

## KCA Young Persons' Service in Kent has collated information from a range of young people in relation to new psychoactive substances (NPS) including legal highs. Here are the results ...

Since the beginning of the year, the service has been asking the young people working with their early intervention projects to complete surveys anonymously on this topic. Over 600 young people were surveyed; questions explored the behaviours of respondents and their wider social groups, and asked whether 'legal highs' are more dangerous than illegal drugs.

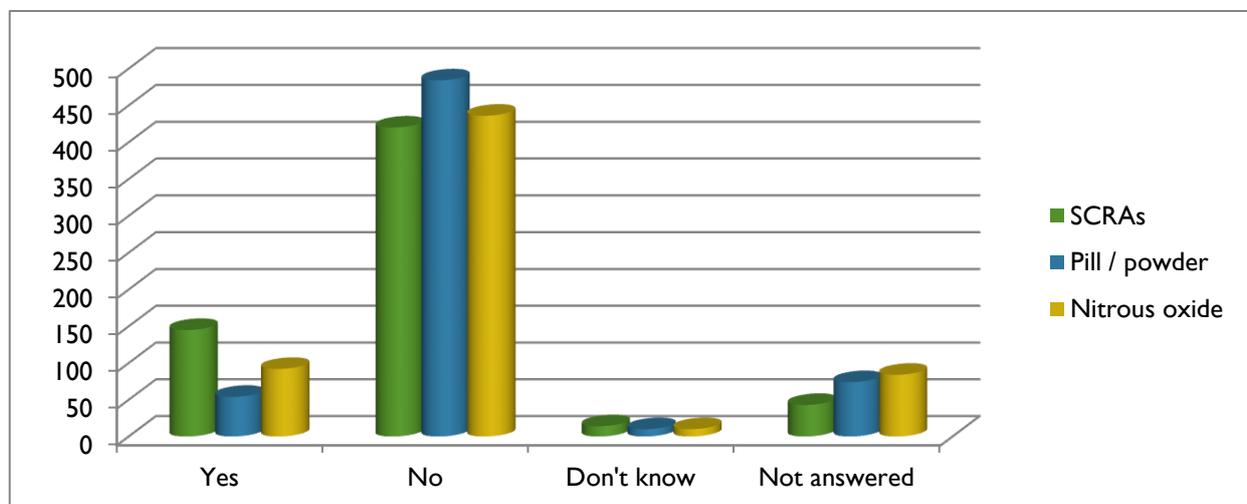
### Which substances have young people been using?

Questions explored three types of substances: synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonist smoking mixtures (SCRAs), pills and powders and nitrous oxide. The results showed that it was the minority of young people surveyed that had ever taken these substances.

*Only a minority of young people surveyed had ever taken NPS*

The most commonly used substances were the SCRA smoking mixtures (25% of respondents), followed by nitrous oxide (17.1%) and lastly pills / powders (9.9%). Wider use within social groups displayed a similar pattern with 50.2% saying that their friends had used smoking mixtures, compared with 32.5% for nitrous oxide and pills / powders at 29.4%.

**Table 1 – Have you ever taken any of these substances?**



These responses are quite different to the wider population where nitrous oxide use is far more commonplace than synthetic cannabinoid consumption.

However, many of the young people surveyed fall into the different vulnerability groups that the early intervention services is tasked to target, such as looked after children, those involved in or at risk of offending as well as those excluded or at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that synthetic cannabinoid consumption is high given that (alongside prison populations and the streets homeless) use of these substances is associated with disenfranchised young people.

*Nearly three times as many respondents answered that 'legal highs' were more dangerous than illegal drugs than vice versa*

