

Views of Learners on Drugs and Related Matters: Preliminary Findings

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1 Introduction

South Africa is in a state of rapid transformation and it is argued that these transitional conditions are providing an enabling environment for forbidden activities. Social change also brings with it pressures that can have unexpected consequences. Community pressures in South Africa today - like the crime crisis, unemployment, a generally insecure environment and a new "freedom" that in some cases provides few real opportunities - all prompt many young people to search for ways to "escape" or alleviate the tension. Simply put, the transitional period of the late 1990s and 2000s has created for the youth who find themselves at the moment of entry into their teenage years and early adolescence - in addition to the usual problems of puberty, incipient sexuality, emotional, intellectual and physical development and risk taking - a world where drugs, alcohol and tobacco are widely available at schools.

Young people are the group most exposed during this transitional stage in South Africa. For this reason formal attempts have been made to isolate the youth as a group that requires specific attention, for example the Inter ministerial Committee on Young People at Risk (1995), the National Crime Prevention Strategy (1996) and the National Drug Master Plan (1997). However, the issue of creating safe, orderly and drug free schools is a concern shared by all. Today, more than ever, it has become essential that community, business, parents and learners work together with the state to develop a disciplined environment where learning can take place.

The 1990s also witnessed an upsurge of interest in the smoking habits of young people, underage drinking and youth substance abuse.

2 Cigarette smoking

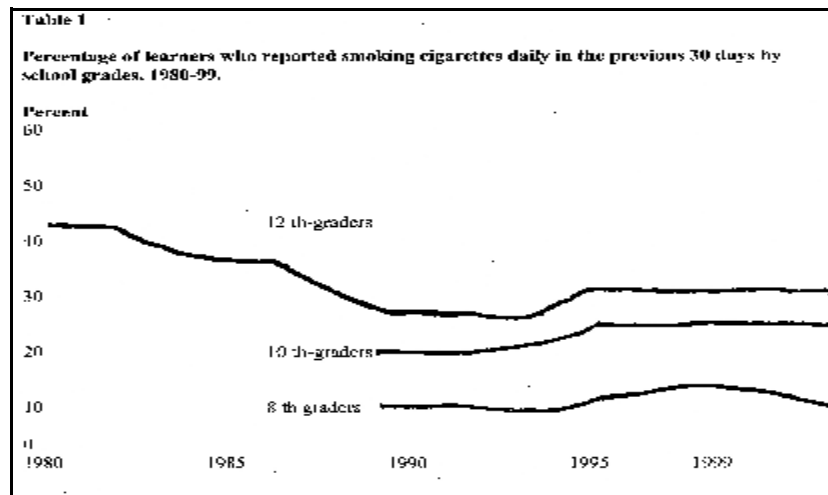
Researchers from the University of Massachusetts conducted a study in 1998 in which they followed the smoking habits of 681 teenagers between the ages of 12 and 13 years from seven schools in the city for one year (BBC News, 11 September 2000). One of the main findings was that several 12 and 13- year- olds show evidence of addiction within a few days of their first cigarette. Symptoms that indicate addiction include

cravings, needing more nicotine to get the same effect, withdrawal symptoms and loss of control over tobacco intake. During the study, a large percentage of the teenagers said they had started smoking occasionally - at least one cigarette a month. The scientists found that 63 percent of the group had one or more symptoms of nicotine addiction, notwithstanding the fact that some children could smoke up to five cigarettes a day without showing any signs of addiction.

Kessler et al (1996: 988-994) are of the opinion that smoking has serious long term consequences, including the risk of smoking related diseases, increased health care costs associated with treating these illnesses, and the risk of premature death. Johnston et al (2000: 32) state that tobacco smoking has been called the greatest preventable cause of disease and mortality in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1996: 971-974) point out that many adults who are addicted to tobacco began smoking as teenagers and adolescents, and it is estimated that more than five million of today's underage smokers in the USA will die of tobacco related illnesses. These consequences underscore the importance of studying patterns of smoking among learners and emphasize the fact that it is critical to prevent smoking very early. Underage smoking shows two significant trends in the United States of America:

- Differences in smoking rates between high school class cohorts throughout the life cycle.
- Trends observed at one grade level may not correspond to the inclinations witnessed in another within a given historical period.

