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# Young people and illicit drug use in Australia

Martin Holt

## Abstract

**Objective:** To review what is known about young people's drug use in Australia and to evaluate whether illicit drug use has become normalised among Australian youth.

**Method:** Survey data and social research findings on young people's illicit drug use are reviewed and evaluated against the criteria of the normalisation thesis. The utility of the normalisation thesis is assessed in the Australian context.

**Results:** National surveys suggest that around a third of Australian young people have tried any illicit substance. The most commonly tried and regularly used illicit substance is cannabis, although its use may be declining. The regular use of drugs other than cannabis is infrequent, although increasing numbers of young people in their twenties appear to be trying 'designer' or 'party' drugs such as ecstasy. Studies of dance music and alternative music subcultures suggest that illicit drug use within these scenes is much more common than among young people in general. Within these contexts illicit drug use could be regarded as normalised.

**Conclusion:** Illicit drug use appears to be normalised among specific groups of young Australians and in particular contexts, not throughout the wider population. The normalisation thesis may be useful when thinking about interventions with young people for whom drug use is 'normal' in that it acknowledges the strategies they develop to manage their drug use. However, the notion of 'sensible and strategic use' should be employed carefully to avoid the further stigmatisation of injecting drug users.

**Keywords:** Young people, illicit drug use, normalisation, Australia, survey data, social research

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## Introduction

Discussing young people's use of illicit drugs can be a fraught endeavour. Young people are persistently viewed in a contradictory manner in Western culture, variously seen as vulnerable, wilful, energetic, innocent, uncontrollable, passive, and in need of supervision, depending on the political and cultural *Zeitgeist*.<sup>1</sup> Illicit drugs provoke greater controversy, with few disinterested accounts of their pleasures and perils. Take drugs and youth together and you have a potent combination that engenders heated debates about the protection and freedom of young people, the personal and social effects of drug use from an early age and whether as a society we should be encouraging abstinence or educating young people to make informed decisions about drug use.

What is clear, however, is that young people *do* use illicit drugs. They are perhaps doing so in greater numbers than ever before. In other countries, notably the United Kingdom, it has been argued that the recreational use of illicit drugs is increasingly seen as a normal part of leisure and 'going out' by many young people rather than a deviant practice experienced by a few.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The deliberate, strategic and 'sensible' use of certain illicit substances by young people, particularly cannabis, ecstasy and other stimulants, is argued to reflect the wider availability and acceptability of these drugs to young people, and the growth of leisure subcultures (particularly those centred on clubbing and dance music) in which drugs may be chosen to provide pleasurable 'mind-altering' experiences and to signal subcultural identification and belonging.

Recently, some have suggested that the 'normalisation' of recreational drugs has also occurred among Australian youth, if not to the same extent as in the UK.<sup>5</sup> The possibility that certain types of illicit drug use are becoming common among Australian young people poses challenges for those working in drug education and health promotion. Because of the evident tensions between Australia's long-standing commitment to harm reduction and the Howard government's 'Tough on Drugs' policy, it is difficult for educators to develop consistent and effective responses to drug use among youth.<sup>6,7</sup> However, the development of the normalisation thesis in the UK does present an opportunity to review what is known about drug use among young people in Australia, and what some of the implications of the normalisation thesis might be in an Australian context.

## Illicit drug use among youth: what do we know?

In order to develop effective responses in the areas of service delivery, education, law enforcement and social policy, it is important that we have a sound understanding of drug use patterns and trends among Australian youth. At present, there are a number of behavioural surveys that capture different aspects of youth drug use at a national level, although all of these surveillance mechanisms systematically exclude some young people. Most of the surveys target specific groups of drug users, such as injecting drug users, rather than young people in general.

**Table 1: Summary of lifetime drug use among Australian young people from national surveys**

| Survey  | Year | Sample                        | Percentage ever having used |          |         |         |                       |
|---|------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|---------|---------|-----------------------|
|   |      |                               | Amphetamines                | Cannabis | Ecstasy | Opiates | Any illicit substance |
| Australian Secondary Students Survey (ASSS)     | 2002 | School students aged 12 to 17 | 7                           | 25       | 5       | 3       | 27                    |
| National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) | 2001 | Young people aged 14 to 19*   | 8                           | 34       | 7       | 1       | 38                    |

\* Subsample of those surveyed

Only two national surveys have attempted to provide overall rates of illicit drug use among representative samples of young Australians—the Australian Secondary Students Survey of over-the-counter and illicit drugs (ASSS) and the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS).<sup>8,9,10,11</sup> A summary of findings from these surveys is shown in Table 1. Both surveys found that between a quarter and two-fifths of Australian youth had tried or used any illicit substance. In these and other surveys, cannabis is reported as the most commonly used illicit substance, with only small proportions of young Australians reporting the use of other illicit substances, such as amphetamines, ecstasy or opiates.

