

Key Statistics

DRUGS SURVEY 2002

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change

REFORM

justice access

Ionadaíocht

fairness

representation

UNITY

Brú

participation

COLLEGE

equality

rights

learning

enable

Ag Athru



U·S·I

Union of Students in Ireland

DRUGS SURVEY 2002



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Foreword

Maureen Woods, Welfare Officer, USI

I am delighted to present the results of the USI Drugs Survey, 2002. The use of drugs in Irish society is a common phenomenon. Drug use is prevalent in all sections of society and is not unique to any particular area. There is a vast volume of literature and research in the area of drug use in Irish society. This report draws on existing research and literature to complement the findings of the USI Drugs Survey, 2002.

The study highlights the nature and patterns of drug use among the student population. The drug survey was conducted on a sample size of 500 students in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The research explores the attitudes and behaviour of students in relation to the use of illicit drugs.

Undoubtedly as the findings suggest illicit drug taking is a common practice among the student population. The research delves deeper and uncovers reasons why students do or do not take drugs. It explores the reasons why students refrain from taking drugs. It uncovers the general awareness and knowledge that students have of the drugs they use and their effects. It focuses on the student experience of drug taking and reveals the proportion of students who currently take drugs and who do not want to cease drug taking. Additionally it reveals the proportion of students who no longer take drugs and the reasons they stopped taking drugs. It also focuses on those students who want to stop taking drugs. It highlights the reasons they cited for wanting to cease their behaviour and identifies the supports cited as necessary in order to stop taking drugs.

The findings of the research provide much food for thought. The research provides very interesting data on students' attitudes and behaviour in relation to the use of illicit drugs. For example, the research findings reveal cannabis to be the most widely used illicit drug consumed by the student population involved in the survey. The survey revealed that of the 51% of students, who admitted to taking drugs, 89% took cannabis.

USI acknowledges that many students take drugs, therefore it is important that the inherent dangers to health are minimised as much as possible. Rather than taking a preventive stance the organisation feels it is important to provide information and support to students about drug use.

Background and Objectives

Rationale/or Research

The research on drug use emerged from a motion passed at USI's Congress 2002 calling for more research into welfare related issues. It was evident that the drugs issue was one that had not been addressed by the organisation in recent years and this prompted officer board to commission research on this area. Primarily the research sought to ascertain the proportion of students who had experimented with illegal drugs, who currently take drugs and the type of drugs they take. It sought to identify the first drug students took and what drugs students are taking at the present time.

The research explores the nature of students' drug use. It focuses on the types of drugs being used and the frequency of the drug use. It also addresses students' attitudes to the controversial debate regarding the decriminalisation of soft drugs such as cannabis. It seeks to uncover the general opinion regarding the adequacy of information about drugs. Another issue covered in the questionnaire is the source of drugs. Students were asked who introduced them to drugs and where they obtained their drugs.

The research also addresses the proportion of drug taking students surveyed who desired to cease their drug taking behaviour. It explores the reasons why they wish to stop taking drugs and the types of supports they consider to be necessary in order to assist them in this process. It also identifies the reasons why former drug taking students stopped taking illegal drugs.

Literature Review

Much of the literature refers to a general increase in illicit drug taking in Irish society. Another common feature in the literature is the use of the term “Drug Misuse”. Drug misuse is a term that shall be adopted and used throughout the course of this report to refer to the use of illegal drugs “that harm the physical, mental or social well being of an individual, the group or society”(Health Research Board, 2002)

A report produced by the Drug Misuse Research Division of the Health Research Board entitled “Overview of Drug Issues in Ireland 2000” provides an overview of the issues relating to drug misuse in Ireland and focuses on information available up to mid-2000. The report covers health and social issues associated with drug misuse. It also identifies legislation directly or indirectly relevant to the control of drugs and a variety of drugs demand reduction initiatives.

The DMRD report emphasises a lack of information on the social and economic costs of drug misuse and identifies the need for more research in these areas. It also highlights the fact that there has been an increase in the number of drug charges over the five-year period from 1995 - 1999 for drug offences. In view of the fact that the majority of drug takers in the USI drugs survey 2002 used cannabis, it is not surprising to note that most prosecutions are for the possession of cannabis (DMRD, 2000). There was also an increase in the number of seizures over the same time period. Cannabis again accounted for most of the drugs seized. Heroin seizures more than tripled, from 208 in 1995 to 767 in 1999.

One of the key recommendations of the DMRD report was the need to undertake special studies to determine the availability of different drugs, in order to improve better information and prevention strategies. In relation to the USI Drugs Survey 2002, the survey revealed the different sources where students obtained their drugs. Such information is extremely important in order to intercept potentially harmful or in some incidences lethal drugs.

Although the USI survey found that a large proportion of students (74%) had knowledge about the nature and effect of drugs prior to taking them, it is imperative that such information is accurate and not in any way misleading to the drug taker. The provision of information on drugs is essential in order to ensure safe usage. This is an issue that needs to be addressed immediately. It is vital that drug-taking students are aware of the risks and effects that all drugs may have. It is equally important that they have the necessary

knowledge to react properly if they begin to feel ill as a result of drug taking. For those respondents who had information about the drug they were taking prior to taking it, the majority obtained the information from school (41%) a friend (28%) or by reading about it (15%). USI feels that an open, transparent and confidential information service should be available to all students in higher education to continue on from the drug education received at primary and secondary level. The organisation suggests that the most effective way of disseminating information about drugs is to introduce a 24-hour free phone service in all colleges. The service would operate in the college and would be manned by professionals with the necessary skills and knowledge to deal effectively, sensitively and in a non-judgemental manner with all calls regarding drugs misuse. The main function of the service would be to offer advice and information to students about the use of illicit drugs. Such a facility would complement existing services such as the NUS-USI on line drugs information website.

