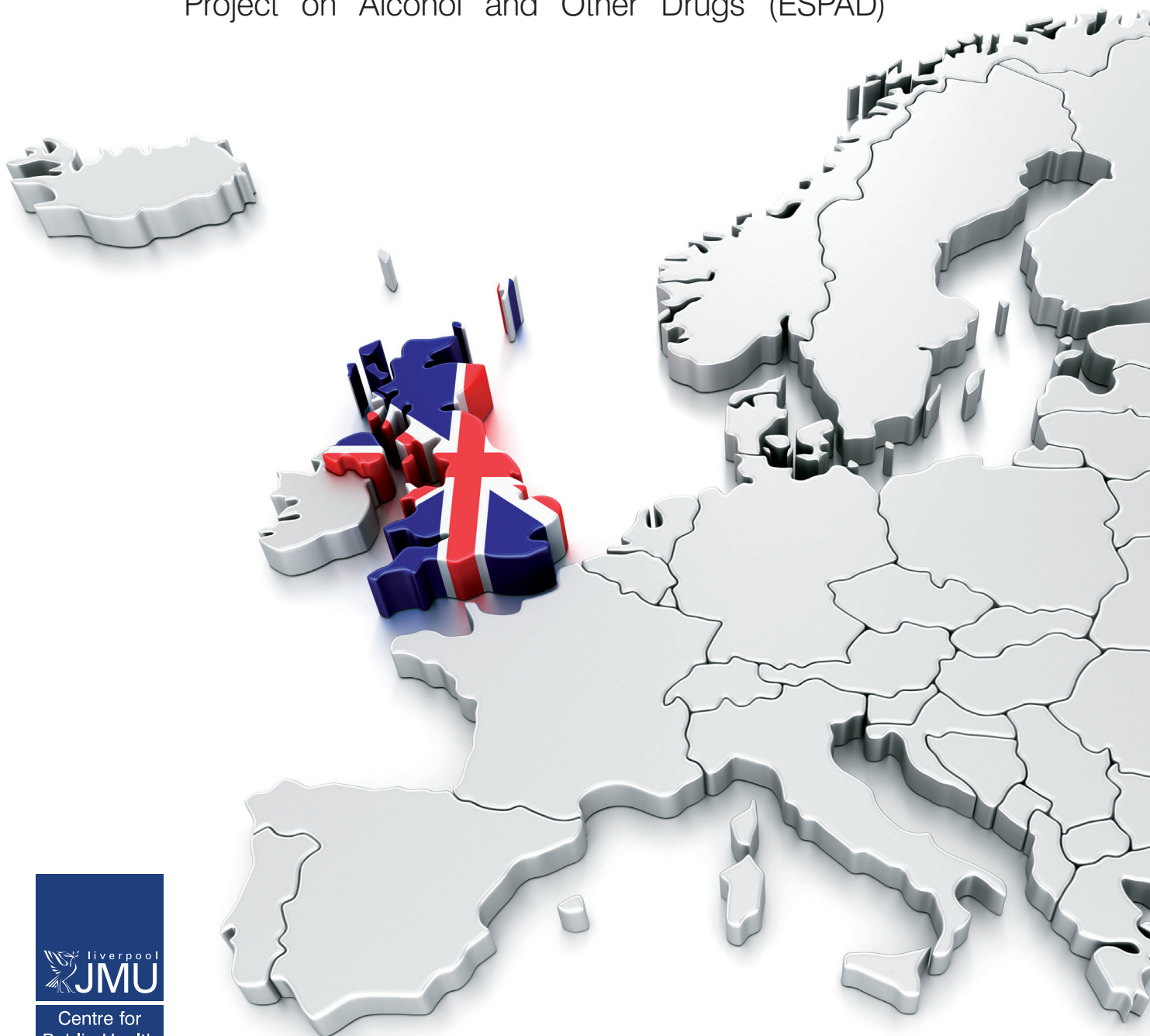


# Substance use among 15-16 year olds **in the UK**

Key findings from the 2011 European School Survey  
Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD)