The normalisation thesis proposed by Howard Parker and his colleagues suggests that, in order to understand the extent to which illicit drug use has become normalised (or not) among young people, we need to focus on a number of dimensions.<sup>4</sup> These include:

- young people's access to illicit substances, i.e. drug availability
- rates of drug experimentation (trying)
- rates of recent and regular use among young people
- social and cultural accommodation of recreational drug use.

According to this thesis, in order for us to say that the normalisation of drug use is occurring, we would expect to find that drugs are increasingly available to young people, that experimentation and regular use are common or increasing, and that drug use is becoming more socially and culturally acceptable. Parker and his colleagues have argued that these shifts have occurred in the UK<sup>4</sup>, but what do we know about the situation in Australia?

### Availability

The NDSHS asks respondents whether they have been offered or have had the opportunity to use different drugs. Cannabis is the most available illicit drug in Australia, with just under a quarter of the population aged 14 or over saying that they had been offered or had the opportunity to use this substance in 1998 and 2001.<sup>9</sup> The availability of other illicit drugs is much lower and varies over time. While the availability of amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy increased between 1998 and 2001, the availability of other illicit drugs (including heroin and LSD) declined over the same period.

### Experimentation

The figures in Table 1 can be taken as rates of experimentation (ever having used a drug) among Australian young people. Although cannabis is consistently the most commonly tried illicit drug among young people, according to the ASSS its use appears to have declined between 1999 and 2002, from 29% to 25% of 12- to 17-year-olds.<sup>11</sup>

The NDSHS also shows a decline in cannabis use between 1993 and 2001, from 35% to 33% of Australians aged 14 and over.<sup>9</sup> Looking at other illicit drugs, the NDSHS found that experimentation with amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy increased between 1993 and 2001; e.g. rates of ever having used ecstasy increased from 3% to 6%, while the ASSS found that the rates of trying these drugs did not change significantly between 1999 and 2002. The average age at which Australians report first trying any illicit drug in the Household Survey remained relatively stable between 1995 and 2001, at 19 years of age.

More recent survey findings from Victoria, however, suggest a somewhat different picture. The Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey (VYADS), of over 6000 young people aged 14 to 24, suggests that lifetime rates of illicit drug use increased in Victoria between 2002 and 2003 from 51% to 54% of young people. Much of this overall increase is likely to be the result of an increase in lifetime rates of cannabis use (from 48% to 53%), but the rates of trying all other illicit drugs increased slightly over the same period, including amphetamines (from 14% to 16%) and ecstasy (16% to 19%).

### Recent and regular use

The NDSHS defines the 'recent' use of drugs as the use of any drug within the 12 months prior to the survey. Cannabis is the most regularly used illicit drug in Australia. The 2001 NDSHS found that a quarter (25%) of 14- to 19-year-olds had used cannabis in the year prior to the survey, while the 2002 ASSS found that 21% of 12- to 17-year-olds had used cannabis in the previous year. Both surveys suggest that rates of recent cannabis use fell between 1995 and 2002. However, figures from VYADS go against this trend (or show a reversal in recent years), with the proportion of young Victorians reporting the recent use of cannabis increasing from 28% in 2002 to 31% in 2003.

As for other illicit substances, the NDSHS showed increases in the recent use of other illicit drugs by 14- to 19-year-olds between 1995 and 2001, such as amphetamines (from 3% to 6% for young men, and 2% to 7% for young women) and ecstasy (from 1% to 6% for young men, and almost zero to 4% for young women). However, over the same period the rates of recent heroin use did not change significantly, remaining at under 1% for young men and women. The VYADS also found that rates of recent heroin use remained at under 1% for young Australians, but it showed higher (and increasing) rates of the recent use of 'recreational' or 'party' drugs in 2002 and 2003. For example, the VYADS found that between 2002 and 2003 the recent use of ecstasy among 16- to 24-year-olds had increased from 10% to 12%, and the recent use of amphetamines had increased from 8% to 10%.

### Acceptability

The NDSHS asked respondents about which drugs were considered acceptable for regular use, which drugs were considered problematic, and whether respondents supported the legalisation of particular illicit drugs. Cannabis was the most accepted illicit substance, although the proportion of Australians who thought its use acceptable fell slightly between 1998 and 2001, from 26% to 24%. The acceptability of other illicit drugs was fairly low, with fewer than 5% of Australians rating the regular use of ecstasy, amphetamines or cocaine as acceptable in 2001, and with only around 1% considering heroin acceptable. The VYADS found similar rates of acceptability for these drugs among young Victorians in 2003.

