

# THE RISE AND FALL OF

"Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates . . . Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight."

— Stanley Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics*.

BEFORE THE 'solvents problem' waxed and then waned in the media and among the public, a similar cycle had been completed with respect to the young 'deviants' of the '60s.

In his book *Folk devils and moral panics*, Stanley Cohen used material gathered from the public response to the mods-and-rockers' clashes of the mid-1960s to develop a theory of 'moral panic' as a response to emerging threats to society's values and interests.

Media reports of various seaside incidents portrayed the fairly homogeneous mass of young people as polarised into these rival gangs, encouraging their polarisation in reality. Public panic came to be out of all proportion to the size of the problem. Young people of all descriptions were turned back from seaside resorts on Bank Holiday weekends, and the fines and other punishments imposed were disproportionate to the relatively minor offences committed.

Coverage of these events encouraged people, including young people themselves, to see mods and rockers in opposition to one another, attracting more young people to the resorts on Bank Holiday weekends and giving a new shape to their presence there: they were 'looking for trouble' instead of 'doing nothing'.

Adult opinion was outraged by this apparently new phenomenon, and many and various causes and solutions were postulated. These were often extremely punitive and included, among others, forcing mods to smash up their own scooters with hammers.

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In the '60s it was the sometimes amphetamine-aided mods and rockers clashes that outraged the nation for a few years before interest faded. Similarly a moral panic over solvents spread throughout the UK from the mid-'70s and apparently faded in the '80s, leaving a legacy of damaging misconceptions. 'Shocking' punk sniffers and 'shocked' adults joined in mutual provocation, raising the temperature of public reaction and making sniffing a prime element in punk's stock of shock-tactics. Richard Ives explains how this unlikely alliance elevated glue sniffing to public drug concern number one.

## Richard Ives

Eventually the moral panic died away. What stopped it? From the point of view of the public and mass media, it was largely a waning of interest. The mod phenomenon had developed before receiving widespread public attention and the disturbances continued after reporting of them had ceased. Mods and rockers as folk devils were replaced by other new and newsworthy youth phenomena — notably drugs, student militancy, hippies and football hooligans.

*For adults and punks alike, sniffing became a potent sign of punk's deviant image.*

The rise and fall of the 'glue sniffer' can be looked at in similar terms. Glue sniffing was born as a social phenomenon in Britain in the late 1970s. Although not at first the prerogative of any particular youth subculture, sniffing was adopted by punks (and later by skinheads) because public perceptions of sniffing fitted in with what punk subculture 'had to say'.

Punk was opposed to consumption and to adults' solutions to problems. Political allegiance, if any, was to anarchy — a political form most opposed to all conventional solutions to structural problems, and significantly the one best suited to shock adults. As a response to youth unemployment and renewed threats of nuclear extinction, its slogan was 'no future'.

Dick Hebdige's notion that "subcultures are constructed, however obliquely, out of headlines"<sup>22</sup> gives an important clue to the origins of the punk movement. By presenting themselves as degenerate, punks were dramatising Britain's highly publicised decline. Punk was a spectacle. It became important to members of the subculture itself, as much as for adults outside it, for punk to be oppositional to adult concerns. As a result, these aspects of punk subculture became 'amplified'.

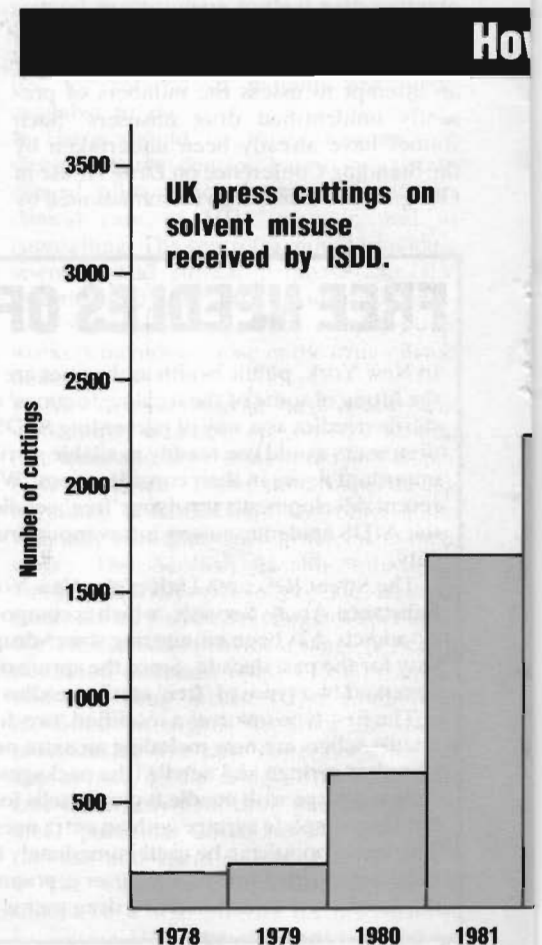
● **Glue equals punk, OK?:** Panic over glue was part of the panic about punk: the link in the public's mind between punk and glue was so strong that non-punk glue sniffing was assimilated to the root of the panic — the punk-glue axis.

