

ILLEGAL LEISURE: THE NORMALIZATION OF ADOLESCENT RECREATIONAL DRUG USE

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CONTEXT



This study is a large-scale longitudinal piece of research covering the five years between 1991 and 1996. *Illegal Leisure* follows a sample of school children from the age of 14 into early adulthood at the age of 18. It is based primarily on the use of annual 'self-report' questionnaires, creating quantitative data. These are supplemented by qualitative data in the form of interviews which took place when the respondents were 17 years old. The research was located in the North-West of England, taking its sample of 14 year olds from eight secondary schools in two different counties – Merseyside and Greater Manchester. In all, 1,125 separate individuals were studied and 'tracked' over at least one or more years.

As the researchers themselves admit, although both longitudinal studies and the production of a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative data are often seen by sociologists and in sociology textbooks as examples of good, detailed, thorough research, they both raise extremely important practical considerations of funding as both can be expensive. This research was funded for three years by the *Alcohol Education and Research Council* and for the last two years by the *Economic and Social Research Council* – both government sources. The total cost of the five-year research period was estimated to be £380,000.

The authors note that although drug-use has always been a part of youth and music cultures, there seemed to be a media-led view (often shared by sociologists) that adolescent drug taking was increasing to record levels. By the mid 1990s it had appeared to have become a 'routine' or normal aspect of young people's lives. The aim of the research is to test these media claims. The study aims to identify the extent to which teenagers use illegal drugs and to see if this use follows the patterns discussed in the media. The research uses some ideas derived from the theory of postmodernism to interpret what the authors see as the dramatic change in young people's lives during the 1990s and the effect of this on their use of illegal drugs.

METHODS



The authors review the methodological options on offer to the sociologist looking at how and why people take drugs. They identify three main techniques.

1 Official statistics

These are useful in identifying trends but are limited in validity. Quite detailed yearly figures are provided by the government for drugs seized and for those arrested and prosecuted for drug-selling and drug-using, but like all criminal statistics, they miss out a huge unknown 'hidden figure'.

2 Social surveys

The authors of this research note that self-report surveys tend to be the best method of uncovering hidden figures of drug use. However, many people might not respond or may over- or under-exaggerate their involvement in illegal activities.

3 Qualitative community studies

These are sometimes described as 'ethnographic' approaches where the 'way of life' of a group is studied. Rather than simply recording patterns of illegal drug use, these research projects seek to explore in detail the motivations and meanings behind the patterns.

This piece of research, by adopting using both a quantitative self-report study and a

qualitative interview approaches, tries to both identify patterns and to seek more detailed explanations than can be provided through the simple 'tick box' method of questionnaires alone. Parker *et al.*'s research used a self-report questionnaire every year with the same respondents and then a further eighty-six interviews.

The results look at:

- **Patterns** – statistical summaries of the results focusing on what types of teenagers use what drugs and how often; in total they received 3,116 questionnaire returns.
- **Pathways** – tracking drug use over time; looking at reasons for (and refusing) first drug use up to regular patterns of use if they occurred.
- **Journeys** – using qualitative data to explore the personal and often emotional reasons behind, and experiences of, drug use.

The authors note that the decision to use interviews late in the time-period covered was to allow the respondents to develop maturity. This meant that more detailed interviews could be developed which would enable the researchers to probe deeper into thoughts and reasons.

The longitudinal nature of the study meant that respondents had to be tracked over time, to ensure that their experiences could be compared. This raised a number of practical and ethical problems:

- **Practical problems**

A database was kept to track the respondents if they moved house or school during the five years of the research and the researchers made continued efforts to keep in touch through letters, follow-up letters, reminders, even Christmas cards! This would have taken a great deal of time and money. In the summer of year 3, the researchers did a great deal of door-to-door tracking of 'lost' respondents to try and keep the sample size as big as possible over the total five year time period.

Parker *et al.* themselves commented that one unanticipated practical problem was dealing with media attention. Some sections of the media sensationalised their findings and some were quite aggressive, attacking the researchers for making drug use seem acceptable.

- **Ethical problems**

Since the self-report questionnaires were administered by post after initial contact in with respondents in their school, the names of the respondents had to be recorded in order to monitor response and to compare the same individual over time. This raised issues of confidentiality, especially important since they were asking questions about involvement in illegal activities. The researchers also experienced a number of dilemmas where some respondents were clearly not coping with their drug use. Decisions had to be made whether to contact respondents and to offer help and advice or to treat all responses as confidentially. Parker *et al.* say that in the end, they simply had to be flexible, treating each case separately, and even the ability to identify someone in need of help or at risk was difficult and subjective.

Another key ethical problem was keeping the responses confidential from the schools, yet also having the practical problem of getting the right – from the schools themselves – to gain access to their sample. Schools were given anonymous feedback on the patterns uncovered, but were promised never to be named, as were the individuals taking part.

