



# **A post-pandemic spike in substance use amongst young people & barriers to accessing support**

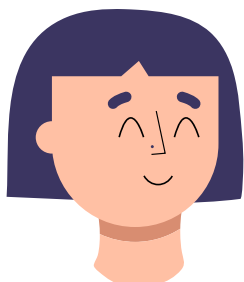


**THE MIX**

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# Introduction



"I think it's just important to make sure that people know that it's ok to get help for these addictions; there's a taboo around it, with people thinking they'll be arrested for heroin addiction, for instance. I think it's important that people understand they should get help for it, regardless."

Young person

"Addiction is a behaviour and not a choice."

Young person



**Trigger warning: This report includes references to substance use, addiction and loss of life.**

Following the ending of Covid-19 restrictions, illegal drug use has soared among young people. 1 in 3 young people have used an illegal drug in the past 12 months, and yet it still remains a taboo topic in our society.

1 in 5 substance users now take drugs or alcohol to escape problems in their life, and growing numbers experience challenges due to substance use and are in need of support. However, societal attitudes connected to substance use and addiction, lack of awareness of services available or belief that there are no suitable services available prevent many from seeking help. As a result, hundreds of thousands of young people are suffering in silence rather than reaching out for support.

Moreover, official figures show that drug-related deaths have been rising across the UK population, reaching their peak in 2021. In England and Wales alone, there were 4,859 drug-related deaths, representing a 6.2% increase from the figures in 2020<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2021 registrations.

**Much more can be done to ensure that young people with substance use issues seek and receive support.**

The Mix conducted a survey to understand the prevalence of substance use among young people, including alcohol, tobacco/cigarettes, vaping and drug use. It also looked into motivations for substance use, barriers to accessing support and ways these could be overcome to encourage more young people to seek support.

The Mix is the UK's leading digital charity for under 25s, reaching over 6 million young people each year. Whatever issue a young person is facing, The Mix is always there for them - via our website, over the phone or via social media. Our support is free, confidential and anonymous and can be accessed wherever young people are. We connect young people to experts and their peers to talk about everything from money to mental health, homelessness to jobs, break-ups to drugs and more. No topic is out of bounds, and we are completely non-judgemental.

## Summary

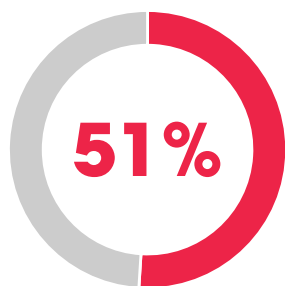
Research by The Mix with young people aged 16 to 25 has found that:

**Worryingly, the proportion of young people vaping in the past 12 months has almost trebled to 44%, from 15% in 2021.**

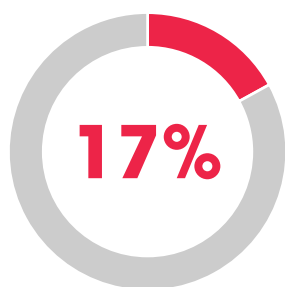
This means that almost 3.5 million young people have vaped in the past 12 months. While vaping and e-cigarettes have been widely promoted as a tool to help people give up smoking, there is an indication that young people who have never smoked before are taking it up. With limited evidence on the effects of vaping available, there is a risk that vaping may become another big health issue in years to come.

# 1 / 3

The proportion of young people smoking tobacco or cigarettes within the past year has increased to almost 1 in 3 (29%) from 1 in 5 (22%) young people in 2021.



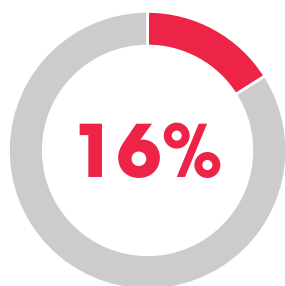
1 in 2 (51%) of 16- to 25-year-olds have consumed alcohol in the past month, which rises to 2 in 3 (64%) drinking alcohol within the last year. This represents a sharp drop compared to 2021 (74.6%).



17% of young people have used a class A drug within the past 12 months, equating to 1.3 million young people. This is far higher compared to 2021 (11%).

# 1 / 3

1 in 3 (33%) 16- to 25-year-olds have used an illegal drug (drug category A, B or C) <sup>2</sup> in the past 12 months, which equates to around 2.6 million people. This represents a dramatic increase compared to 2021, when 22% reported using an illegal drug.



The frequency of using drugs has increased considerably since 2021. In 2021, only 16% of young people used drugs at least once a week; this increased to 23% in 2022.

# 1 in 3

1 in 3 (32%) young people reported that they intend to use drugs in the next 12 months; this equates to 2.5 million young people, a similar level as recorded this year.

# 915,000

Some 12% of young people had used antidepressants outside of prescription within the last 12 months, approximately 951,000 16–25-year-olds. While some young people 'self-prescribe' antidepressants, others adjust dosing prescribed by their doctor, with some young people showing signs of addiction to antidepressants.

<sup>2</sup> The following drugs were included in the surveys: cocaine; ecstasy/ MDMA; LSD, magic mushrooms/psilocybin; heroin; methadone; amphetamines; cannabis, ketamine; mephedrone; tranquillisers; anabolic steroids)

## Substance use is a coping mechanism for an increasing number of young people.



Our findings suggest that more and more young people use substances to help them cope with problems in their life, and as this does not make the problems disappear, an increasing number of young people are forming a habit that is hard to break.

Our data shows that while fewer young people are currently using substances to have fun, there has been a sharp increase in using substances to escape problems, with 1 in 5 substance users doing so. A similar number use substances to help them cope with a mental health issue or emotional distress. Alarming, the proportion of young people taking substances as a habit, which indicates addiction, almost trebled from 5% in 2021 to 14% in 2022.



Likely connected to the higher frequency of drug taking, a far larger proportion of substance users reported experiencing challenges as a result of substance use (56%), and particularly with their mental health (22%).

Yet, only a quarter (28%) of substance users who have experienced challenges with substance use accessed any support or services to help them deal with the challenges, meaning that there are over 2.2 million young people who had experienced challenges but did not access any support.

Although far fewer young people told us this year that they had not accessed support as they can deal with the challenges on their own, this is still the main reason for not accessing support (55% in 2021, 40% in 2022). Such a large fall may be indicative of young people being better able to recognise that they need to deal with their challenges, but it may also indicate more serious nature of challenges experienced.

Many young people do not believe that support that is available would help them or are not aware of the services available. Moreover, over 2 in 5 believe that there is not enough support available to help young people with concerns about drug or alcohol use, which may be a reason why some young people do not even try to find support. The stigma attached to substance use and societal attitudes towards users still present major barriers for young people to accessing support.

And yet, among those who experienced challenges but have not sought support, the proportion saying that nothing would motivate them to seek support has halved from 43% in 2021 to 19% in 2022, indicating a shift in attitudes, perhaps because young people are better aware that they need support to help them cope with their challenges. This also means that there are 1.6 million young people who are currently being failed by existing support as they would have accessed support to help them cope if improvements were made.

Guarantee of anonymity, more information on support options available, easier access to support such as via telephone or online, ability to speak to people who have overcome substance use issues or being able to find out about other people's experiences with particular services or support options would motive more young people to seek support.

# Gathering our data

Data has been collected by Opinium<sup>3</sup>, on behalf of The Mix. The research surveyed a total of 2,000 young people aged 16 to 25 years and was undertaken between 7th - 18th July 2022.



The survey was carried out online; figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK 16-to 25-year-olds. Where quotes from young people are used in the report, they are drawn from qualitative questions included in the survey.

The Mix survey aimed to understand how widespread the use of substances causing addiction is, from alcohol, tobacco/cigarettes and vaping to drug use. The Mix carried out a similar survey a year ago in August 2021. Results from both surveys are compared, where practical, to better understand changes in substance use, motivations for substance use, challenges experienced with substance use, barriers to accessing support and improvements needed to encourage more young people to access support.

## We asked young people about their substance use:

in the 30 days (a month)  
before the survey

in the year prior to  
the survey

and at any point at  
least a year ago.

Substances in our survey include: alcohol, tobacco or cigarettes, vaping; cocaine, ecstasy/ MDMA; LSD, magic mushrooms/psilocybin; heroin; methadone; amphetamines; cannabis, ketamine; mephedrone; tranquillisers; anabolic steroids; inhalants, diet pills and antidepressants.

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<sup>3</sup> The Mix contracted Opinium to survey young people across the UK. Opinium is a research company specialising in research consultancy.

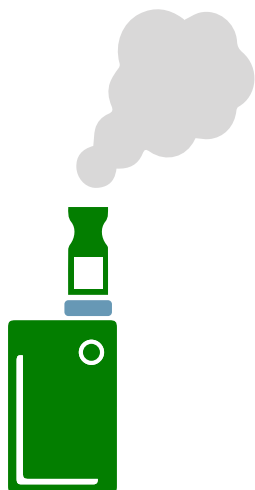


# Use of alcohol, tobacco or cigarettes & vaping

## Vaping

**Worryingly, the proportion of young people vaping in the past year had almost trebled to 44% in 2022, from 15% in 2021. This equates to almost 3.5 million young people.**

**Within a month before our survey, 1 in 3 (32%) of 16- to 25-year-olds have vaped; this equates to over 2.5 million young people in the UK.**



Although vaping and e-cigarettes have been widely promoted as a tool to help you stop smoking, there are concerns that vaping and e-cigarette marketing have been targeted at those who have never smoked<sup>4</sup>, and this is likely one of the reasons behind the growing popularity of vaping among young people. Nowadays, e-cigarettes or vaping products are widely available and well accessible. Vaping is perceived as fashionable among many young people who like the wide choice of flavours and colours available. Importantly, vaping is often seen as a healthier and better alternative to smoking.

However, there are dangers attached to vaping; with emerging data suggesting links to chronic lung disease and asthma, as well as associations between dual use of e-cigarettes and smoking with cardiovascular disease<sup>5</sup>. As e-cigarettes contain nicotine, they are highly addictive, which means that people who start vaping e-cigarettes can easily find themselves addicted to them, some without fully realising the danger.

<sup>4</sup> House of Lords Library (2022). Vaping among teens. A growing trend?  
<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/vaping-among-teens-a-growing-trend/>. Accessed 13/08/2022

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/5-truths-you-need-to-know-about-vaping>

Vaping is more popular among females than males, with 36% of females vaping within a month prior to the survey, compared to 28% of males.

