

Young people and drugs

Media reports and official publications have frequently portrayed drug takers as lacking self-esteem, unable to resist peer pressure, seeking oblivion, rejecting traditional norms, anti-social and willing to violate laws. This research by a team at Demos tested these impressions by examining young people's attitudes, through quantitative re-analysis of a survey of 854 young people (respondents - divided into those who had tried and had not tried illicit drugs) and a qualitative study of 110 young people (interviewees - classified as non-users, recreational users and problem users). It found:

f In the quantitative survey, those who had ever tried an illicit drug tended to be similar to those who had not in terms of:

- sociability (those who had tried drugs tended to be slightly more independent, more at ease in complex situations and less introverted)
- levels of trust and respect for their families
- levels of resignation and self-esteem
- holding a 'puritanical' outlook

f In the qualitative study, recreational user interviewees were as likely to disapprove of behaviour they regard as being 'out of control' as were non-users.

f Recreational users were a little more distrusting than non-users of authority figures in general, and had a significantly less positive attitude to the police and law enforcement.

f Attitudes and behaviours that reduced the potential harm of drugs were evident within the youth sub-cultures of interviewees. For example, there was a strong sense of duty to help those in trouble with drugs or those they perceive to be becoming addicted.

f Among interviewees in the relatively deprived area of Wythenshawe, fatalism and family and social breakdown among young people did coincide with drug use. However, the research suggests that these 'stereotypical' characteristics only apply to a minority of young drug users, primarily in deprived areas.

f The researchers conclude that policy responses to drug taking need to be targeted at particular youth cultures. An effective role for the 'drugs czar' may therefore be as a champion of local services and disseminator of good practice.

Introduction

For nearly a decade, Britain's politicians and popular press have been seriously alarmed about young people's use of illicit drugs. The appointment of the new 'drugs czar' and the launch of an inquiry to review drugs law makes it even more important that policy makers and professionals share an informed image of drug takers.

Descriptions of drug takers, such as those in recent Ofsted reports on drug education and in some of the papers commissioned as part of the Home Office Drugs Prevention Initiative, often highlight their poor self-esteem, lack of personal resilience and anti-social values. This research into the attitudes and outlooks of 15- to 24-year-olds who do and do not use drugs found that these images may apply in part to some users, but are not generally representative of young people who have ever tried an illicit drug or who use them 'recreationally' rather than as the central focus of their lives.

The research included a re-analysis of a survey of 854 young people (aged 15 to 24), and qualitative in-depth interviews with 110 young people around the country. In the survey, the attitudes of the 39 per cent who had ever tried an illicit drug were compared to the average for all young people in the sample. The qualitative interviews were undertaken with members of three groups:

- those who took an illicit drug less than twice a year ('non-users')
- those who took drugs fairly frequently but did not use heroin or methadone, and in interviews did not describe themselves as having a problem and did not describe drug use as a dominant element in their lives ('recreational users')
- those who attended a drugs agency and took heroin or methadone daily ('problem users')

The first part of this *Findings* shows that in the quantitative re-analysis, those who have tried drugs have similar outlooks to young people in general - and what small differences there are tend to undermine the popular stereotypes. The second part then looks more closely at drug users using the qualitative research, distinguishing between the non-user, the recreational user and the problem user.

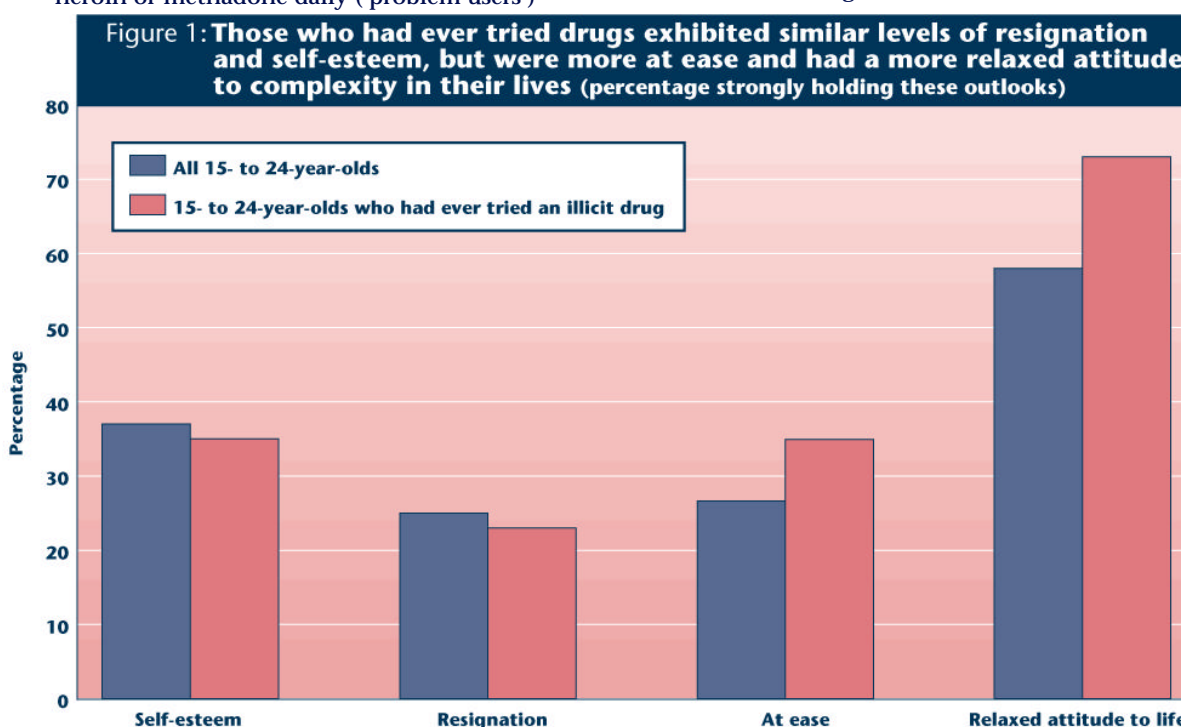
Quantitative analysis of young people who have ever tried drugs

