

# 'Alternatives' to Drugs and Crime

John Newcombe describes alternatives for people who became involved in drugs and crime early in life.

The links between drug use and crime are blindingly obvious, but difficult to measure statistically. Research amongst Merseyside Drug Council's (MDC) clients shows that the average heroin user spends £238 a week purchasing street drugs. Most problematic users are unemployed and turning to crime is the only way to afford an expensive habit. While drug dealing, prostitution and 'ducking and diving' feature prominently, the main way of raising cash is by fencing items gained through shoplifting and burglary. The ratio of goods to cash is conservatively estimated at four to one. The average user probably needs therefore to steal over £800 worth of goods a week, every week.

A further meaningful statistic shows that the crisis of drugs dependency in Merseyside is very much a crisis of adolescence and young adulthood. Although the average age of the trainees is nearly

29, most began their drugs careers at 16 to 18 using cannabis, ecstasy, LSD and cocaine. The progression to heroin is reached at around 20. Overwhelmingly they are low achievers from economically disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods. Two-thirds of trainees left school without any O-level qualifications and rate their school performances as low or below average. In reaction to this failure most joined 'outcast enclaves' of drug users during adolescence, severely restricting their chances for future employment.

The Merseyside Drugs Council (MDC) operates community drug services throughout the region, providing specialist support to local GPs, the courts and police custody suites. The agency's 'Alternatives to Drugs' project was launched in 1995, initially funded by Safer Merseyside Partnership and European Objective One funds, most recently by a three-

years grant from the National Lottery Charities Board. The initiative is a structured day programme with a pre-vocational focus designed to offer clients the chance to learn and develop skills, to produce good quality marketable goods, and to prepare for employment. Metalwork, IT and furniture marking are presently the most popular workshop facilities used by the 160 trainees per year. Last year the metalwork unit secured a contract to manufacture and install the anti-burglary metal gates and frames central to Merseyside's Safer Terraces 'Alleygaters' Project. The 'set a thief' principle is a source of considerable amusement, and not a little pride, amongst the trainees.

The rehabilitation process is no quick fix. The clients have to show a willingness and determination to control their drug use. The achievement of stability, generally through the prescribed use of Methadone, is a pre-requisite. What for the drug user used to be a full-time occupation, securing the wherewithall for the night's intake, has turned into a daily two-second swallow of linctus. The agency's

workers have a major role in providing the professional counselling and support needed to sustain the client's resolve. Nevertheless the dangers of relapse are obvious, unless some other activity can fill the void. The Alternatives programme was designed with the aim of bringing ex-users to a point where they are mentally, emotionally and socially prepared for mainstream education, training and employment. Much emphasis is placed on group work, and the need for reliability and commitment from each member if the team is to succeed. Contact is maintained with local employers and trainees are coached and supported in their efforts to enter the primary labour market.

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However, many do not progress sufficiently to be work-ready in six months. The effects of rejection at this point can easily lead to a reversion to heavy drug use. Hence a Phase II within the programme has been recently developed which offers trainees who have not yet moved into employment a further 18 months on a more demanding commercially-related course. Punctuality, common work practices and the need to generate revenue from sales all feature during this period, during which the trainees participate in a credit system which provides reimbursement for their productivity. For example, furniture makers can be offered a two-for-one deal whereby for every two items made for sale, a third piece goes to the individual.

There are clear dangers within this expansion move, not least in diminishing the main thrust of the programme which is always focused on the rehabilitation of the client and not on revenue potential. The bottom line is that the Alternatives programme has to retain the goal of social assistance rather than profit motive.

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'Alternatives' programme. John Mills Photography Ltd