Rates of daily smoking among teenagers and adolescents in the United States are illustrated in table 1.



Source: adapted from Johnston et al (2000: 33)

In 1999, 8 percent of the eighth graders, 16 percent of the tenth graders and 23 percent of the twelfth graders reported smoking cigarettes on a daily basis during the previous 30 days. Rates of daily smoking peaked in

1996 for learners in the eighth and tenth grades (between 1991 and 1999) and in 1997 for pupils in grade 12 (between 1991 and 1999). Among eight- and tenth graders, daily smoking declined steadily between 1996 and 1999. Among the grade 12 group, daily smoking decreased between 1997 and 1998 and remained unchanged in 1999. Long term trends for high school pupils show that daily smoking declined from 21 percent in 1980 to 17 percent in 1992 and has been higher in subsequent years despite some fluctuations between 1996 and 1998.

The Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2000: 1) reports similar daily smoking rates among female and male secondary school pupils in the United States. Seven percent of male learners in grade 8 smoke daily, while 16 percent of tenth - and 24 percent of twelfth -grade males do so. For females, rates are 8, 16, and 22 percent for pupils in grades 8, 10 and 12, respectively. Rates of smoking differ substantially among population groups. White learners have the highest rates of smoking, followed by Hispanics and blacks. In 1999, 27 percent of white scholars in grade 12 reported daily smoking compared to 14 percent of Hispanics and 8 percent of blacks.

The CASA National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse (iv: Teens, Teachers and Principles) (Califano 1999: 24) shows that learners tend to take a cautious view of cigarettes. Twelve percent of young people say they have had a cigarette during the past 30 days, and among this group, four percent have smoked half a pack a day or more. However, this circumspection toward tobacco smoking does weaken with each passing year. Two percent of 12-year-olds say they have smoked a cigarette during the past 30 days, but by the time they reach 17, a fully 23 percent report they have smoked in the last month.

Table 2 - Percentage of learners who reported smoking cigarettes during the previous 30 days, by age	
Age	Percentage
12	2%
13	7%
14	11%
15	15%
16	20%
17	23%

Source: Califano (1999:24)

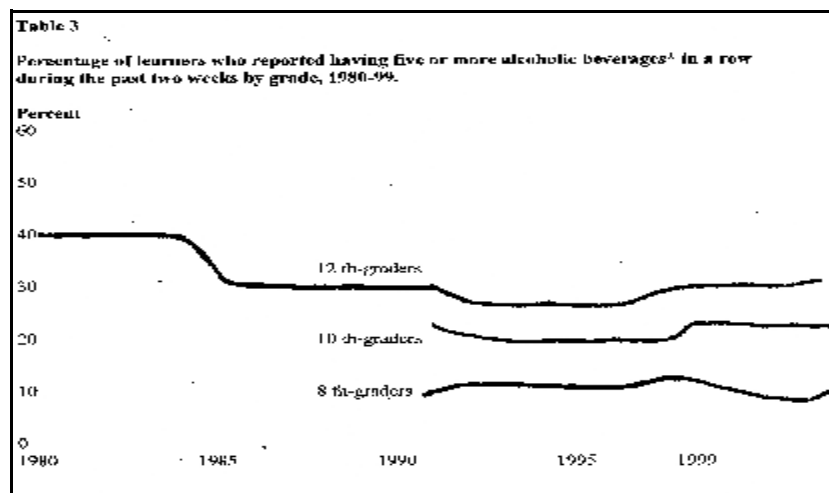
3 Alcohol use

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (1997) is of the opinion that alcohol is the psychoactive substance most commonly used by young people in the United States. Its use is associated with