Many reports have called for the need to expand upon existing innovative drug demand reduction programmes or interventions currently in place in Ireland. USI recognises that drug taking is part of student life and in many incidences it is a passing phase. The research conducted by USI supports this claim. The survey found that a large proportion of students surveyed had taken drugs and ceased their drug taking for a variety of reasons. The reasons cited were numerous but four of the main reasons given were to concentrate on academic studies (32%), health reasons (40%), a bad experience (14%) or debt incurred as a result of taking drugs (7%).

USI acknowledges that many students take drugs, therefore it is important that the inherent danger to health is minimised as much as possible. Rather than taking a preventive stance, the organisation feels it is important to provide information and support for students who may need assistance.

USI also calls for ongoing training and support for those working with students who are drug users. The organisation believes is important that current initiatives to educate the public about the dangers of drug use are continuously monitored and assessed to ensure their effectiveness.

A recent report *Identifying Resources and The Way Ahead* (2002) was produced in the aftermath of the death of three men in West Belfast. Following these tragic deaths, the Northern Ireland Drugs & Alcohol Strategy Co-ordinator consulted with local community members and it became apparent that there was no coherent local strategy to address drug misuse in the West Belfast area. The need for a local drug and alcohol strategy to be developed and implemented is underlined by statistical evidence relating to drug misuse in West Belfast. The aim of the study was to:

- Identify current resources available in West Belfast to tackle drugs and alcohol,
- Increase co-ordination between these resources,
- Raise community awareness about drug and alcohol issues,
- Examine and debate the role and responsibilities of the community in responding to drug and alcohol issues and debate
- Create mechanisms to move this first step process forward (2002: 3).

The report stated that in Northern Ireland young people have greater access to drugs than ever before. A study conducted by the Health Promotion Agency in Northern Ireland entitled *What Young People Know* found that there is a growing knowledge and awareness of illicit drugs among young people. Alarmingly it found that 38% of 14 - 17 year-olds had used illicit drugs. It asserted that as young people have a greater access to drugs, the age of experimentation has fallen, while the number of young people who have used drugs has increased (Northern Ireland Health Promotion Agency, 1998).

Research compiled by the Drug Misuse Research Division (DMRD) of the Health Research Board also found that the average age of initial drug use in the Republic of Ireland was between 15 and 16 years of age (2000). USI's Drug Survey 2002 found that the majority of students (23%) commenced their drug taking at 17 years of age. It is remarkable, however, that 9% of respondents surveyed were between the ages of 12 - 14 years of age, 15% took their first illegal drug at 15 years of age, while 19% of students were 16 years old when they first experimented with drugs.

The research conducted by the DMRD is based on figures collected from the national Drug Treatment Reporting System, which is operated in all health boards in the Republic of Ireland. The reporting system found that cannabis was the drug most people presented with for treatment, while on the other hand opiates are predominant in the eastern region causing the most problems. The report suggested, however, that the characteristics found in the research are indicative of the social disadvantage of drug users.

Since the national introduction of the DRMD in 1995, a trend in the age profile of new cases has emerged. There has been an increase in the number of 15 to 39 year olds coming forward for treatment in all health boards areas, except the eastern region. While the number of new cases in the eastern region is much higher than other parts of the country, it has decreased from 27 per 10, 000 population in 1996 to 22 per 10, 000 in 1999 (DMRD, 2000).

For all other health boards, the rate in 1996 was under 10 per 10, 000 population. By 2000, the Northern Eastern, Midland, South Eastern and the Southern Health Board had rates of more than 10 per 10, 000 population.

Identifying Resources and The Way Ahead, 2002 revealed that the numbers of registered drug addicts in Northern Ireland has also increased since 1998.

Northern Ireland Drug Addicts Index

Date	Northern Ireland	EHSSB	N & W Belfast HSS Trust
1998	229	87	20
1999	306	100	26
2000	304	88	20

One of the key points made in the *Identifying Resources and The Way Ahead* report was the need for an increase in financial and human resources to address drug misuse in Irish society. The study highlighted the need to develop strategies in structures to address drug misuse. The most significant and tangible measures to combat drug misuse contained in the report were:

- The transmitting of information and education to all sections of the community about the dangers of drug and solvent abuse.
- The need for a properly resourced and funded treatment for the care of drug users (2002:6).

Identifying Resources and the Way Ahead emphasises the importance of looking at the broader picture and focusing on the social factors that influence one's attitude and behaviour to drugs. For instance, how does the media's portrayal of drugs affect public opinion? Does the media glamourise drug use? A significant development in the U.K has been the Governments' recent decision to examine the reclassification of cannabis from a Class B drug to a Class C drug.

Undoubtedly the media have a significant part to play in influencing young people in Irish society. Music, television, radio, newspaper articles and magazines often address the issue of drugs. The fundamental question is whether or not the media paints a negative image of drug use or glamourises drug taking. Another key point is the extent to which the public and especially young people have access to information about drugs. These are issues that shall be addressed in the USI Drugs Survey 2002.

Methodology

At the research design stage the quantitative method was selected as the most suitable method for collecting data on students' attitudes and behaviour in relation to the use of illicit drugs. In the initial stages of research, it was essential to conceptualise the definitions and formulate appropriate research questions. Formulation of the research questions required a process of identifying research aims and objectives and prioritising what the research sought to find out. Once the research objectives and aims had been clearly established, then it was possible to formulate the questionnaire. Construction of the questionnaire involved the use of a close-ended question format. The questions were structured in such a way **as to** ascertain a yes/no response. The research involved surveying a nation wide sample of students from all parts of Ireland - North and South. It examined students' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs regarding drugs. The study aimed to ascertain:

- The attitudes of students to illicit drug use.
- The level of student knowledge of and experience with drugs,
- Attitudes to decriminalisation of cannabis and the role the media plays in glamourising drug use.
- The general student perception of the personal and societal consequences of drug misuse.
- The extent of drug use
- The proportion of students who have taken illegal drugs.
- The age at which they took their first illegal drug.
- The type of drug they took for the first time.
- The proportion of students who take illegal drugs at the present time.
- The type of drug that students take.
- Reasons for commencing drug taking.
- Reasons for refraining from the misuse of drugs.
- The level of knowledge about drugs prior to taking them.
- The general attitude among the students to drugs and their use in Irish society.

