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Young People's Narratives: Drug use and criminal involvement trajectories

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OF 2nd WP5 CROSS NATIONAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the 2nd WP5 Report of the EPPIC project (www.eppic-project.eu) was to analyse the drug use trajectories – and how they intertwine with offending trajectories - of a sample of young people aged 15-25 years who were also in touch with the Criminal Justice System. In addition, the study aimed at investigating young people's perceptions about prevention and treatment experiences.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

The report is based on 6 national reports where, following common guidelines, the project partners analysed interviews conducted in their country with young people under different justice measures (such as detention, home arrest, therapeutic communities, probation...). Altogether 189 young offenders were interviewed between September 2017 and August 2018. Most interviewees (78.9%) were male, divided fairly equally between the two individualized age sub-cohorts (14-18 and 19-25). Most of them had no partners or children and had a low educational level, even considering their young ages. About one third of the interviewees were either immigrants from foreign countries or second-generation immigrants.

DRUG USE TRAJECTORIES AMONG YOUNG OFFENDERS

Substances

The most used substance among the whole sample was cannabis; for many interviewees that became daily significant use for many reasons going beyond the reasons that led to first consumption. Indeed pleasurable reasons for smoking cannabis were often strictly associated with other main underlying “negative” motives, namely perceived stress - which often caused additional problems with sleeping, the boredom of living an unstructured daily life, and the need to cope with violence, loneliness and/or traumas. Besides cannabis, the most quoted substances depended on the country. The second most widespread illegal substance was cocaine, often used in combination with cannabis because of its complementary effects. In Italy, the use of crack and heroin were also widespread among interviewees. On the whole, poly-drug users represented a minority of interviewees in almost all the countries, with the exception of the UK and Poland. Furthermore, in all countries except Poland, only a few interviewees had ever used NPS, while almost all had a negative attitude towards synthetic drugs and considered them very risky. On the contrary, the use of cannabis is largely considered as safe and “normal”, even though some negative consequences were also mentioned (difficulty in concentration and low energy).

Impact of the CJS on young offenders

The impact of the CJS on young offenders' drug use trajectories can result in different patterns according to young peoples' narratives. In the majority of cases, convictions and penalties seem to have a decreasing effect on consumption of illegal drugs, mostly because of reduced availability and the fear of sanctions. In some cases, on the other hand, the stress caused by being in trouble with the justice system may even lead to increased consumption or – as reported in Poland – to switch to less detectable drugs, such as NPS, which may actually increase the risk of adverse unexpected consequences. Lastly, some interviewees – who are a minority – claimed to have quit drug use after entering the CJS. Sometimes this is described as a personal decision, resulting from reflection and maturation. This is reported especially by older detainees after several detention experiences, but also by young interviewees when first getting into trouble with the justice system.

Increasing factors

Factors increasing the drug use of young offenders can be grouped into three main categories, which actually intersect: life context, life events, and factors inherent in substances. Many interviewees reported growing up with different kinds of problems in the family, problems of a more or less serious nature, in some cases including abandonment, violence, abuse and traumas. In any case, most of interviewees described life contexts (school, work...) where drug use is normalised. In such contexts, it is considered very difficult to abstain from using drugs; for this reason after their release there is a high risk of resuming the habit. Also negative life events, such as bereavement, might lead to peaks of consumption. The lack or loss of a job can be another cause of increased consumption, via starting to sell drugs as an alternative opportunity for income. Based on the Italian data, this is a typical trajectory among illegal immigrants. Lastly, drug effects, per se, may forge increasing trajectories. Among these, tolerance is the most quoted, which was also reported about cannabis. Other significant patterns of increased use related to shifting from recreational to pharmaceutical use, starting to use cocaine or crack.

Decreasing factors

A minority of participants explicitly mentioned drug treatment as a decreasing factor in their use of drugs. Instead, the role of family relationships – particularly the parents' or partner's support, and having children – were emphasized by the interviewees. Furthermore, having drug-free friendships was mentioned as a key factor. Being able to engage in meaningful activities such as work and school was also considered important in limiting consumption. Being in contact with the CJS and particularly being detained may also lower the use of drugs, particularly because of reduced availability and fear of sanctions. However, participants stressed the fact that personal will is crucial, both in prison and outside, in order to quit or limit substance use. Awareness about negative consequences of drug use and the subsequent will to limit it can also come from personal negative experiences of unwanted effects (bad trip, hospitalization...) or from loved ones' experiences, such as friends' and parents' death.

Interplay between crime and drug use

To sum up, the relationship between drug use and crime emerged as varied and complex from the interviewees' point of view. The collected data question the traditional view according to which the crimes committed by people who use drugs are a consequence of addiction. Only a few interviewees justified their crimes – mainly dealing – with the need to support their consumption, while many stated that their criminal career began before they started to use drugs. Furthermore, many factors that increase the likelihood of committing crimes are the same ones that can lead to drug use, primarily a social context where this behaviour is somehow normalised and job opportunities are scarce. However, we must not overlook the fact that even young people who do not lack resources can be fascinated by crime and making money easily.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

The main stances of young interviewees with respect to their own prevention experiences in the CJS are summarised as follows.

- **Professionals' attitudes towards young people.** They should approach young people with respect, care and in a non-judgemental manner. They should guarantee strict confidence and leave young people the right of self-determination, that is, setting their own goals.

- **Setting harm reduction goals.** Not being forced to quit drug consumption but only being motivated and helped to control their use was uniformly reported to be highly appreciated by interviewees.
- **Differentiating treatment.** There is no effective recipe for everyone in terms of prevention and treatment.
- **Providing integrated and diversified support.** A recurrent claim among young interviewees is the importance of being able to do meaningful activities while in the CJS, for instance doing physical activity, attending school and being trained for a job.
- **Providing help after release.** The young interviewees, especially detainees, emphasised the crucial need to receive help after release, e.g. in terms of living arrangements, drug treatment, and emotional support. Otherwise there is a high risk of returning to old habits.
- **Timeliness and accessibility.** Several young interviewees (especially in the UK) underlined the necessity of finding support when they needed it, at any time they felt they were in crisis. Others claimed the need of being supported in “navigating the system”, since services are not well enough integrated.
- **Depenalization and legalization.** Many interviewees clearly separate cannabis from other drugs (cocaine and NPS above all) in terms of health and social consequences of use and maintain that cannabis legalization could be an effective prevention tool, both because it would diminish the fascination linked to prohibition and, mostly, because it would prevent young people from ending up in the CJS.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of the drug use trajectories showed the complexity of the problems of young people who use drugs and are in touch with the CJS, and how many factors can influence both the use of substances and criminal behaviour, above all the family, and social and economic resources. Therefore, effective prevention interventions must be broad and intersectoral and should be implemented firstly at policy level. Also, to increase the effectiveness of CJS programs targeting young people who use drugs, the conflict and contradictions between punishment and treatment should be overcome. As drugs are largely also available in the CJS - as the study clearly showed – and since after leaving the CJS young people are going to return to the same contexts and reasons that caused their problems, only real and free individual engagement can hopefully be effective. This means, primarily, to help young offenders to set their own aims, which could mean adopting a harm reduction approach, possibly more realistic and successful than the zero tolerance approach (WHO, 2014).