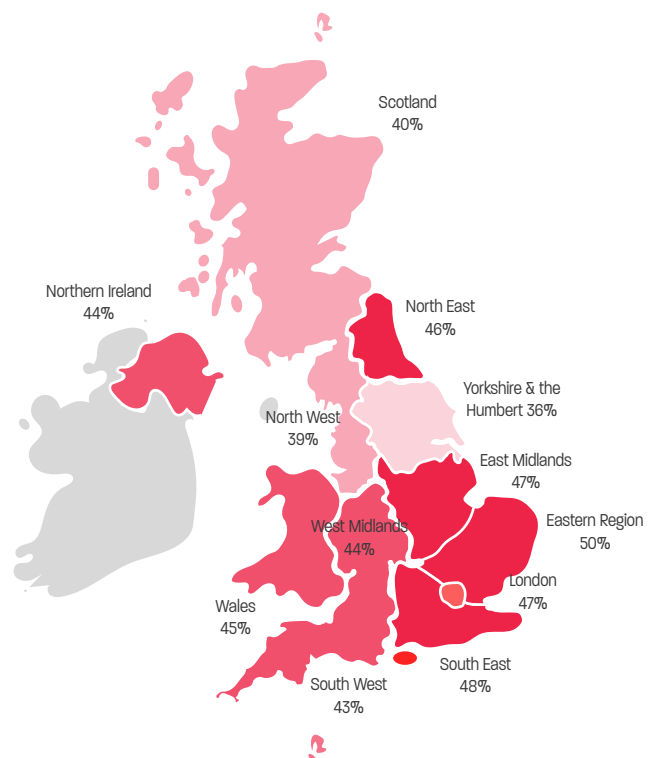
Bisexual young people (43%) are far more likely to have vaped in the past 30 days than heterosexuals (31%).

Vaping is more popular among employed young people, with 1 in 2 (49%) of employed young people vaping within the last year, compared to 40% among unemployed and 37% of those in education.

It is almost equally popular among 16- to 20-year-olds (with 31% vaping in the past 30 days) as it is among 21-to 25-year-olds (32%).

## Vaping prevalence among young people by region (within the past 12 months)

Base: all 16-25 year olds (2000)



## Tobacco & cigarettes

**The proportion of young people smoking tobacco or cigarettes within the past year has increased to almost 1 in 3 (29%) from 1 in 5 (22%) young people in 2021.**

In the past month alone, 21% of young people have smoked tobacco or cigarettes. With an estimated 16- to 25-year-old UK population of 7.9 million this means that there are around 1.7 million smokers in the UK who are young people.

**Smoking tobacco or cigarettes is associated with young people's age, working status and sexuality. The Mix's data for smoking in the past 30 days shows that:**



21- to 25-year-olds are far more likely (27%) to smoke than young people aged 16 to 20 years (15%).

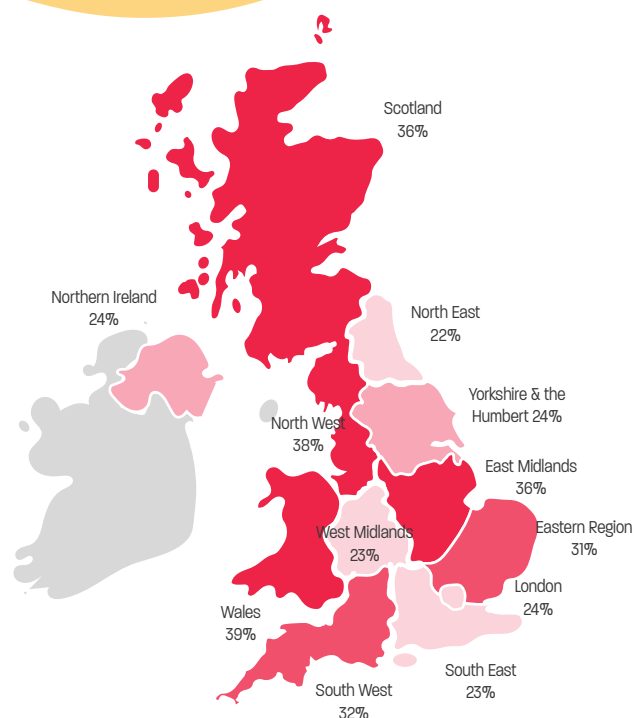
Employed young people are far more likely to smoke (26%) compared to young people in education (12%).

Bisexual young people (29%) are far more likely to smoke than heterosexuals (21%) or gay or lesbian young people (24%).

## Use of tobacco and cigarettes among young people by region (within the past 12 months)

Base: all 16-25 year olds (2000)

0.39  
0.22



## Alcohol

**1 in 2 (51%) of 16 to 25 year olds have consumed alcohol in the past month, which rises to 2 in 3 (64%) drinking alcohol within the last year. This represents a sharp drop compared to 2021, when almost 3 in 4 (74.6%) young people had consumed alcohol in the past year. This is in line with data from Drinkaware<sup>6</sup> showing decline in drinking among 18-24 year olds.**

Consumption of alcohol is related to young people's age, gender, social grade, working status, and sexuality.

Young adults aged 21 to 25 are far more likely to have drunk alcohol in the past 30 days (55%) than 16-to 20-year-olds (46%).

There is a vast difference in alcohol consumption between males and females, with 57% of females consuming alcohol within the past month, compared to 45% among males.



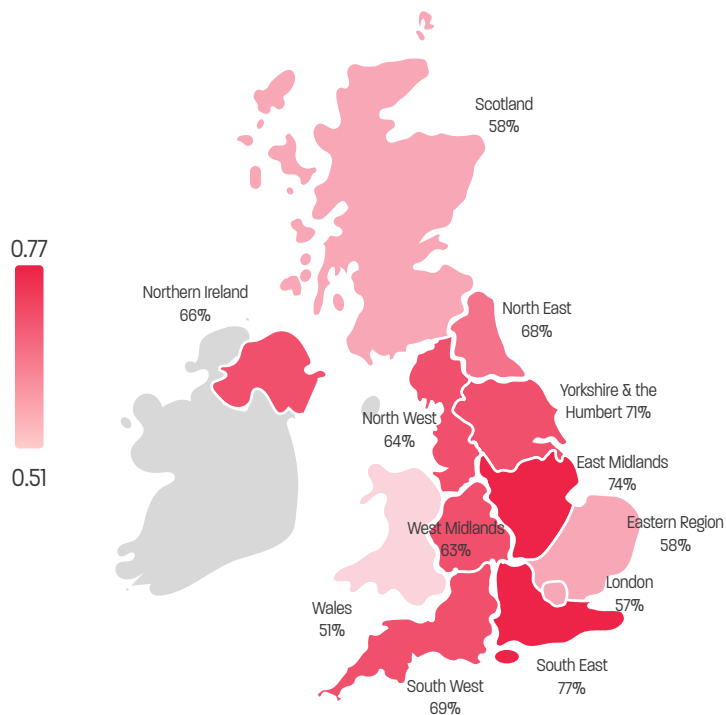
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/research/data-library/drinking-behaviours>

In the 30 days prior to the survey, alcohol consumption was highest among young people from the wealthier C1 social grade<sup>7</sup> (57%). In comparison, only 47% of young people from the less wealthy DE social grade consumed alcohol.

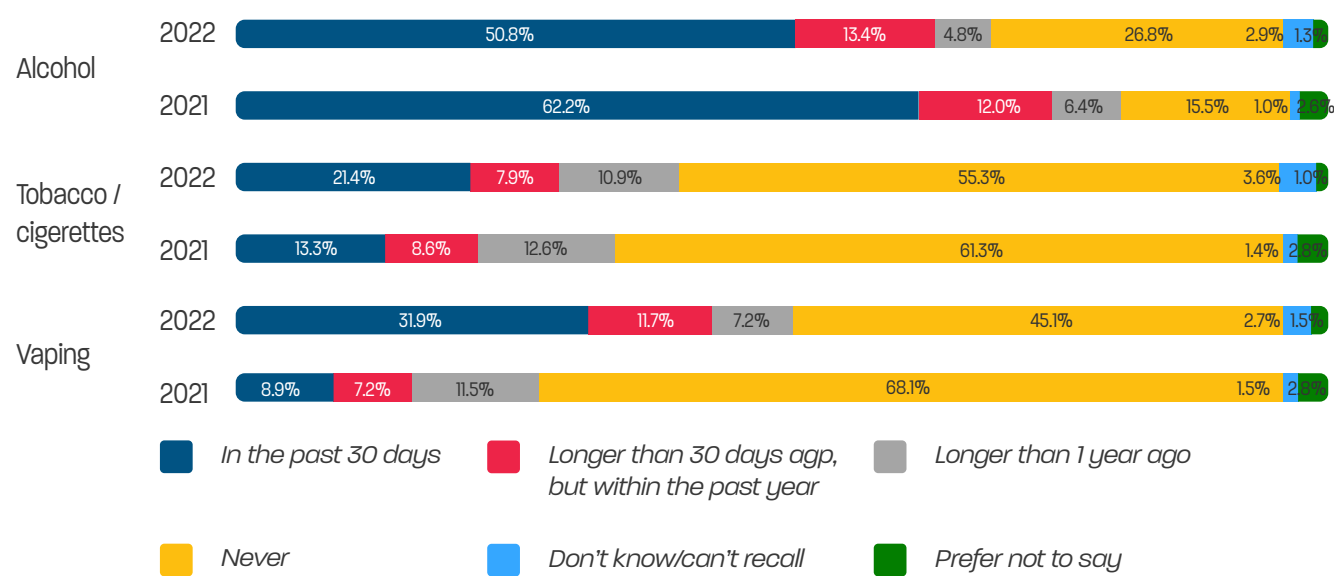
Over the 12 months prior to the survey, employed young people were far more likely to have consumed alcohol (70%) compared to young people in education (56%) or those who were not employed (55%).

# Alcohol consumption by region (within the past 12 months)

Base: all 16-25 year olds (2000)



## Prevalence of alcohol, smoking and vaping among young people



<sup>7</sup> Social grade is a classification system based on occupation developed for use on the British National Readership Survey (NRS), and for over 50 years NRS has been the research industry's source of social grade data.  
<https://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/> Accessed on 30/07/2022

# Drug use among young people

## A sharp increase in the use of illegal drugs (Class A, B and C)

1 in 3 (33%) 16 to 25 year olds have used an illegal drug (drug category A, B or C)<sup>8</sup> in the past 12 months, which equates to around 2.6 million people. This represents a dramatic increase compared to 2021 when 22% reported using a drug category A, B or C.