problems in school; with motor vehicle accidents, injuries and deaths; and with fighting, crime, and other forms of serious misbehavior. Heavy drinking in adolescence may be especially problematic, potentially increasing the possibility of negative outcomes in latter life. The Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (1997) points out that by the time learners in the United States reach grade 12, approximately 8 in 10 will have consumed alcohol at some time in their lives. Of these, more than 60 percent will have consumed it to the point of intoxication. These statistics are reflected in the approximately 1 000 drivers between the ages of 16 and 20 who are involved in fatal accidents each year with blood alcohol levels above the allowed percentage. The National Safety Council (1997) identifies additional problems associated with youth drinking:

- Violence (Cookson 1992: 352-360)
- Suicidal behavior (King et al 1993: 82-88)
- High-risk sexual activity (Biglan et al 1990: 245-261)
- A general orientation toward engaging in risky behavior patterns (Windel et al 1992: 317-330).

Rates of underage drinking among teenagers and adolescents in the United States are illustrated in table 3.



Source: adapted from Johnston et al (2000: 31)

*Note: Alcohol beverages include beer, wine, coolers and hard liquor.

Heavy drinking remained unchanged between 1998 and 1999, with 31 percent of grade 12 learners, 26 percent of pupils in grade 10 and 15 percent of grade 8 scholars reporting heavy drinking (i.e. having at least five drinks in a row during the previous two weeks). Long term trends for secondary school learners indicate a peak in 1981, when 41 percent reported heavy drinking. Subsequently, the percentages declined significantly to a low of 28 percent in 1993. Since 1995, the prevalence of this behavior has held fairly steady.

The Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2000: 2) indicates that male teenagers in the United States are

more inclined to drink heavily than female pupils. Heavy drinking is much more common among Hispanic and white secondary scholars than among their black counterparts.

The CASA investigation (Califano 1999: 25) shows that alcohol becomes more available - and tempting - to young people as they begin their high school years.

Table 4 - Percentage of learners who reported having had alcohol beverages to drink - more than just a few sips - during the last 30 days, by age		
Number	Age & Percentage	
	12-14 year olds	15-17 year olds
None	84%	64%
1-2	10%	19%
3 or more	4%	16%

Source: Califano (1999: 25)

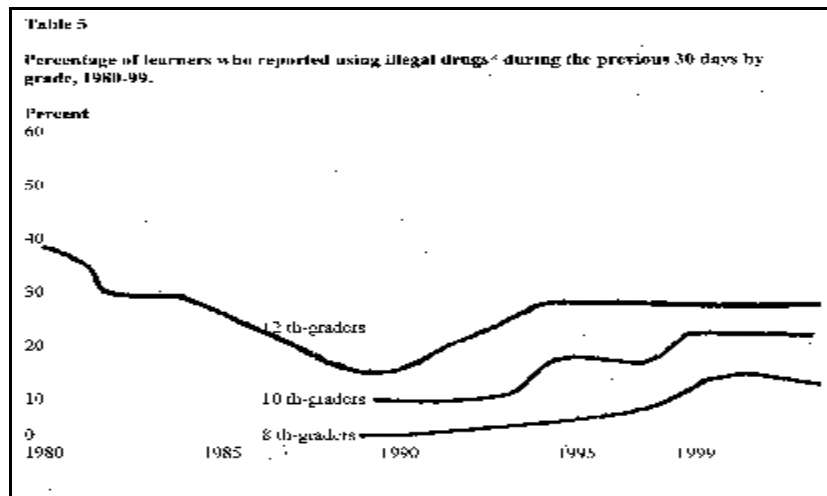
A very disturbing finding is that four times as many 15- to 17-year-olds (16 percent) as to 12- to 14-year-olds (4 percent) say they consumed alcohol on at least three occasions during the last 30 days. By the time teenagers reach 17 years of age, 39 percent say they have drunk alcohol in the past month.