The questionnaire contains twenty-nine questions. Each question in the questionnaire seeks to find out the respondents' attitudes and behaviour in relation to illegal drug taking. The questionnaire was structured in such a way as to avoid bias or unambiguous terminology. Particular attention was paid to any misleading concepts

Sampling procedures

It was extremely important to ensure that the results of the survey were as representative as possible. In order to ensure that findings were representative of the student population, it was imperative that a random sample was used. The sampling procedure to ensure that the sample was random involved stopping respondents randomly throughout the campuses of the colleges involved in the survey. The sample size included 500 students studying at colleges in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

Administering of Questionnaires

The study included students from 23 third level colleges. The following colleges were involved in the survey:

- Queen's University Belfast,
- University of Ulster, Jordanstown,
- Belfast Institute of Further & Higher Education,
- Dublin Institute of Technology,
- Dublin City University,
- Dundalk Institute of Technology,
- Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology,
- National College of Ireland,
- St. Patrick's College,
- Institute of Technology, Tallaght
- Trinity College Dublin,
- University College Dublin,
- National University of Ireland, Maynooth
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology,
- Institute of Technology, Sligo,
- Athlone Institute of Technology,
- National University of Ireland, Galway,
- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology,
- University College Cork,
- Institute of Technology, Tralee,
- Limerick Institute of Technology,
- Mary Immaculate College,
- Institute of Technology, Carlow.

The sample size for each college was proportionate to the student population of the respective college. The Research Executive conducted the administering of all surveys with the assistance of National Student Union Officers and USI Staff. Questionnaires were self-administered and interviews were conducted in April 2002.

Profile of Respondents

A Table showing the ages of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
17-23	463	92.6	92.6
24-29	31	6.2	6.2
30-55	5	1.0	1.0
56+	1	.2	.2
Total	500	100.0	100.0

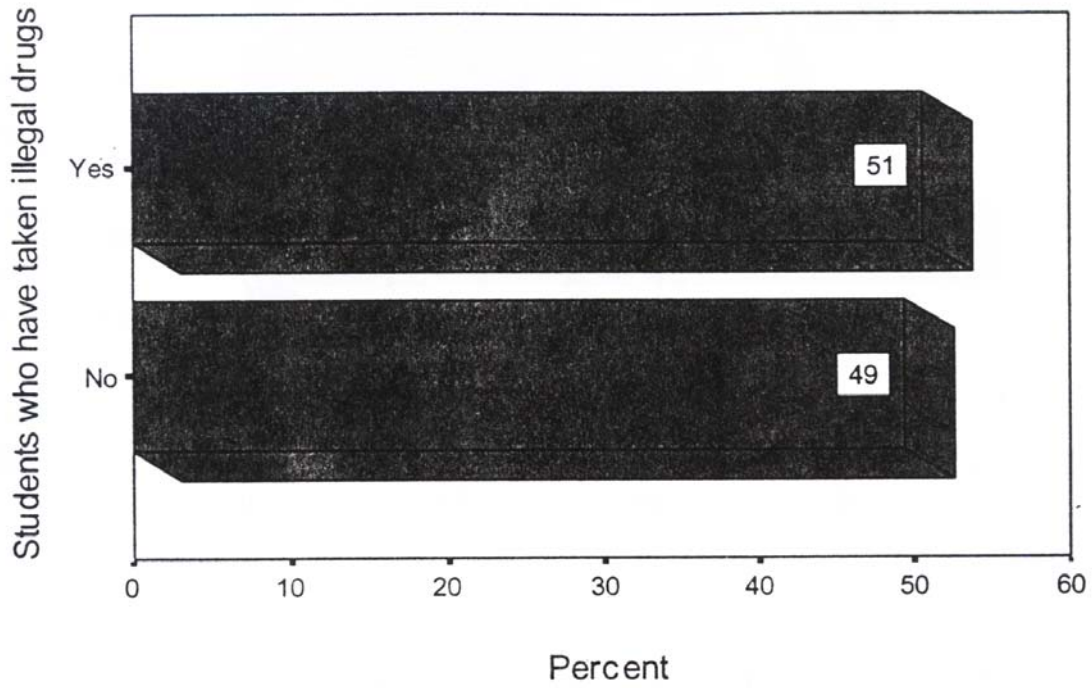
Table 1

A Table Showing the Gender of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Female	251	50.2	50.2
Male	249	49.8	49.8
Total	500	100.0	100.0

