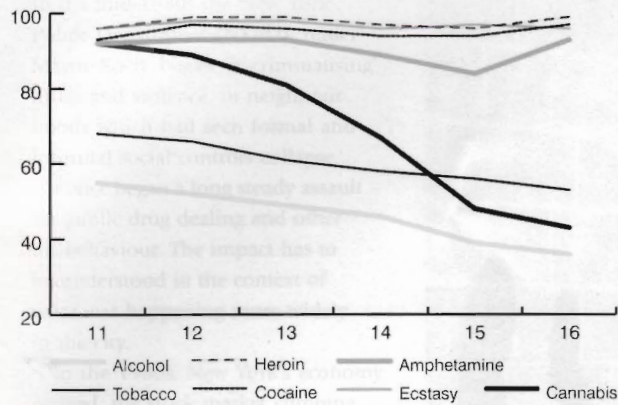


Figure 2: Do you know someone your own age who smokes/has smoked cannabis?

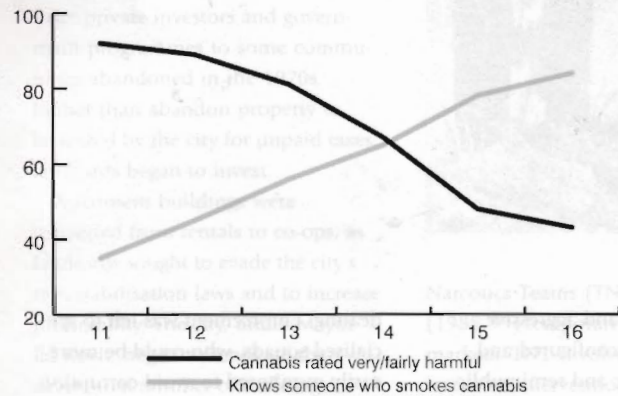


Figure 3: Adults who rate different drugs as 'very' or 'fairly' harmful (percentages)

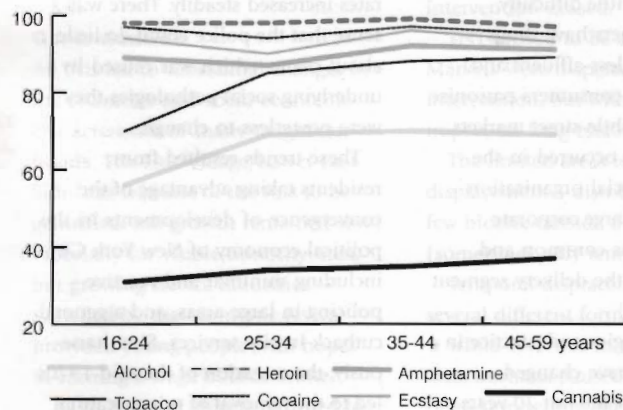


Table 1: Which three of the following do you think should be the highest priority of the police?

Sexual assaults on women	71%
Drug dealers who sell heroin	66%
Assault	32%
Racial violence	32%
Drink-driving	32%
Burglary	22%
Mugging	17%
Drug dealers who sell cannabis	8%
Heroin users	8%
Vehicle theft	4%
Cannabis users	0.5%

## Drugs and harm

One of the most revealing questions concerned how people rated the harmfulness of different drugs. This question was in both the adult and school-based surveys, allowing comparison between the attitudes of young people and adults.

People were asked whether they thought a substance 'very harmful', 'fairly harmful', 'not very harmful' or 'not at all harmful'. They were asked to rate the harmfulness of heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamine, cannabis, alcohol and tobacco. A simple measure of relative harmfulness is obtained by combining 'very' and 'fairly' harmful responses.

At age 11 and 12, children tend to see all illicit drugs as harmful – more than 90 per cent think all illicit drugs very or fairly harmful. Tobacco and alcohol were 'much less harmful'.

As children get older, their attitudes towards heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamine hardly change. These drugs continued to be seen as harmful by 90 per cent or more of young people. Attitudes towards alcohol and tobacco tend to soften – only one-half of 15-16 year olds define tobacco as harmful, while a little more than one-third sees alcohol as harmful.

What changes most dramatically are young people's attitudes towards cannabis – those who perceive cannabis as harmful drops by more than a half. 15 and 16 year olds who see cannabis as harmful are in a minority. By this age cannabis is seen as different from other illicit drugs.

This dramatic shift of opinion is an aspect of increased familiarity with cannabis as children grow older. The school survey did not attempt to estimate self-reported drug use, but did ask, 'do you know anyone your

own age who smokes/has smoked cannabis or not?' The proportion saying 'yes' steadily increases with age. Among 15-16 year olds only 15 per cent did not know someone who smoked cannabis. Their increased familiarity with cannabis mirrors the decreasing view of it as harmful.

These trends were consistent among boys and girls, with no evidence that different types of school or social background influenced the results. The sub-samples were too small to allow meaningful comparisons for different ethnic groups.

## Generation gap

This evidence shows that many adolescents in Britain accept cannabis (but not other drugs) as relatively unthreatening, but we might expect different attitudes among adults. The generation gap is often thought to be at the heart of Britain's drugs dilemma, but this survey questions the very idea of a generation gap.

Adults from 16 to 59 years of age consistently see heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamine as 'very' or 'fairly' harmful. With equal consistency a majority of two-thirds do not see cannabis as nearly so harmful by these measures – with little observable movement in terms of age.

What do change with age are adults' perceptions of the harmfulness of tobacco and, to a lesser degree, alcohol. The proportion of adults who see cannabis as less harmful than alcohol is actually greater among 45-59 year olds than among 16-24 year olds.

On first sight, this is unexpected. All available evidence on patterns of drug consumption show levels of use highest among young people, declining very rapidly among people aged 30 or more.

If, according to commentators such as Howard Parker and his colleagues, drug use among young people has become normalised in modern Britain, responses from older people and the parental generation are thought to be disapproval and anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Yet here something quite different is apparent.

The views of people in modern Britain would appear not to be what policymakers and researchers often imagine them to be ■

1. *Drugs and the Law: Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971*. Police Foundation, 2000.
2. MORI Social Research. *Attitudes Towards illegal Drug: Research Study Conducted for the Police Foundation*. MORI April 1999.
3. MORI Social Research. *Drugs Report: A Research Study Among 11-16 Year Olds*. Research Study Conducted for the Police Foundation. MORI January-February 1999.
4. H. Parker, J. Aldridge and F. Measham, *Illegal Leisure: The Normalization of Adolescent Recreational Drug Use*. Routledge, 1998.