Heroin and cannabis are the drugs most likely to be associated with a drug 'problem', with over half of Australians surveyed in the 2001 NDSHS identifying heroin as problematic (up from 37% in 1998), and nearly a quarter singling out cannabis (a small increase from 1998). The VYADS found that higher proportions of young Victorians thought that heroin and cannabis were problem drugs in 2002 (39% for both drugs), and that cannabis had displaced heroin as the drug most likely to be thought problematic in 2003 (40% vs 34%).

With regard to legalisation, the NDSHS found that around 30% of Australians supported the legalisation of cannabis for personal use in both 1998 and 2001. Support for the legalisation of heroin increased slightly from 7% to 8% during the same period, as did support for legalising amphetamines and cocaine (support increased from 6% to 7% for both).

### Evaluating the data

The data from the NDSHS, ASSS and VYADS give a somewhat confused picture of young people's drug use in Australia. While the availability of cannabis has remained largely constant in recent years, there have been modest increases in the availability of what we might term 'party drugs', i.e. amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy. Looking at rates of experimentation, we find there is a substantial number of young people (a majority in the VYADS) who say they have tried illicit drugs. However, while the NDSHS and ASSS show falls in the rate of lifetime cannabis use during the 1990s and early 2000s, more recent figures from Victoria suggest an increase in the use of cannabis by young people in 2002–2003. The NDSHS and VYADS suggest that the proportions of Australian youth trying amphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine have increased since the 1990s (perhaps reflecting increases in availability), with the VYADS suggesting that around one in six young Victorians have experimented with each of these drugs.

The ASSS, looking at a younger sample of secondary students, did not find increases in experimentation with ‘party drugs’ between 1999 and 2002, suggesting that young people in their twenties are more likely to try these drugs. Rates of recent illicit drug use seem to reflect trends in lifetime rates in each of the surveys, with reported increases in the recent use of party drugs in the NDSHS and VYADS, but not the ASSS. The VYADS found that over one in 10 young Victorians had used ecstasy in the year prior to the survey.

The survey figures suggest that experimentation with and the use of cannabis is a relatively common experience for around a third of Australian young people. Use of other illicit drugs is still reported by only a minority of young people, but this minority may be growing. The use of party drugs, in particular, may be increasing among young Australians who have left school. However, when we look at the acceptability of illicit drugs, we find that while just under a third of the Australian population as a whole supports the legalisation of cannabis, many also see its regular use as problematic.<sup>11</sup> The proportion of Australians who see the regular use of cannabis as acceptable has also fallen in recent years, while the acceptability of other illicit drugs remains low.

Therefore, in terms of the normalisation thesis, the picture of illicit drug use among young Australians fits in some respects, but not others. Drug experimentation and recent use is common for cannabis and may be increasing for party drugs, but the use of most illicit drugs is reported only by small minorities of young people. The perceived acceptability of most illicit drugs is still quite low and attitudes do not appear to be liberalising in a significant fashion, as we might expect if illicit drug use were becoming normalised in Australia. This suggests that either the normalisation of drug use by young people is not occurring in Australia, or that it is happening in limited contexts and is not apparent within national and state survey data. Both supporters and critics of the normalisation thesis have suggested that more attention needs to be paid to the contexts in which drug use occurs, and the specific groups of young people for whom drug use may have become normalised.<sup>5,6,13,14,15</sup> I therefore consider research on specific groups of young people in the next section.

## Context and subculture

A recent national study conducted by the consultancy Blue Moon Research and Planning investigated young Australians’ attitudes to and use of alcohol and illicit drugs.<sup>16</sup> The quantitative arm of the study was in many respects similar to other national surveys of drug use, recruiting over 2000 people aged 15 to 24 across Australia, and finding similar rates of drug use to the VYADS. However, the study also conducted qualitative small-group interviews with young people to enrich and contextualise the quantitative findings. While the recruitment for the quantitative survey attempted to produce a representative sample of Australian youth, the qualitative arm deliberately oversampled young people who had used illicit drugs. Blue Moon then constructed a typology of young

people, based on attitudes to drugs and rates of experimentation and regular use. The authors argued that the majority of drug use found in the survey was reported by the minorities of young people who could be characterised as ‘thrill seekers’ or ‘reality swappers’. These two groups of young people made up just over a third of Blue Moon’s sample, but accounted for around 90% of the reported cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine use, and over 70% of amphetamine use.