Sociability, individualism, and introversion

Those who take drugs are often portrayed as socially inadequate and strongly influenced by their peers. However, the survey found that young people who have tried drugs indicate levels of sociability similar to young people in general. A little under half of both groups (43 and 45 per cent respectively) have a strongly 'sociable outlook' ('show feelings freely', 'enjoy making new friends' and 'make an effort to go out and see people'). 'Individualistic' characteristics (saying that you 'do not always go along with what other people want' and are 'not concerned about getting approval for your way of life') were, if anything, slightly more common among those who have tried drugs (37 per cent as compared with 30 per cent of all young people). The survey also found that those who had tried drugs were slightly less likely to hold an introverted outlook than young people as a whole (27 and 33 per cent respectively; 'introvert' includes people who say they are 'quiet and reserved', 'hard to get to know', 'tend to talk easily only when they know people', and 'only talk to one person at a time in a group').

Fatalism

The popular image of drug takers as particularly fatalistic and having lower self-esteem was also



Source: Synergy

Note: Because this index is an aggregation of questions, the scores only indicate relative attachment among different groups.

challenged by the survey's findings. Young people who have ever tried drugs tend to view the future in much the same way as young people in general. The same proportions strongly agreed they 'want to feel successful and useful'. Similar numbers also agree with statements such as 'there is no point in trying because it will not make any difference' (part of the 'resignation index' of the survey). Drug users are more likely strongly to welcome change, and slightly more people who have tried drugs have a particularly relaxed attitude to life - 'go with the flow', 'don't feel the need for clear cut rules to live by' and say they 'have few fears' (Figure 1).

Puritanism

Few young people hold a strongly 'puritanical' outlook, for instance believing 'strict discipline is in a child's best interest', 'criminals should be punished with the maximum prison sentences' and 'people who dislike hard work have weak characters'. But those who have ever tried drugs are no less puritanical than young people in general (16 and 17 per cent respectively held puritanical outlooks). Those who have tried drugs were, however, less likely to agree with statements which advocate rigid adherence to rules and deference to traditional authority, such as that 'rules should always be obeyed'.

These findings relate simply to those young people who have ever tried illicit drugs and are thus an average of a large group, many of whom would not have been regular drug users at the time of completing the questionnaire. To provide a more disaggregated view of drug users, qualitative research in Wythenshawe (Manchester), Yorkshire, London and Brighton was undertaken, with 'recreational drug users' defined separately to 'problem users' and compared to those who used drugs very infrequently or not at all ('non-users').

Qualitative analysis of recreational drug users

Authority

Drug takers have often been perceived as rejecting authority. The quantitative survey did suggest that those who have tried drugs are somewhat less likely than young people in general to hold strict rule-obeying outlooks. But the more in-depth qualitative research found that recreational users generally trust and respect their parents and a range of authority figures such as teachers and doctors. For instance, nearly all recreational users reported trusting their family 'a great deal'.

The main difference between non-users and recreational users was recreational users' lower trust and respect for the police. Only 8 out of 34 recreational users trusted the police, compared with 18 out of 30 non-users. Fifteen out of 34 recreational users disrespected the police compared with 5 out of 30 non-users. Respondents explained their distrust in terms of the personal prejudices they perceived in the police force.

This distrust sometimes extended beyond the police. Michelle (age 20), from Wythenshawe, said:

I distrust the law in general really. I don't trust it to put away the ones who really mess up people's egos - ponces and perverts. Judges are just thinking about the cost of damages [to property] not to lives. Sometimes they're arrogant and ignorant and don't look at you as an individual.