**Within a month before our survey, 23% (approximately 1.8 million young people) had used an illegal drug of class A, B or C.**

Increase in drug use following the removal of pandemic-related restrictions has been generally expected as young people can yet again freely socialise together, and with clubs, pubs and festivals open again. However, an increase from 22% in 2021 to 33% in 2022 is very sharp. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some young people want to make up for lost time when they were not able to experiment with drugs in the company of others and that they are taking drugs to enjoy themselves while they can, in case pandemic restrictions return in the future.

The Mix data shows a far higher illegal drug use than official estimates for England and Wales from 2021 according to which 15% of young people aged 18 to 24 years reported taking an illegal drug in the last year.<sup>9</sup> Similar to the previous year, it is likely that the illegality of illicit drug use means that understanding true usage is difficult and often leads to underestimation.

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<sup>8</sup> The following drugs were included in the surveys: cocaine; ecstasy/ MDMA; LSD; magic mushrooms/psilocybin; heroin; methadone; amphetamines; cannabis; ketamine; mephedrone; tranquillisers; anabolic steroids)

<sup>9</sup> Victimisation and its relationship to drug misuse, common mental disorder and well-being in England and Wales: year ending March 2021. [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/victimisationanditsrelationshipdrugmisusecommonmentalhealthdisorderandwellbeinginenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2021#:~:text=Any%20drug%20use,Appendix%20tables%201%20and%203\).](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/victimisationanditsrelationshipdrugmisusecommonmentalhealthdisorderandwellbeinginenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2021#:~:text=Any%20drug%20use,Appendix%20tables%201%20and%203).) Accessed 06 August 2022.

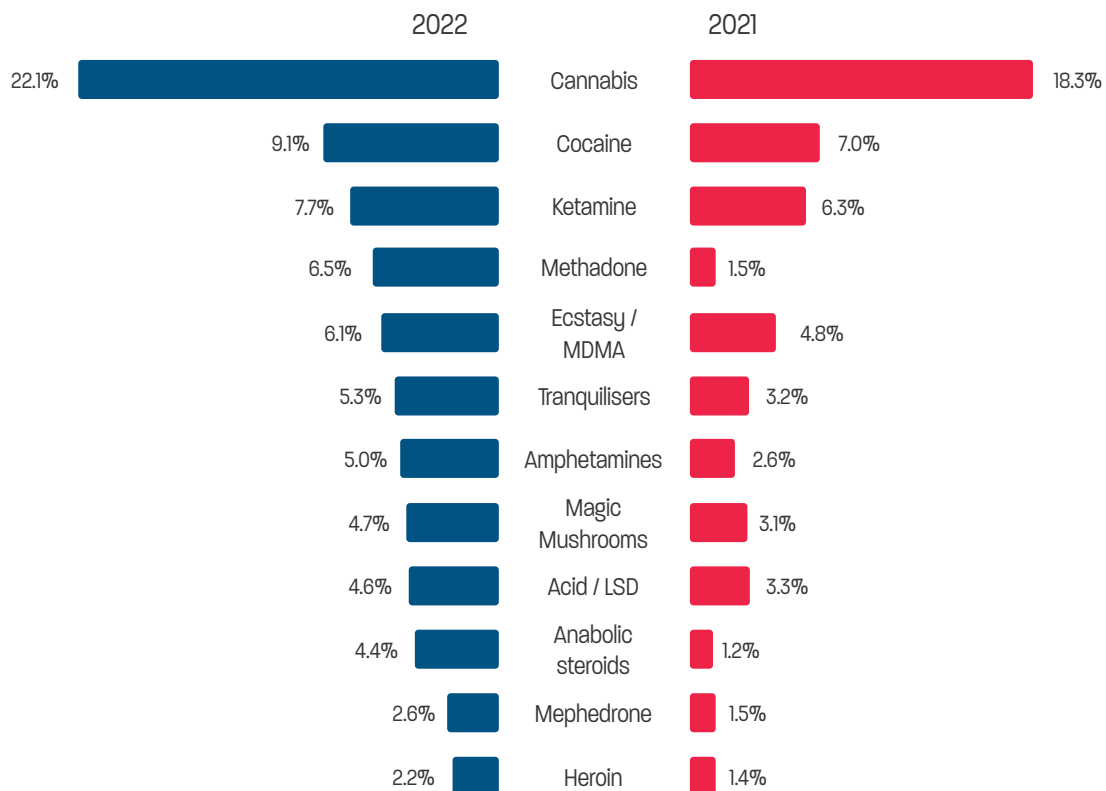
## Which are the most commonly used illegal drugs?

Based on the usage within the 12 months prior to the survey, cannabis is the most commonly used drug among young people, with 22% having used it in the past year. Cocaine is the second most commonly used drug with 9% of young people using it, while Ketamine is the third most popular drug used by 8%.

Methadone (7%), ecstasy (6%) and tranquilisers (5%) were the next most widely used drugs. These are followed by amphetamines, magic mushrooms and LSD, each being used by about 5% of young people. Anabolic steroids (4%) are slightly less commonly used, with smaller numbers using mephedrone (3%) and heroin (2%).

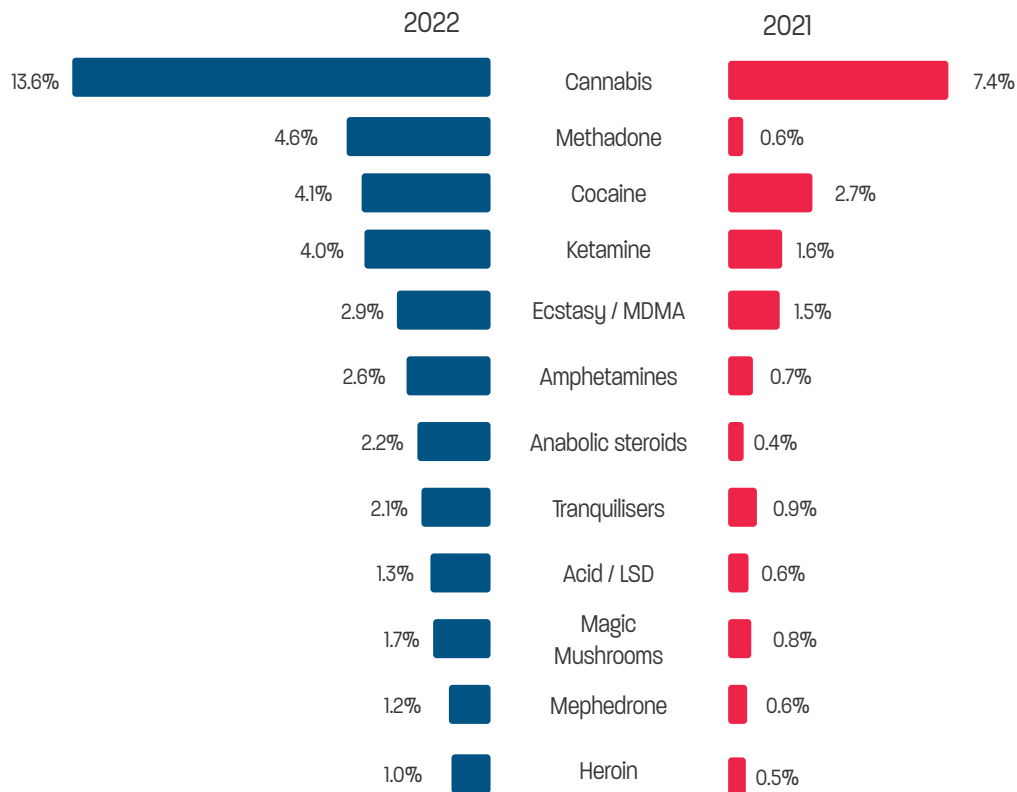
Compared to 2021, there has been an increase in usage of all class A, B or C drugs, with methadone, cannabis, amphetamines and tranquilisers showing the highest increases.

### Class A, B or C drugs taken within the past 12 months



Base: all 16-25 year olds (2000)

## Class A, B or C drugs taken within the last 30 days



Base: all 16-25 year olds (2000)

## The use of drugs is associated with age, gender, sexuality, social grade and working status.



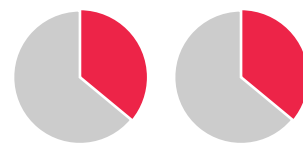
In terms of age, 21-to 25-year-olds (27%) were far more likely than 16-to 20 -year-olds (18%) to have used an illegal drug in the 30 days prior to the survey.



With regards to gender, those who are non-binary (31%), and males (26%) were the most likely to have used an illegal drug within a month before the survey; this compares to 19% among females.



Employed young people were far more likely to have used an illegal drug in the past 12 months (39%) compared to unemployed young people (27%) or those in education (25%).



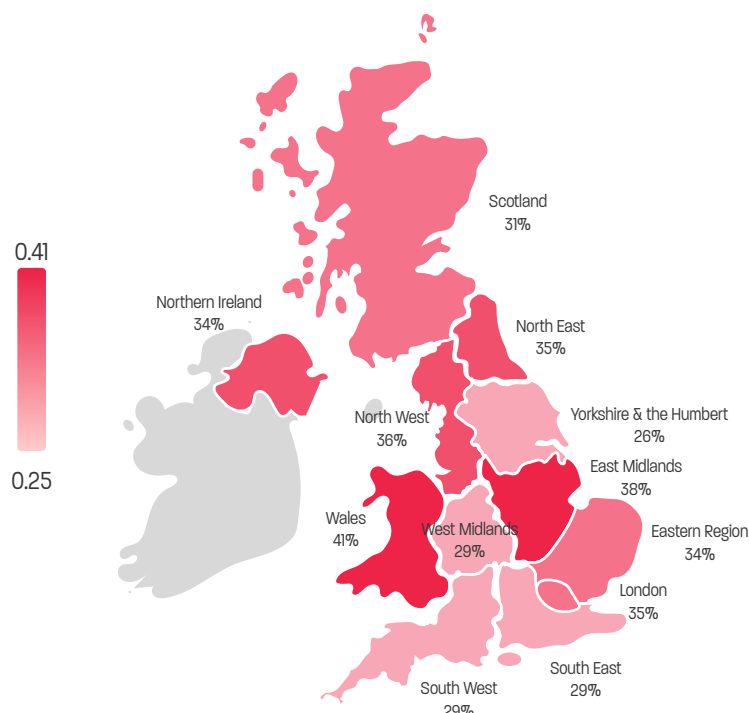
Gay or lesbian (36%) and bisexual young people (36%) were slightly more likely to have used an illegal drug in past 12 months than heterosexuals (32%).