# Authors

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## Introduction

The European Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) is conducted every four years and collects comparable data on trends in substance use among 15-16 year old school pupils across Europe. It is a high-quality survey and provides important data to support policy, practice and research. In 2011 36 countries and around 100,000 students took part; with 1712 being from the UK. The UK has taken part in ESPAD since it began in 1995, and the survey is now in its fifth data collection stage. This briefing presents a focussed summary of key results for the UK from the 2011 survey that was undertaken on behalf of the UK by the Centre for Public Health. It should be read alongside the full ESPAD report (see [www.espad.org](http://www.espad.org)). Longer-term trends are also discussed and comparisons are made with other surveys of substance use among school pupils in the UK (Currie *et al.*, 2012<sup>1</sup>, Fuller *et al.*, 2011<sup>2</sup>). The full ESPAD report contains further data on a range of associated substance use and risk taking behaviours.

### Summary of key trends

BEHAVIOUR	% In 1995	% In 2007	% In 2011	APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF 15 AND 16 YEAR OLDS ACROSS THE UK IN 2010*	RANK OF ESPAD COUNTRIES (1ST BEING THE COUNTRY WHERE BEHAVIOUR IS MOST PREVALENT)
Lifetime smoking	68	52	47	702,000	23rd
Last 30 days smoking	36	22	23	344,000	24th
Lifetime alcohol use	94	92	90	1,345,000	15th
Last 30 days alcohol use	74	70	65	971,000	12th
Having drunk at least 5 drinks on one occasion in the last 30 days	50	54	52	777,000	7th
Lifetime use of any illicit drug	42	29	27	403,000	5th
Lifetime cannabis use	41	29	25	374,000	5th
Cannabis use in last 30 days	24	11	13	194,000	4th

\* Based on 1,494,000 15 and 16 year olds in the UK in 2010

## Methodology

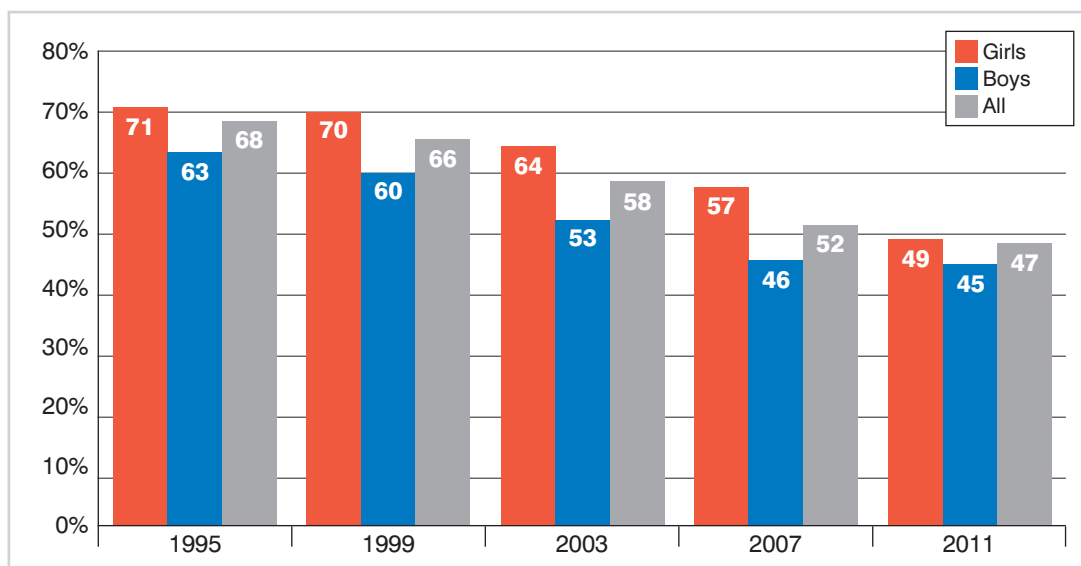
To provide comparable data across countries and time, the survey is conducted using a standardised methodology and questionnaire. The UK data was collected during March-April 2011 in a random sample of 74 secondary schools in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (sampling was in proportion to the number of schools in each country). Participants were 1712 school children born in 1995 and this comprised a relatively even split of boys (n=865) and girls (n=847). All schools that participated in the survey reported good pupil engagement with the research. Busy school schedules and involvement in other research projects meant that the overall number of schools agreeing to take part in the survey was low (approximately 1 in 17 agreed)<sup>3</sup>. However, as participating schools were selected using a random sampling process the data can be considered representative of the wide variety of UK schools.