4 Substance abuse

Drug use is risk taking behavior that has serious consequences. Youth drug use can have immediate as well as long term health and social repercussions. Pope and Yurgelun-Todd (1996: 7) indicate that the use of dagga poses both health and cognitive risks, particularly for damage to pulmonary functions as a result of chronic use. Cocaine use is, for example, linked with health problems that range from eating disorders to death from heart attacks and strokes. (Blanken 1993: supplement 1). Possession or use of drugs is illegal and can lead to a variety of penalties and a permanent criminal record.

Rates of illegal drug use among young people in the United States are shown in table 5.

In 1999, 26 percent of learners in grade 12 reported using illegal drugs during the previous 30 days, as did 22 percent of pupils in grade 10 and 12 percent of the eighth -graders. The percentage of scholars in each grade level reporting illegal drug use during the past 30 days increased substantially between 1992 and 1996 - from 14 to 25 percent for learners in grade 12, from 11 to 23 percent for pupils in grade 10, and from 7 to 15 percent for eighth - graders. Since 1996, rates have remained stable or decreased. Long-term trends for learners in grade 12 indicate that illegal drug use declined from 37 percent in 1980 to 14 percent in 1992. However, after 1992, rates began to rise sharply.



Source: adapted from Johnston et al (2000: 7)

*Note: Illegal drugs include dagga, cocaine, heroin, LSD and ecstasy.

The Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2000: 3) reports that among US learners in grade 12, males are more inclined to use illegal drugs than females. In 1999, 29 percent of male pupils in grade 12 reported using illegal drugs, compared with 23 percent of females. For scholars in grade 8, however, males and females are equally likely to report the use of illegal drugs during the last 30 days.

Dagga has been the most widely used illegal drug in the United States for decades. The use of dagga rose sharply in the early and mid-90s, and the annual prevalence rates peaked in 1996 at the eighth- grade level and in 1997 at the tenth- and twelfth- grades. For 1999 the yearly prevalence rates in grades 8, 10 and 12, respectively, were 17, 32 and 38 percent. (Johnston et al 2000: 8-9)

Califano (1999: 27) points out that, in the United States, the exposure to dagga becomes one of the first pressures that teenagers encounter on the way to adulthood. The use increases steadily as the learners grow older. Forty-nine percent of teenagers first try dagga at the age of 13 or younger.

5 Method and Respondents

The study reported on in this paper was conceived for the purpose of establishing a knowledge basis with regard to one facet of the South African criminological establishment, namely information on tobacco smoking habits, underage drinking and the use of illegal drugs in schools. A range of issues and questions are addressed:

- Social problems facing learners

- The role of parental involvement, family ties and religious life
- Recreation and social life of respondents
- Smoking habits and alcohol consumption of pupils
- Access to illegal drugs, the use of drugs and drug dealing at schools
- Pupils' discontent with the situation
- General attitudes to drugs
- Learners' views on what should be done to combat the use of illegal drugs in schools.

The major outcomes of the survey are to identify key concerns regarding illegal drugs and related matters in schools, and to make information available to legitimate and interested stakeholders in order to establish partnerships for the development of problem solving strategies.

During the first semester of 2000 a structured survey questionnaire was developed and subjected to the criticism of colleagues and others familiar with the nature and scope of the study. The revised draft questionnaire was pilot tested in consultation with members of the Department of Education, Lefase la Rena and learners from district N-3 schools in Pretoria. On the basis of ensuing feedback, the draft instrument was revised and drawn up in final form, which consisted of 11 pages and comprised 46 main questions, focussing on the issues mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The researchers were able to generate a non probability sample by means of the convenience sampling technique consisting of grade 7, 10 and 11 learners from 35 secondary schools in the N-3 district in Pretoria. The sample does not permit generalizations outside the group of sample elements. Table 6 provides an overview of the general demographics of the respondents.

