'It's not normal!'

Tim Newburn and **Michael Shiner** question current thinking about drug use amongst young people.

Earlier this year, Noel Gallagher of Oasis suggested that '[taking] drugs is like getting up and having a cup of tea in the morning'. Although his comments caused some controversy at the time, they reflected a view which has, during the last few years, become increasingly orthodox among academics and policy makers.

Among academics, Howard Parker and his colleagues in the North West of England are the leading proponents of the view that, for young people, drug use has become a 'normalised activity' (Measham *et al*, 1994). In 1995, claiming that 'for many young people taking drugs has become the norm', they predicted that 'over the next few years, and certainly in urban areas, non drug-trying adolescents will be a minority group. In one sense they will be the deviants'.

In this article we question the appropriateness of the notion of 'normalisation' for describing the drug-use of the nation's youth. We argue that it is in fact inaccurate in some important respects. Crucially, it exaggerates the extent of youthful drug-use and simplifies the ways in which drug use is perceived by young people. Consequently, there is a danger that claims made for 'normalisation' will simply serve to reinforce stereotypical images of young people and inappropriate responses to youthful drug-use.

The 'normalisation' thesis

A cursory glance at the survey evidence supports the view that drug-use by young people can no longer accurately be viewed as an unusual or subterranean activity. In a recent national self-report study conducted by the Home Office (Graham and Bowling, 1995) over one third of 14-21 year olds reported ever having used an illicit drug. Figures from the North West of England are even more striking. Parker et al's (1995) study is based on three annual surveys of nearly 800 young people who were first contacted during the penultimate year of their compulsory education, when most were 14 years old. By the time that the majority of these young people were 15, 42 per cent of them reported that they had, at some point in their lives, used at least one illicit drug. This increased to 51 per cent by the time they were 16. Hence the projection that non-users would eventually become 'the deviants'.

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As soon as one begins to scratch the surface, however, the 'normalisation thesis' starts to creak under the strain. The reasons for this are, we suggest, threefold. First, the measures of drug use reported above are very crude. They are based on 'lifetime' or 'ever use'. That is to say, they reflect the proportion of young people who have *ever* used an illicit drug. Consequently, they do not distinguish between one-off users and regular polydrug users, and cannot tell current from ex-users. Secondly, in talking of 'drug-use', they fail to distinguish between different types of drug. Thus, for example, the 16 year old who puffed on a spliff once, when he was 14, and has not touched drugs since is deemed to be the same as his class-mate who is a regular 'clubber' and user of LSD and amphetamine. Finally, in focusing entirely on the frequency of drug use, the proponents of normalisation fail to consider the context within which such use takes place. Before we develop this last point let's return to the data.

Looking at the figures

Using the figures from the North West, if the measure of frequency is restricted to drug-use during the past year, the proportion of users drops to approximately two-fifths. If we focus on the past month, it drops to about one quarter. The proportions diminish further if we shift the focus from the North West which is generally accepted as having high levels of drug use. Thus, the Home Office national self-report study found that slightly less than one third of males aged 14-21 and less than a quarter of females had used drugs during the previous year.

Even these measures create a false picture, however, as they aggregate a whole range of substances. All the surveys show cannabis to be, by some distance, the most frequently used drug by young people. In contrast to the relative popularity of cannabis, however, use of cocaine, for example, was limited to four per cent of the North West sample at age 16, and heroin use to three per cent. While the rise of the 'rave' scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s did see a significant increase in the use of 'dance drugs', this increase tended to be from a low baseline. Hence, despite being the most popular of the 'dance drugs' within the North West, *lifetime use* of LSD was restricted to one quarter of Parker et al's respondents. In the Home Office self-report study, use of each of the 'dance drugs' (amphetamine, LSD and ecstasy) *during the past year* was limited to approximately one in twenty of the sample.

What are we to conclude from these data? First, even though there is clear evidence of increasing levels of drug-use among young people, both the extent and frequency are easily exaggerated through over-reliance on lifetime measures; shorter time-frame measures produce a less startling picture. Second, when distinctions are drawn between a variety of substances, strong evidence for the normalisation thesis becomes much more elusive. There is also a further difficulty for the proponents of 'normalisation'. Convincing support for the claims made by these commentators not only requires that drug-use is extremely widespread, but also that it is perceived to be 'normal'.