# Key findings

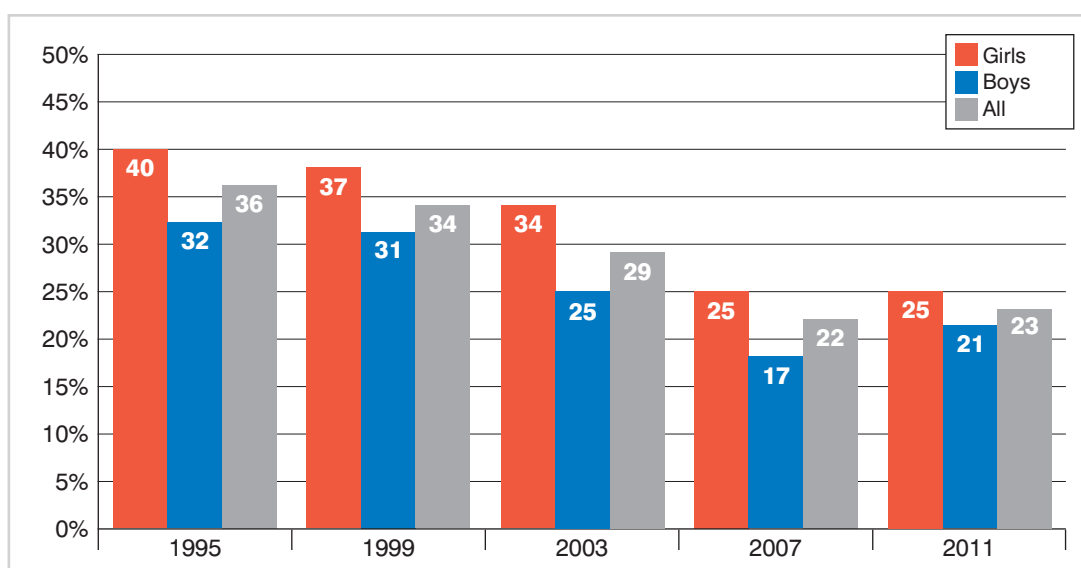
## Cigarettes

In 2011, 47% of UK school pupils reported having tried smoking at least once in their lifetime (see Graph 1). 23% reported having smoked in the last 30 days (see Graph 2). 49% of girls reported lifetime smoking compared to 45% of boys. 25% of girls reported having smoked in the last 30 days compared to 21% of boys. The majority (66%) of pupils reported finding it 'fairly' or 'very' easy to obtain cigarettes. The UK is considered to have the most comprehensive set of tobacco control policies in Europe (Jooseens and Raw, 2010) and lifetime use of cigarettes by 15 and 16 year olds is below the ESPAD average of 54%. The proportion of pupils reporting smoking during the last 30 days was also below the ESPAD average of 28%. These figures are similar to the 2009/10 World Health Organization's Health Behaviours in School-aged Children survey of smoking (Currie *et al.*, 2012). For example, in 2009/2010, lifetime smoking prevalence for 15 year olds in England was 41%, 42% for Wales and 39% for Scotland (Currie *et al.*, 2012). There has been a decrease in lifetime and last 30 days use of cigarettes in the UK since the start of the ESPAD survey in 1995 (see Graphs 1 and 2).