Table 6 - Demographic characteristics of survey respondents by percentage*	
Age	Percentage
13	.5
14	1.6
15	16.0
16	35.9
17	31.3
18	10.9
19	2.7
20	.7
>20	.5
TOTAL	100.0

Table 6 - Demographic characteristics of survey respondents by percentage*	
Gender	Percentage
Male	43.3
Female	56.7
TOTAL	100.0
Grade	Percentage
7	5.3
10	42.6
11	52.1
TOTAL	100.0
Population Group	Percentage
Black	41.7
Coloured	9.0
Indian	10.7
White	37.9
Unspecified	.7
TOTAL	100.0

*Note: N = 2003

The questionnaire administration in each school was carried out (in some schools with the assistance of Unisa lecturers) by trained local learners, following standardized procedures. The questionnaires were administered in classrooms during normal class periods. Teachers were urged to avoid walking around the classroom, so that pupils could answer the questions without fear of being observed. Respondents were requested to seal their completed questionnaires in the envelopes provided.

The survey was conducted in August 2000 and learners in grades 7, 10 and 11 completed 2 281 questionnaires. Two hundred and seventy eight questionnaires were not correctly completed and could not be used in the study.

6 Results

Approximately 21 percent of all respondents identified "drugs" as the most important problem facing young people while 20,5 percent of them pointed to "crime and violence in school" as the main issue of concern. Furthermore 14 percent of scholars indicated "sexual issues" as the one thing that challenged them the most while 15 percent mentioned "doing well at school" as the most important challenge facing them. It was also

evident that a higher percentage (57 percent) of male respondents as compared to 43 percent female respondents viewed "crime and violence in school" as the most important problem facing them. With regard to drugs, more females (52 percent) than males (48 percent) perceived this to be the most important problem. Regarding the most important problem facing young people in modern society, the various population groups responded as follows:

Crime and violence in school was singled out as the most important problem by 44,7 percent of all coloured scholars contrasted to 23,9 percent of Indian scholars, 21 percent of black scholars and 13,4 percent of white scholars. The problem of drugs was viewed as the most serious by 29,6 percent of all coloured respondents followed by 26,3 percent Indian participants, 19,5 percent of all black scholars and 18,6 percent of the white scholars. Moreover the problem of "sexual issues" was perceived as the most crucial by 21,6 percent of all black learners followed by 10,8 percent Indians, 9,2 percent whites, and 6,7 percent of all coloured respondents.

The majority of scholars (63 percent) indicated they had not smoked cigarettes during the last 30 days preceding their participation in the survey. In this specific subgroup one of the reasons given by 40 percent of the respondents for not smoking was "trying to quit smoking". However, the majority (89 percent) of this particular subgroup gave "bad for health" as the main reason. This can possibly be attributed to the effect of various anti-smoking campaigns, amongst other factors.

Almost 48 percent of the respondents who had started smoking cigarettes mentioned the calming or relaxing effect it had as a reason. This was more so amongst female respondents (55,3 percent) than males (44,7 percent). Moreover, almost three-quarters of those who started smoking, did so due to curiosity and experimentation while more than two-thirds mentioned the example set by their friends as their main reason for smoking. Replying to the question "Why did you start smoking cigarettes?" the majority of whites (60 percent) gave as reason the calming effect of tobacco while 49 percent of Indians, 48,9 percent of blacks and only 14,8 percent of coloureds shared the same view. However, the overwhelming majority of coloured respondents (91,4) gave as reason for starting to smoke the aspect of curiosity or experimentation, followed by 81,6 percent of Indians, 68,3 percent of whites and 67,2 of blacks. Furthermore the effect of peer pressure, namely smoking following the example of friends, was indicated by 91,4 percent of coloured, 77,5 percent of Indian, 59,1 percent of black and 59 percent of white scholars. Also in this respect the example of parents smoking was highlighted by almost half of the Indian respondents (48 percent) and by one-third (33,4 percent) of their white counterparts.

Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of those who smoked gave as reason "curiosity" or "to experiment" while two-thirds of them admitted being addicted to smoking cigarettes as the reason for not being able to quit.