The youth perspective

As a result of our qualitative research on young people, some of whom had used drugs, we have argued that the normalisation thesis pays inadequate attention to the normative context of behaviour (Shiner and Newburn, 1996, 1997). In our view, young people tend not to see drug use as an 'unproblematic' activity. The attitudes of those in our study who had used drugs were, in many respects, similar to those expressed by non-users. Drug-use was seen as potentially problematic by both groups in relation to their health, finance and relationships with significant others. The principal difference between users and non-users lay in the generation, by the former, of 'neutralization techniques' which allowed them to engage in drug-use while at the same time ascribing to consensus values.

This is not to suggest that drug use among young people should not be taken seriously. There are some clear signs that drug-use, including problematic use, is on the increase. However, we do not do anybody any favours by implying that all young people are at it all the time, or that the dawn of a drug-using dystopia is just around the corner. Use may have increased, and done so markedly, but it still has some distance to travel before it can be accurately described as a 'normal' youthful pastime. ■

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Race and crime

Colin Webster demystifies the debate around Asian youth.

While some long-stand ing problems remain, in discussion about the association of 'race' or ethnicity with crime, particularly the disproportionate presence of some Afro-Caribbean young people in street crime as perceived by victims and recorded by the police, more recent concerns have tended to focus on an alleged increased involvement of Asian young people in delinquent and criminal activity, and in street disorder.

British law enforcement policy continues to refer to American models of law enforcement in dealing with street crime (Dennis 1996). Yet the effects of these law enforcement policies on black American males have been disastrous because in 1991 33 % of black males aged 20 to 29 in California, 42 % of black males aged 18 to 35 in Washington, and 56% of black males aged 18 to 35 in Baltimore were under justice system control (Tonry 1995: 29-30). These proportions are extraordinary and serve as a warning about what might happen in Britain unless there is reflection on the processes by which minority ethnic youth become criminalised.

Policing strategies

A long and often dishonourable tradition of official and popular discourses about race and crime was recently extended by the contributions of two senior police officers. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner Paul Condon announced Operation 'Eagle Eye' aimed at targeting 'black muggers', in summer 1995, which once again had the effect of evoking the racist paralogic that 'most muggings are committed by blacks, therefore most blacks are muggers'. This despite the care that Condon and other officers have taken in identifying a small hard core of perpetrators, separating 'ethnicity' from the perpetration of crime and outlining structural deprivation experienced by young blacks. In commenting on the disorders in Bradford, West Yorkshire in June 1995, Keith Hellawell, Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police, identified the roots of these disorders in a widening cultural and generation gap within the 'Asian' community.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the police, in their operational decisions, are constructing Asian criminality with the co-operation and collusion of Asian community elders who wish to tighten their rein on what are seen as 'uncontrollable' and 'disruptive' elements among Asian youth. This is designed to elicit support and crime intelligence from the parent culture, and to solve an alleged crime control problem for the police, whilst solving cultural and religious control problems for elders and community leaders, said to have arisen from conflicts within Asian, and particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim communities.

It is unlikely, however, that these control strategies will be successful as Asian young people as a whole come to feel racialised and criminalised by the police. The 'rough' and 'respectable' split only succeeds in 'painting them all with the same brush' which in turn backfires on the police as the parent culture withdraws its support for police actions. These are increasingly perceived as the police 'picking on' their young people. Neither the police or the parent culture are able to address or rationalise to Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin young people in

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particular, their cumulative and persistent 'failure' to take up educational and employment opportunities, against the background of a decline in the demand for unskilled youth labour at the same time as there are demographic pressures on local labour markets, both resulting in Asian youth unemployment rates in the order of 60%.

Media attention

Meanwhile, young Asian males have become a particular focus of media attention which has ranged from a BBC Panorama programme in 1993 which portrayed the Bradford Muslim Community as an 'Underclass in Purdah' rife with drug abuse and crime, to numerous local and national press stories about the alleged development of Asian gangs, a rise in Asian crime and the disintegration of Asian family life. Although there are important senses in which this police and popular discourse reflects what is actually going on within *some* groups of young people, it serves at the same time to amplify and exaggerate popular racism in the wider context of on the one hand, an idealisation of Asian family and communal life, whilst on the other a demonization of Islam, accompanied by stories of Islamic fundamentalist youth groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, of Asian ethnic inter-gang rivalries, vigilante groups, drug crime, 'no-go areas' and the like.