Blue Moon argued that both groups of young people had positive attitudes to drugs, knew peers who were drug users, and saw drug use as a potentially fun and exciting activity. The two groups differed in terms of their sense of happiness, security and control over their lives. While thrill seekers were described as ‘happy, secure and self-motivated’ and feeling ‘in control of their lives’, reality swappers were seen as ‘unhappy and insecure’ and lacking a sense of control. Thrill seekers tended to use drugs primarily for pleasure and excitement but, for reality swappers, drug use was a means of escape and a way to avoid everyday life.

Blue Moon’s research is interesting in that it tried to identify the types of young people for whom drug use was a normal or regular activity, and then described their personality traits, attitudes to drugs and life in general. As the authors argue, this may help in education and health promotion efforts, but we should bear in mind the limits of this approach. The typologies of drug-using youth that researchers create do not necessarily reflect the ways in which young people see themselves and their drug use, and do not capture the contexts in which drug use takes place. The approach adopted by Blue Moon assumes that individual personality and attitude are the driving forces behind decisions to engage in or abstain from drug use. While individual factors clearly play an important role in decisions around drug use, it is also important to understand the social contexts, meanings and practices of drug use if we want education and health promotion activities to be taken seriously by young people.

It is therefore interesting to see a different typology of drug use among young people developed from a sociological point of view. Lindsay’s research with nearly 400 young people aged 15 to 25 in Melbourne identified three socialising patterns (‘partying hard’, ‘partying sometimes’ and ‘shopping’) that were associated with different levels of alcohol and other drug use and safe sex practices.<sup>17</sup> Each group accounted for around a third of the sample. While both the ‘party hard’ and ‘party sometimes’ groups reported similar levels of the lifetime use of any illicit drug (over half in each group), the ‘party hards’ were significantly more likely to report the use of ecstasy (24% vs 11%), harmful levels of alcohol consumption (56% vs 46%) and occasions of unsafe sex (23% vs 16%). The ‘party hards’ attended the widest range of leisure venues and, on average, attended pubs, night-clubs, cafés, restaurants and a gym every week. Lindsay’s approach is useful in that it confirms the idea that illicit drug use tends to be concentrated among particular groups of young people (as in Blue Moon’s study), and supports the idea of a selective normalisation of illicit drug use among particular groups of Australian youth. The study also emphasises that regular illicit drug use tends to be part of a broader repertoire

of socialising for young people, and suggests *where* we might find (and potentially target) young people who consume high levels of alcohol and other drugs. While some venues are obvious (i.e. pubs and clubs), the ‘party hards’ also regularly attend venues such as gyms and cafés, suggesting alternative outlets for health promotion.

A key part of the normalisation thesis is the idea that the growth of dance music club cultures in the 1990s fuelled a rise in the use of ‘designer’ or ‘party’ drugs such as ecstasy among young people. The popularity of ‘rave’ and club scenes was associated with hedonistic and celebratory representations of party drug use that circulated within youth cultures and beyond.<sup>18</sup> These positive representations of ecstasy and other drugs challenged dominant accounts of illicit drug use as deviant, furtive or shameful, thus normalising the idea of selective illicit drug use for some people. The use of ecstasy in particular certainly appears to have increased among young people in Australia during and after the 1990s, and has been a key part in the development of local club cultures.<sup>19</sup> Although there have been some media and cultural analyses of the development of club cultures in Australia<sup>20</sup>, there are few studies of how party drugs are used by young people in Australia. The Party Drugs Initiative is a notable exception, recruiting ecstasy users across Australia, including younger users aged 15 to 22.<sup>21</sup> This research suggests that the age of initiation of ecstasy use is falling among younger users, and that younger users commonly report bingeing (using ecstasy for more than 48 hours without sleep), taking more than one pill at once, and using other drugs (notably speed, crystal and LSD). Although the Party Drugs Initiative gives us insight into behavioural trends of party drug use, it does not tell us much about how party drug use is learnt or experienced by young people. One of the few studies to address these issues is an ethnographic study of the use of ecstasy by young club and party patrons in Sydney and Canberra.<sup>22</sup>

Although small in scale, Gourley’s study is valuable in that it highlights the importance of friends and peers in young people’s initiations into ecstasy use, and the ways in which users learn to perceive the pleasurable effects of drugs.<sup>22</sup> The study also explores how ecstasy use is informally regulated within clubbing subcultures by folk pharmacologies, shared values and norms of appropriate drug use. While Gourley found that drug use was indeed normalised within the club cultures she observed, and that these club cultures were becoming increasingly acceptable and visible to the mainstream, she argues that this does not mean illicit drug use has become normalised across Australia. Instead, she argues that ‘the meaning of drug use has to be looked at in the context of the norms of behaviour and shared understandings of the drug-using group in which they are learnt’.