Table 2

The proportion of students who
have taken an illegal drug



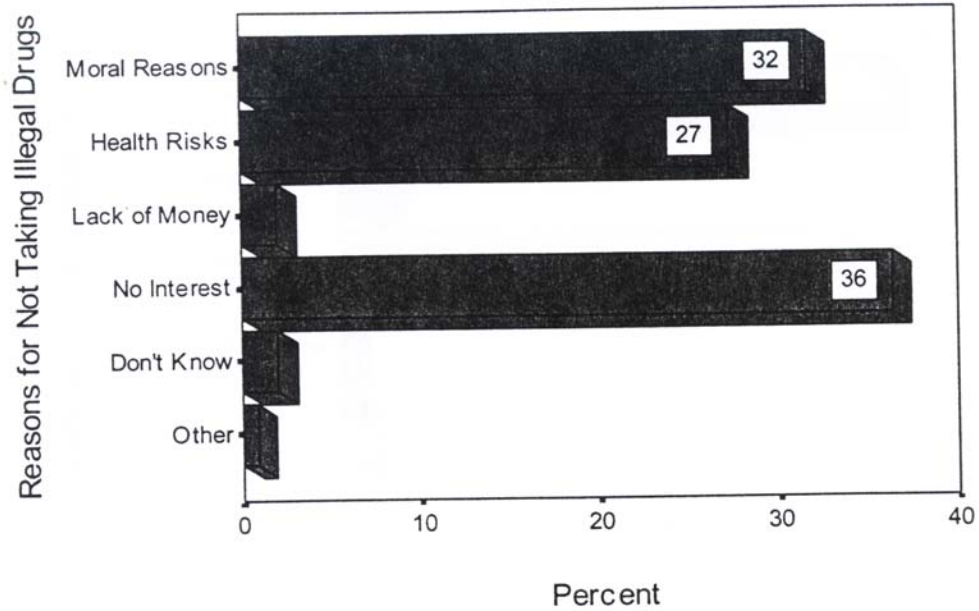
A Table showing the proportion of students who
have taken an illegal drug.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	253	50.2	50.6
No	247	49.8	49.4
Total	500	100.0	100.0

Table 3

Reasons Cited by Students for Not Taking Illegal Drugs

Table shows the reasons cited by students for refraining from illegal drug taking.

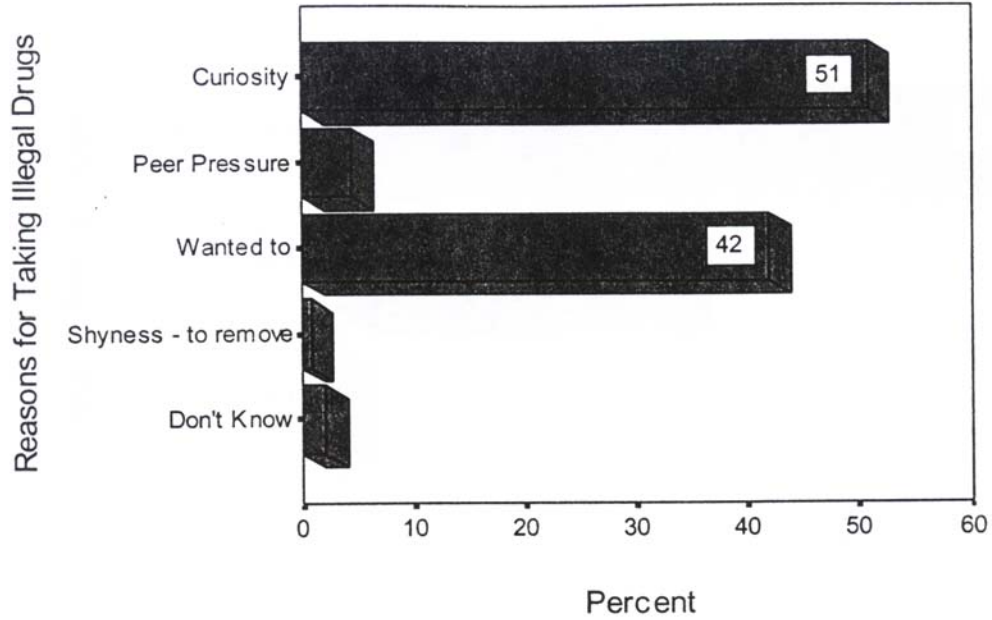


**A Table shows the reasons cited by students for refraining from
Illegal drug taking.**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Moral Reasons	80	16.0	31.6
Health Risks	69	13.8	27.3
Lack of Money	5	1.0	2.0
No Interest	92	18.4	36.4
Don't Know	5	1.0	2.0
Other	2	.4	.8
Total	253	50.6	100.0
Student who take drugs	247	49.4	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 4

Reasons cited by Students for Taking Illegal Drugs

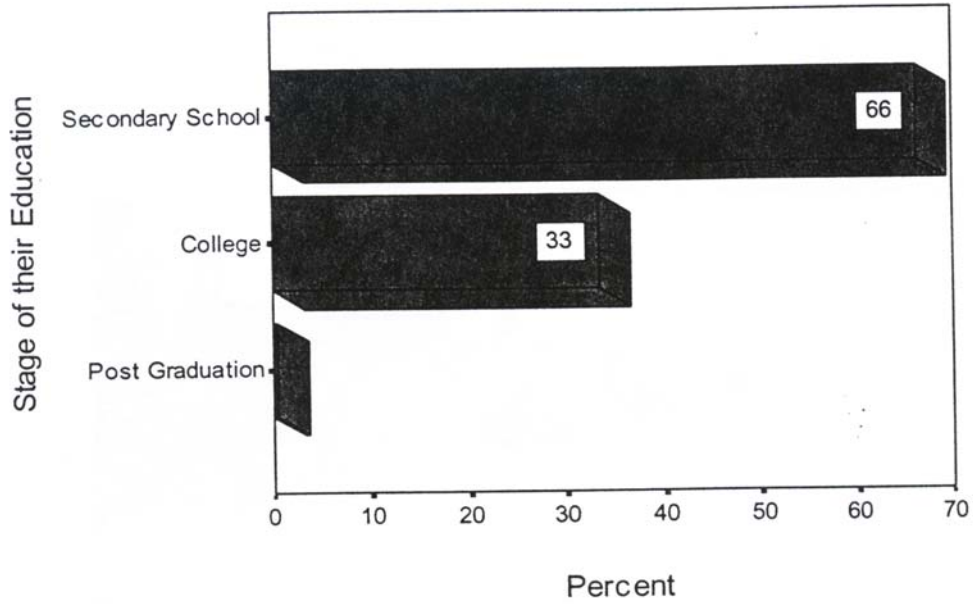


The Table shows the reasons cited by students for Taking
Illegal Drugs.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Curiosity	126	25.2	50.8
Peer Pressure	11	2.2	4.4
Wanted to	104	20.8	41.9
Shyness - to remove inhibitions	2	.4	.8
Don't Know	5	1.0	2.0
Total	248	49.6	100.0
Students who didn't Take Illegal Drugs	252	50.4	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 5

When Students Took their First Illegal Drug.