Where this has happened, we can expect to see, eventually, a corresponding increase in police statistics of Asian arrests, delinquency and crime rates. These developments will be compounded by local demographic rises in the proportion of Asians falling into peak offending ages. The pattern that applies to police and popular discourses about young black Londoners begins to repeat itself only this time in relation to an altogether new folk devil - the young Asian criminal, drug pusher or rioter, as police discourse becomes joined to a wider discourse of community leaders and the media.

An important effect of this attention is the repositioning of Asian youth from being seen as primarily victims of crime, especially racial violence, to being perpetrators so that the meaning of the term 'racial attack', comes to stand for incidents mostly involving cases of theft and robbery against white victims by Asian perpetrators.

Research findings

Contrary to popular opinion, recent criminological research has demonstrated through both national and local self-report surveys that Asian young people of all ethnic groups continue to offend at much lower levels than either Afro-Caribbean or white young people who have similar rates of offending. Although Burney's (1990) study of street thefts in Lambeth, did find that the very large majority of street robberies in Lambeth were committed by young black men, this hard core of persistent offenders were only a small proportion of young black men, and although some were occasional offenders, the majority did not offend at all. My study of offending among young Asians arrived at similar conclusions about a core offending group (Webster 1997). Because these offending groups are not representative of the whole group, explanations which rely on notions such as cultural and generational conflict which point to the general characteristics of the ethnic group do not get us very far. However, Burney pointed to two important sources of concern in terms of finding ways of dealing with street crime. First, that young blacks in general felt that they were a target of police attention, and second, that sensationalised reporting and stereotyping in the local press hampered discussion about street crime offenders.

Explanations about crime among 'Asians' rely on ideologies of 'Asianness' that impute binary attributes of *both* discipline and disorder. The likelihood is however, that ethnic and cultural attributes such as 'Muslim', 'Asian' or 'black' are misnomers and predict neither law abiding or criminal behaviour. Instead we should be asking what characteristics, *if any,* distinguish offending from non-offending among Asian young people, and what characteristics, *if any,* distinguish Asian and white offenders, once having taken into account factors other than 'race' or ethnicity. ■

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Young people in prison

Sue McCormick argues for a balanced approach to the needs of children in Prison Service care.

Damaged children or hooligans in need of a sharp lesson? The tension between a welfare and a retributive approach to young offenders has pulled official policy this way and that throughout this century. The last few years have seen politicians reacting to a mounting public impatience with offending by young people, especially younger teenagers and children below school leaving age. Both researchers and the professionals who deal with young offenders and study their backgrounds know that in general the younger the offender the more disastrous his or her childhood experiences have been, with histories of appalling neglect and abuse not at all uncommon. But the climate of opinion has made it almost impossible to draw attention to this, as it is considered to be making excuses for behaviour which should not be tolerated.

Individual stories

The youngest group of inmates in Prison Service Custody, the juveniles, are aged from 15 to 17 and count as "children" for purposes of the Children Act 1989 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both say that in legal decisions about a child, the welfare of the child should be given priority. This principle has not

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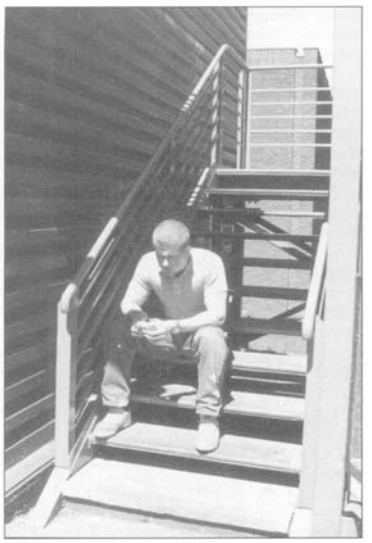

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been built into criminal justice legislation affecting children during the 1990s, although before that the use of institutions for children, and especially institutions in which they are locked up, had been much reduced over a period, as not good for children's welfare unless there was no alternative.

What do we know about juveniles in prison? A good deal of information ought to be available, in the form of pre-sentence reports (PSRS) and police information including previous convictions, as this is provided to the courts for consideration in passing sentence. Copies should be sent on to YOIs after young offenders are sentenced but often they are not, and when YOIs manage to obtain them we do not collate the information and use it to draw general conclusions about our juvenile population. I took the opportunity, while on secondment to NACRO, to interview some juveniles in Feltham YOI after reading their background papers. I could only see 35 boys in the time available, because PSRs and previous convictions were so often not available, although Feltham staff tried to obtain them. Some of the information that emerged was surprising and some was not.