**Graph 1: Lifetime use of cigarettes**



**Graph 2: Cigarette smoking in the last 30 days**



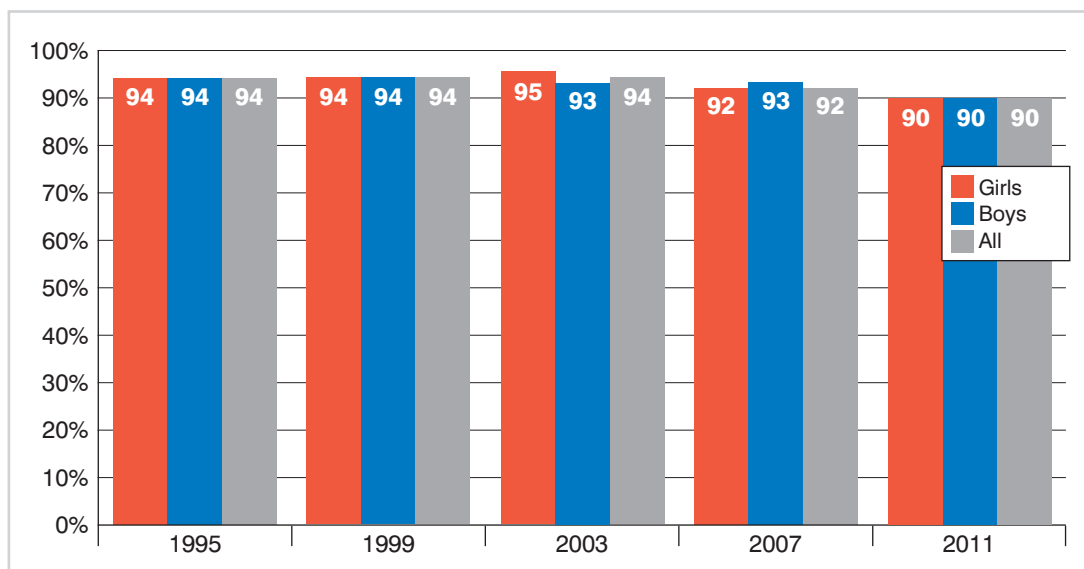
# Alcohol

In 2011, 90% of 15-16 year old school pupils in the UK reported having drunk an alcoholic drink at least once in their lifetime (see Graph 3). 85% reported having drunk alcohol in the last 12 months and 65% in the last 30 days (see Graph 4). There were no sex differences. 52% of pupils reported having drunk 5 or more drinks on at least one occasion in last 30 days (see Graph 5). 54% of girls reported having drunk at least 5 drinks on one occasion in the last 30 days compared to 50% of boys. 26% of pupils reported having been drunk in the last 30 days<sup>4</sup>. Girls (29%) reported drunkenness more than boys (24%). The majority (82%) of pupils reported that alcohol is 'fairly' or 'very' easy to obtain. More on-premise purchasing of alcohol for own consumption (40%) was reported than off premise purchasing (26%).

