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Ethnicity and drug use: key findings from the 2001/2002 British Crime Survey

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The British Crime Survey (BCS) is a large national survey of adults who live in a representative cross-section of private households in England and Wales. In addition to asking respondents about their experiences of crime, the BCS also asks about a number of other crime-related topics. Since 1996, the BCS has included a comparable module of questions on drug misuse. The 2001/2002 BCS asked respondents to indicate their cultural background. Any reference made to ethnicity is based on responses to this question.

This Findings examines the prevalence of illicit drug use across different ethnic groups. It includes estimates for lifetime, last year and last month consumption and examines differences by age and gender subgroups. This analysis has been conducted to inform policy makers and practitioners when considering the provision of drug prevention activities and drug treatment services across different parts of the community.

Key points

- Of 16- to 59-year-olds from a mixed background, 26% had taken an illicit drug in the last year. This was statistically higher than the estimate for any other group; white (12%), black (12%), Chinese/other (8%) and Asian (5%).
- Of 16- to 59-year-olds from a mixed background, 7% had taken a Class A drug in the last year. Again, this was statistically higher than the estimate for any other group; white (3%), black (2%), Chinese/other (1%) and Asian (1%).
- Amongst 16- to 24-year-olds, levels of drug use were lower for black people than for those from a white or mixed background. Around a tenth of people from a white or a mixed background had used a Class A drug in the last year (10% and 8% respectively), compared with 2% of black people. A similar pattern was evident for the 25- to 35-year-old group.
- Use of an illicit drug in the last year amongst both males and females from a mixed background was statistically higher than the estimate for any other group (mixed males 29% and mixed females 23%).
- Rates of Class A drug use in the last year amongst both males and females from a mixed background were also statistically higher than the estimate for any other group (mixed males 9% and mixed females 5%).

In previous sweeps of the BCS, respondents were shown a list of various ethnic backgrounds and asked which of the groups they considered they belonged to/best described them. However, in the 2001/2002 BCS this question changed to

asking respondents to indicate their cultural background. There is no way to quantify what impact this change may have had on respondents' interpretation and therefore the answers they gave.

Ethnic classification

Respondents are asked to classify their cultural background as either:

White	White – British	Asian	Asian or Asian British – Indian
	White – Irish		Asian or Asian British – Pakistani
	White – Other White		Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
Black	Black or Black British – Caribbean	Mixed	Asian or Asian British – Other Asian
	Black or Black British – African		Mixed – White and Black Caribbean
	Black or Black British – Other Black		Mixed – White and Black African
Chinese	Chinese		Mixed – White and Asian
Other	Other ethnic group		Mixed – Any Other Mixed

Additionally, the response categories for this question also changed in the 2001/2002 BCS, bringing them in line with those used by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) for collecting the 2001 Census data. The categories respondents were asked to classify themselves against are shown above.

The drug strategy

The Government's Drug Strategy has the over-arching aim of 'reducing the harm that drugs cause to society, including communities, individuals and their families'. In seeking to deliver this, the Strategy aims to ensure that diversity issues are addressed across all areas of activity. Specific objectives include:

- increasing the number of minority ethnic users entering and retained in drug treatment
- increasing the number of minority ethnic young people receiving drug prevention education and treatment.

The estimates given here show the prevalence of drug use among people from different backgrounds. These estimates can in turn be used to help establish whether certain communities may be under-represented in treatment or drug prevention activities and consequently inform the allocation of service provisions.

Extent of drug use

Table 1 shows the prevalence of drug use among people aged between 16 and 59 from different backgrounds.

The 2001/2002 BCS estimated that just over a quarter of people from a mixed background had taken an illicit drug in the last year (26%). This was statistically higher than the estimate for any other group. Further examination of the use of an illicit drug shows that there was a significant difference in last year use between all groups, except

between white and black groups, and between Asian and Chinese/other groups.

People from a mixed background were also statistically more likely than any other group to have taken a Class A drug in the last year (7%). People from a white background had the next highest last year use of a Class A drug, with their rates being significantly higher than all remaining groups (3%).

For all groups, cannabis was the most commonly used drug, followed by ecstasy and cocaine.