Of course, club cultures are not the only youth subcultures where drug use is normalised. A recent study of drug use among young people attending music festivals suggests that alternative, guitar-based music scenes also provide cultural spaces in which young people use illicit drugs.<sup>23</sup> The study surveyed nearly 1600 people (mean age 22) who attended the

Big Day Out festival in Sydney and Splendour in the Grass in Byron Bay in 2004. The vast majority of those surveyed (82%) had used illicit substances, with high lifetime rates of the use of cannabis (78%), ecstasy (50%), amphetamines (46%), LSD (26%), cocaine (21%), methamphetamines (18%), heroin (5%) and GHB (5%). High proportions of festival attendees also reported the recent use of drugs and said that it was easy to obtain illicit substances. Over 4% of those surveyed had ever injected illicit drugs. Reinforcing the idea that drug use takes place within social milieux, over half of the participants reported that they had used drugs in the presence of their friends, a third with their schoolmates or work colleagues, a third with family members, and a quarter with dance or club buddies. Nearly all of the participants surveyed knew friends who used illicit drugs (95%), or had spent time with people who used illicit drugs (91%). It would appear that drug use is relatively common among young people in alternative music scenes, yet knowledge of blood-borne viruses was mixed among participants. While knowledge of HIV was good, awareness of the different forms of hepatitis was inconsistent. Targeting these scenes may therefore be useful in drug and blood-borne virus education with young people.

### Strategic and sensible use

It is clear that illicit drug use is relatively common among some groups of Australian young people, notably those involved in clubbing, dance music and alternative music subcultures. For these groups, it may be appropriate and useful to regard their drug use as normalised, particularly when developing health education strategies. Appeals to young people for whom drug use is common need to avoid patronising users or portraying drug use as inherently deviant or pathological. Indeed, supporters of the normalisation thesis have focused on the ways in which young people have developed 'strategic' and 'sensible' practices of drug use, and how this type of drug use has become socially accommodated even by young people who are cautious about drugs or who remain abstainers.<sup>24</sup> 'Sensible and strategic use' seems to capture the idea of using drugs for their pleasurable, mind-altering and stamina-extending effects while not becoming 'messy', out of control or drug dependent. Appealing to and reinforcing norms of sensible and strategic use with appropriate health information may therefore be a good way to boost harm reduction efforts among young drug users.

However, we may wish to exercise some caution in relation to the concept of sensible and strategic drug use. In particular, the value assigned to sensible and strategic drug use by young people (and some drug researchers and educators) may unintentionally intensify the stigmatisation of those very practices of most concern to educators and health promoters. By emphasising the desirability of remaining in control of oneself and one's drug use, in not using drugs to excess, and specifying approved routes of administration and behaviour while intoxicated, the notion of sensible and strategic use does little to challenge the stigma attached to 'messy' drug use, being out of control, or less common routes of administration (notably

injecting). This may increase the difficulties of the most marginalised young drug users, particularly those who inject. In addition, the concept of sensible and strategic use is troublesome in that, although it rightly acknowledges that drug users are capable of developing sophisticated ways of monitoring and managing their drug use, it may also foster a false sense of security among users who base their drug-using practices on inaccurate knowledge about drug effects, blood-borne viruses and general health maintenance. While there are some good examples of research on how users develop norms of appropriate drug use<sup>22,24</sup>, more needs to be done on the ways that 'sensible and strategic use' is learnt by young drug users, or what users do when their drug use is labelled as messy, risky or beyond the pale.

### Conclusion

There is mixed evidence about whether the normalisation of illicit drug use is occurring among Australian youth in general. Drug use is certainly common among some groups of Australian young people, particularly those involved in clubbing and alternative music subcultures, and aspects of the normalisation approach may be useful for understanding their drug use in context. The notion of sensible and strategic use, while acknowledging that drug users often find complex ways of managing their drug use, should be treated with caution lest it contribute to the stigmatisation of the most marginalised drug users or generate a false sense of security among those lacking accurate harm reduction information.

### Glossary

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ASSS  | Australian Secondary Students Survey of over-the-counter and illicit drugs |
| NDSHS | National Drug Strategy Household Survey                                    |
| VYADS | Victorian Youth Alcohol and Drug Survey                                    |

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