UK regions that had the largest proportion of young people using illegal drugs within the last year were Wales (41%), East Midlands (38%) and the Northwest of England (36%).

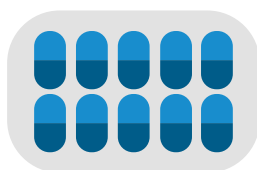
## Illegal drug usage by region (within the past 12 months)

Base: all 16-25 year olds (2000)



## Class A drugs

1 in 10 (10%) young people have used a class A drug within a month before our survey (over 792,000 young people), rising to 17% within the past 12 months; equating to 1.3 million young people.



Compared to 2021, this year, there has been a dramatic increase in young people using a class A drug, with only 11% of young people reporting using class A drugs in the 12 months prior to the survey in 2021.



Class A drugs are considered by the UK government to be the most harmful. In the class A category, our survey included the following drugs: cocaine; ecstasy/MDMA; LSD, magic mushrooms/ psilocybin; heroin and methadone.

Class A drug usage is higher among males and young people aged 21 to 25 years; for both groups 1 in 5 (21%) reported using a class A drug in the past 12 months. This is far higher than usage among females (14%) or those aged 16 to 20 years (13%). Employed young people are far more likely to have used a class A drug in the past year (21%) than those in education (12%) or unemployed young people (14%).

## Antidepressants, diet pills & inhalants

Apart from collecting data on class A, B and C drug usage, The Mix survey looked at usage of inhalants. It also collected data on use of diet pills and antidepressants when not used in line with prescription or used for non-medical purposes, as these can be addictive.

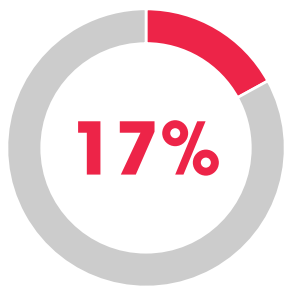
**Some 8% of young people had used antidepressants outside of their doctor's prescription within 30 days before the survey. This equates to over 634,000 young people aged 16 to 25 across the UK. This rises to 12% among young people who have used antidepressants outside of prescription over the last 12 months.**

**In terms of demographics, there are some stark variations. Based on the usage in the past 30 days:**

Young adults aged 21 to 25 years (11%) are almost three times more likely to use antidepressants outside of prescription than those aged 16 to 20 (4%). Females (9%) are slightly more likely to use antidepressants outside of prescription than males (6%). Employed young people (11%) are far more likely to use antidepressants outside of prescription than young people in education (3%). Gay or lesbian (16%) or bisexual (11%) young people are far more likely to use antidepressants outside of prescription than heterosexuals (6%).

It is worrying that such a large number of young people use antidepressants outside of prescription as long-term use of antidepressants can cause physical dependence. To better understand why or how young people do this, we have asked them about their reasons for doing it. The answers below indicate that while some young people 'self-prescribe' antidepressants, others adjust dosing prescribed by their doctor, with some young people showing signs of addiction to antidepressants.

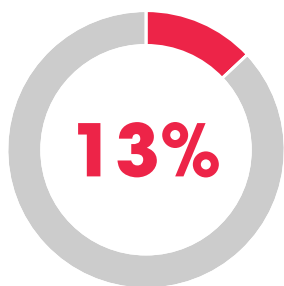
**Among young people who use antidepressants outside of prescription, almost two fifths (38%) do so to make them feel better because of a mental health issue or emotional distress, with 1 in 3 (30%) doing so to relax.**



Some 17% prefer to use antidepressants as and when they need them rather than following their prescription, with 15% struggling to follow regular routine for using antidepressants as prescribed.

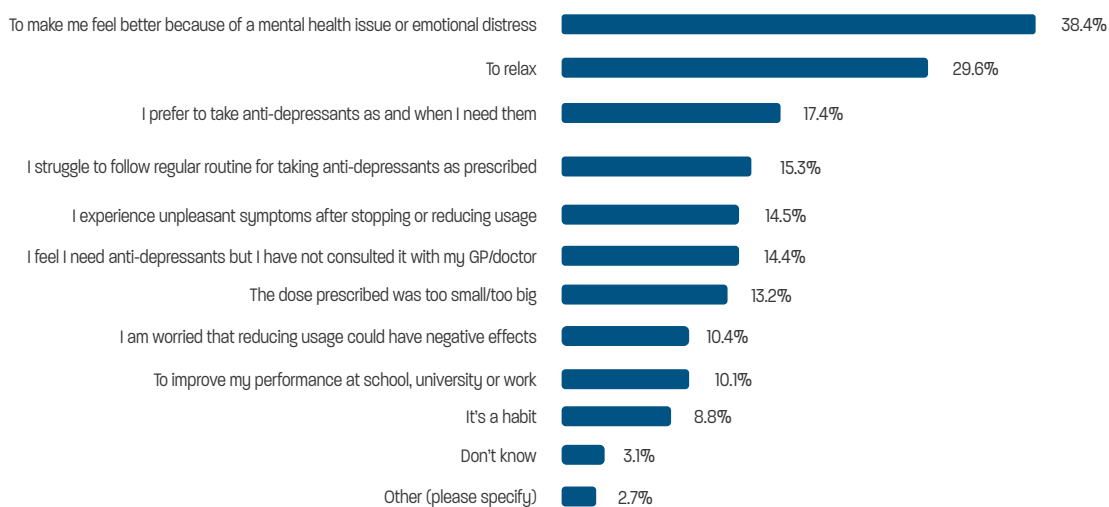


Worryingly, 14% use antidepressants outside of prescription because they have experienced unpleasant symptoms after stopping or reducing usage, with the same proportion saying that they feel they need antidepressants but have not consulted with their GP or doctor.



Some 13% said that the dose prescribed to them was too small or too big. 1 in 10 (10%) are worried that reducing usage could have negative effects, with a similar number (10%) taking antidepressants to improve their performance at school, university or work and 9% taking them because it is a habit.

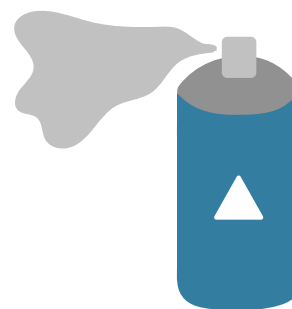
### Reasons for using antidepressants outside of prescription



Base: all 16-25 year olds using antidepressants outside of prescription (368)



Diet pills have been used outside of prescription by over 713,000 young people (9%) over the past 12 months, with those aged 21 to 25 years slightly more likely to have used them (11%) than those aged 16 to 20 years (7%).



Inhalants have also been used by over 713,000 young people (9%) in the past 12 months. Males (11%) and those aged 21 to 25 years (11%) were more likely to use inhalants; this compares to 7% using them among 16-to 21-year-olds and 8% among females.

## Looking to the future

All the young people in our survey were asked about their intention to use drugs<sup>10</sup> in the next 12 months, and 1 in 3 (32%) reported that they intend to do so. This equates to 2.5 million young people who intend to use drugs in the next 12 months.

In 2021, 1 in 5 young people (around 1.7 million young people) used an illegal drug. In our current survey, 1 in 3 (about 2.6 million young people) have used an illicit drug over past 12 months. This indicates that over the next 12 months, we can expect substance use to remain similar to 2022 levels.

## Who intends to use drugs in the next 12 months?

Among young adults aged 21-25 years (38%) there is a far higher intention to use illegal drugs than among those aged 16 to 20 years (26 %). Males (36%) are more likely than females (29%) to use illegal drugs in the next 12 months.

<sup>10</sup> Excluding: alcohol, tobacco / cigarettes, vaping and prescription / over the counter medication when used in line with the prescription.

Interestingly, many employed young people intend to use illegal drugs within the next year, with 1 in 4 (39%) planning to do so. This is far higher than among young people who are unemployed (29%) or in education (24%).

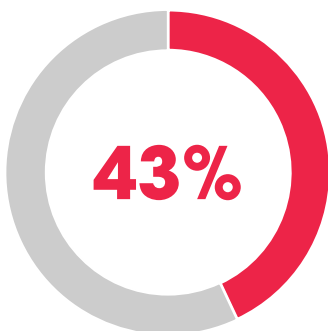


The link between sexuality and illegal drug use continues to be strong, with 2 in 5 (39%) of bisexual young people intending to use illegal drugs in the next 12 months compared to 1 in 3 (31%) heterosexual young people. As we learn in the section on motivations for substance use, drug taking is partly a coping mechanism for bisexual young people who are disproportionately more likely than heterosexuals to experience mental health issues and elevated levels of hate crime<sup>11</sup>

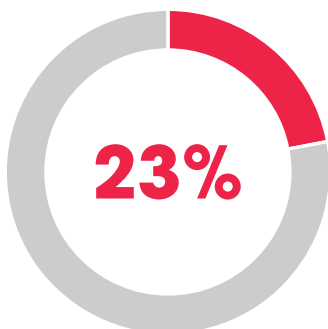


## Changes in frequency of drug use

Among young people who reported using drugs (excluding alcohol, cigarettes or tobacco and vaping) in our survey, more than 1 in 10 (13%) used them at least once a day.

