

# Criminal Justice implications of drug use by young people

**Malcolm Ramsay and Arun Sondhi** of the Home Office RSDS Drugs Research Unit summarise research findings linking drug use and offending behaviour in young people.

**T**he popular assertion that drug use has become normalised among young people is questionable. It probably is hard for young people to avoid occasional exposure or offers, but there are still plenty of young people, almost half, who have never succumbed. Of those who have tried drugs, most could not be said to be regular users. Generally, illicit drug use is occasional or exceptional.

Cannabis remains the most widely favoured substance. It is possible to become dependent on it, but this is unusual (less so, in the case of young or not-so-young offenders). Ecstasy may have been one of the ultimate brand names of the 1990s, but there are clear signs that, in the last three or four years in particular, cocaine represents the height of 'cool' where illicit drugs are concerned. The report on the drugs component of the 1998 British Crime Survey pointed to a significant increase in consumption of cocaine. As many as seven per cent of young people aged 16-24 reported its use. Cocaine is not physically addictive, although there are still health concerns. These concerns intensify when a 'cooked' form is used: 'crack' or 'rock'. Crack can be rather more addictive than uncooked cocaine and thus, in all sorts of ways, more costly.

## Problematic users and offenders

Heroin, shunned by all but a few young people in general, has in recent years had a well established following among those regularly caught up in the workings of the criminal justice system. The NEW-ADAM research programme (New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring carried out by the University of Cambridge for the Home Office), involved voluntary interviewing and urine testing of people arrested by the police. Recent findings from this research suggested recent opiate use by participants averaging 29 per cent across four locations (50 per cent in the Liverpool sample).

Research, including NEW-ADAM, shows clearly that regular use of harmful drugs such as heroin and crack is highly predictive of criminal involvement. Furthermore, the greater the extent of poly-drug use (drugs taken in combination with others) the higher the level of illegal income and thus the higher the level of offending. To finance their drug use, offenders are likely to be regularly involved in shoplifting, burglary, drug dealing and fraud. The NEW-ADAM research identified nine per cent of people arrested as both high-rate offenders and heroin or crack users: they were responsible for over a third (34 per cent) of all illegal income and over a half (52 per cent) of all reported offences.

The associations between the use of heroin or crack and offending are complex. There is an on-going academic debate about the chronology of drug use and offending: does involvement in acquisitive crimes predate drug use; or does drug use lead people into crime; or do the two habits develop in tandem? What is clear is that the proceeds from crime allow surplus cash to be spent on drugs, which in turn locks the offender further into acquisitive crime.

## Involvement in treatment

Drug use and offending seem to be closely associated and mutually sustaining. What can be done to break this cycle? The National Treatment Outcome Research Study

(NTORS) and a recent survey of an inner-city drug clinic in London have highlighted improvements in criminal behaviour and drug use resulting from engagement with drug treatment services.

The government's response has been to expand the role of arrest referral schemes across England and Wales. In these schemes, drug-using offenders are put into contact with arrest referral workers within police custody suites. Offenders identified as having a drug problem are referred to a local drugs agency for treatment. Alongside the national implementation of Drug Treatment and Testing Orders (a new form of community-based sanction), this initiative will enhance the role of treatment as a criminal justice intervention for drug-using offenders. The challenge for the criminal justice system is to ensure young people get better access to drug treatment services and that appropriate interventions are available to deal with their drug use and offending habits. Future monitoring and evaluation will help us to shed some light on these complex issues.

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*All opinions are personal and independent of any official view of the Home Office.*

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