Table 1 Prevalence of drug use (16- to 59-year-olds)

Percentage used	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/other
Amphetamines					
Last year	2	1	0	2	0
Last month	1	0	0	1	–
Cannabis					
Last year	11	11	4	25	6
Last month	7	7	2	16	4
Cocaine					
Last year	2	1	1	5	1
Last month	1	1	0	2	–
Crack					
Last year	0	–	0	0	0
Last month	0	–	–	0	0
Ecstasy					
Last year	2	1	1	5	1
Last month	1	1	0	2	0
Heroin					
Last year	0	–	0	0	–
Last month	0	–	0	0	–
Methadone					
Last year	0	–	–	0	–
Last month	0	–	–	0	–
Class A					
Last year	3	2	1	7	1
Last month	2	1	1	4	1
Any illicit drug					
Last year	12	12	5	26	8
Last month	8	8	3	17	4

Definitions

Class A includes use of at least one of the following – LSD, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, heroin, magic mushrooms or methadone.

Any illicit drug includes use of at least one of the following – Class A drugs, amphetamines, cannabis, tranquillisers, amyl nitrite, anabolic steroids, glues or any other unlicensed drugs respondents may have taken.

A quarter of people from a mixed background had taken cannabis in the last year. This again was statistically higher than the estimate for any other group. Just over a tenth of those from black or white backgrounds had used cannabis in the last year (11%). This was roughly double (and statistically higher than) the amount of usage among people from Asian or Chinese/other backgrounds (4% and 6% respectively).

Ecstasy and cocaine were also most commonly used by those from a mixed background (5% of people had used these drugs in the last year). This was significantly higher than the use of ecstasy or cocaine by any other group. People from a white background had the next highest 'last year use' of ecstasy and cocaine, with their rates being significantly higher than all remaining groups (2%).

Detailed ethnic classification

The respondents' background was collected in the 2001/2002 BCS according to 16 categories, which were then aggregated into five broader groups. It was possible to use the detailed categories to analyse cannabis, any illicit drug, and Class A use (Table 2). Other individual drugs could not be considered, as their use was so low among each individual category that robust analysis was not possible. For this reason also, the detailed breakdown could only be used to analyse levels of drug use during the respondent's lifetime and the last year.

Estimates of lifetime prevalence of drug use may incorporate some degree of recall error due to a number of factors. For example, someone in their youth may have tried an illicit drug once but forgotten about it later in life, or they no longer associate themselves with their earlier behaviour and subsequently deny any previous use. It is not possible to accurately assess the extent to which this happens, therefore lifetime prevalence estimates must be interpreted with some degree of caution.

Lifetime drug use

Using the detailed classification, it can be seen that those people from a 'mixed – white and black Caribbean'

background were most likely to have used an illicit drug in their lifetime (58%). They were also most likely to have used cannabis in their lifetime (54%). People from a 'black – other black background' had the highest lifetime use of a Class A drug (24%).

Last year drug use

Amongst those who report being from a mixed background, people identifying as 'mixed – white and black Caribbean' had the highest last year use of cannabis (33%), a Class A drug (8%) and any illicit drug (35%). This group were statistically more likely to have used any illicit drug or cannabis in the last year than all other mixed ethnic groups, except 'mixed – white and black African'. None of the differences recognised within the mixed population for last year use of a Class A drug were statistically significant.

Amongst those who reported being from a black background, those identifying as 'black – Caribbean' had the highest last year use of cannabis (17%) and any illicit drug (18%). People identifying as 'black – other black background' had the highest last year use of a Class A drug (7%). For last year use of cannabis and any drug, those from a 'black – Caribbean' background had rates of use statistically higher than 'black – Africans'. None of the differences recognised within the black population for last year use of a Class A drug were statistically significant.

Amongst those who reported being from a white background, people identifying as 'white – British' had the highest last year use of cannabis (11%) and any illicit drug (12%). Those identifying as 'white – Irish' had the highest last year use of a Class A drug (6%). However, none of the differences recognised within the white population were statistically significant.

Amongst people who reported being from an Asian background, those identifying as 'Asian – Bangladeshi' had the highest last year use of cannabis (7%) and any illicit drug (8%). Those identifying as 'Asian – other Asian

Table 2 Prevalence of drug use by detailed ethnic classification (16- to 59-year-olds)