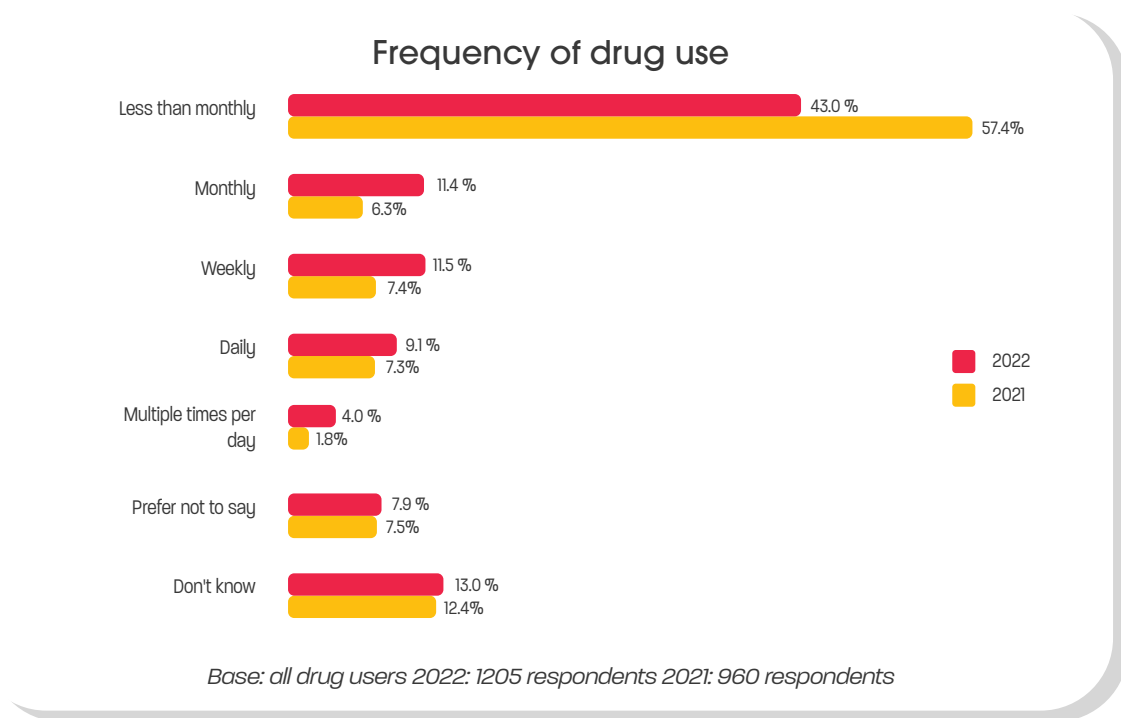


Some 43% of drug users use drugs less often than monthly, with 11% using them monthly, 12% weekly, another 9% daily, and 4% using them multiple times per day. It should be noted that an additional 21% of respondents were not able to answer the question.



The frequency of using drugs has increased considerably since 2021. In 2021, only 16% of young people used drugs at least once a week; this increased to 23% in 2022.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/mental-health-statistics/lgbtiq-people-statistics>



## Drugs with highest frequency of use

**Almost a third of young people taking amphetamines (30%) use drugs on a daily basis**

**29% of young people taking mephedrone or magic mushrooms use drugs on a daily basis**

**28% of young people taking LSD or tranquilisers use drugs on a daily basis**

## Where are young people sourcing drugs?

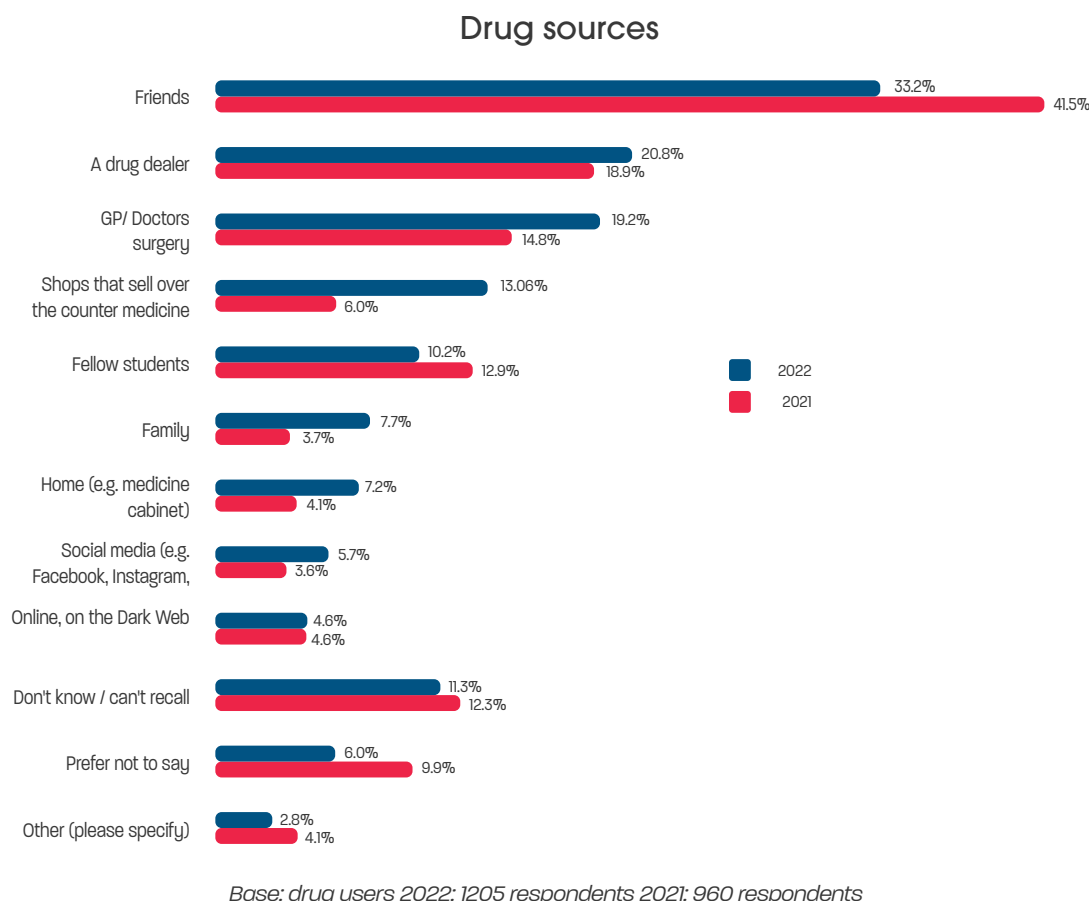
Among young people who had used drugs, the most common sources of drugs were friends (33%), drug dealers (21%), doctor or General Practitioner (19%), shops selling over the counter medicine (14%) and fellow students (10%).

Cocaine and ecstasy are ranked as the most common drugs obtained from drug dealers; 1 in 2 (49%) of those using either cocaine or ecstasy obtained it from a drug dealer. Among those who use cannabis, 43% obtained it from a drug dealer.

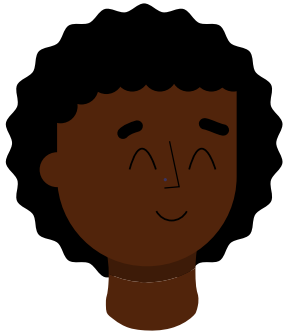
Doctors or General Practitioners (GP) were a major source for antidepressants, diet pills and anabolic steroids, with around 1 in 3 users of these drugs obtaining them from a doctor or GP (35%, 30% and 27%, respectively).

Fellow students were a major source of mephedrone, amphetamines, ecstasy/MDMA, and ketamine.

The less common sources of drugs included family (8%), home (7%), social media (6%) and the dark web (5%).



## Motivations for using substances

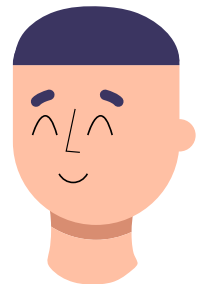


“Getting high is the greatest thing you can experience.”

Young person

“I first deemed drugs and alcohol as temporary solutions, a way to forget troubles and problems. However, I learnt they merely drain you further into a spiral of everlasting panic, stress, hurt and pain, mentally, physically, financially, and emotionally.”

Young person



Similarly to the previous year, having fun (48%) is by far the main reason for taking drugs, alcohol, smoking or vaping, followed by relaxation (38%) and desire to experiment or try new experiences (24%). Yet, interestingly, the proportions of young people taking substances for fun or to try new experiences have fallen somewhat since 2021.

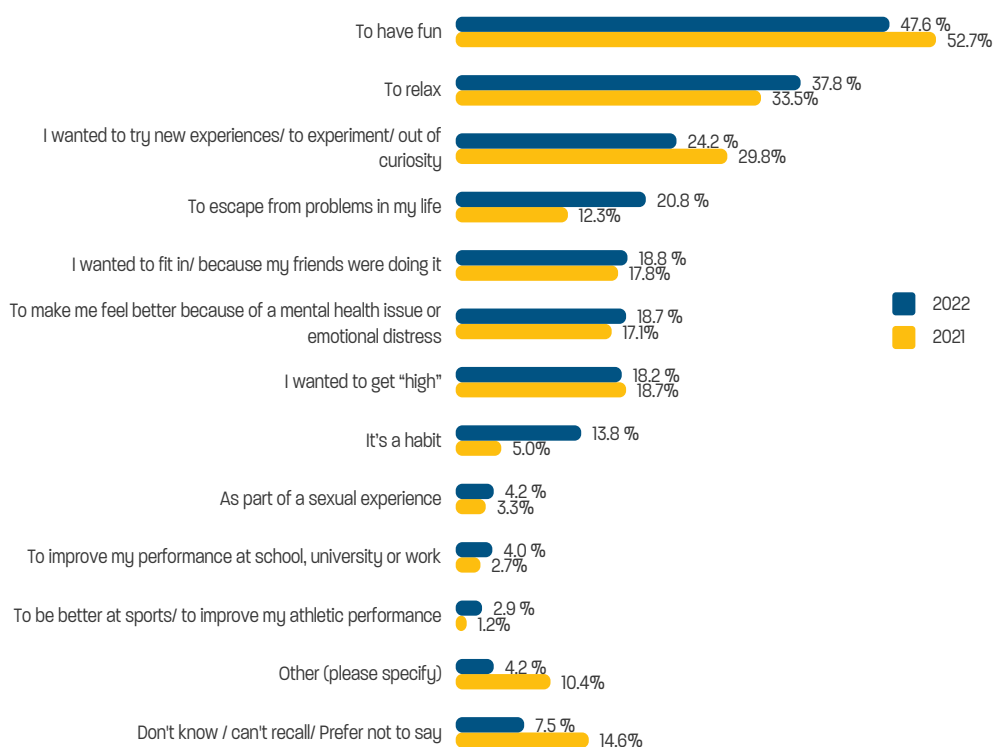
Worryingly, there has been a big increase in young people who use substances to escape from problems in their life; from 12% in 2021 to 21% in 2022.