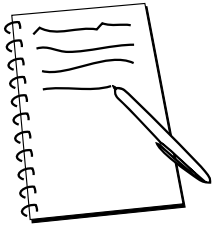
As the research progressed, the questions asked themselves developed and changed. By the final questionnaire in the fifth year, the respondents were being asked about:

- attitudes to drugs
- ease of access to specific types of drugs/drugs tried/frequency of use/future intentions
- the situation surrounding last use, if applicable
- reasons for use
- explanations for multi-drug use, and comparisons
- how the respondents measured and calculated drug harm.

The issues and wording of questions changed following analysis of the previous years'

results. The authors also comment that many questions changed due to detailed and useful respondent evaluation and feedback.

KEY FINDINGS

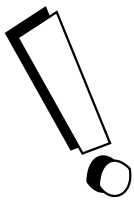


The researchers are able to apply postmodernist ideas to the large body of detailed evidence they have collected. Postmodernism views the contemporary world as unstable and ever-changing and the authors see drinking alcohol and some drug use as a way for young people to take 'time out' from this uncertain and confusing world.

The patterns of drug use discovered are summarised below.

- Drug use increased from one-third to two-thirds of respondents between the ages of 14 and 18.
- Cannabis was the most available and the most frequently used drug for those who used drugs on a regular basis.
- Cannabis was also the most usual first drug to be experimented with, or to be used only once by the respondents.
- Regular users made up between 20 and 25% of the sample by the end of the research.
- There were few statistical differences between male and female drug use.
- However, young girls were more likely to be in situations of being offered drugs at an earlier age than boys. This was because they tended to have 'older' friendship groups in their early teens, than boys.
- Early 'risk-takers' with drugs was most common among working-class respondents. However, by late-adolescence middle class use of drugs has 'caught-up'.

IMPORTANCE



The authors conclude that half of all teenagers have tried an illegal drug by the end of their teenage years and that a quarter of this generation are 'regular recreational users'. Given the widespread nature of drug taking within young peoples' lives, previous explanations for drug-use need to be re-assessed. As a society, Parker *et al.* argue, we can no longer see all drug-takers as 'delinquent' or 'no-hopers'. Neither can we see drug taking as unusual. Although there are some for whom drug use becomes a problem, for most it is based on a calculation of the costs or risks weighed up against the benefits. It is therefore very rational, based upon information from school, medical sources, the media and peers. The authors recommend that governments re-think their 'war on drugs' approach.

The importance of the research lies in its detached, unemotional view of drug taking way and its plea for those in positions of authority to think about the evidence, rather than to simply respond to media moral panics.

EVALUATION



The combination of quantitative and qualitative data seeks to achieve both reliability and validity. It identifies patterns over time, but adds to this in-depth exploration of the thoughts and feelings of some of the individuals whose experiences make up the larger patterns identified. Its longitudinal nature of the research means that a larger picture can be assessed and changes over time analysed.

The survey method was evaluated, developed and updated as the research developed, using feedback from the respondents and analysis of their answers. This allowed the research team to focus on particular themes in more depth. Usually questionnaires are completed and, once returned, no further probing of the same respondents is possible.

The subject of the research raises many ethical issues. Should the researchers be detached, simply reporting back on their findings, or should they intervene, trying to 'help' those identified as being in need or those who may ask for help directly or indirectly? Parker *et al.* say they made this decision on a case-by-case basis. Some sociologists might argue that this was too high a level of personal involvement in the lives of those studied, but others would defend these decisions on the basis that researchers have a responsibility - if asked - to help those they study. After all, respondents are opening up private parts of their life to public scrutiny. Without a degree of personal contact, these individuals are simply being exploited for the sociologists gain.

Given the self-report nature of the study, we might question the validity of some

answers. Since they were delivered through the post it is quite possible that individuals completed their answers with peers or even family members. In these situations the answers might be either exaggerated or covered-up. However, the researchers did take steps to try and measure both under and over reporting.

The survey included two questions as checks to the validity of the answers. One question, asking about the frequency of use of various drugs, included a false name – a ‘dummy drug’ – to see if answers were ‘spoiled’ and therefore not able to be included in the sample. Only three respondents in all ever said they had used this drug. Another question asked respondents to say if they would admit illegal drug use if they had done so. This might measure if people are under-reporting by giving them the opportunity to admit to lying without having to disclose further information. After the full five years 2.1% of the sample had admitted under-reporting in this way.



QUESTIONS

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 What are the benefits of a longitudinal study?
- 2 Describe the aims of the study in your own words.
- 3 What practical and ethical problems did this study raise for the researchers?
- 4 Why might it be beneficial to the research to try and produce both quantitative and qualitative data?
- 5 What conclusions did the research show about teenagers' drug use?
- 6 What were recommendations were made after the research?

ANALYSIS

- 1 Do you think the researchers were right to contact some of the sample and offer help? Explain your answer.
- 2 Comment on the generalisability of this research.
- 3 Evaluate the validity of the data collected.
- 4 Why is research of this type important in light of how the media might report issues of drug taking?