
Director General for Regulation

Jeremy Fagan
By email

10 November 2015

Dear Jeremy,

Thank you for your email of 18 October where you raised your concerns over a statement attributed to Mike Penning, Minister of State at the Home Office, in the Guardian article 'Steep fall in cannabis offences points to silent relaxation of drugs policy'.

In the statement, Mr Penning quotes statistics related to the proportion of adults aged 16-59 using cannabis in the last year in England and Wales in 2004/5 and 2014/15. We understand that his statement, as quoted in the Guardian article, was:

"This government's drug strategy is working. The proportion of adults aged 16-59 using cannabis in the last year in England and Wales has declined from 9.6% in 2004-05 to 6.7 % [2014-15], with cannabis use among young adults aged 16-24 and young people aged 11-15 following a similar pattern."

We considered this statement from two perspectives:

- Is it an accurate portrayal of the figures in the official statistics?
- Is the interpretation of the statistics justifiable?

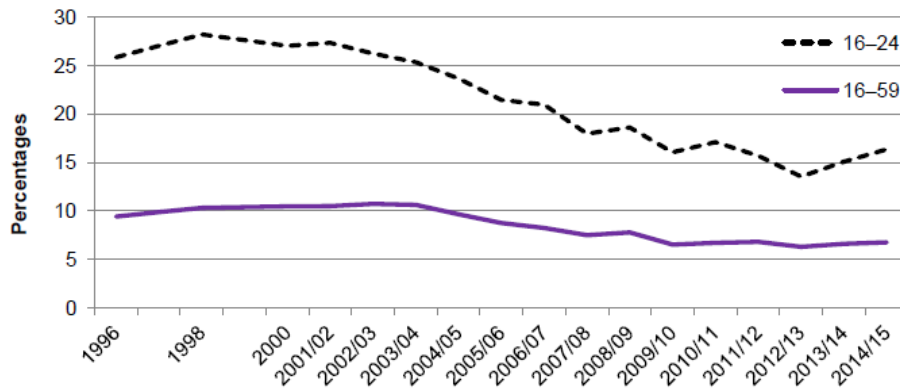
We have cross-referenced these figures with the Home Office's 'Drug misuse: findings from the 2014 to 2015 CSEW second edition' National Statistics publication and can confirm that they are accurate.

However, we note also that the following extract from the Home Office publication provides a clearer presentation of the trends in cannabis use of adults aged 16-59:

"Over the longer-term, between the 1998 and 2003/04 surveys, the last year use of cannabis was stable, at around 10 per cent of adults, before falling to 6.5 per cent in 2009/10. The trend since the 2009/10 survey has been relatively flat, at between six and seven per cent."

This is illustrated by the following graph, taken from the Home Office publication:

Figure 1.2: Proportion of adults using cannabis in the last year, 16 to 59 and 16 to 24 year olds, 1996 to 2014/15, CSEW



Source: Home Office: Tables 1.02 and 1.06.

In only referring to two data points the statement does not describe the *patterns* of cannabis use over that time period, which covers several different Governments. It is also slightly unclear whether the statement is attributing a decline in cannabis use to the current Government, or merely describing changes in cannabis use between two points in time. Given the potential for different interpretations of the statement, we conclude that it could have been made clearer. But this concern is not a significant one, and we do not think the potential lack of clarity is a major shortcoming.

I am copying this letter to David Blunt, the Head of Profession for statistics in the Home Office.

Yours sincerely,

Ed Humpherson