Similarly to 2021, 19% use substances to fit in with their friends, with the same proportion taking them to make them feel better because of a mental health issue or emotional distress. Some 18% use drugs to get “high”.

Alarmingly, 14% of young people taking the substances said that they do it because it is a habit. This has increased dramatically from 5% in 2021, which is a very worrying trend as habit often indicates addiction.



## Reasons for using substances



Base: all users 2022: 1637 respondents; 2021: 1693 respondents

The use of substances among young people to escape life's problems was linked to age, social grade, work status and sexual orientation.

## Substance use to escape problems in life

**24%**

Substance users aged 21 to 25 years were far more likely to use substances to escape problems in their lives (24%) compared to those aged 16 to 20 years (17%).

Substance users from less wealthy backgrounds C2 (26%) and DE (22%) were somewhat more likely to say that they use substances to escape problems in their lives, however, a large proportion from wealthier backgrounds AB (19%) and C1 (18%) also said this.

**26%**

**22%**

**27%**

Unemployed substance users were the most likely to use substances to escape problems in their lives (27%) compared to either those employed (23%) or those in education (15%).

1 in 4 (28%) of bisexual substance users used substances to escape life's problems; this compares to 24% of gay or lesbian substance users and 19% among heterosexuals.

"It's not a way out from life's troubles. You can't use these substances to ignore life. It's sad but it's true... You may have a small high but it's not worth the downfall after the affects."

Young person



## Substance use to cope with mental health issues or emotional distress

Use of substances to feel better from mental health issues or emotional distress was associated with age, gender, employment status, sexual orientation, and type of substances.

### 21-25 years

Substance users aged 21-25 years were more likely to use substances for mental health issues or emotional distress (20%) than those aged 16-20 years (17%), and females (21%) were more likely to than males (15%).

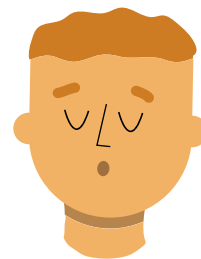
Unemployed substance users were more likely to use substances for mental health issues or emotional distress (24%), than those who were employed (19%) or in education (15%).

While 1 in 3 (33%) of bisexual young people who used substances used them to help them cope with mental health issues or emotional distress, only 17% of heterosexual and gay/lesbian substance users used substances for this reason.

## Use of substances & peer pressure

“Don’t do it simply because the people around you are doing it. It’s fun to experiment, but before you know it, they suddenly become bad habits that are hard to break.”

Young person



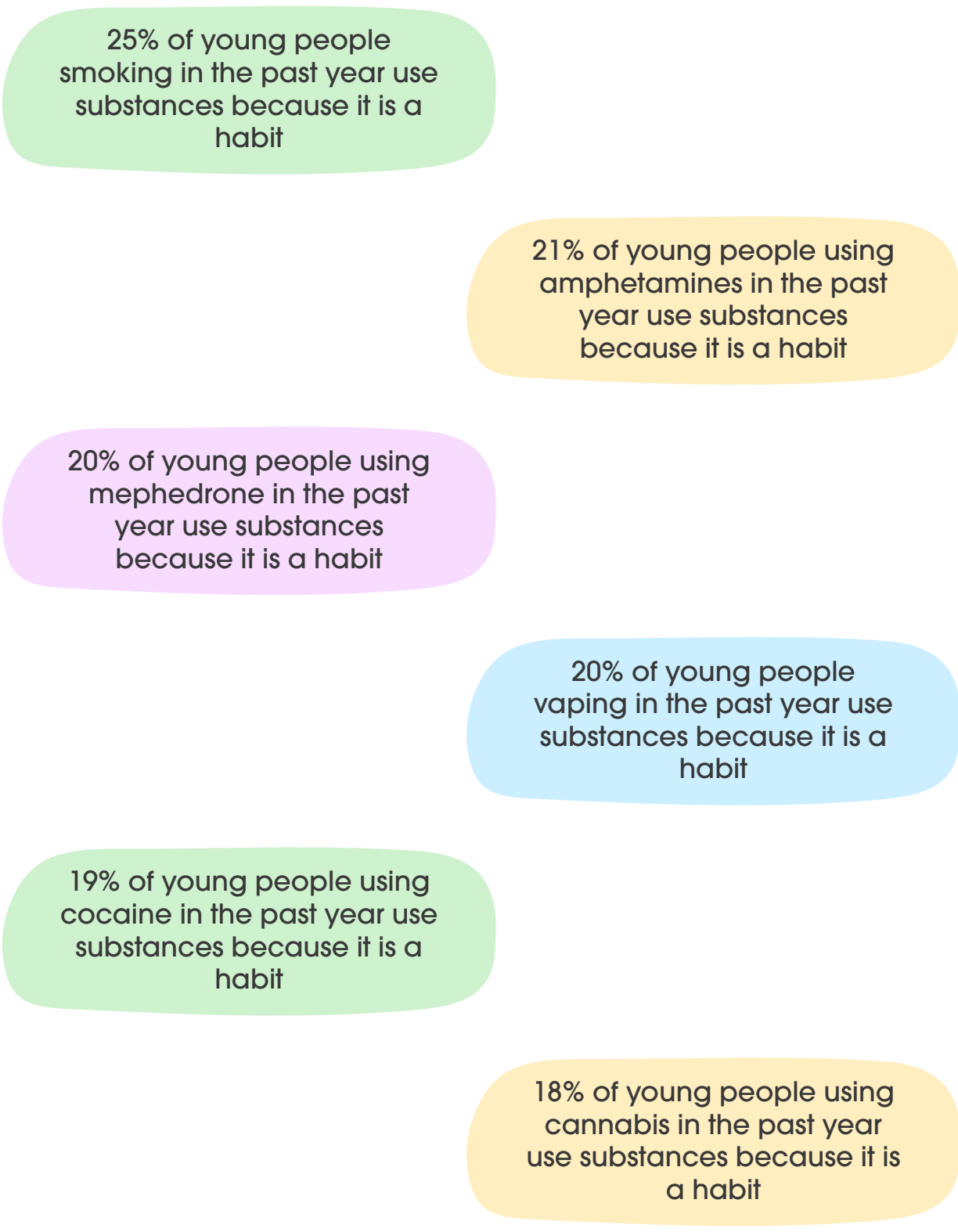
The motivation for taking substances to fit in with friends was more common among substance users from the more wealthy AB social grade, with 1 in 5 (24%) substance users doing so, compared to less than 20% among any other social grade. This was also more common among those in education (22%) and those employed (19%) than those unemployed (12%).

Interestingly, in terms of sexuality, the use of substances to fit in was consistent with 19% of heterosexual substance users, 21% bisexual substance users and 22% gay or lesbian substance users using substances to fit in. This shows the significant impact of peer pressure among young people, regardless of their sexuality.

## Use of substances due to habit

Using substances because it is a habit can indicate addiction. Substance users aged 21 to 25 (16%) are far more likely to use substances because it is a habit than those aged 16 to 20 years (11%). Bisexual (19%) and gay or lesbian substance users (18%) are also more likely than heterosexual substance users (12%) to use substances as a habit.

**Smoking, vaping, amphetamines, mephedrone, cocaine and cannabis appear to be the substances with highest proportions of addiction.**



25% of young people smoking in the past year use substances because it is a habit

21% of young people using amphetamines in the past year use substances because it is a habit

20% of young people using mephedrone in the past year use substances because it is a habit

20% of young people vaping in the past year use substances because it is a habit

19% of young people using cocaine in the past year use substances because it is a habit

18% of young people using cannabis in the past year use substances because it is a habit

## Challenges experienced due to substance use

Despite young people using substances for short-term benefits, including having fun, fitting in with friends, improved performance and relief from life's problems, the long-term effects of substance use are well documented and can be devastating for some young people.

Of the 1,637 young people in our survey who had used a substance at least once in their life, over a half (56%) experienced a short-term or a long-term challenge because of substance use, which represents a dramatic increase compared to 34% who reported experiencing challenges in 2021.

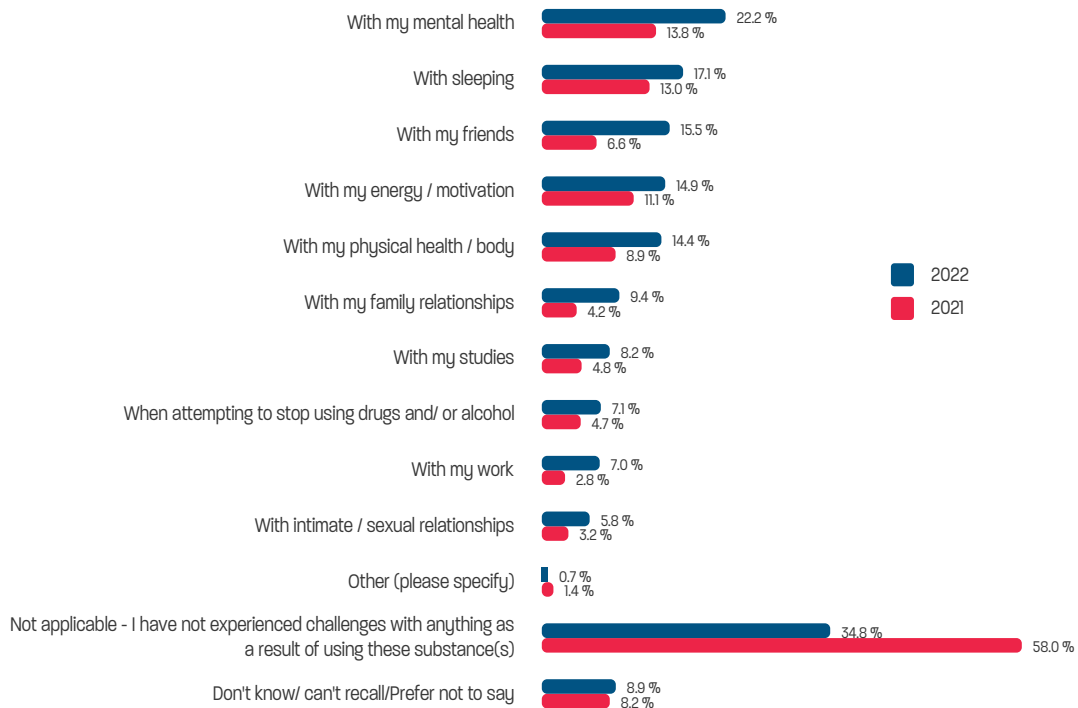
Most commonly, substance users experienced challenges with mental health. The proportion of substance users experiencing mental health challenges due to their substance use has risen dramatically from 14% in 2021 to 22% in 2022. Substance users aged 21-25 years (26%) were more likely to report experiencing challenges with mental health compared to those aged 16-20 years (18%) and so were women (24%) compared to men (20%).