Percentage used	Cannabis		Any illicit drug		Class A	
	Year	Ever	Year	Ever	Year	Ever
Mixed – white and black Caribbean	33	54	35	58	8	19
Mixed – white and black African	29	44	30	49	8	12
Mixed – white and Asian	17	36	17	38	6	14
Mixed – any other mixed background	15	27	15	35	5	13
Black – Caribbean	17	33	18	39	2	6
Black – African	3	8	4	14	–	2
Black – other black background	13	42	13	48	7	24
White – British	11	30	12	35	3	12
White – Irish	9	20	9	24	6	10
White – other	8	28	9	33	3	10
Asian – Indian	4	9	5	14	1	3
Asian – Pakistani	5	10	5	13	1	2
Asian – Bangladeshi	7	13	8	16	–	2
Asian – other Asian background	4	12	5	15	2	5
Chinese	3	10	4	14	2	3
Other ethnic group	7	17	10	26	1	6

Table 3 Last year and last month prevalence of drug use among males and females (16- to 59-year-olds)

Percentage used	Male					Female				
	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ other	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ other
Any illicit drug										
Last year	16	17	6	29	8	9	7	5	23	7
Last month	10	12	4	22	4	5	5	2	11	4
Class A										
Last year	5	2	1	9	2	2	1	1	5	1
Last month	3	1	1	5	0	1	0	1	3	1

Table 4 Last year prevalence of drug use among males and females (16- to 59-year-olds)

Percentage used	Male					Female				
	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ other	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ other
Amphetamines	2	1	0	2	–	1	0	0	3	1
Cannabis	14	16	5	28	6	8	7	4	22	6
Cocaine	3	1	1	7	0	1	1	1	3	1
Crack	0	–	–	–	–	0	–	–	–	0
Ecstasy	3	1	1	6	2	1	1	0	4	0
Heroin	0	–	–	1	–	0	–	–	1	–
LSD	1	–	–	1	–	0	–	–	–	0
Magic mushrooms	1	1	–	1	–	0	–	0	1	0

background' had the highest last year use of a Class A drug (2%). However, none of the differences recognised within the Asian population were statistically significant.

Extent of drug use among males and females

Tables 3 and 4 show the prevalence of drug use among 16- to 59-year-olds broken down by gender and cultural background. People from a mixed background continued to have the highest prevalence of drug use, even when broken down by gender. Use of an illicit drug in the last year amongst both males and females from a mixed background was statistically higher than the estimate for any other ethnic group (mixed males 29% and mixed females 23%). Estimates of Class A drug use in the last

year amongst both males and females from a mixed background were also statistically higher than the estimates for any other ethnic group (mixed males 9% and mixed females 5%).

The most commonly used drugs among people from different backgrounds remained unchanged when broken down by gender, with cannabis being the most commonly used, followed by ecstasy and cocaine.

Drug use among different age groups

For all groups, age was positively correlated with drug use. Those aged 16 to 24 had the highest use of any illicit drug in the last year and month (Table 5).

Table 5 Last year and last month prevalence of drug use among different age groups

Percentage used	16–24					25–34					35–59				
	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ /other	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ /other	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/ /other
Any illicit drug															
Last year	32	18	9	33	18	16	11	4	27	6	5	8	2	8	2
Last month	20	11	5	21	9	10	7	3	18	3	3	6	1	6	1
Class A															
Last year	10	2	2	8	3	5	2	0	12	2	1	1	0	1	–
Last month	5	1	1	5	1	3	1	0	5	–	0	0	0	–	–

Table 6 Last year prevalence of drug use among different age groups

Percentage used	16–24					25–34					35–59				
	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/other	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/other	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/other
Amphetamines	6	0	1	2	–	2	2	0	5	2	0	0	0	1	–
Cannabis	29	17	8	32	13	14	10	3	26	4	4	7	1	8	2
Cocaine	5	1	2	4	2	4	1	0	11	–	1	1	0	–	–
Crack	1	–	–	–	1	0	–	–	–	–	0	–	–	–	–
Ecstasy	7	1	1	5	2	3	1	0	8	2	0	1	0	1	–
Heroin	0	–	–	0	–	0	–	–	–	–	0	–	–	–	–
LSD	1	–	–	–	1	1	–	–	1	–	0	–	–	–	–
Magic mushrooms	2	1	–	0	1	1	–	0	4	–	0	–	–	–	–

Around a third of those aged between 16 and 24 from both mixed and white backgrounds had used an illicit drug in the last year (33% and 32% respectively). This was significantly higher than the estimate for all remaining groups.

Those from a mixed background in the middle age cohort were most likely to have used an illicit drug in the last year (27%). This, again, was significantly higher than the estimate for any other group. In the oldest cohort, use of an illicit drug in the last year was highest among those from black and mixed backgrounds (both 8%).

