

COMMERCIAL BREAKDOWN

A severe drop in quality of many illegal drugs coupled with a mix and match approach to taking them is creating an expanding 'junk food' drug market. Max Daly takes a look at this year's UK-wide drug trends survey.

The article overleaf appears in the September/October 2009 issue of [Druglink](#) magazine



Also featured in the September/October 2009 issue of [Druglink](#):

We look at a Bristol drug service which helps turn dealers' lives around, new research into cannabis use that suggests some people may have a psychological 'sensitivity' to the drug, while the recovery debate is furthered over three articles.

In a hard-hitting piece on Russia's attitude to problem drug users, we expose how people are maltreated and 'left to rot' in Gulag-style 'treatment' centres. Finally, Chris Hallam of Release offers his take on the Conservative party's attempt at using acclaimed US TV show *The Wire* as a stick with which to beat the UK government.

About *Druglink* magazine:

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Druglink

REPORTING ON DRUGS SINCE 1975

- Helping dealers
- Cannabis psychosis
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Junk!

Britain's low grade drug trade

DRUGLINK STREET DRUG TRENDS SURVEY 2009



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- Drop in purity across the board
- Poly drug use spreads
- Ketamine rise among young people
- Crystal meth scarce

Druglink Street Drug Trends is an annual survey, started in 2005, which aims to capture emerging drug trends by speaking to a range of organisations and experts in 20 town and cities in the UK

The UK's illicit drug market is starting to mirror the junk food economy – with a menu of increasingly low quality, cheap, homogeneous and readily available products being sold to a rapidly less discerning group of customers, according to *Druglink Street Drug Trends 2009*.

Feedback from 70 frontline drug services, police forces, drug actions teams and user groups in 20 towns and cities across the UK found that – despite a healthy market – the quality of drugs such as powder cocaine, crack cocaine, ecstasy, speed, cannabis, heroin and tranquillisers had dipped significantly in most areas over the last year.

In addition, the survey revealed that poly drug use – taking a variety of substances in combination or at different times – was on the rise across the UK, reflecting a more long-term move away from users sticking to one high.

Direct links can be made between the rise in poly drug use and the concurrent drop in quality of many drugs. The wider variety of drugs people are taking on a night out, the less worried they are likely to be about the quality of each individual substance. In turn, poor quality drugs, such as ecstasy pills for example, can mean users start to 'top up' or experiment with alternative highs, such as GHB or ketamine.

The survey backed a growing body of evidence from drugs seized by police and analysed by forensic scientists on

plummeting purities of both powder and crack cocaine. Powder and rock cocaine quality had dropped in 15 of the 20 areas. Prices were similar to last year – with £10 buying on average a 0.15g rock of crack and a gram of cocaine ranging from £25 to £50.

In Bristol, police said bags of cocaine being sold on the street contained as little as two per cent of the real thing. While a senior drugs squad detective in Strathclyde described the drug as “adulterated into oblivion” by the time it had reached Glasgow. In Manchester ‘bitesize’ wraps of cocaine are being sold for £10. In London, crack cocaine users told the survey they often saw “sticky, low quality crack rocks which foamed-up” when heated. In the hunt for better deals, some users admitted getting conned. “I’ve paid £20 for a Rice Crispie wrapped in clingfilm,” said one user, while another paid cash for a roasted peanut.

The steep slide in crack cocaine quality – brought about because modern adulterants in powder cocaine are carried through the ‘cooking’ process – has been so pronounced in some parts of the country that some dealers and users have washed their hands of the drug. In Ipswich and Middlesbrough, crack users are swapping bad crack for alcohol and black market pharmaceuticals, while in Newcastle some are instead buying powder cocaine because it is cheaper.



Products offered on the UK cannabis market, with many areas dominated by high yield, low grade 'skunk' produced by organised cultivation networks, are becoming increasingly uniform. Apart from some parts of southern England, users are reporting that it is becoming harder to find alternative types of marijuana, particularly good quality resin.

In 12 of the areas surveyed, heroin quality was either poorer than it was last year or subject to sudden swings in purity, for example, due to dealers from cities swamping rural markets with low price, good quality goods to attract customers, before scaling down purity. The average UK price of a bag of heroin remained at £10 for 0.15g. Many dealers around the country, however, offered a rock of crack and a bag of heroin for £15.

Most areas reported that ecstasy pills, now costing on average £2 each, contained very little MDMA content, citing BZP as its cheaper and less euphoric substitute ingredient in pills. Even the illicit market in tranquillisers such as diazepam and temazepam, now a staple part of many Class A drug users' drug menu (see last year's survey), has been driven downmarket. While authentic 10mg pills diverted into the black market are being sold in most areas for £1, fake versions from labs in China and south east Asia are available at half the price.

Drug users are now more likely to mix and match from a variety of substances on the drug menu rather than stick with one drug, according to the survey. Younger, recreational users are now swapping or combining cocaine, ketamine, GHB, ecstasy, cannabis and alcohol on a night out. Class A users in most areas are now more likely to be using cheap, strong alcohol, skunk-like cannabis, tranquillisers and in some cases, ketamine.

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"Purity levels of cocaine and crack are toppling and heroin has not recovered from the dip in quality of last year," says Gary Sutton, head of drug services at London-based charity Release. "It's a logical progression of poly drug use. If you go out drinking, smoking skunk

and taking cocaine, then you are not as fussy about the quality of the drugs as a connoisseur who is just into taking cocaine.

