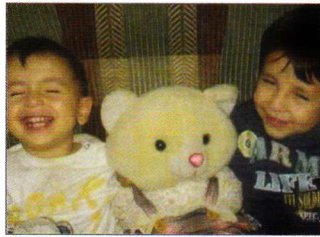




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EVERYTHING

In

MODERATION

A RECENT NATIONAL STUDENT DRUG SURVEY SUGGESTS A STRONG SHIFT AWAY FROM THE USE OF POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS 'MYSTERY WHITE POWDERS' IN FAVOUR OF OLD RELIABLES SUCH AS CANNABIS AND ECSTASY. WORDS OLAF TYARANSEN

• REPORT // OLAF TYARANSEN •

Alcohol is by far the leading legal drug of choice amongst Ireland's third level students, with cannabis and ecstasy leading the field of illegal substances. These are amongst the not altogether surprising results of the first National Student Drug Survey ever to be conducted in Ireland.

The data was collected from 2,700 third level students throughout the Republic of Ireland, and collated by co-ordinators Tim Bingham (a research associate at Global Drug Policy Observatory) and psychologist Colin O'Driscoll, in association with Graham DeBarra of Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP).

The research shows a shift away from using 'mystery white powders' to more common drugs such as cannabis and MDMA.

"We're still sifting through some

of the dark net stuff," explains Bingham, "but one of the biggest findings is that there has been a transition from using mystery white powders – the Snow Blows and methedrones, etc. – going back to more traditional drugs.

"We asked what had been used in the past 12 months and, particularly in the last six months, we've seen people move from using the mystery white powders back into the use of ecstasy, MDMA and cannabis."

The fall-off in use of 'mystery white powders' is undoubtedly connected to the closure of headshops.

However, the data also suggests that many students are taking a more sensible approach to their illegal drug use anyway.

"I've broken this down for some of the colleges recently," says Bingham. "Certainly, people are beginning to make more informed choices. They are trying to reduce the harm to themselves. When you look at the



Tim Bingham

breakdown of how many people are test-dosing, it's significant enough. 15% are telling sober friends, 10% are test-dosing; the highest proportion of people are asking their friends and researching about the drugs themselves.

"We've seen a proportion of this group basically making more informed choices," he continues. "The whole thing about PMA [para-Methoxyamphetamine] and everything that happened – the recent deaths – I think that's why people are making more informed choices. Certainly the overdose messages are starting to get back out there again.

"Going back to the mystery white powders – the headshops closing definitely had an effect on it. We are seeing a proportion of these people buying online – we're just going through the percentages at the moment, so we're not sure of the numbers, but we are definitely seeing

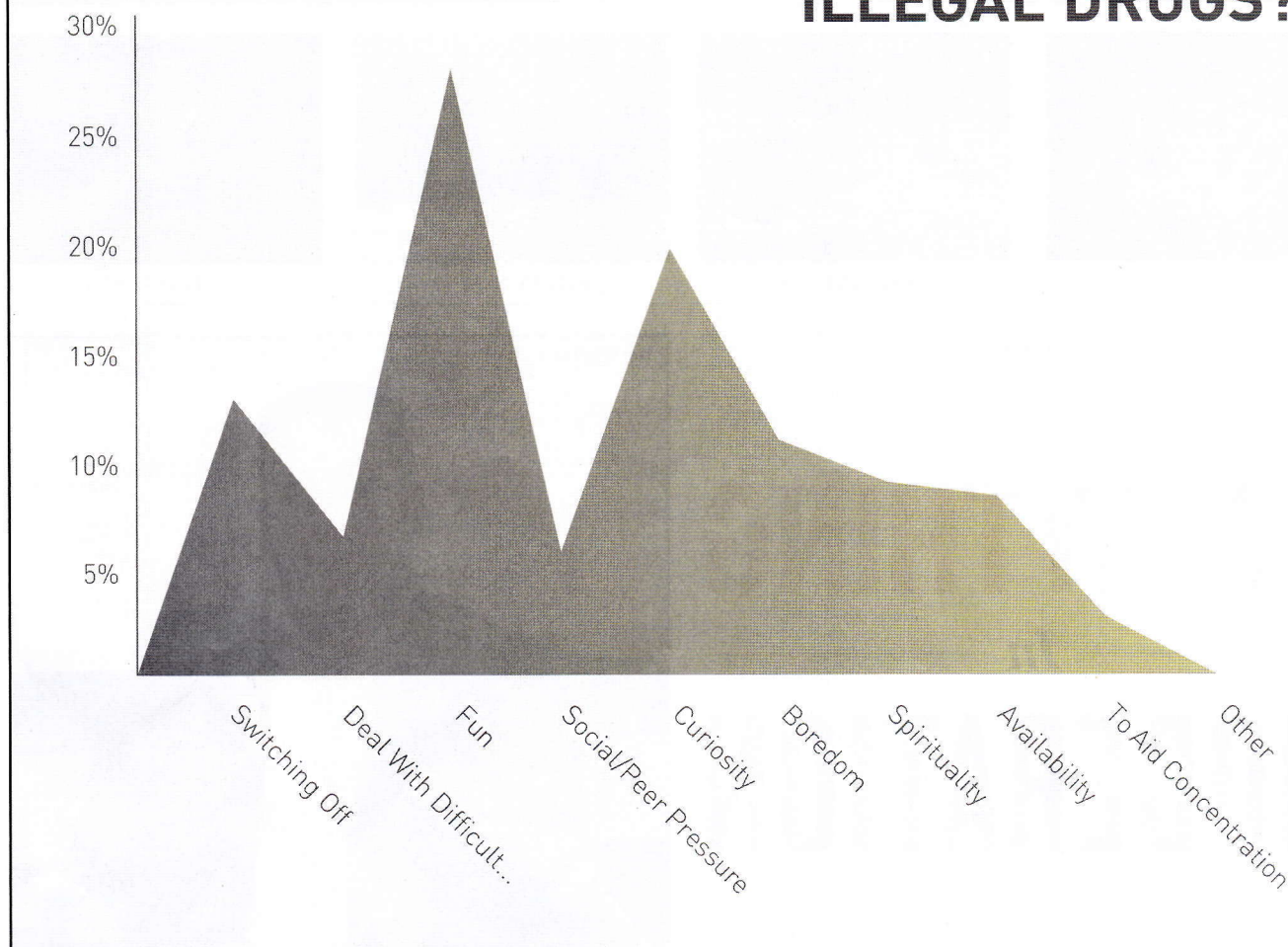
an increase."