In terms of socioeconomic background, substance users from the less wealthy backgrounds were most likely to experience challenges with mental health. Some 26% of substance users from the C2 social grade and 24% from the DE social grade experienced challenges with mental health compared to 19% from the AB and 20% from the C1 social grade.

While 1 in 5 (20%) heterosexual substance users experienced mental health challenges due to substance use, this increased to 1 in 3 among gay or lesbian (34%) or bisexual (31%) substance users.

Since 2021, for every single challenge, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of young people reporting that they had experienced it. Young people experienced challenges with sleeping (17%), energy and motivation (15%), relationships with friends (15%) and physical health (14%). A smaller proportion of young people experienced family relationship issues (9%), or issues with studies (8%), work (7%) and intimate relationships (6%). Importantly, 7% of substance users experienced challenges when attempting to stop using drugs, alcohol or smoking, which may indicate addiction.

### Challenges experienced as a result of using substances



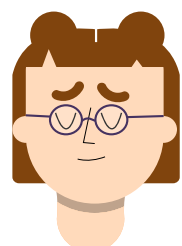
Base: all substance users 2022: 1637 respondents; 2021: 1693 respondents

## Attitudes to accessing support & improvements needed to encourage use of support services

Young people are not accessing support to help them deal with challenges

“Addiction is a disease; there's no shame in asking for help.”

Young person



# 28%

Only 28% of substance users who have experienced challenges with taking substances accessed any support or services (e.g. counselling, information from GP, online forums, online information) to help them deal with the challenges experienced.

# 2.2 million

This means that there are over 2.2 million young people who had experienced challenges as a result of taking drugs, alcohol or smoking who did not access support to help them cope with their challenges.



Accessing support appears to be influenced by young people's socioeconomic background and work status.

# 73%

Over 7 of 10 young people (73%) from the wealthier C1 social grade who experienced challenges with substance use, had not accessed support; this was by far the highest proportion compared to any other social grade (C2 - 63%; AB- 62%, DE -56%).

# 69%

Young people in education experiencing challenges with substance use were the least likely to seek support, with 7 in 10 (69%) not accessing support. In comparison, 59% of employed young people experiencing challenges have not accessed support and 52% among those who are unemployed.

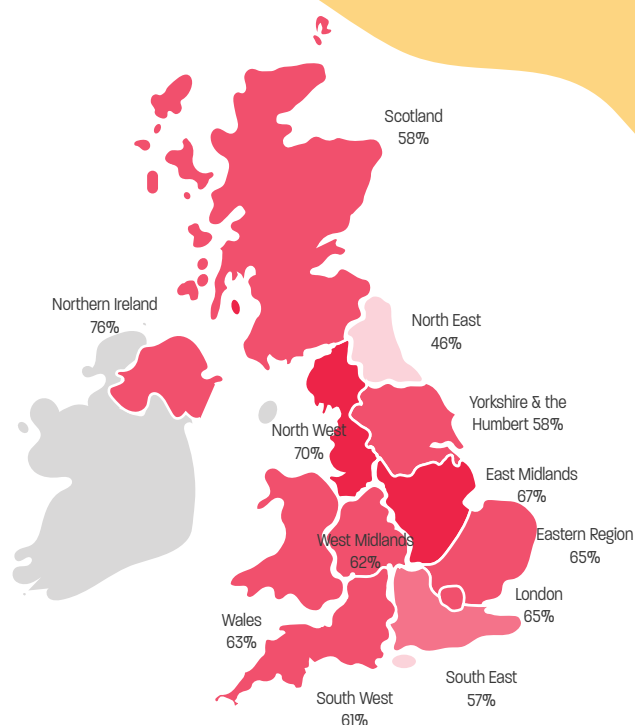
# 71%

In terms of sexuality, bisexual young people were the least likely to seek support for challenges experienced with substance use, with 71% not accessing support. This was far higher than among heterosexual young people (63%).

## YP not accessing support (within the past 12 months)

*Base: all 16-25 year olds who have experienced challenges as a result of using substances 2022:920*

0.76  
0.46



The proportion of young people experiencing challenges with substance use who access support is still very low; far more needs to be done to encourage them to access support to avoid negative consequences of substance use and addiction.

## Why aren't young people accessing support?

"Getting help is a sign of strength."

Young person



The top reasons young people do not seek support for drug use relate to young people's perception of their need for help, lack of awareness and trust in services and fear of negative reaction from society/ being judged or persecuted.

4 in 10 (40%) young people who have not accessed support think they can deal with the challenges they experienced on their own. While this proportion is large, it has fallen substantially from 2021 when 55% said they can deal with their challenges on their own. Such a large fall may be indicative of young people being better able to recognise that they need to deal with their challenges, but it may also indicate more serious nature of challenges experienced. Furthermore, while it may be true for some that they can deal with their challenges on their own, it is very likely that some of these young people would benefit from accessing support.



"It's a much bigger problem than people think. Most people who do drugs wouldn't class themselves as a 'drug user' so don't think it's a problem."

Young person



**A quarter (24%) do not think the support would help them, which is higher compared to 16% in 2021.**

This trend is concerning as it can further discourage young people from seeking support. More needs to be done to help young people understand how support can help them, and the different types of support available.

Some 16% think that they do not need support as it's not that bad as "everyone does it", which can also provide a false comfort.

The stigma attached to substance use and societal attitudes towards users still present barriers for young people to access support.

Among those who experienced challenges with substance use and did not seek support



13% were worried that people around them would overreact



11% did not think anyone would understand what they were experiencing



9% were worried about how their parents would react



6% were worried about the stigma attached to substance use



6% were worried about how their school/university would react

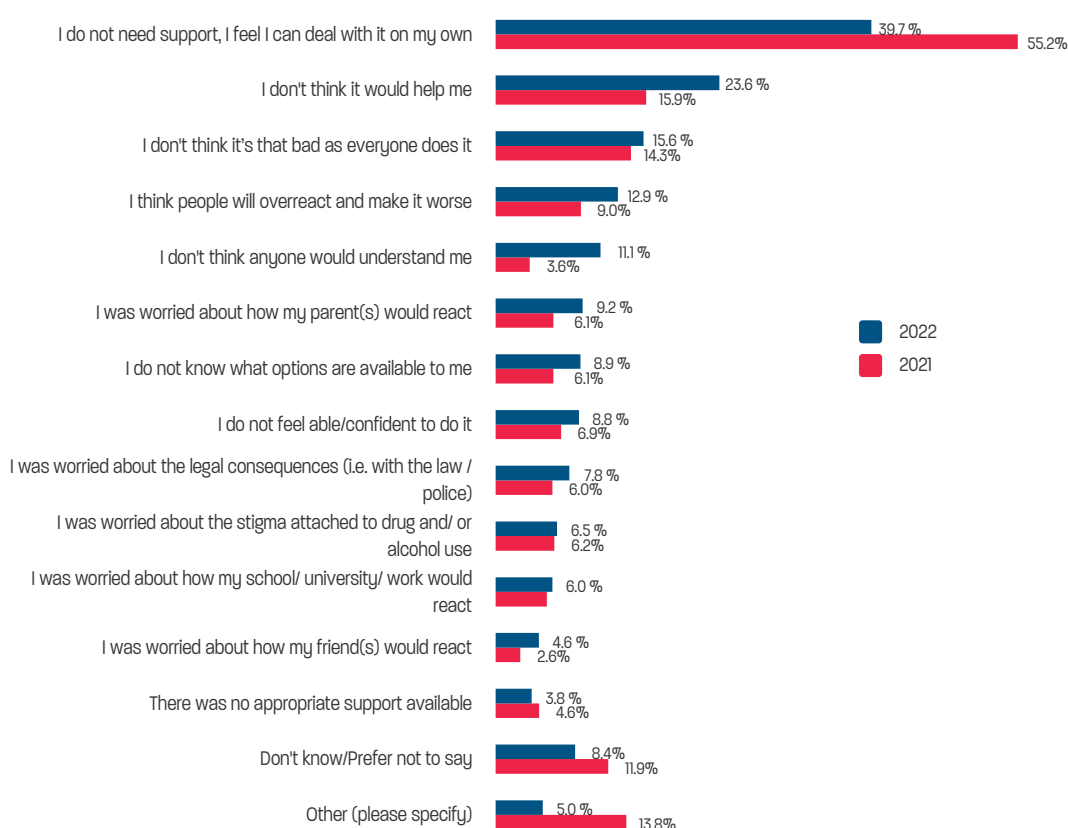


5% were worried about how their friends would react

**Therefore, breaking the stigma and changing societal attitudes to substance use is crucial in allowing more young people in need of support to seek it out without being judged or otherwise penalised for doing so.**

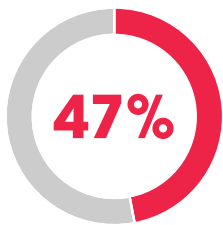
While various support options are available to young people experiencing challenges with substance use, importantly, almost 1 in 10 (9%) do not access support because of lack of awareness of the available support services, while 4% did not think there was appropriate support they could turn to. Clearly, more needs to be done to raise awareness of services available to support those experiencing substance use issues. Additionally, some young people are deterred from seeking support as they are not confident to seek support for their substance use issues (9%), with 8% being afraid of legal consequences.

### Reasons for not seeking support

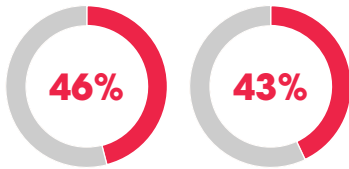


*All 16-25 substance users who have not accessed support for challenges; 2022: 575 respondents; 2021: 507 respondents*

All young people completing our survey were asked whether stigma around drug use would discourage them from accessing support services if they needed them. Stigma around drug use is still a very important barrier preventing many young people from accessing support services, with 4 in 10 (44%) young people agreeing that it would discourage them from accessing support services if they needed them. Compared to 2021, this represents a small increase (42%).