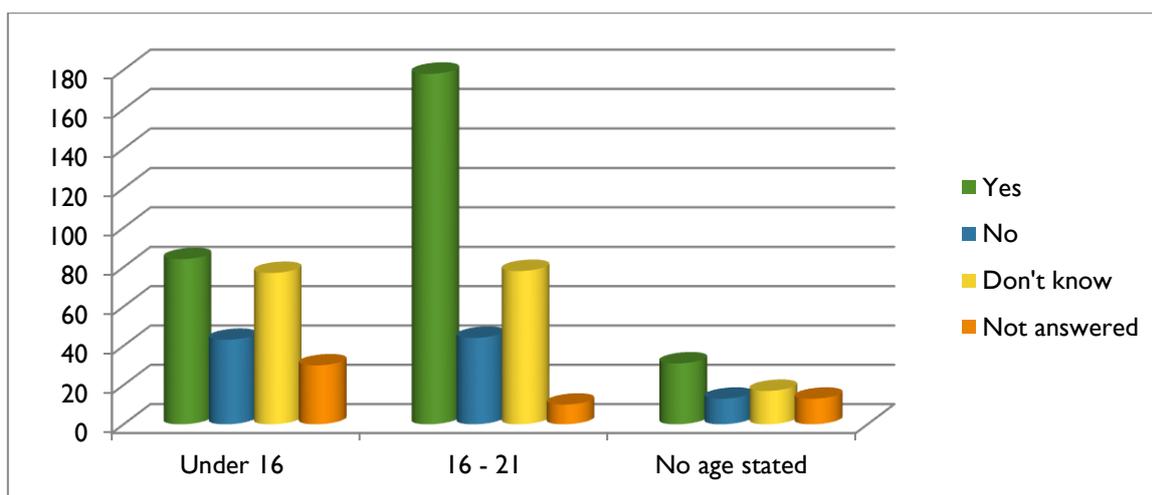
*Link to the DrugScope 2014 Street Drug Survey*

*<http://www.drugscope.org.uk/Documents/PDF/Publications/DownAStonyRoadDrugTrendsSurvey2014.pdf>*

## Do young people think 'legal highs' are more dangerous than illegal drugs?

The answers given around attitudes to substances also offer a different perspective to the view that is often carried in the mainstream media.

**Table 2 – Are 'legal highs' more dangerous than illegal drugs?**



Respondents were asked whether they thought 'legal highs' were more dangerous than illegal drugs and, of those answering this question, nearly three times as many said 'yes' (293) than 'no' (100). Interestingly, a further 172 respondents stated they did not know which were more dangerous which perhaps highlights the confusion that still dominates discussions around these substances.

With those that stated legal highs were more dangerous than illegal drugs, this was particularly noticeable in the 16 and over age group. Nearly four times as many respondents in this age bracket felt that legal highs were a higher risk than those more concerned by illegal drugs.

In the under 16 category, whilst they also indicated legal rather than illegal substances could pose a greater risk, this figure was significantly lower with a ratio of nearly two to one answering in this way.

It is encouraging that a high proportion of these young people acknowledge that there are risks in using the substances discussed. However, it could be interpreted that more information needs to be directed at slightly younger age groups as they appear to be slightly less clear on the potential risks of NPS.

*Should more information be targeted at lower age groups if they are less aware of risks?*

## **Socially excluded teenagers**

In total 622 young people took part in the survey, although not all sections of the survey were always completed. 238 of respondents were under 16 years old, 310 were aged between 16 and 21 years old. 74 respondents did not disclose their age.

The young people who completed the surveys are not accessing KCA specialist treatment services and may not necessarily use substances themselves. However, those accessing early intervention support are likely

*Vulnerable populations may be more aware of NPS risks perhaps because they have more direct experience of SCRA use*

to have been identified as needing some input around these topics and they are often either involved in or exposed to substance use. As a consequence, it is important to highlight that the results of these surveys are unlikely to be representative of young people in terms of the general population.

The results may however be more indicative of the attitudes and behaviours of hard to reach young people elsewhere in the country. These more vulnerable populations seem to be more aware of the potential risks of some NPS perhaps because they are often more directly experienced in relation to substances such as SCRA's.

## In summary

The results of these surveys perhaps do not replicate the findings of other broader UK studies around the nature and prevalence of young people's substance use. Nor are they likely to echo the customary enforcement agency or media viewpoint that young people might try legal highs because they underestimate their risks – i.e. “just because they're legal doesn't mean they're safe”. However, the findings were not a surprise to our service.

Young people accessing our sessions regularly make it clear to our workers that they know the newer breed of substances can be high risk, with SCRA's in particular often being described as “dirty”. Of course, just because a substance is known to be risky does not mean that young people won't take them. As such, it is important that NPS are not explored in isolation but in the context of other substances and safe decision making in general. Support around resilience and self-esteem in combination with substance information and appropriate harm reduction advice can hopefully empower individuals to make safer, positive choices around any substance, legal or otherwise.

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**For more information on the survey please contact Rick Bradley at KCA Young Persons'**

**Service:**

Email: [rbradley@kca.org.uk](mailto:rbradley@kca.org.uk)

Twitter: [@RickBradley](https://twitter.com/RickBradley)

Phone: 01227 456744