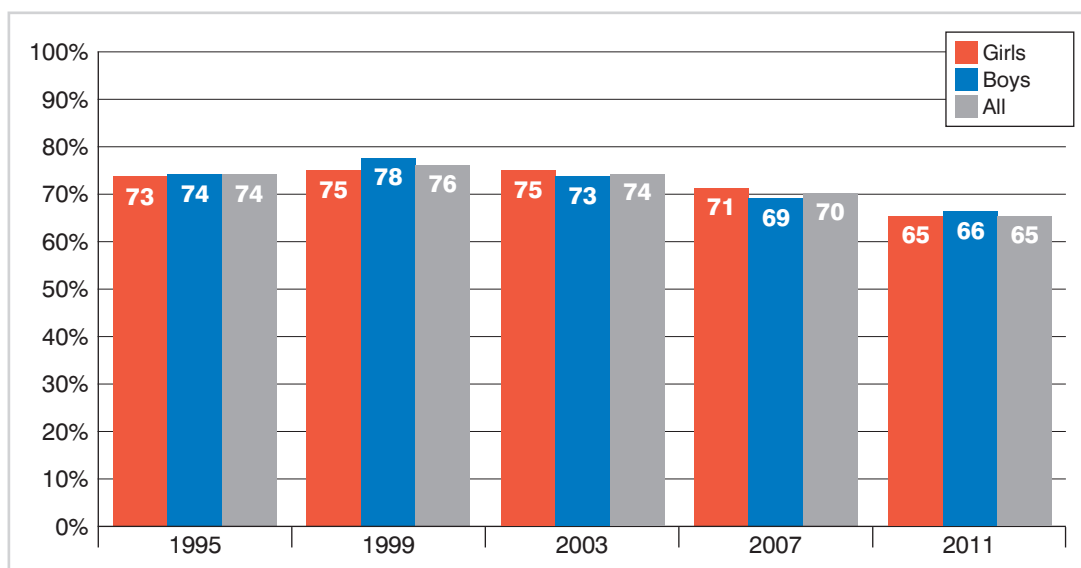
Participants reported experiencing a number of alcohol-related problems in the last 12 months. 13% of pupils reported having experienced relational problems (e.g. serious problems with friends) that they associated with their personal use of alcohol. 12% reported having experienced sexual problems (e.g. engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse) and 11% reported having experienced individual problems (e.g. performing poorly at school or work). 9% reported having experienced delinquency problems related to their own alcohol use (e.g. physical fight).

The UK is classed as a high prevalence country for alcohol use. For example, the proportions of pupils reporting having used alcohol during their lifetime (90%), the last 12 months (85%) and the last 30 days (65%) were higher than the ESPAD averages (87%, 79%, 57% respectively). However, since 1995, the proportion of pupils reporting lifetime and last 30 days alcohol use have decreased (See Graph 3 and 4). Similar downward trends have been reported in national surveys of substance use among UK school children (Fuller *et al.*, 2011). Despite this, the number of pupils reporting heavy episodic drinking (i.e. at least 5 drinks on one occasion), has not fallen since 1995 (see Graph 5).