Regarding the use of alcohol the majority (62 percent) of pupils remarked they had consumed alcohol on a

few to several occasions during the past month. Additionally, almost 40 percent of them stated getting drunk occasionally in the course of a typical month. However, when given the choice of attending various parties most of the respondents (63 percent) elected to attend a party where illegal drugs such as LSD, ecstasy, cocaine and heroin were not available. Faced with the option of choosing between a party with illegal drugs like LSD, ecstasy and cocaine and a party without such illegal drugs the majority of white respondents (71,5 percent) indicated their preference for a party where illegal drugs were not available, followed by 67,8 percent of blacks, 51,2 percent of Indians and 20,1 percent of coloureds. However, 59,8 percent of coloureds remarked that it made no difference which party they attended, compared to 43,2 percent of Indians, 27,1 percent of blacks and 25,1 percent of whites.

One-quarter of the learners participating in the survey were of the opinion that the illegal drug problem in their school was getting worse while only 13 percent believed it was getting better, 14 percent felt the problem remained the same and 47 percent had no knowledge as to the extent of the problem. Still on the subject of illegal drugs, more than one-quarter of the group had witnessed the sale of illegal drugs on their school grounds while 42 percent of them had personally seen the sale of illegal drugs in their neighborhood. Almost three-quarters (74,9 percent) of coloured respondents stated they knew of pupils at their schools who were selling illegal drugs compared to 43,2 percent of Indians, 19,7 percent of blacks and 16,2 percent of whites who also had knowledge of this nature. As to the illegal drug problem in their respective schools, 59,8 percent of coloureds, 43,2 of Indians, 24,8 of blacks and 14,7 percent of whites were of the opinion that the situation was getting worse. Respondents who had no knowledge of this problem among each population group included 64,1 percent of whites, 42,6 percent of blacks, 30 percent of Indians and 16,2 percent of coloureds. Approximately three-quarters (74,9 percent) of coloured scholars witnessed illegal drugs being sold in their school or on their school grounds, while similar incidents were also observed by 41,8 percent of Indians, 25 percent of blacks and 13,2 percent of whites. Such occurrences in their respective neighborhoods were also observed by 83,8 percent of coloureds, 54,9 percent of Indians, 42,3 percent of blacks and 29,1 percent of whites.

To the question "Do you know a friend or classmate who has been using illegal drugs like LSD, ecstasy, cocaine or heroin?" the majority of coloureds (79,3 percent) answered in the affirmative, also adding that such friends were teenagers. Similar views were expressed by 56,8 percent of Indians, 40,4 percent of whites and 37,4 percent of blacks.

More than one-third of the respondents indicated that dagga could be bought within an hour compared to one-quarter of them who revealed that LSD, ecstasy, cocaine or heroin could be obtained within a day. The majority of scholars (85 percent) felt that in order to eliminate the use of drugs from school parental support is vital, linked with educating pupils with regard to the dangers of drugs. An issue of concern is that only 8 percent of learners stated that their school is drug free contrasted to more than half of them (51,5 percent) who acknowledged their school as not being drug free, while 40 percent of them expressed ignorance. The

majority of coloureds (75,4 percent) and Indians (63,8 percent) as well as 49,3 percent of blacks and 45,6 of whites maintained that their particular schools were not drug free. Moreover, 45,7 percent of whites, 41,8 percent of blacks, 31,5 percent of Indians and 19,6 percent of coloureds expressed their uncertainty in this respect.

More than half of the respondents (55 percent) were prepared to report a pupil who was selling drugs at school to school officials and 45 percent were also willing to report pupils who used illegal drugs at school. In addition two-thirds of the scholars recommended that pupils found selling illegal drugs at school should be expelled from school, while 45 percent of them expressed the same view regarding those found using illegal drugs at school. The majority of whites (56 percent) were willing to report those they saw using illegal drugs at school to school officials, while the corresponding figures were 46,2 percent for blacks, 31,9 percent for Indians and 15,1 percent for coloureds. The converse percentages for the respondents who were prepared to report those selling illegal drugs at school were as follows: 70 percent of whites, 54,2 percent of blacks, 39,8 percent of Indians and 19 percent of coloureds.