Being in control

Many respondents stressed the importance of maintaining self-control while using drugs. Typical comments were:

Losing control is a big problem. Its one of the things which puts me off the whole scene really.

I don't want to use anything which is addictive because if you are addicted you are not in control.

Excitement seeking

When asked whether they were particularly excitement-seeking, some respondents in their late teens and early twenties said they had been during their early teens, but respondents rarely described their current drug use as driven primarily by a wish for excitement. When recreational users did discuss excitement, the role of drugs seemed bound up with social occasions as a whole. John (18), from Wythenshawe, said he takes ecstasy:

because it adds to the music and if you [just] drink you get drowsy.

Motivations for reducing drug use

Most recreational users freely admitted to a concern about the health risks associated with drug use. But changes in their patterns of drug use seemed less to do with health risks than with a broader desire for a shift in lifestyle, often associated with getting a job, revising for exams, having children or generally changing their leisure priorities. For instance Sarah, a 24-year-old from Kingston, said:

I am gradually settling down now - I don't go out as often as I used to. I used to always go to a club on Saturdays. But it wastes a Sunday...I'm beginning to think there's more to life generally...A lot of my school friends got to that point years ago. I've got to start thinking about money, trying to be more sensible.

Qualitative analysis of problem drug users

The research found a distinct difference in outlook between 'problem users' (drug-service clients, predominantly regular users of heroin/methadone) on the one hand, and 'recreational users' and non-drug users on the other.

Problem users are generally more isolated than young recreational and non-drug users. Their comments emphasised a lack of close friends, a

distrust of authority figures and a feeling of stigmatisation. They also appeared to have a less confident and more fatalistic outlook than others. It is difficult, however, to distinguish cause and effect in these areas.

The varying place of drugs in local youth sub-cultures

Drugs form some part of many of the wide range of youth sub-cultures in Britain. But the place of drugs in each varies enormously. In some cases, young people associate their drug use with establishing a degree of autonomy. In others, the same behaviour represents conformity to a sub-cultural norm and is therefore avoided by people seeking autonomy.

The norms surrounding drug use, such as whether it is acceptable for drug taking to reduce one's ability to work, also vary between the sub-cultures in the areas in which the qualitative interviews took place. Peers may try to influence people's behaviour if the accepted norms are broken. For instance, a group of 18-year-olds in Yorkshire were looking for a job for one friend in order to help him reduce his use of speed.

In Brighton and London, drug use tended to be an integrated part of leisure activity. By contrast in Wythenshawe, a large council estate on the outskirts of Manchester, drugs were often used as a substitute more than a supplement for other leisure activities, which were anyway limited.

Key policy implications

No national co-ordination agency can make effective use of its resources unless it works with opportunities and constraints in youth sub-cultures that can only be understood at the local level. This research suggests that some youth sub-cultures already contain established attitude and behavioural norms which reduce drug use and practice that is perceived to be harmful. The goals of harm reduction and safer use, drug education, prevention and diversion may more effectively be achieved by empowering local networks to work with young people in ways that engage with the local youth cultures.

An important role for an effective drugs czar would therefore be as a champion for successful local drugs programmes and a disseminator of best-practice information.

A number of drug prevention programmes, such as the American Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE)

projects, assume that fewer young people would try drugs if they had better skills to resist peer pressure and make independent decisions, and had higher self-esteem and motivation. The quantitative research in this project suggests that most people who try drugs usually possess similar or greater levels of these attributes already and that these programmes are therefore unlikely to reduce initial experimentation with drugs. The qualitative research confirms that recreational users who are using drugs fairly regularly tend also to possess these attributes. It is only 'problem users' who more frequently lack these skills. The research did not establish whether this was a cause or effect of developing 'problem' drug taking. If it is a cause, life-skills programmes might help to prevent problem use. Life-skills training, however, is unlikely to prevent most drug experimentation and, if provided at all, should be targeted at those most likely to develop problem drug use, in so far as these can be identified.

In summary, these research findings suggest that:

- drugs policy should primarily be designed at the local level
- strategies should be designed that draw on the social resources within youth cultures
- national policy makers should be used to disseminate best practice and champion harm reduction

About the study

Primary fieldwork was conducted among 110 young people in Manchester, Yorkshire, London and Brighton. Respondents took part in focus groups and individual interviews of approximately one-and-a-half hours each. The quantitative analysis was based on a survey by Synergy Consulting for their privately commissioned and previously unpublished 1996 *Insight* survey. It consisted of 5,000 people, including 854 aged 15 to 24.

Further information

The full report from this study *The substance of youth: The role of drugs in young people's lives today* by Perri 6, Ben Jupp, Helen Perry and Kristen Lasky of Demos, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, York YO3 7XQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868 (ISBN 1 85935 038 0, price £11.95 plus £1.50 p&p).



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