

Drug and Alcohol Survey in Clare; Cultural Factors and Substance Abuse

From your first tipsy kiss at a teenage disco to the acrid tang of your initial cigarette in the school yard, the teenage years remind many of exhilarating new experiences and monumental milestones. Swigs of wine at family gatherings and tokes of a musty joint at a hormone-addled party are news to almost nobody-- they have been pillars of many teens' lives for generations.

The results of the Clare Youth Service's survey of teen substance use, then, shocked few. Alcohol, cannabis, and cigarettes were listed as the three most popular substances among 14-18 year olds in Clare. The survey, shared and undertaken mostly on Facebook, showed that from house parties and home brew to festivals and free booze-- there are as many opportunities as ever for young people to indulge in substances, and no more incentive than there's ever been for them to decline.

So it's little wonder that one of the better-received results from the study has been the circumstances under which alcohol was first taken. Unsurprisingly, and perhaps reassuringly, most of the young people questioned mentioned 'family events' as the deceptively safe-looking backdrop to their first sip of alcohol. Traditionally, christenings, weddings, and national holidays have provided many young people with their first alcoholic drink, under the auspices of shared achievement and familial joy.

Interestingly, then, many young people listed 'celebration' as the main inspiration for a solid night's drinking. The link between celebration and intoxication seems to be established early on, and remains, in the heads of many, for years. Results night for Junior and Leaving Certificate students historically leads to huge pressure on hospitals, with hundreds of teenagers across the country suffering from alcohol poisoning and alcohol-related injury-- a side-effect, perhaps, of the 'achievement = drinking' mentality prevalent in our culture. Participants of the survey mentioned 'celebration' as a reason for taking

drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine. Could the availability of substances among young people have taken our 'intoxication as reward' culture to a new level?

It seems alcohol is not the only substance introduced to Irish teens at a young age, either. According to CYS' survey, the mode age of first cannabis consumption was 14, while many teens smoked their first cigarette aged just 13. Some young people had had their first experiences with alcohol under the age of ten-- a fact which speaks volumes about our culture, and one which could be having many more negative effects than many of us think.

Until the age of 21, young brains are still developing, and are more easily affected by intoxicants such as alcohol and cannabis. Levels of later paranoia and drop out rates are linked to frequent early marijuana use (Risk and Protection Factors for Substance Use Among Young People : Trutz Haase and Dr. Jonathan Pratschke for the National Advisory Committee on Drugs); effects of the drug which are more extreme than those seen in users who begin taking the drug later in life. It's possible that the early use of marijuana, recently destigmatized and normalised almost to the extent that alcohol has been, has become, to teens, as seemingly harmless and innocent as their first supervised swigs of alcohol.

Perhaps the most poignant feature of the survey were the comments left by the young people at the end of the questionnaire. The group offered an optional section in which young people could comment on how drug abuse affects their everyday lives-- a section which was answered exclusively with either apathy, or negativity. Comments ranged from the nonchalant 'It doesn't affect me', to the rather more upsetting 'It has ruined my relationship with family members'. We found it remarkable that, while many young people listed 'celebration' and 'curiosity' as their main incentive for taking substances, few of them seemed to actually enjoy the effects of substance use on their lives. One teen mentioned 'owing people money' as a downside of taking intoxicants, while others were so displeased with the behaviour of their peers while on drugs that they had vowed to never take them.

Remarkable discords between intentions and behaviour, like we see here, demand deeper investigation. It is noteworthy that many young people listed having 'nothing better to do', or being 'bored', as a reason for experimenting with substances. How many of us know the often fruitless, constant adolescent search for something, anything, to DO? While communities in Ireland-- especially rural ones-- tend to be vibrant, close-knit and supportive, it's so often the case that localities become pigeonholed into a restrictively specific area of recreation; GAA, or perhaps soccer, can dominate youth communities. The entirely healthy and positive effects of sports, such as camogie or hurling, aren't to be questioned; they're a vital social and physical activity for many young people, and they merit, as they should, our highest levels of support and regard. But what about young people whose interests many communities can't cater for? Whether you are nuts about throwing hammer, crazy about knitting, or just looking for a warm, friendly place to meet people outside of a sporting environment; the struggle to find an appropriate and supportive backdrop for that can be almost crushing. Little wonder, then, that these 'curious' and 'bored' minds resort to behaviour that, while social and sometimes intensely enjoyable, does not appear in the long run to be having a positive impact on their lives.

Perhaps it's time that we as a nation began to separate intoxication and celebration; that we began to expand our recreational landscape for young people; in short, it's time for a good aul rethink of what joy, and celebration, and recreation, looks like. Maybe it is not always the stumbling group of guys at the bar, the slurring teens at the house party; the curious first sip of Guinness at a christening. Sometimes it looks like a workshop, a pair of hiking boots, just a friendly room with free access to kettles, new people, and chocolate hobnobs. And maybe, for some young people, that's as good as any drug.