One-third of the respondents admitted having smoked dagga (23 percent of them under the age of 12 and 34 percent being 15- and 16-year-olds). A disconcerting majority of coloureds (79,8 percent) admitted to having smoked dagga followed by 45,1 percent of Indians, 28,3 percent of whites and 25,6 percent of blacks. Amongst the coloured learners, 39,4 percent were 11 years old when they first tried dagga, 28,2 percent were 12 years old and 14,8 percent were 13 years of age. Almost one-quarter (24,2 percent) of Indian respondents were 11 years old, 15,8 percent were 12 years old and 11,6 percent were 13 years old. The corresponding percentages for black learners were as follows: 9,4 percent were 11 years old, 6,6 percent were 12 years old and 4,7 percent were 13 years old. With regard to white scholars, 6,6 percent were 11 years old, 5,6 percent were 12 years old and 8,5 percent were 13 years old.

Just over two-thirds (66,9 percent) of coloured respondents alleged that it was somewhat likely to very likely that they would try an illegal drug in future, while 43,2 percent of Indians, 19,3 percent of blacks and 16,8 percent of whites expressed the same viewpoint. On the other hand, almost two-thirds (65,5 percent) of black scholars, 62,8 percent of whites, 37,6 percent of Indians and 16,9 percent of coloureds stated that this would never happen.

One-quarter of those using drugs blamed themselves for doing so, and more than half of the learners not using drugs also pointed to themselves as taking this vital decision. The importance of parents' influence in their children's decision not to use drugs was highlighted by 45 percent of the scholars.

One-quarter of respondents revealed they had inhaled substances such as glue, petrol and thinners,

27 percent had swallowed, eaten or drunk mandrax, ecstasy, LSD etc. and 22 percent had smoked crack or

cocaine and mandrax. With reference to the various methods of taking drugs, 70,2 percent of coloured learners revealed that they had inhaled substances such as glue, petrol and thinners, a method also used by 25,9 percent of Indians, 22 percent of whites and 16,8 percent of blacks. Furthermore, smoking cocaine or mandrax was tried by 38,8 percent of coloureds, 31,6 percent of Indians, 21,2 percent of blacks and 15,6 percent of whites. Sniffing or snorting cocaine was attempted by 56,7 percent of coloured, 21,7 percent of Indians, 14,7 percent of blacks and 7,7 percent of whites.

Two-thirds of the learners were of the opinion that people start taking illegal drugs just to keep up with their friends, while the majority (84 percent) felt that those who have drug problems need help and not punishment.

Responding to the question "What should happen to a pupil found using illegal drugs at school?" two-thirds (66,5) of white scholars recommended expulsion from school while more than half (52,5 percent) of blacks, 50,7 percent of Indians and 18,4 percent of coloureds advocated equivalent action. The corresponding percentages for those found selling illegal drugs at school were 80,1 percent of whites, 64,7 percent of blacks, 60,4 percent of Indians and 34,6 percent of coloureds.

7 Conclusion

It is highly unlikely that the use of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs in our schools will decrease in the near future. Various factors can be identified, such as

- The opening of South Africa's markets and borders, inviting investment and engagement from the rest of the world, but also including the sharp increase in the traffic and trade of illegal drugs
- The large percentage of children and young people in the population
- Urbanisation
- The lack of community involvement
- The limited capacity of the criminal justice system.

Scientists and other interested stakeholders should be encouraged to collect more information about the long-term trends in the use of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs in our schools. To understand these issues more clearly, we need more sensitive measuring instruments and accurate data over a long period on the occurrence of the problem among young people. It is also clear that conventional research approaches to these issues (e.g. the use of surveys) will need to be supplemented by more qualitative assessments.

The next step is to reach beyond school boundaries to investigate for the development and implementation of multi-agency and community based problem solving strategies.

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