"It's like wine," says Sutton. "People who go out drinking wine alongside lager and spirits are less likely to be fussy about its quality than someone who is sticking to their favourite tippie all night. As far as suppliers go, it's about being accessible and making money from unit volume, not unit cost.

"Why are drugs lower in purity? Dealers are getting more greedy, or, to put it more accurately, increasing the risk premium. There seems to be a longer chain from importer to the street and users, especially cocaine buyers, seem happy to buy lower grade substances. Most heroin users will complain about their gear, but most will buy it anyway."

A Suffolk drug squad officer told the survey: "A few years ago crack was being sold in Ipswich at 60 per cent purity, now its 20 per cent. Lots of people are coming off crack because its such low quality and taking valium or alcohol instead. Some of the heroin users can take it or leave it: normally every dealer would sell crack and smack, now some just have heroin."

The trend towards a more downmarket, commercialised drug trade has been reflected in previous *Druglink Street Drug Trends* findings. Last

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	Average Prices (£)	
	2008	2009
HERBAL CANNABIS STD (qtr oz)	89/oz	31/qtr oz
HERBAL CANNABIS GD (qtr oz)	131/oz	40/qtr oz
RESIN (qtr oz)	51/oz	21/qtr oz
HEROIN (per bag)	10/0.15g	10/0.15g
COCAINE (per g)	42	39
CRACK (rock)	10/0.15g	10/0.15g
ECSTASY (pill)	2.30	2.00
MDMA Powder (per g)	39	36
AMPHETAMINE (per g)	9	9
KETAMINE (per g)	20	22
DIAZEPAM (10mg)	1	1

year we revealed a rise in black market tranquillisers being used as a substitute for low quality or scarce heroin supplies. What we christened the 'two tier' cocaine market in 2007 has continued catering for a rapidly expanding, less discerning group of users.

There is evidence to show that an increasingly 'junk food' drug market is pushing users onto more powerful and less well-researched alternatives. For example, mephedrone, the cocaine/speed/MDMA analogue which is doing such good business over the internet (see March-April Druglink), was identified as being an emerging element of the drug market among young users in several areas. Many 'meph' users were motivated to use the drug, not just because it was legal, but because it was seen as a more reliable high than cocaine or ecstasy. The same can be said for people turning to ketamine for a more hallucinogenic experience than could be got from low MDMA content ecstasy pills.

Certainly, the plethora of similar-looking stimulant powders – cocaine, speed, ketamine, mephedrone, methylone, MDMA powder and methamphetamine – currently available make it increasingly more likely that users will be snorting a substance that is not the one they think it is. And drug users who are less fussy about which type of drug they will use are more likely to be able to get high when they need to.

Low quality stimulants such as crack, speed, powder cocaine and ecstasy pills are opening the door for other substances such as ketamine, GHB and mephedrone.

In 18 of the 20 town and cities covered by the survey, the hallucinogenic anaesthetic drug ketamine was reported as being used by a growing number of young people in the last year. The trend (also reported in January-February Druglink) may have been fuelled by other stimulants becoming less attractive to users. The average price of a gram of ketamine is £22, cheaper than the average gram of cocaine at £39.

James Sadler, service manager for Datus (Drug and Treatment User Service) in Birmingham, said: "Ketamine is becoming the main stimulant drug of young people age 13-19. They hang around on street corners outside shops and in parks taking it with alcohol and cannabis. Why? It's cheaper than cocaine and has more of an effect than pills."

Co-ordinator at Suffolk Drug and Alcohol Action Team, Simon Aalders, said Ipswich had seen a similar pattern of ketamine and poly drug use. "Over the last year there has been a real emergence of ketamine, particularly

among older teenagers. They are taking it in different kinds of social settings, not just clubs. Recently there was a problem with some teenagers turning up off their heads on ketamine at a youth club. Among teenagers and people in their 20s and early 30s, ketamine is being swapped with cocaine or GHB."

The survey found little evidence of the much forecast crystal meth epidemic. Areas reported either no sign at all of the drug or a scattering of isolated cases of use or dealing. But despite the media's fondness for crying wolf over the drug, some respondents felt that if dealers continue to adulterate and downgrade stimulant drugs, a window of opportunity could yet open for crystal meth to gain popularity in the UK.

Several towns and cities said they had seen a reduction in 'street corner' style drug dealing, as more dealing networks move to operating purely by mobile phone appointment and from premises. In central London, dealers have been using 'aggressive' sales tactics such as handing out slips of paper with mobile numbers and conducting business outside addiction clinics. Buying drugs over the internet, whether legal or illegal, was mentioned for the first time in some areas. In London, police said there was evidence that social networking sites had been used for selling illicit drugs.

Virtually every area which responded to questions on the impact of local police enforcement operations said that, however successful they were initially, drug markets returned to normal within a maximum period of one month.

As with past surveys, alcohol – of the strong and cheap variety – continues to loom large in many drug users' lives. The majority of areas reported an increase in alcohol problems among both young and Class A drug users. In Portsmouth and Manchester, services said teenagers regularly went on heavy drinking sessions in parks, drinking cheap vodka and bargain bucket crates of strong lager from supermarkets.

The recession has so far failed to impact on drug services nationwide, although Cardiff witnessed an increase in the number of jobless Eastern European construction workers seeking help for Class A drug problems after being laid off by big firms.

However, police and drug services have been given a glimpse of optimism. In three towns and cities – Middlesbrough, Sheffield and Luton – it was reported that a rising number of young people are turning their back on crack and heroin.