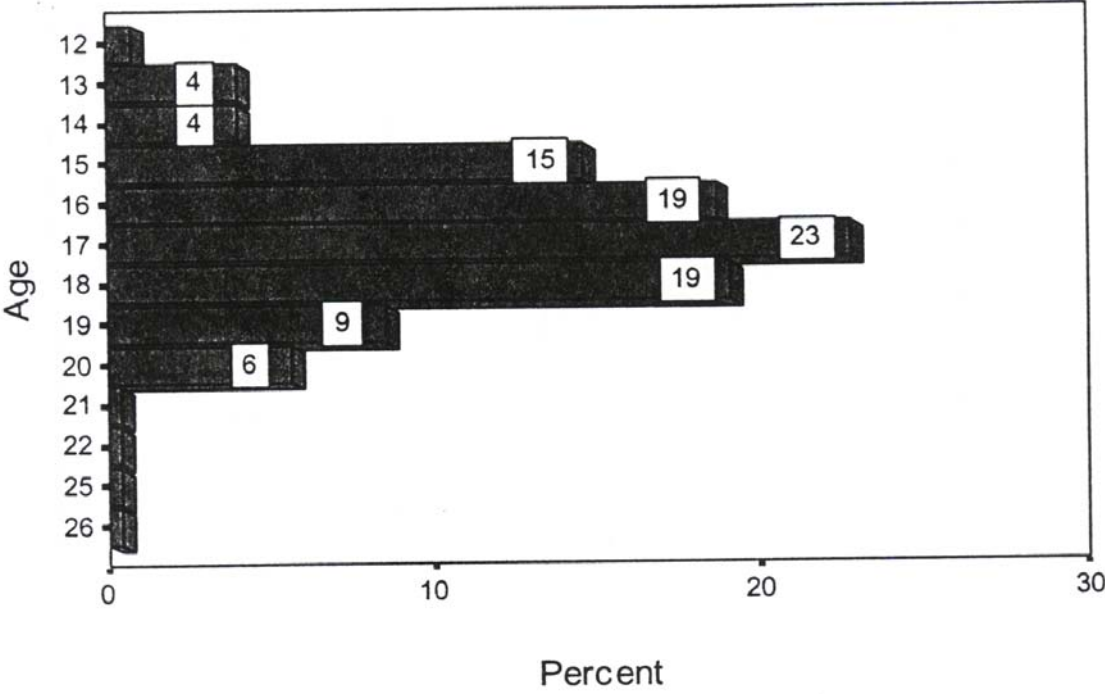


A Table showing the stage of education that students started taking
illegal drugs.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Secondary School	165	33.0	66.3
College	83	16.6	33.3
Post Graduation	1	.2	.4
Total	249	49.8	100.0
Students who have never taken drugs	251	50.2	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 6

Age when students first took an
illegal drug

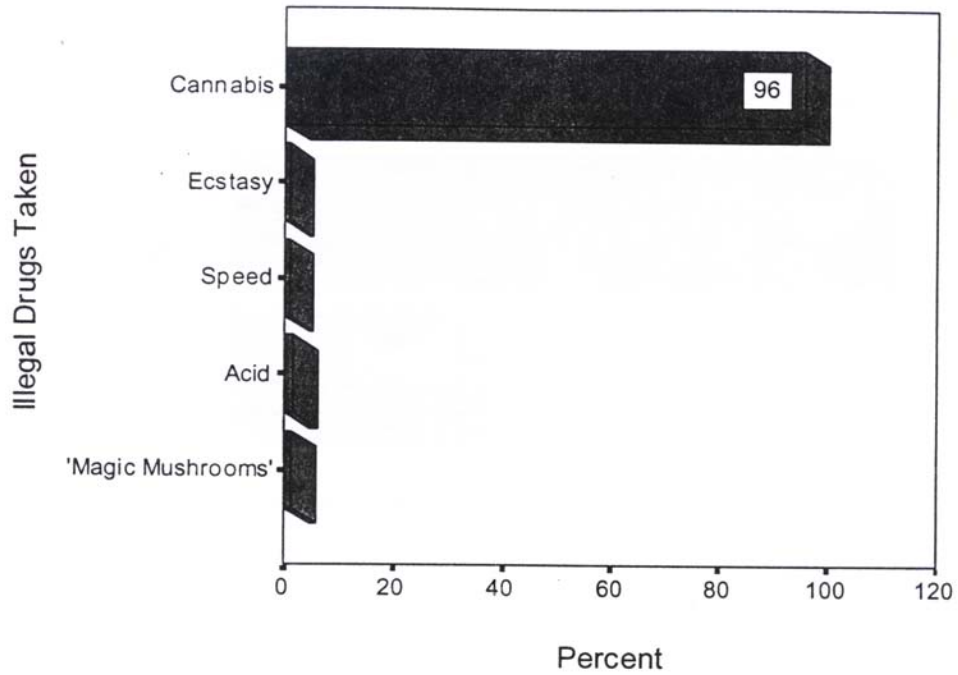


A Table showing the age when the students surveyed first took an illegal drug.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
12	2	.4	.8
13	10	2.0	4.1
14	10	2.0	4.1
15	36	7.2	14.6
16	46	9.2	18.7
17	56	11.2	22.8
18	47	9.4	19.1
19	21	4.2	8.5
20	14	2.8	5.7
21	1	.2	.4
22	1	.2	.4
25	1	.2	.4
26	1	.2	.4
Total	246	49.2	100.0
Non Drug Takers	254	50.8	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 7

