

HOW HAVE TEENS' LIFESTYLES CHANGED?



WHAT WAS THE AIM OF THE STUDY?

Fewer high school students are using substances (tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs) now compared to 20 years ago, and we wanted to understand why. To find out what had changed over time, we compared interviews with teens from 1999–2001, with interviews undertaken for this project in 2022. We looked for changes in how substance use (and non-use) were viewed by teens, and contextual changes that might impact on substance use.

HOW DID WE INTERVIEW TEENS?

Students were interviewed in friendship pairs first, so we could talk about friend groups and lifestyles. Then each student had a follow-up one-to-one interview to talk about values and personal experiences.

Interviews took place at school, started in mid-June and finished in late October 2022.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

We interviewed 64 students from Years 10, 11 and 12.

They included 32 girls, 30 boys and 2 non-binary students. There was diversity in terms of background and ethnicity, e.g. 16 students identified as Māori, 14 as Pasifika, and many reported multiple ethnicities.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

More than half of the students did not vape, drink, or use other substances.

Compared to teens 20 years ago, going to parties was uncommon in 14–17 year olds in 2022.

Today's teens socialised at home more and spent less unsupervised time with friends. Young people are starting to drink and party later in life than the teens interviewed in 1999–2001. Some of the functions that partying and drinking once fulfilled (e.g. expanding one's social circle, meeting romantic partners) are now being fulfilled online.

Many of today's young people are more informed about risks, and are actively avoiding risks to health, personal safety and ambitions. Whereas non-drinking was seen as 'nerdy' in 1999–2001, it is now more socially acceptable to say no. However, a small proportion of teens are heavy substance-users from a young age, often using substance use as a way of coping with past trauma, family difficulties or other stressors.

Today's teens were articulate, thoughtful and non-judgemental about other's motives and actions.

A huge thank you from the research team to the school and students who took part.

