

In 2020, there were 776 deaths related to psychoactive substance abuse in England.

Yet, just 22 prosecutions for psychoactive substance offences actually reached the first hearing, according to exclusive statistics from Freedom of Information requests.

The 2016 Psychoactive Substances Act (PSA) made it an offence to produce or possess any substance for human consumption capable of producing a psychoactive effect. The ban aimed to crack down on the open sale of new drugs in headshops and across social media; something the government claims to have effectively achieved.

But has this ban truly been successful in shaping any drug reform?

\*Sophie, now 19, said she first started buying drugs at 17 to help her cope with mental health issues.

“As I gradually used more, the physical and mental effects became very evident in my health and behaviour at school. I received external support that taught me about these effects but this still didn’t persuade me to alter my usage.

“In all honesty, I did not think of legal punishment even once during my addiction. I thought it was very unlikely I would get caught.”

In 2018, the government published its [own review of](#) the ban's success, indicating that there has been a significant fall in the use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) among users aged 16-24. Their evidence also shows that 332 retailers have been identified as ceasing the sale of psychoactive substances. But a [survey](#) conducted by the Yorkshire Post\* in March 2022 indicates that psychoactive substance use is still extremely prevalent among 16-24-year-olds despite new legislation.

Out of 100 respondents, 82 admitted to purchasing psychoactive drugs themselves. More scarily, 98 respondents know someone who has purchased psychoactive drugs.

When asked where these purchases had been made, 54% said social media, 15% said websites and the rest used other means such as phone numbers.

\*[Ollie](#), one of the survey respondents, said that whilst psychoactive substances have become less accessible in stores, it just drove the sale of psychoactive substances to other areas; whether it be underground markets or via the internet.

This information clearly disputes the government's claim that the availability of psychoactive substances has fallen.

[Paul North](#), director of VolteFace, a drug advocacy organisation, and secretary of the Labour drug reform campaign, has seen similar patterns whilst working in drug reform.

\*Names of individuals used as case studies were changed in order to protect their identities.

\*\*The survey mentioned, was a survey conducted by ourselves, [link here](#).

“When they brought the bill in, the option to easily purchase legal highs at shops stopped. It kind of did what the government wanted it to do. If we are measuring success in terms of what the government deemed as problematic, then surely it was successful.

“However, it just drove most of those illicit markets underground. Then those drugs became more targeted to vulnerable groups such as people in prisons and the homeless. What we find with drug policy is that it's a bit like whack-a-mole.”

The government's main aim of the act was simply to stop the open sale of drugs, and as a result, stop how much the government needs to interfere with drug use; ultimately just benefiting themselves. The act neglects the actual welfare of drug users, with death statistics rising year upon year.

In 2015, one year before the ban was introduced, there were 62 recorded deaths related to psychoactive substance use across Yorkshire and the Humber. The year after the ban, deaths rose to 88, and the last available [data](#) shows that in 2020, the deaths took a staggering jump up to 120.

[ONS data](#) shows that this trend of deaths actually rising after the ban was introduced, is reciprocated across England as well, showing that harmful psychoactive drug use is actually increasing.

Frequent drug user [\\*Katy](#), details how the psychoactive substance ban has had no effect on her experience with drugs.

She said: “I know people who died from overdosing on coke and heroin. Drugs have their own culture and stereotypes which hypes up the highs and deflect the lows. I don't need legislation to tell me a drug is bad when I can see people with addictions and poor health.

“I actually wasn't aware of the psychoactive drug ban, even though I studied law in college and I wasn't even worried about getting caught.”

York Central MP, [Rachel Maskell](#) agrees that drug policy must be changed to actually reduce harm amongst users.

She said: “As with all substance abuse, I believe that serious harm occurs for all who take non-prescribed substances and we understand that the strength and impact of psychoactive substances is creating significant risk.

“However, I believe that until a full public health approach is taken to support people away from taking all drugs, then legal measures will be insufficient in protecting individuals and insufficient in identifying perpetrators of drug crime.”

The government review admits that the PSA has failed to tackle internet NPS activity, with online drug-selling being rife in the UK both before and after the Act. An abundance of websites exist online which appear to openly sell psychoactive substances.

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It took just one search to find a website called cannabispharmuk.com which claims to sell medicinal marijuana to users through payments of cryptocurrency. The Yorkshire Post [contacted](#) the owner of the website but received no reply. There are many easily accessible websites like this that the government has failed to close down. So why aren't they doing more to remove these other methods of drug-selling?

\*Ollie, a 19-year-old student, explained how buying drugs online has turned out to be both easier and safer for him.

He said: "I started purchasing weed when I was about 15 or 16. I got addicted quickly and couldn't go through my day without smoking. At my worst, I was having a blunt as soon as I woke up, before dinner, and to get to sleep. I didn't realise it was an addiction at the time.

I rarely buy weed anymore but when I do I often do it online or on the dark web. It's way cheaper to buy in bulk online and also kind of easier. I don't have to make up any lies to my parents about where I'm going and the packaging is discreet. It's pretty foolproof and I've never worried about being caught the way I do when I'm purchasing it out in the open."

While the government act focused heavily on eradicating 'new legal highs', they have neglected users of pre-existing psychoactive drugs such as MDMA, cocaine and opiates. [Data](#) shows that since 2016, drug-related deaths have been the highest on record for these substances.

Paul North continued: "I don't think they brought the bill in to actually decrease the number of people already taking drugs, I think they did it as they were stressed about the length of time to ban a new drug."

When asked if he believed the ban had been successful, he was conflicted.

He said: "It depends on your parameters for success. If their aim was to reduce open access for young people and eliminate an open drug market then it has been. But did it stop young people from taking drugs? No. Those people who had MCAT and spice are still going to have MDMA and cocaine."

The Yorkshire Post also asked survey participants how successful they thought the Psychoactive Drug Ban 2016 was. 42% said they thought the ban had been very unsuccessful whilst 47% said it was unsuccessful. The remaining amount chose the neutral option with only 5 people saying it had been successful.

A spokesperson for the home [office said](#): "Since the Psychoactive Substances Act has come into force, hundreds of suppliers have been arrested and convicted, retailers have either stopped selling psychoactive substances or closed down and action by the National Crime Agency has resulted in the removal of psychoactive substances being sold by UK-based websites."

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“Our 10-year drugs strategy will drive down drug supply and demand through tougher responses to criminal supply chains. We also know how important local partnerships are to addressing drug use and this is why our strategy is focused on drug treatment and recovery services, with an additional £780 million over three years specifically to rebuild those.

“Additionally, the government is investing £300m dedicated funding to tackle drug supply and country lines over the next three years.”

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