First Illegal Drug Taken

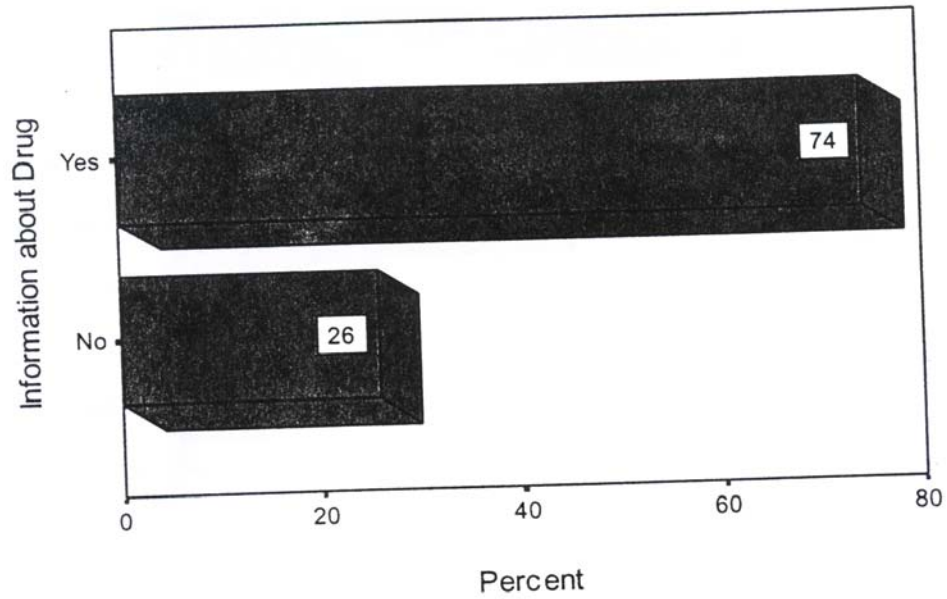


A Table showing the first illegal drug taken by students surveyed

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Cannabis	237	47.4	95.6
Ecstasy	2	.4	.8
Speed	2	.4	.8
Acid	4	.8	1.6
'Magic Mushrooms'	3	.6	1.2
Total	248	49.6	100.0
Students who have never taken an illegal drug	252	50.4	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 8

The Proportion of Students who had information about the drug before they took it

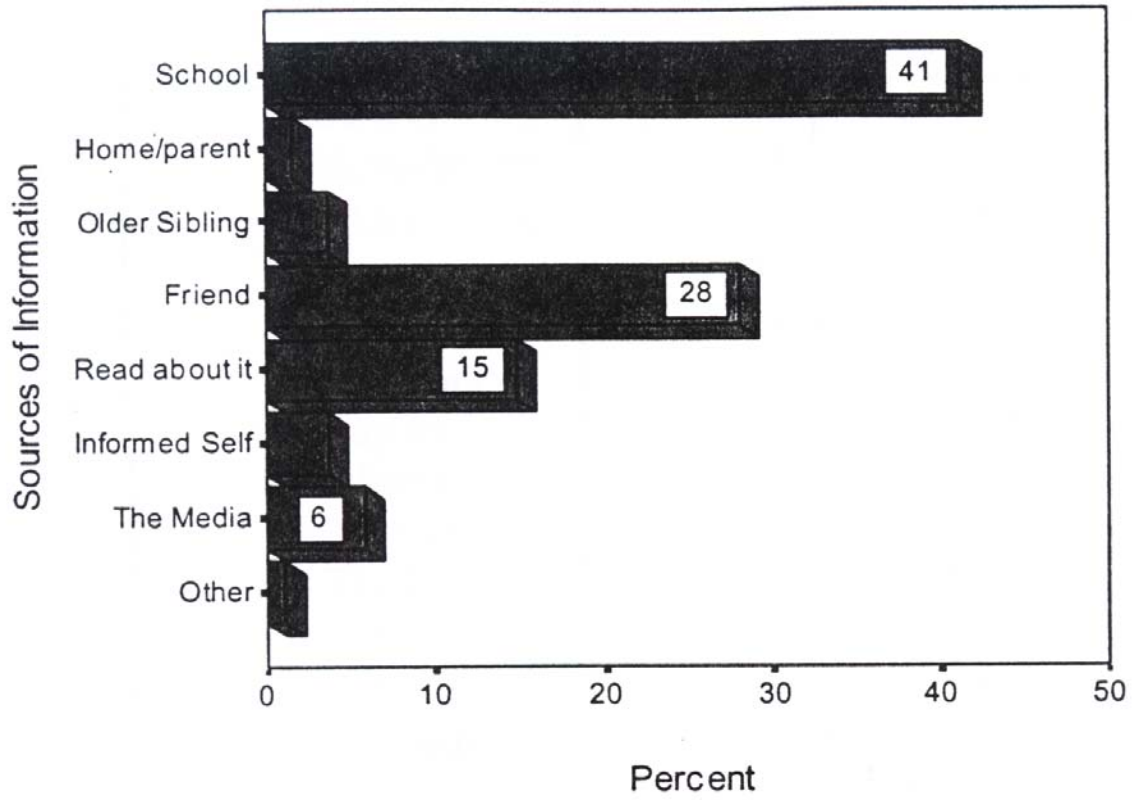


A Table showing the proportion of students who had information about the drug before they took it

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	185	37.0	74.3
No	64	12.8	25.7
Total	249	49.8	100.0
Students who have never taken an illegal drug.	251	50.2	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 9