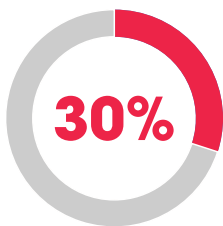
Young people aged 21-25 years (47%) are more likely to agree that stigma would discourage them from accessing support than those aged 16-20 years (42%). Also, females (46%) were more likely to agree than males (42%).



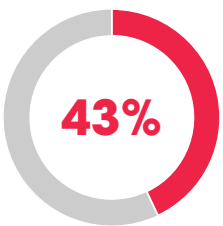
Young people employed (46%) and those in education (43%) were more likely to agree with the statement than those who are not employed (38%).



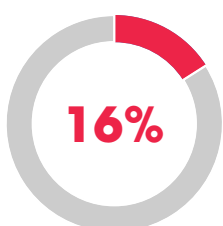
In terms of sexuality, bisexual young people were the most likely to agree that stigma would prevent them from seeking support (57%), compared to either gay or lesbian young people (49%) and heterosexual young people (43%).



Almost a third (30%) of young people disagreed that they would know where to turn to for support if they were worried about their drug or alcohol use; this is slightly lower compared to 2021 (34%). This confirms that lack of awareness around support services is an important barrier, preventing young people from accessing support services.



Importantly, over 2 in 5 (43%) young people do not believe that there is enough support available to help young people with concerns about drug or alcohol use; the proportion rose to 56% among bisexual young people. This belief may strongly contribute to young people not seeking support, as they may think that it would be difficult to access, or not right for them. Yet again, making young people more aware of the range of support options available, better explaining services, how they could help them and accessibility would go some way towards encouraging young people to seek support when they need it.



Sadly, 16% of young people disagreed that they would seek help if they had a problem with drugs or alcohol that impacted themselves or someone else; this is higher compared to 10% in 2021.

## What could motivate young people to seek support?

We asked young people who had experienced challenges with substance use and had not accessed support what can be done to encourage them to seek support.

While 1 in 5 (19%) of this group think that nothing would motivate them to seek support, other young people were able to identify improvements that would encourage them to seek support. Importantly, the proportion of young people saying that nothing would motivate them to seek support has more than halved from 43% in 2021 to 19% in 2022. This indicates a shift in attitudes, perhaps because young people are better aware that they need support to help them cope with their challenges.

**This means that there are 1.6 million young people who are currently being failed by existing support.**

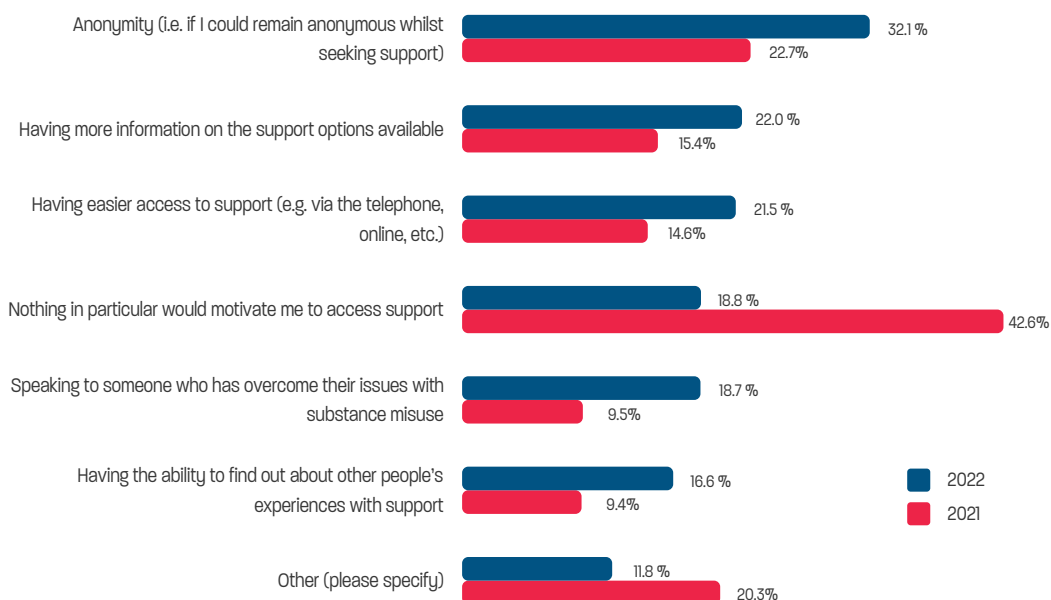
This means that there are 1.6 million young people who are currently being failed by existing support as they would have accessed support to help them cope with their challenges with substance use if improvements were made (20% of the overall sample).

**The most important factor that would motivate young people to seek support for substance use is anonymity; 32% noted that if they could remain anonymous, they would seek support.**

Some 22% would seek substance use support if they had more information on different support options available to them. This points to the significance of awareness-raising initiatives such as awareness campaigns. Some 22% of young people would like easier access to support, such as via telephone or online. This highlights the need to ensure that support is youth-friendly and in line with needs and expectations of young people.

Other important factors include the ability to speak and learn from people who experienced substance use issues and overcame them (19%) and being able to find out about other people's experiences with support they used (17%).

### Motivation to seek support



Base: All 16-25 substance users who have not accessed support for challenges 2022: 575 respondents; 2021: 507 respondents

## Supporting young people with substance use issues: Response from The Mix

"Doing drugs shouldn't be seen as shameful as this does not prevent it from happening but prevents people from getting help."

Young person



An increasing number of young people turn to substance use to escape problems in their life, and sadly for some this results in addiction; with our survey indicating that addiction caused by substance use is on the rise.

Breaking the stigma attached to substance use is key in encouraging more young people in need of support to seek help. Addiction needs to be viewed and treated primarily as a health problem. Lack of awareness of services available, what the different options are and how they can help also need to be addressed. To further motivate young people fearing the stigma and legal consequences of using illegal drugs to access services, support services need to ensure that young people can remain anonymous, and confidentiality needs to be guaranteed.

Although challenges connected to substance use are experienced by all young people, there are specific groups who are more impacted by their use. These include young people from the LGBTQ+ community and young people in employment. Unique characteristics and needs of these groups need to be considered and appropriate support options designed for these groups.



**Such a sharp growth in the popularity of vaping should be a cause for concern, and the high percentage suggests that non-smokers are also taking up vaping. Non-smokers in particular need to know more about the risks of addiction and harm to physical health.**



The Mix provides free, confidential non-judgemental and anonymous support for young people across the UK and encourages young people to seek and access support to help them deal with their life challenges or mental health and emotional issues early, before they grow into larger problems or escalate into a crisis. The Mix offers a wide range of services so that it can meet diverse preferences and needs, including a website with over 2,000 articles; telephone and webchat counselling; a helpline accessible via webchat, telephone or email and an online community including discussion boards and live group chats.

## The Mix is taking action to improve our support for young people who are taking or considering taking drugs and other substances. We are taking the following steps:



Releasing this report as part of a media campaign to raise awareness about young people's challenges around substance use and accessing support.



Launching a new campaign across our channels to provide young people with non-judgemental resources and information about substance use, addiction, recovery and harm reduction.



Highlighting our free and anonymous services as a source of support for those facing challenges with substance use, as well as signposting to other expert services.



Partnering with experts such as The Loop and the Amy Winehouse Foundation to platform real-life experiences of substance use and to ensure we are offering the most up to date, relevant and useful information to young people.



Producing content tailored to young people using antidepressants and young LGBTQ+ people who are experiencing challenges with substance use, such as resources on chem sex.



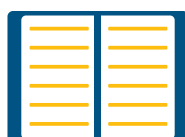
Producing new and engaging video content to educate and raise awareness about different substances.



Training our staff and volunteers to support young people with substance use, addiction and recovery.



Starting conversations on our community to encourage peer to peer support around substance use.



Sharing young people's stories and experiences of substance use through article content and social resources.

**But The Mix cannot achieve a large-scale change on its own. To ensure more young people in need access support to help with substance use issues, The Mix is calling for:**

Addiction to be viewed and treated primarily as a health problem

Media and other institutions including schools or universities to help promote non-judgemental discussion about drug use and help young people with substance use issues to recognise the problem and access support

Better access to support services for young people, be it online, via telephone or in person

Services to provide an option to remain anonymous for young people accessing the service

Better signposting to support services and resources in areas where young people might be seeking support, such as in school, at GPs or among peers

Non-judgemental support specifically tailored for young people from the LGBTQ+ community that recognises their distinctive experiences and needs



# Support services for substance use

You can get in touch with these organisations for support, advice and information. They are there for anyone experiencing challenges with substance use, or their parents, carers or friends.

## The Mix

Call 0808 808 4994 (7 days a week, 4pm to 11pm)  
Access via [themix.org.uk](https://themix.org.uk)

## Crisis Messenger

Text "THEMIX" to 85258 to contact the Shout Crisis  
Text Line

## The Loop

Access via [wearetheloop.org](https://wearetheloop.org)

## Release

Call 0207 324 2989 (Monday to Friday, 11am-1pm,  
2pm-4pm)

Email them [ask@release.org.uk](mailto:ask@release.org.uk) or visit  
[release.org.uk](https://release.org.uk)

## Amy Winehouse Foundation

Access via [amywinehousefoundation.org](https://amywinehousefoundation.org)

## FRANK

Call 0300 123 6600 (7 days a week, 24 hours a day)  
Access via [talktofrank.com](https://talktofrank.com)

## **Alcohol Change**

Access via [alcoholchange.org.uk](https://alcoholchange.org.uk)

## **Drinkline**

Call 0300 123 1110 from England; 0808 808 2234 from Wales

## **Postscript360**

Call 0117 966 3629 (10am-4pm)  
Access via [postscript360.org.uk](https://postscript360.org.uk)

## **We are with you**

Chat to someone online via webchat  
(Monday-Friday 9am-9pm and Saturday-Sunday 10am-4pm) Access via [wearewithyou.org.uk](https://wearewithyou.org.uk)

## **Drug Wise**

Access via [drugwise.org.uk](https://drugwise.org.uk)

## **Drugfam**

Call 0300 888 3853 (9am-9pm) any day of the week  
Access via [drugfam.co.uk](https://drugfam.co.uk)

## **Samaritans**

Call 116 123, or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
for a reply within 24 hours