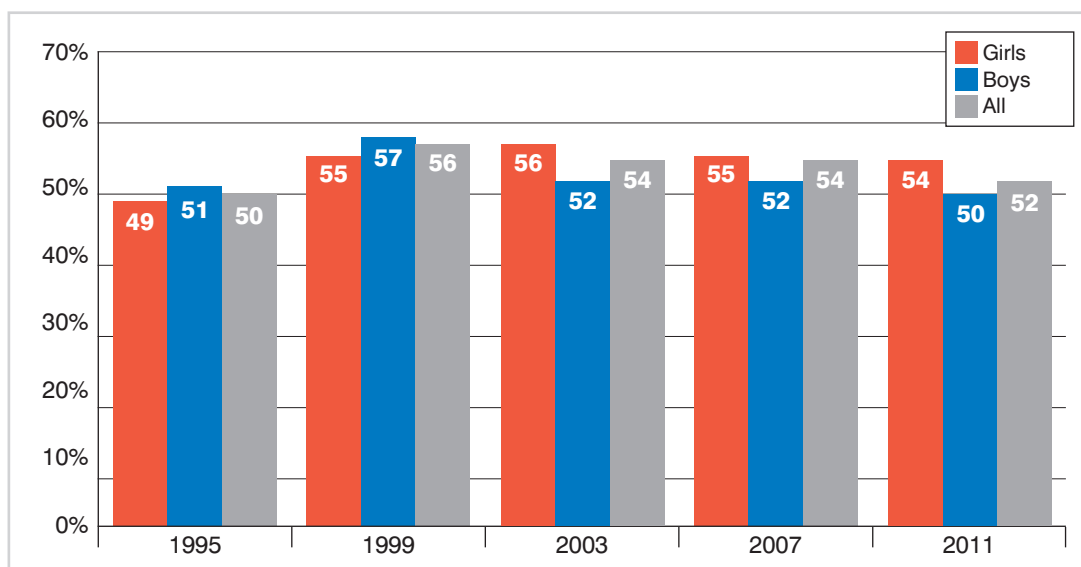
**Graph 3: Lifetime use of alcohol**



**Graph 4: Use of alcohol in the last 30 days**



**Graph 5: Consuming more than five alcoholic drinks on one occasion in the last 30 days**

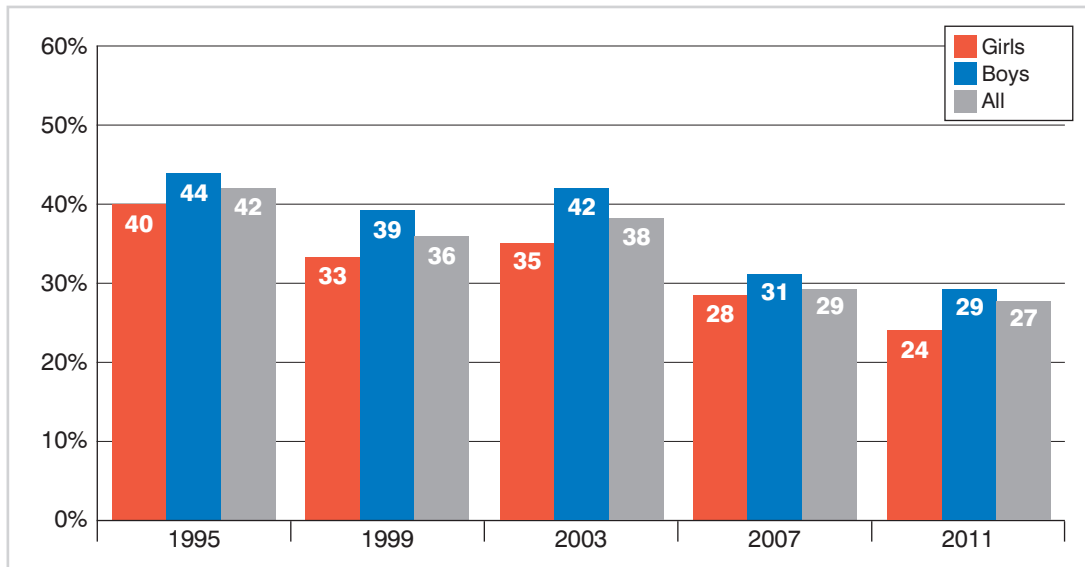


## Illicit drugs

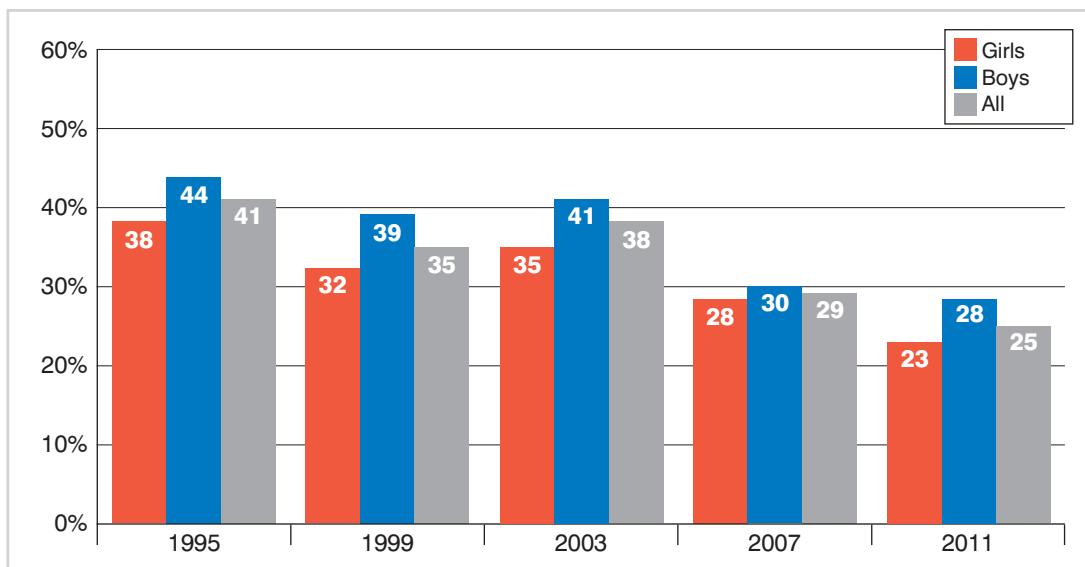
Just over a quarter (27%) of pupils reported having ever used any illicit drug in their lifetime<sup>5</sup> (see Graph 6). The proportion of pupils reporting lifetime use of any drug was higher among boys (29%) than girls (24%) (See Graph 6). Pupils reported higher proportions of cannabis use than any other drug for lifetime (25%), last 12 month (21%) and last 30 days use (13%) (see Graph 7 and 8). Cannabis use has also been reported as the most commonly used drug among this age group in national and European surveys (Fuller *et al.*, 2011, Currie *et al.*, 2012). More boys reported lifetime, last 12 months and last 30 days cannabis use than girls (see Graph 7 and 8), and overall 42% of pupils reported that cannabis was 'fairly' to 'very' easy to obtain.

There has been a decrease in the proportion of 15-16 year old school pupils reporting having used illicit drugs during their lifetime since 1995 (see Graph 6). 42% of pupils reported having ever used an illicit drug in 1995, compared to 29% in 2007 and 27% in 2011. Similarly, the proportions of pupils reporting having used cannabis during their lifetime and during the last 30 days has decreased since 1995 (See Graph 7 and 8).