People aged between 25 and 34 years from a mixed background had the overall highest use of a Class A drug in the last year (12%). This was significantly higher than the estimate for all other groups in this age band. People from a white background had the next highest use of a Class A drug in this group (5%). This was statistically higher than the estimate for all remaining groups in this age band. People from white and mixed backgrounds had similar levels of Class A drug use in the last year amongst those aged between 16- and 24-years-old (10% and 8% respectively).

The most commonly used drugs among people from different backgrounds remained unchanged when broken down by age (Table 6). Cannabis was the most commonly used, followed by ecstasy and cocaine.

Number of drugs used by those aged 16 to 59

The 2001/2002 BCS showed that the majority of drug users had only taken one type of drug in the last year, regardless of background (Table 7). In most cases this one drug was cannabis. Use of two or more drugs was similar for both people from a mixed background (37%), and people from a white background (33%). Around 3% of people from white, black and Chinese/other backgrounds had taken six or more different types of drug in the last year (this figure was 1% for those from a mixed and those from an Asian background).

Discussion

A key finding running through this analysis concerns the higher levels of drug use among people from a mixed background compared to other ethnic groups. These higher levels mainly concern the use of cannabis, ecstasy and powdered cocaine. Having said this, recent use of cocaine and ecstasy by those from a mixed background is still relatively rare. The change in the ethnic classification in the BCS in 2001/2002 currently limits the scope for further analysis. As estimates from previous surveys are not comparable, there is no way of discerning whether the findings for those from a mixed background are just an anomaly. Also, as only one survey year is available, more detailed analysis is restricted. However, it is recognised that this is an important finding that warrants further examination.

Exploratory analysis of the current data provided a possible indication as to why those from a mixed background had higher levels of drug use. Looking at key socio-economic information it was shown that people from

Table 7 Number of drugs used in the last year by drug users (16- to 59-year-olds)

Number of drugs used	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Chinese/other
1	67	84	74	63	83
2	15	9	17	22	8
3	8	4	2	8	6
4	4	–	4	6	–
5	2	–	2	–	–
6+	3	3	1	1	3

a mixed background were more likely to live in deprived areas, live in social rented accommodation and have less personal income.

Therefore, underlying disadvantage may go some way to explaining these high levels.

Further analysis is required to explore this issue, as well as that of social exclusion. However, because of the small numbers of people engaged in drug use across the different ethnic groups it is not possible at this stage to explore links between drug use, ethnicity and social

disadvantage and exclusion. However, once two or more similar survey years are available, data could be combined to allow further investigation.

Methodological note

The 2001/2002 BCS has a nationally representative sample of 32,824 adults living in private households in England and Wales. The response rate was 74%. Of the total achieved sample, 21,965 were eligible to complete the self-completion drugs module (i.e., aged between 16 and 59 years). Subtracting the 1,794 respondents that refused to take part, a further six for methodological reasons and three that gave no ethnicity, this gave a total sample size of 20,162. See Aust et al. (2002) for estimates from this sample.

The 2001/2002 BCS also included a booster sample of black and minority ethnic respondents. The response rate for this additional sample was 50%. The size of this sample was 2,580. This gave a final sample size of 22,742 of which 3,805 classified themselves as being from a black or minority ethnic background (341 mixed, 1,832 Asian, 1,184 black and 448 Chinese/other). The 2001/2002 BCS also included an additional net sample of 1,536 16-to 24-year-olds, of which 1,387 were from a white ethnic background. For more information on the BCS methodology see Bolling et al. (2002). Sample sizes for each ethnic group by age group are: 16–24 years (white 3,647, mixed 91, Asian 411, black 167, Chinese/other 84); 25–34 years (white 4,554, mixed 112, Asian 624, black 368, Chinese/other 142); 35–59 years (white 12,121, mixed 138, Asian 797, black 649, Chinese/other 222).

Estimates given for people from a white background are based on the core sample. Estimates given for people from non-white backgrounds are based on the core and ethnic boost sample. Estimates given for those people aged 16 to 24 from a white background are based on the core and youth boost sample. Equivalent estimates for this age group from non-white backgrounds are based on the core and ethnic boost sample.

All estimates are based on data from the 2001/2002 BCS and are weighted (including adjustment for non-response). The following convention has been used throughout '0' = less than 0.5%, but not zero, '-' = zero. All figures are rounded to the nearest whole number, therefore columns may not always sum to 100%.

Two-tailed significance tests were carried out at the 5% and 10% level (the majority qualified at the 5% level). A design factor of 1.2 has been used throughout.

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