Media presentations of sniffing associated with punk reinforced the adult pub-

lic's image of sniffing, but were often at odds with younger people's awareness that sniffing was not a punk preserve. There was a period in the early 1980s when many adults assumed any 'punkily' dressed youngster must be a sniffer, and anyone discovered sniffing must be a punk. This inaccurate coupling eventually broke down in the face of reality, especially when skinheads adopted equally visible sniffing.

Non-punks sniffed solvents for a variety of reasons. For some it was a cheap intoxicant, for others availability was crucial. The perceived risk involved — overstated again and again in the media and by parents and professionals — provided an attractive dare encouraging some to give it a try.

Parents who caught their child sniffing immediately associated this behaviour with





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their image of punk. Their child was either a punk or an insipient punk, or had been encouraged, or even forced, to sniff by punks. (This last explanation was sometimes eagerly seized upon by beleaguered children to explain their behaviour to angry parents.) In its formative period, the moral panic over solvent sniffing was a response to this (as adults saw it) extreme expression of punk negativity.

## Why glue sniffing?

By using household products as intoxicants, punks were certainly giving objects and events fresh meaning by re-assembling them in novel ways, one definition of the creation of a 'style'.<sup>3</sup> But from the start there must have been something about these objects that fitted punk's self-image.

For many years, experimental sniffing (and sometimes a bit more than experimental) had been fairly random individual and small group behaviour. Sniffing was taken up by a few punks, probably at first as a cheap 'high'. Adults who saw them were outraged, hostile, and often concerned: sniffing became a 'problem'.

Because sniffing was singled out for adult repulsion, punks came to see sniffing as useful 'oppositional behaviour', and adult emphasis on 'sniffing kills' resonated well with the punk theme of 'no future'. For adults and punks alike, sniffing be-

came a potent sign of punk's deviant image, arousing yet higher collective emotions spilling over into outrage against anything (such as the innocent scented

The hallucinations experienced by many solvent users helped provide a sense of shared 'communion' among the small group of sniffers.<sup>4</sup> At the same time these mystic experiences helped mark out the sniffer as someone special in a society where individuality is often not recognised. Hallucinations also offered youngsters scope to control a small part of their world. Sniffers report exerting considerable control over the course of their experiences and groups have reported that they can collectively control jointly experienced hallucinations. Hallucinations often have themes of power, of flying or swooping over territory — taking 'symbolic possession' of it.

rubbers) seen as encouraging sniffing.

Sniffing was both a useful and a practical part of punk 'sign-language' for several reasons.

► Sniffing was visible drugtaking which (being legal) could take place on the street, fitting well with punk's *emphasis on street life* and making it easy to *shock adults* by sniffing in front of them.