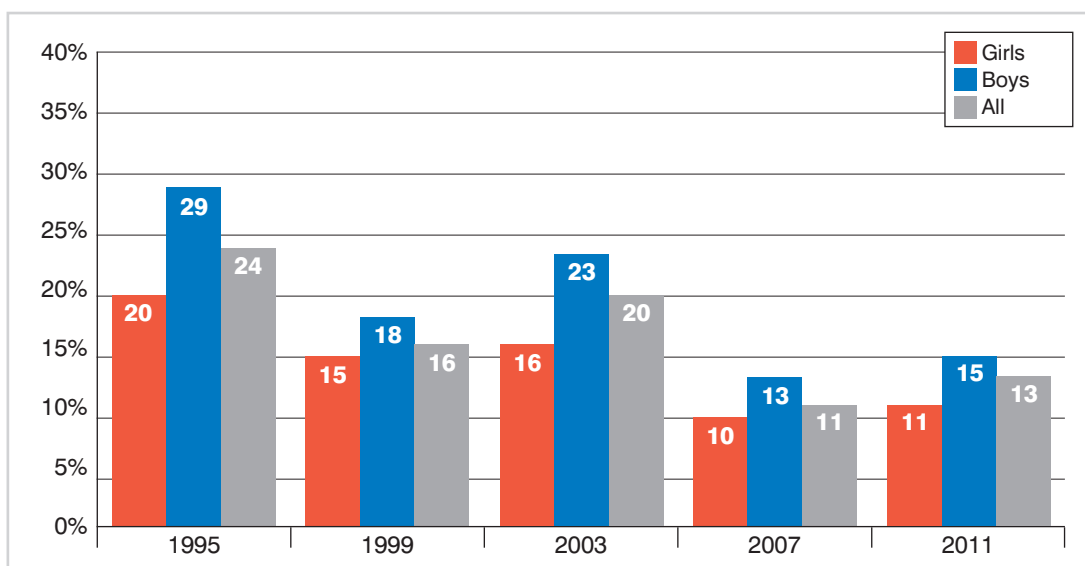
**Graph 6: Lifetime use of any drug**



**Graph 7: Lifetime use of cannabis**



**Graph 8: Cannabis use in the last 30 days**



# Conclusions and issues to consider

A number of key variables have been included in this briefing to provide a summary of substance use prevalence and trends among 15-16 year old school pupils in the UK. There appears to have been a reduction in smoking among school pupils since the first phase of data collection in 1995. Girls continue to smoke more than boys. Similarly there has been a decrease in alcohol use since 1995. Critically however, patterns of heavy drinking (consuming more than 5 drinks in a single occasion) have not changed since 2003 and more girls than boys now report heavy drinking and drunkenness in the last 30 days. Lifetime use of illicit drugs has also decreased over time, but boys continue to report greater use of all types of drug use than girls

The 2011 ESPAD survey has provided important information about the extent of substance use among 15-16 year olds in the UK and how these have changed over the last 16 years. The survey provides intelligence to assist with the design and targeting of interventions that support healthy adolescent development, as well as for monitoring the impact of national policies. Comparison with wider European data provides insight as to whether the trends in substance use reported here are as a result of UK specific factors or reflect wider European changes. Homogenisation of international youth cultures, globalisation of addictive goods marketing, and the increasing importance of EU strategies designed to limit the harmful impact of substance use means that it is essential that UK data are considered alongside those of other countries. ESPAD is unique in that it is the only survey that provides comparative data on a wide range of substance use and risk behaviours at the European level. The continued participation of the UK in ESPAD is critical for providing basic intelligence on the substance use of UK youths compared to their European counterparts. However, quality intelligence on risk taking and related harms amongst UK school pupils is threatened by an increasingly busy curriculum, multiple requests for research in UK schools and a lack of national school research coordination.

## References

Currie, C. *et al.*, (2012) Social determinants of health and well-being among young people: Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) study: international report from the 2009/2010 survey. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe.

Fuller, E. *et al.*, (2011) Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England in 2010. London: NHS Information centre for health and social care and Natcen.

Joosens, L., and Raw, M. (2010) The Tobacco Control Scale 2010 in Europe. Belgium: Association of European Cancer Leagues.

## Notes

1. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey is a cross-national study conducted in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The survey provides insight into the well-being and health behaviours (including substance use) of 11, 13 and 15 year olds across Europe. Data from the HBSC survey presented in this report are for 2009/2010 and are for 15 year olds only.
2. The UK government conducts a national annual survey to monitor smoking, drinking and drug use among secondary school pupils aged 11 to 15. Data from the 11-15 year old survey presented in this report are from 2010 and are for 15 year olds only.
3. The initial sample was randomly chosen from all schools in the UK and stratified in order to ensure schools from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were included in numbers proportional to their population. If any school refused to participate another school was randomly chosen to take their place. The process was repeated until 74 schools had agreed to participate giving a low total school participation rate of 6%.
4. Drunkenness is self-defined.
5. 'Any drug' includes cannabis, amphetamine, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, LSD and heroin.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the schools and young people who participated in the survey for their time and cooperation. We are also grateful to Alcohol Research UK (formerly Alcohol Education Research Council) and NHS North West for funding the research.

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**Tel:** +44(0)151 231 4535  
**Web:** [www.cph.org.uk](http://www.cph.org.uk)  
**ISBN:** 978-1-908929-08-2 ESPAD P (print)  
978-1-908929-09-9 ESPAD P (web)

