**Britain tops teen drugs league**

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*by Graham Harris, Social Reporter*

Teenagers in Britain are more likely to have taken illegal drugs than youngsters anywhere else in Europe, according to a survey out today.

Nearly 40% of teenagers in the UK said they had tried substances including cannabis and ecstasy, according to the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD). UK teenagers are also top of the league of shame for drinking and are among the worst offenders for smoking, the ESPAD survey says. The survey questioned 15 and 16-year-olds from schools in 30 European countries. In Britain 223 schools participated out of a random sample of 302.

Sociologist Dr Martin Plant, who co-ordinated the British part of the survey from the Alcohol and Health Research Centre in Edinburgh, said the figures raised serious concerns.

He said: "36% of teenagers in the UK have admitted to taking illegal drugs at some stage. But I would like to see a sensible approach to this because it is the legal drugs such as cigarettes and alcohol which lead to the most deaths and illnesses with young people in this country. If the Government wants to crack down on drugs dealers it should be looking at the shop keepers who are selling the drink and cigarettes to the children. Part of the explanation is also that British families are setting a bad example to their children. If they grow up watching their parents drinking and smoking they are likely to copy. Teenage drinking has been going up for some time and even as we see it begin to level out it is still a serious concern."

Although the number of teenagers in Britain who have taken drugs has slightly decreased in the last five years, the UK is still top of the list. Other countries where a high number of teenagers admitted taking drugs were the Republic of Ireland, France and the Czech Republic. Countries with low levels of drug use included Finland, Sweden, Malta and Cyprus.

Teenagers in the UK topped the drinking league along with those from Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland and Ireland. Countries where alcohol consumption was least included Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta and Portugal.

In Britain 20% of teenagers questioned reported daily smoking with girls more likely to light up than boys.

The survey is published the day after a World Health Organisation report said that one in eight deaths of men aged 15-29 in the UK is caused by alcohol abuse. The survey, which was co-ordinated in Sweden, was due to be published today at 10am at the Royal College of Physicians in London.