It was not surprising to find that:

- half the 15 and 16 year olds had been in care
- less than half were in touch with their fathers
- more than half said they had played truant from school
- even more had been excluded from school
- all but four said they had used drugs
- less than half had ever had a job.

The care histories reflected extremely disturbed family backgrounds but, contrary to the popular myth, the boys did not use this as an excuse for their criminality. They were nearly all in touch with their mothers, and valued this relationship very highly even when the maternal care they had received was hopelessly inadequate. They blamed themselves for the difficulties their mothers had in looking after them. "It was just me being a little fucker", one said.

Carl was one of two boys whose mothers were alcoholics. She used to get violent when she was drunk, and he was in the habit of going out, to be out of the way. But he got into trouble and was put under a supervision order with a condition that he had to stay in in the evenings. The result was that she beat him so badly over the head with a bottle that the police removed him to a place of safety. Nevertheless he intended to go home to her because, he said, "She's alright when she's not pissed".

When the boys' mistreatment at home did not result in them being taken into care, it often led to misbehaviour at school and exclusion. In either case they, then fell into the company of other disaffected youngsters who were often using drugs and committing offences. But school failure was not an inevitable part of the picture - two out of the 35 had done quite well at school.

Offence seriousness

I wanted to see whether the tough climate and "prison works" rhetoric had led to an increase in the length of sentences passed on these young people. In early 1995 the maximum sentence of detention in a YOI for under-18 year olds, other than for "especially grave" offences covered by section 53 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, was doubled from one to two years. My survey only included boys who had been given ordinary YOI sentences, not under section 53, and the average sentence being served was just over 15 months. I was surprised to discover that all the boys had committed offences serious enough to make them eligible for a section 53 sentence. They had not been locked up for joy-riding or shoplifting, upsetting as those offences are for the victims. Nearly all had committed robbery or burglary, often several times or in conjunction with other offences. It looks as if the courts are not just reacting to the tough climate of opinion.

Robbery was the most frequent offence, and had been committed by many of both the white and black boys, but burglary was predominantly a white offence, only committed by two out of the 16 black boys. Another interesting difference between the white and black boys was that the black boys were much less involved in drug use. (The British Crime Survey, for 1994 found a similar racial difference in drug use).

None of the boys believed their offences were drug-related or that they had drug problems, and they did not think they needed education or counselling about drugs - they thought they had already had this when they were in care or under supervision orders. This may reflect lack of insight, yet two boys admitted to a problem with alcohol. Several boys said they would spend money on drugs when they had it, but the overwhelming reason for committing crimes was to afford the fashionable clothes that they felt they needed.

We all need to understand more about juvenile offenders. Those who think they just need a sharp lesson need to appreciate the seriousness of their mistreatment by the adults who ought to have cared for them, this often amounted to serious crime (GBH and rape), even if it had not been pursued through the courts and reports described it only as "abuse". This has severely damaged their developing personalities. Punishment and threats of punishment alone, without positive help, only add to the confusion and despair the young victim/offenders feel. On the other hand, those who suspect young people are being locked up unnecessarily, and without proper regard for their welfare, need to appreciate the scale and seriousness of their offending. We all need to understand more about the part played by drugs in their lives. Above all, the prison and probation services need to share information and develop a genuine partnership if we are to have any hope, after so much damage has been done, of giving juveniles in custody what they need to develop into responsible adults.

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ChildLine

A report has been published based on calls to ChildLine from *children living away from home.*

The report is sharply critical of the amount of unchecked bullying that goes on in children's homes, which leads some terrified children to run away, and of the upheaval caused in children's lives when social services move children repeatedly from one care placement to another. Out of 840 children who called ChildLine for Children in Care (0800 884444) between October 1992 and November 1996, 14 per cent had had four to ten placements; three per cent more than ten, and seven per cent just said "many".

"Given that these are youngsters who have already experienced family loss and disruption, these are shameful statistics," says the report.

"The impression is of staff at the end of their tether, unable to maintain the emotional distance that allows compassion to remain and be felt, even when carers are beset by rude, rejecting, self-destructive behaviour". The calls that ChildLine receives from children suggest that some are experiencing "a broken burnt-out service, unable to withstand the very challenges which are the staple of child-care practice."

Children Living Away from Home (1997) by Mary Macleod, £4.50 (incl p&p) from: ChildLine, Royal Mail Building, Studd Street, London N1 0QW.