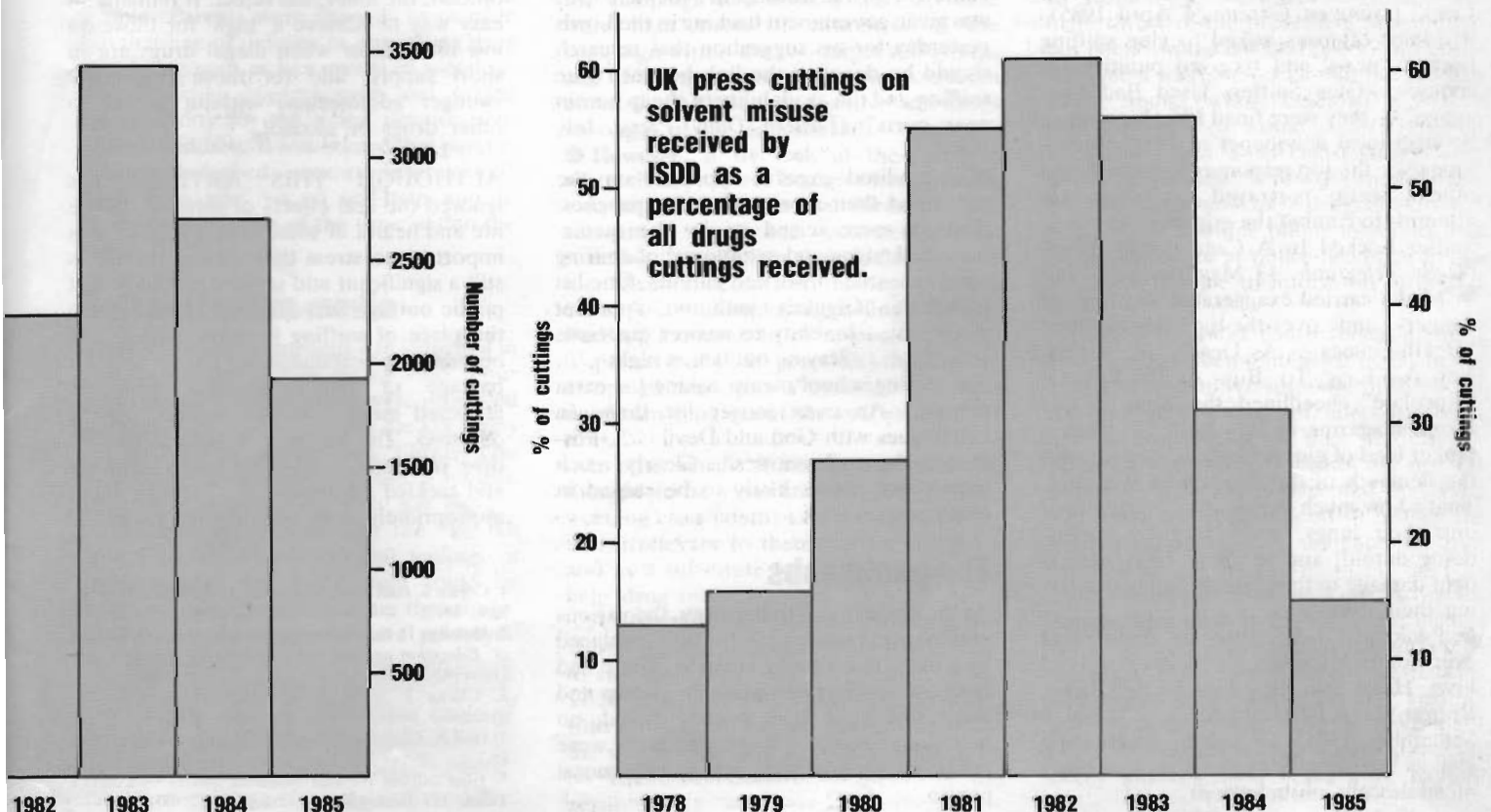
► Sniffing provided a swift 'high', fitting in with the value punks placed on *immediacy*. This same emphasis on immediacy called for a drug that was not only cheap but easily and widely available — not one (like illegal drugs) that required forethought to obtain and might be in short supply. Solvents fitted the requirement.

► Use of a readily available consumer product to achieve intoxication strengthened punk's statement about its *relationship to consumer society*. Punks saw themselves as outcasts from consumer society and rejected consumerist values. Sniffing transmuted the products offered by society for practical, unglamorous purposes into items of illicit pleasure.

► The objects of sniffing could be used to provide hallucinatory experiences which *distinguished* the sniffer from adults and from other young people, and could even perform a *sacramental* role. These experiences could also be used to give at least the illusion of *control* and *power*, which sniffers actually lacked (see box for details).

► *Disgust* is one of the most noticeable features of adult reaction to solvent sniffing, perhaps due to the confusion of consumer categories. If familiar household products are not used for their manufacturer-ordained purpose, then nothing is sacred. If glues can become intoxicants, what can be done with a packet of Persil! This disturbing dissonance made ►

## Why 'the solvent sniffer' rose and fell in the British press.





glue sniffing a particularly effective way for punk to shake up the adult 'establishment'.

► To most adults today sniffing from a plastic bag is a dramatically different way of becoming intoxicated, although in the last century snuff-taking and the inhalation of nitrous oxide or ether were all fairly common. So sniffing served to emphasise the *difference* between members of the subculture and the rest of humanity.

► Solvents are an effective way of becoming 'completely out of it', often for considerable periods of time, a potentially desirable prospect for unemployed youngsters with time to kill.

► Sniffing solvents can be *dangerous*, an attraction to many people. And the more adults told young people that 'sniffing kills', for some youngsters, the more attractive it became.

## Moral panic develops

The constantly changing elements of punk style were partly a response to the internal demands of the subculture and of the individuals who composed it. But changes were also due to the response of adults. Much of that response was visible through newspaper reports. In the constant interplay between public concern and media response, the media reflected and wrote large society's concerns, providing a graphic record of the development of the moral panic over sniffing.