What is intriguing is the number of students using illegal drugs as study aids. "40% was high enough," Bingham observes. "We looked at the Global Drug Survey and what they took into account. The other thing we've definitely seen an increase in is in the use of cocaine. We've seen a lot more of that starting to emerge. But I have to admit that I was quite surprised that 40% of the population were using substances during their normal day-to-day activity of studying. I personally didn't expect it to be that high."

What's potentially worrying about this is the number of students using drugs away from their friends and fellow students. "30% of people are using drugs alone," Bingham says. "That to me would be a concern. If they're using drugs alone, are they using them secretly? Why are they using drugs alone when most people tend to use them with friends or

CONTINUED OVER ➔

WHY DO YOU USE ILLEGAL DRUGS?



“WE’VE SEEN PEOPLE MOVE FROM USING THE MYSTERY WHITE POWDERS **BACK INTO THE USE OF MDMA AND CANNABIS.**”

during a party or at an event? That 30% is worrying.

“Again, the colleges and universities need to know that this is going on. We recently presented our findings to Trinity College, and I got the impression that colleges are starting to look at this and are asking themselves: is there a gap in the services we provide? How do you actually reach those people who are using alone in their normal, everyday life?”

Going against all of the received wisdom, a mere 5 per cent of students cited social or peer-pressure as their reason for using illegal drugs. “I was very surprised by that,” Bingham says. “Again that raises questions: has the role of social or peer use been greatly exaggerated? When you get to this cohort of people, at university, their cognitive skills are much further advanced than if they were 12, 13 or 14. They believe they are making the choices – so they, I suppose, wouldn’t see that as

responding to social peer pressure. And maybe they aren’t.

“Another thing that really impressed me was why many students *don’t* use illegal drugs. Health consequences stand out for people making that choice – they’re not sure about the purity or whatever. That feeds into the whole argument for decriminalisation as well – the evidence here says that people don’t use illegal drugs just because of their availability. And if you look at why people *do* use illegal drugs, well, at less than 10 per cent, availability isn’t high on the agenda there either. Certainly, the cohort of people we’ve surveyed are making informed choices.”

Given that this is the first survey of its kind, it’s difficult to ascertain whether or not the new generation is approaching things differently.

“This is the first study that has been done specifically around third-level students, so it really is very hard to know. What this

THE FACTS

40%

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS TAKING DRUGS DURING “NORMAL” COLLEGE DAY

30%

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS TAKING DRUGS ALONE

5%

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO TOOK DRUGS BECAUSE OF SOCIAL PRESSURE

survey does say is: a number of us assumed X, Y and Z but we didn’t really know; now we have a picture. And the truth is that cannabis use is higher than any of us expected. When we broke it all down, cannabis and ecstasy are the ones that really stood out as the top two substances.”

Interestingly, very few third level students have presented themselves at hospital A&E departments as a result of excessive drug use – blowing another popular myth out of the water. “The numbers of people admitted to A&E are very low,” Bingham confirms. “We hear about students being admitted to A&E all the time, but the figures show that 4 per cent were for alcohol, 1 per cent for drugs, and 2 per cent for alcohol and drugs. Again, it’s a very low proportion.”

Sport is probably far more dangerous – and costly! Indeed, if the National Student Drug Survey definitively demonstrates anything, it’s that in 2015, Irish third level students are relatively sensible about their illegal drug use. Bingham agrees.

“The ones that we really have to watch out for, from this data, are that (a) cocaine is on the increase, and (b) ketamine has been on the increase as well, over the last six months. Heroin has emerged in the last month, but it was a very small proportion. You’re talking less than 1 per cent so you can’t read anything into it. But this cohort, is definitely relatively sensible. Yeah.”