

## Addiction



ESRC SCHOOL BRIEFINGS

# Addiction: teenage kicks – the debate rages on

*The penalties of excess are rarely out of the headlines. Stars such as Amy Winehouse and George Michael have been in trouble with the law because of drink and drugs. Stars succumbing to the effects of drugs, alcohol or smoking have hit the headlines with depressing regularity.*

## The facts

This does not, however, seem to put off teenagers and young people. According to research discussed in this resource, 'recreational' drug use is more popular than ever and a third of 16-year-old girls smoke. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) says that a quarter of Britons regularly drink to dangerous levels. The number of alcohol-related deaths has more than doubled in 16 years, rising to more than 8,000 a year. Britain has the highest rates of teenage drinking in the developed world.

With the arrival of the new coalition government, debate about these issues has intensified, as Ministers consider policy changes. NICE has suggested measures such as setting minimum prices for alcohol and a ban on advertising. While Health Minister Andrew Lansley rejected minimum pricing shortly after the 2010 general election, Home Secretary Theresa May pledged to introduce a ban on the below-cost sale of alcohol several months later. According to May alcohol abuse is "the one thing that is behind more anti-social behaviour, criminality and violence than anything else." She also said local councils would



be able to charge more for late-night licences, double the fine for under-age sales and shut down shops and bars that persistently sold alcohol to children.

The Red Cross believes the situation is so serious that it has begun teaching children as young as 11 basic lifesaving techniques for someone who is dangerously drunk. "One in seven children questioned by the charity said they had been in an emergency involving a drunken friend in the previous 12 months," reported the *Sunday Times*.

When it comes to cigarettes, it appears as though the ban on public smoking is having an impact. There were 1,200 fewer hospital admissions for heart attacks in England during the 12 months after the ban came into effect in July

2007, a study from Bath University suggested. Still, leading doctors, such as the president of the Royal College of Paediatrics, are urging the Government to ban displaying cigarettes in shops.

The most complex debates surround drug laws. Cannabis has moved up and down the drug classifications scale in recent years, and was recently moved up from the bottom Class C (which includes tranquilisers and Ketamine) to the middle Class B (including Amphetamines and Ritalin), with up to five years in prison and/or an unlimited fine for possession.

In December 2010, the coalition government published a new strategy setting out its ambition to reduce demand, restrict supply and support and achieve recovery. During the consultation period senior police officers were among the voices calling for the decriminalisation of cannabis, so that resources could be concentrated on targeting high-level criminals. However, ministers opposed this view, saying decriminalisation failed to recognise the complex nature of the problem and lacked regard to the harms that drugs pose to the individual.

The new strategy aims to reduce both the demand and supply, and support localities in helping people to recover from drug misuse.

This resource focuses on three research projects which looked at young people's attitudes to different kinds of addictive substances: cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.

## Further information

[www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Media-centre/Press-releases/2010/September/Teens-feel-ill-equipped-to-handle-consequences-of-underage-drinking](http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Media-centre/Press-releases/2010/September/Teens-feel-ill-equipped-to-handle-consequences-of-underage-drinking)

[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/drugs/drugs-law/](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/drugs/drugs-law/)

[www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/jun/06/binge-drinking-shift-in-attitudes/](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/jun/06/binge-drinking-shift-in-attitudes/)

[www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2010/july/alcohol.aspx](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2010/july/alcohol.aspx)

[www.nice.org.uk/newsroom/news/ConcernsRaisedOverAlcoholAdvertising.jsp](http://www.nice.org.uk/newsroom/news/ConcernsRaisedOverAlcoholAdvertising.jsp)