

Baseline data on the lifestyle of second level students aged 16-18 Years

Midland Health Board

Tullamore

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The survey was conducted during April and May 1996 in order to establish baseline data on the lifestyle of second level students aged 16 - 18 in the four counties comprising the Midland Health Board area. The survey covered issues such as students behaviour in relation to smoking, use of alcohol and illicit drugs, sexual behaviour and knowledge of sexuality. This report summarises the findings in relation to smoking, alcohol and illicit drug use.

Methods

Twelve second level schools were randomly selected. All schools agreed to participate. Each students completed a standardised questionnaire in school under examination conditions. 1,654 pupils participated - 892 males and 762 females.

Results

Smoking

Current Smokers	34%
Ex-Smokers	10%
Non-Smokers	56%

There was no difference in smoking rates between males and females. Those who smoked were more

likely to drink alcohol and use illegal drugs.

Alcohol

88% of all those surveyed claimed to have consumed drink on at least one occasion with no difference between males and females. However, males were significantly heavier drinkers than females.

	Males	Females
None	10%	11%
< 1 drink	4%	4%
1 - 2 drinks	9%	15%
3 - 4 drinks	15%	24%
5 - 6 drinks	17%	18%
> 6 drinks	45%	28%
Total	100%	100%

Table 1 – Percentage of students who had consumed varying amounts of alcohol in the previous month.

Eleven per cent of the sample claimed to have drunk cider by the age of ten years. 9% wine and 9% spirits. Fourteen to fifteen years was reported to be the most common age of initiation of drinking. There was no significant difference in alcohol consumption between teenagers of low income families compared with those of high income families. Those who took alcohol were more likely to have used illegal drugs than those who did not.

Illegal Drug Use

Forty per cent of the students claimed to have been offered illegal drugs. The table below shows the percentage of students who admitted to taking different kinds of illegal drugs. Overall 27% (31% males; 23% females) of students had taken illegal drugs but it is important to note that some had taken more than one kind of illegal drug so there is an overlap between many of the categories listed below.

Percentage who had ever used drugs	Male	Female
Barbiturates	2%	2%
Amphetamines	6%	3%
Ecstasy	9%	5%
Marijuana	30%	22%
Inhalants	20%	14%
Tranquilizers	3%	4%
Hallucinogens	12%	6%
Any drug	31%	23%

Table 2 – Percentage of Students who had taken illegal drugs.

Male students were much more likely to have been offered drugs and to have used drugs than females. Marijuana is the most common drug to have been used by students - males 30%; females 22%; overall 26%. Overall, 27% of students admitted to having taken illegal drugs at some stage in their lives.

Comparison with Other Studies

Smoking

	Percentage who have ever smoked	Percentage currently smoking
M.H.B. (1996)	44%	34%
Grube & Morgan, Dublin (1991)	61%	37%
Northern Ireland (1991)	65%	28%
Kilkenny Health Project (1987)	71%	22%
Miller & Plant U.K. (1995)	63%	32%

Table 3 – Studies on Smoking Behaviour among young people.

The figure for the Midland Health Board is towards the higher end of the range. It is possible that the Midland Health Board study reflects a general increase in smoking prevalence among young people.

Alcohol

	Percentage who have ever taken a drink	Percentage currently drinking
M.H.B. (1996)	88%	-
Gmbe & Morgan, Dublin (1982)	65%	-
Grube & Morgan, Dublin (1991)	77.9%	51.4%
Kilkenny Health Project (1987)	73%	22%
Kieman (W.H.B.) 1994	67%	62%
Miller & Plant (1995)	94%	-

Table 4 – Studies on Alcohol use among young people

The percentage of students in the Midland Health Board area who have ever taken a drink is towards the higher end of the range of studies quoted. However, Grube & Morgan note an increase in the number of young people taking a drink between 1982 and 1991. The Midland Health Board figure may, therefore simply reflect a trend whereby more young people are starting to drink.

Illegal Drug Use

	Percentage who have ever taken drugs of any kind
M.H.B. (1996)	27%
Grube & Morgan, Dublin (1991)	27%
Kieman (1994) 16-18 yr. Olds	28%
Miller & Plant, U.K. (1995)	40.6%

Table 5 – Studies on Illegal Drug Use

There is little difference in the percentage of students saying they have ever taken drugs in each of the three Irish studies, which show lower figures than the U.K. study.

Conclusions

The study was meant to be representative of second level students in the four counties of the Midland Health Board area. It may not be representative of those who leave school early. In all studies, of this kind, one cannot rule out a slight degree of over-reporting of drug use. However, this does not invalidate comparisons.

A significant proportion of the students have taken mood altering drugs of some kind. Overall the findings are not significantly different from those of other Irish studies. It is a source of concern that 27% of students have admitted taking an illegal substance at some stage. However, the biggest public health problems highlighted are the level of smoking and alcohol use among students. Most students who smoke are probably addicted and

will have some difficulties giving up. Those who drink at a young age are more likely than the non drinkers to have problems in the future with alcohol.

Midland Health Board Response

The Midland Health Board has set up a Working Party for the purpose of drafting a regional policy on drugs and alcohol. The board's prevention strategy will be based on an approach of working in the 'settings' for health promotion outlined in the Health Promotion Strategy document i.e. the school, the workplace, the community and the health services.

Health Education in Primary Schools

The board in partnership with the Department of Education, the local Teacher Centres and local Inspectors has commenced a programme of Social, Personal and Health Education for primary school pupils. The programme called Bi Follain aims to make children aware of all the influences on their health and help them to maximise their own health potential. Smoking and substance misuse form an important part of this programme. Programmes such as Bi Follain have been shown to have good potential to improve the behaviour of young people with regard to the use of alcohol. A small group of teachers is currently being trained with a view to training 100 of their colleagues to implement this programme in schools in 1997.

Community Drugs and Alcohol Services

The board's Community Drugs and Alcohol Services have as one of their main objectives the prevention of alcohol and drug related problems. They have been facilitating and supporting alcohol and drugs education in primary, post-primary and third level schools and colleges in the region. Schools and colleges are given support in the following ways:

- ❖ Educational videos on request.
- ❖ Project material/Project guidelines.
- ❖ Workshops for students on alcohol, drug issues.
- ❖ Education and training for teachers and lecturers.
- ❖ Consultancy services for schools and colleges on policy matters related to alcohol and drugs.
- ❖ Consultation and information for third level students on academic work.
- ❖ Education and information for parents' councils and school management teams.

The Community Drugs and Alcohol Service provides education and training for healthcare workers, teachers, youth leaders, gardai and probation officers.

As a result done by the board in researching the need for more prevention, the Department of Health sanctioned the employment of two new Education Officers in the area of drugs misuse. It is hoped, therefore, that in 1997 the boards services to schools and colleges will be enhanced.

Regional Intersectoral Committee

The Midland Health Board has brought together a regional intersectoral committee on drugs misuse with the aim of achieving a joint approach to drugs misuse between different agencies.

Smoking

The Midland Health Board together with other health board in 1995 conducted an awareness programme launched by the Office for Health Gain, aimed at dissuading retailers from selling cigarettes to children.

The board will be kept informed of other measures which result from the board's Drugs and Alcohol Working Party.