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► Glue deaths became material for lurid front page stories in both local and national newspapers: "Glue Trip Punk In Death Leap" (*Islington Gazette*, 4 April 1985).

► Minor offences linked to glue sniffing became 'news' and received punitive responses: "Glue Sniffers Used Bad Language" — they were fined £25 plus costs (a Scottish local newspaper in 1984). Mean-time over-the-top responses by parents and others were portrayed as desperate attempts to combat the grip of glue: "Glue Sniffer Locked In A Cage For A Year" (*Daily Telegraph*, 13 May 1985).

► Media carried exaggerated warnings of dangers and over-the-top descriptions: "Death Games — As Deadly As Heroin, Yet As Easy To Buy As A Bar Of Chocolate", headlined the *News of the World* magazine in July 1984: "It takes a tanker load of glue a week to keep up with the demands of the children in Wiltshire. That's how much they sniff . . . gulping it into their lungs, wrecking their bodies, doing untold, and in many cases permanent damage to their health and endangering their lives".

► Panic was heightened by discovering ever younger sniffers — "Mohican Aged Five. Head Says Boy Has Sniffed Glue. Robert Was A Skinhead At Three" (*Sun*, 6 September 1984) — and by implicating glue as the primary cause of various kinds of adolescent misbehaviour.



**"After a sniffing session, glue gets into people's hair. This started the spikey hair fashion, and it was under the anaesthetic effects of glue that punks were able to put safety pins through their noses and ears", says the commentary to this slide from a set on glue sniffing.<sup>5</sup>**

► Deviant images of sniffers were presented. A poster advertising a Scottish solvent helpline counter-productively depicted an evil-looking sniffer and press photos featured sniffers with their eyes blanked out, like criminals required to hide their identity.

► Media campaigns reported and promoted many and various calls for legislation, some claiming success with the passing of the Intoxicating Substances Supply Act of 1985.

► Sniffing was linked to up-and-coming moral panics: "Glue And Heroin Link Feared . . . the Bishop of Norwich . . ." was given government backing in the Lords yesterday for his suggestion that research should be done on the link between glue sniffing and the availability of cheap heroin near ports" (*Eastern Daily Press*, July 1984).

► Accredited experts appeared on the scene and their most frightening prognostications were seized on by the media. So-called 'signs and symptoms' of sniffing were repeated to worried parents. One list included: "Giggling with no apparent reason . . . Inability to answer questions sensibly . . . Staying out late at night . . . Not buying school meals, asking for extra money." An even longer list threw in "Dialogues with God and Devil . . . Possession by evil entities". Clearly, such 'symptoms' are as likely to be caused in other ways.

## The panic ebbs

As the panic began to die away, the various unthinking reactions tended to be replaced by a more questioning attitude. There had been too much crying wolf, the papers and those who read them became bored, no new angles could be found and there were other more newsworthy and current moral panics.

Youth culture, too, moved on and developed new concerns. Society was and is left with a 'mopping-up exercise', to inform those still confused about the problem, and ensure young sniffers are helped to stop and that other young people do not start.

Concern and outrage about solvent misuse not only 'amplified' sniffing's role in punk subculture, but can also encourage experimentation by other young people. As punk died out, some members of the new generations of young people took up sniffing. To some, it became a useful metaphor which emphasised the role of the outcast, the loner, the reject. It remains an easy way to achieve a 'high' for those on low incomes or when illegal drugs are in short supply, and for those (especially younger adolescents) without access to other drugs or alcohol.

ALTHOUGH THIS ARTICLE has ignored the real effects of solvents on the life and health of some young people, it is important to stress that solvent misuse is still a significant and serious problem. But public outrage served merely to reinforce the place of sniffing in punk culture and obscure any real damaging effects under a barrage of hyperbole that probably attracted more potential sniffers than it deterred. The lesson is a general one — drug problems need to be taken seriously and tackled appropriately. Tackling them appropriately does not involve panic. □

1. Cohen S. *Folk devils and moral panic*. MacGibbon & Kee, 1972.

2. Hebdige D. *Subculture: image and noise*. In Dale et al. *Education and the state*, Volume II, Falmer/Open University, 1981.

3. Clarke J. Style. In Hall S. and Jefferson T. *Resistance through ritual*. Hutchinson, 1976.

4. Hall K. Crossing the divide. *Youth in Society*: 1984, 96.

5. *Glue sniffing (volatile substance abuse)* by Camera Talks, 197 Botley Road, Oxford OX2 0HE.