Sources of Information

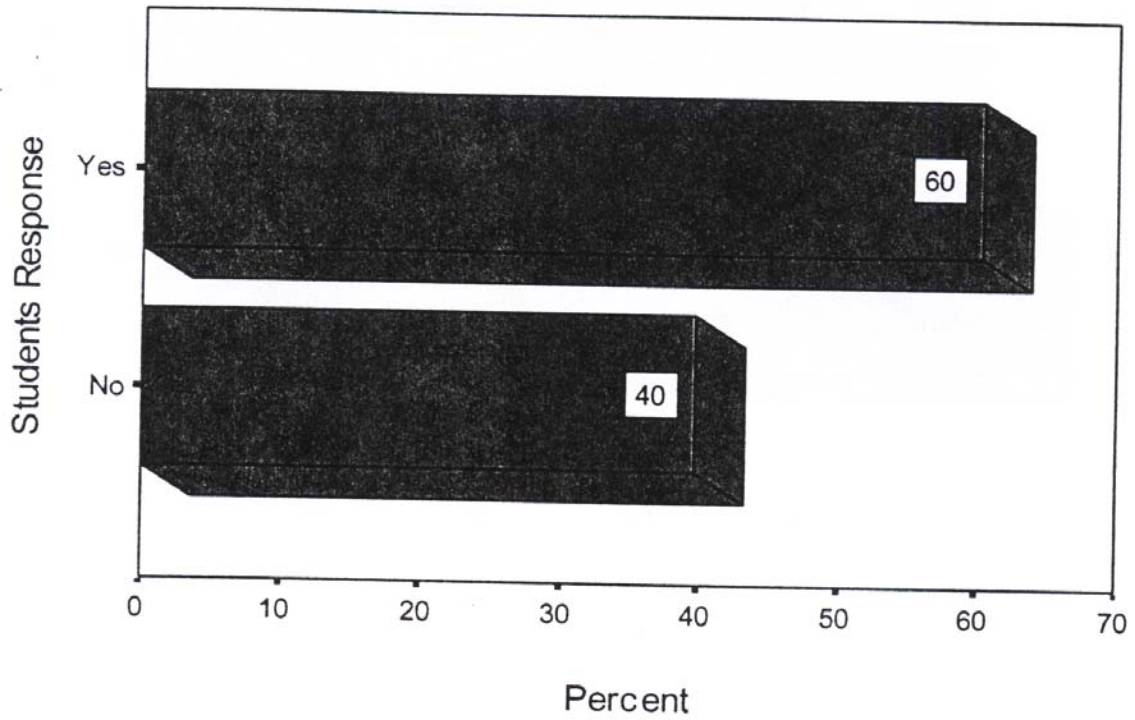


A Table showing the different sources of information about the use of Illegal drugs.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
School	78	15.6	41.3
Home/parent	3	.6	1.6
Older Sibling	7	1.4	3.7
Friend	53	10.6	28.0
Read about it	28	5.6	14.8
Went out of way to inform yourself	7	1.4	3.7
The Media	11	2.2	5.8
Other	2	.4	1.1
Total	189	37.8	100.0
Students who never sought information about drugs	311	62.2	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 10

Is there sufficient information about illegal drugs available in the public domain?

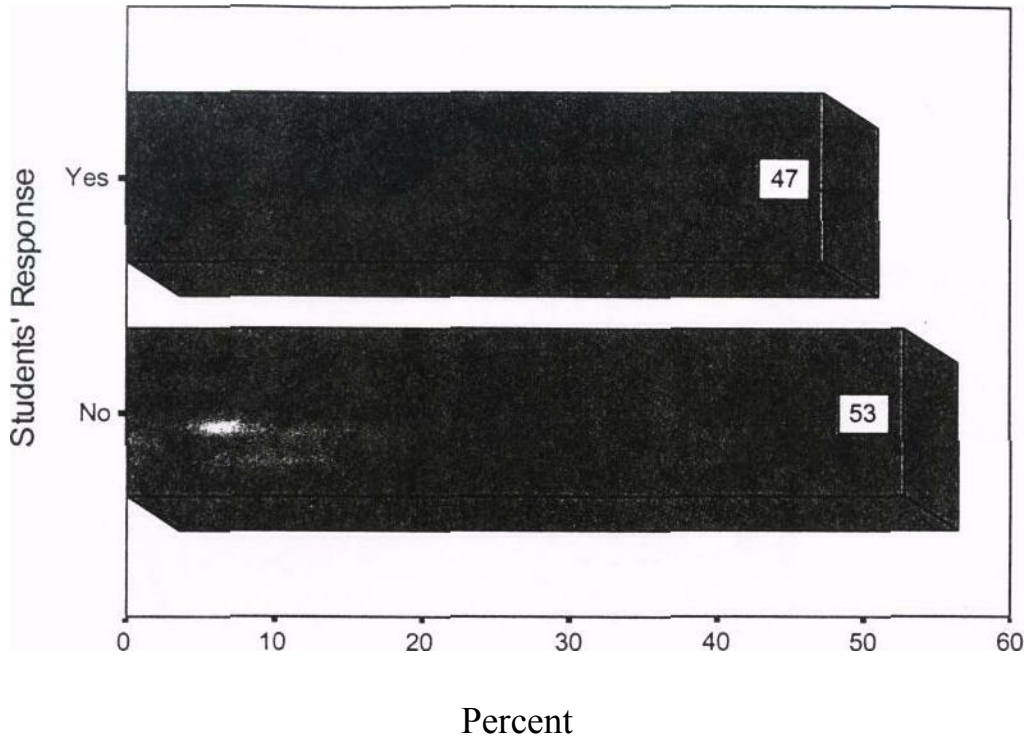


The Proportion of students who stated that there was sufficient information about drugs available in the public domain.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	301	60.2	60.3
No	198	39.6	39.7
Total	499	99.8	100.0
Missing Data	1	.2	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 11

Does the media glamourise drug-taking?

