



WP5: 2nd COUNTRY REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Interventions to prevent and reduce young people's substance use
and criminal justice involvement trajectories**

UK

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THE EPPIC PROJECT

Young offenders are considered one of the groups most ‘at risk’ of developing drug problems and they are likely to be affected by a multiplicity of health and social inequalities. However, there has been very little attention paid to young people in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) in relation to drugs prevention policy and practice. The EPPIC project focuses on young people aged between 15 and 24 who are/ have been in contact with the CJS in six European countries (UK, Italy, Denmark, Poland, Germany and Austria). The project aims to gather knowledge, exchange best practice and identify transferable innovations and principles of good practice on interventions to prevent illicit drug use, the development of polydrug use and the use of new psychoactive drugs (NPS) among vulnerable young people in touch with the CJS in partner countries.

BACKGROUND

The previous country report described two interventions identified as innovative projects in preventing or reducing substance related harm for young people involved in the criminal justice system. Project A, aimed at 11 to 18 year olds, consisted of a series of videos, activities and discussion questions designed to encourage consideration of risky behaviour and ways of staying safe. Project B trained young people involved in the youth justice system, aged 16 to 21 years old, to become peer navigators with accredited qualifications so that they could act as navigators between various services (e.g. mental health, housing services). This report describes the themes that have emerged from 34 interviews with young people who have experiences with the criminal justice system and substance misuse interventions.

METHODS, SAMPLE AND RECRUITMENT

A number of challenges arose in recruiting young people due to issues such as; a lack of staff time to support access; low engagement of young people in the services and refusal to be interviewed; and safeguarding issues arising within the services.

To overcome these challenges, youth workers in these organisations, who had established good relationships with the young people, conducted 34 interviews with young people accessing the programmes.

All interviews included the completion of a criminal justice and drug using trajectory, were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed thematically.

DRUG CAREERS, ONSET AND USE BEFORE ENTERING CJS

- Many first experiences of substances had occurred prior to age 13, with cannabis and alcohol being most common
- Other substances (cocaine, ecstasy, MDMA etc.) were often taken at parties and the substances available were linked to the particular peer group at that time
- NPS use was low in this group and was usually used just once due to adverse physical and psychological effects experienced
- Intoxication was a factor in many of the charges being served at time of interview but young people rarely made explicit the links between their substance use and offending
- Just two participants stated that they had sold drugs as a means of financing their own substance use

INCREASING AND DECREASING FACTORS

- Factors associated with increasing substance use included; availability of a range of substances to experiment with; life events or mental health difficulties and; easy access to and availability of substances
- Factors associated with decreasing substance use included; negative health impacts of substances; becoming involved in the criminal justice system; identifying future goals incompatible with continued substance use and; psycho-social education interventions.

OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCES RELEVANT TO PREVENTION

- Participants identified critical moments that influenced their offending trajectories such as; involvement of family and the impact of offending on these relationships; having access to services through becoming involved in the criminal justice system; life events such as bereavement and; interactions with professionals who were seen as understanding their circumstances
- Some reported that they had experienced difficulties in accessing support for their substance use outside of the criminal justice system and felt there were not enough services available to them at an early stage
- Positive experiences of services were those that assisted with employment, housing and in some cases interest from the police that helped with family relationship issues

INTERVENTIONS

- Participants identified a need for interventions to address environmental and family contexts that influenced their substance use
- Four key elements of interventions that were identified as helpful or unhelpful by young people were; the quality of relationships with professionals; feeling in control; timeliness of support and; practical support
- Mutually respectful and open relationships with professionals was cited as the most important element in interventions that were found to be helpful to young people. Good relationships were those characterised by a worker who was easy to talk to, was non-judgemental, had lived experience of drug use and/or criminal justice and who treated the young person with respect
- Young people stated that they felt more engaged with services that they thought they had some personal control over, either in terms of the goals they worked towards or in deciding what was discussed within interactions
- The availability of services was discussed as important for effective prevention by young people that referred to having access when they felt ready to accept support, being able to contact workers when needed and being offered support for substance use before entering the criminal justice system
- Help with practical issues including employment and housing were also cited by some participants as being important in helping them to move away from substance use and offending.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Participants were asked what they thought would help them and other young people to either avoid using substances in the first place or to help them reduce/stop use

- Suggestions included better education on the effects of drugs at a younger age than currently offered and the negative consequences of drug use (e.g. homelessness), and information about the financial costs of substance use
- Education through the use of video and those with lived experience were thought to be effective ways to communicate these issues
- Within interventions young people stated it was important to have positive role models, to have support with practical issues (e.g. housing, employment) and to have time to build relationships with workers
- Other factors suggested as ways to support young people and reduce substance harms included; legalising and regulating drugs; better aftercare support; easier access to support services and; having access to anonymous services.

For further information about the project:

The project website:

<https://www.eppic-project.eu>

UK reports can also be found on:

<http://drugandalcoholresearchcentre.org/eppic-portal/reports/>

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