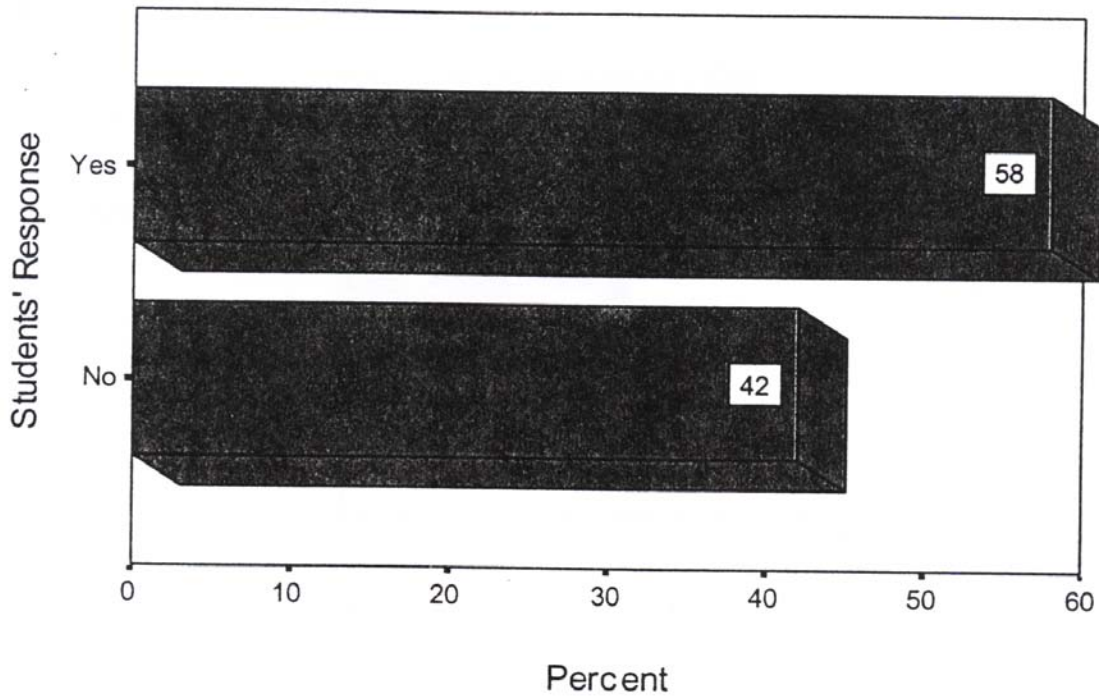


A Table showing the proportion of students who agree or disagree with the view that the media glamourises drug taking.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	236	47.2	47.3
No	263	52.6	52.7
Total	499	99.8	100.0
Missing Data	1	.2	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 12

Should the use of Cannabis be
decriminalised?

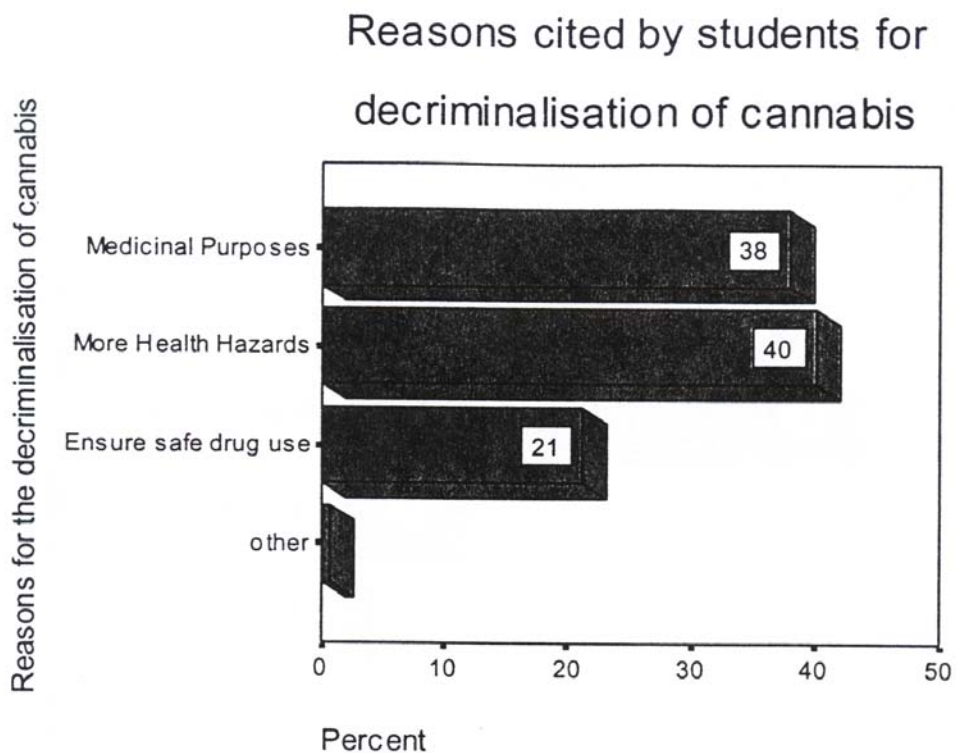


A Table showing the proportion of students who either favour or oppose the decriminalisation of cannabis.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	287	57.4	58.0
No	208	41.6	42.0
Total	495	99.0	100.0
Missing Data	5	1.0	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 13

Reasons cited by students for
decriminalisation of cannabis



A Table showing the reasons cited by students to support decriminalisation of cannabis.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Medicinal Purposes	109	21.8	38.0
It health hazards are no more dangerous than alcohol	115	23.0	40.1
Ensure safe drug use	61	12.2	21.3
other	2	.4	.7
Total	287	57.4	100.0
Missing Data	213	42.6	
Total	500	100.0	

Table 14