

Drugs and Diversity: An Overview of implications for policy and practice

Learning from the evidence

Introduction

This Overview briefing provides a summary of the key implications for policy and practice emerging from a programme of work undertaken by the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC) to examine the differing needs and challenges associated with drug use among diverse minority communities within the UK.

The three associated reports, *'The impact of Drugs on Different Minority Groups: A Review of the UK Literature'* and accompanying Policy and Practice Briefings, together with a special report on drug treatment and ethnicity, pull together what is known about the impact of drugs on disabled people, ethnic communities and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups.

By bringing together this variety of evidence in one place we are seeking to encourage a broader view of the evidence and its implications, and to stimulate debate about how to respond to the varying patterns of drug use and harm in different communities.

The government, local partnerships and commissioners along with service providers and interest groups have sought to address the challenges of a range of diverse groups over the years. This review has not sought to evaluate the impact these have made but rather to describe what is known about the current situation, to stimulate much-needed discussion of the issues, highlight gaps and to identify new areas for action.

It was a common finding for all the reviews conducted as part of this project that the evidence was limited and often of poor quality. Therefore the findings, although the best available, need to be interpreted with some caution.

This document has highlighted a few broad areas for action relevant to the new government's focus on the need for cost savings; public service reform, greater community and voluntary sector involvement, emphasis on a 'rehabilitation revolution' to reduce re-offending and increased devolution of responsibility and accountability to local bodies.

This is not an exhaustive list but rather a few suggested actions that may provide valuable opportunities to address some of the hidden needs of minority groups concerning drugs.

The importance of evidence:

A better understanding of drug use within diverse communities may provide warning of 'new' or emergent patterns of drug use and potential risks and harms. Research and development in this area, and the evaluation of interventions aimed at preventing and treating problematic drug use will be important to sustain, given the rapidly changing social and demographic profiles of diverse communities in the UK. The new drug strategy needs to take account of the impact of a wider range of substances, beyond the priority of heroin and crack use, as it appears the impact of other drugs can be significant among some groups.

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This briefing is based on the following reviews:

- *The Impact of Drugs on Different Minority Groups: A Review of the UK Literature*
Part 1: Ethnic Minority Groups
Part 2: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And Transgender Communities
Part 3: Disabled People
- The Impact of Drugs on Different Minority Groups: Ethnicity and Drug Treatment
- Available at: www.ukdpc.org.uk/reports.shtml

Areas for action

Services

The treatment and rehabilitation needs of drug users from diverse groups must be better addressed by public services if they are to achieve recovery from drug problems. Whilst it is not feasible to provide separate services specific to all groups everywhere, mainstream providers will need to be able to have the ability to meet the differing needs of all individuals.

Actions that would facilitate this include:

- Building the capacity and competences of both existing drug services and generic support services through targeted workforce development initiatives to support flexible service responses to address the drug-related needs of different minority groups;
- Ensuring 'payment by results' systems are configured to generate improved outcomes for minority groups;
- Using local partnership and commissioning processes to 'engineer' better collaborative working between mainstream drug service providers and specialist LGBT, ethnic and disability support organizations; mental health and learning disability services and sexual health services;
- Ensure routine impact assessments include outcome data, such as that gathered from the Treatment Outcome Profile system, for different minority groups;
- Introducing a national 'kite-mark' system for services demonstrating good practice in meeting the needs of different groups could help improve people's confidence in services and encourage access.

Communities

The risk factors for drug use, the contexts in which use takes place and the consequential harms vary between and within the diverse groups as do the most appropriate means of communicating information. Current drug information, education and prevention programmes do not adequately meet these differing needs.

Actions that can harness the resources within the communities themselves include:

- Identifying ways of supporting and maintaining cultural resilience against drugs among successive generations in a way that does not stigmatise users and families and hinder help-seeking;
- Fostering supportive peer networks to reinforce positive group identity and cultural norms;
- Developing and evaluating innovative approaches to the use of self-help groups, faith communities and social media networks for delivering new substance use prevention information programmes;
- Developing national and local anti stigma programmes.

Criminal justice system

While some people from minority groups are involved in drug markets and drug use, policing and criminal justice processes may have a disproportionate impact, be a source of tension, and result in greater criminalisation and marginalisation of some groups.

Action to address this could include:

- Taking the opportunity afforded by the introduction of police and crime commissioners to put the use of stop and search tactics in certain areas under scrutiny, in order to judge their efficacy and value;
- Review the extent to which the people with disability, in particular those using cannabis for pain relief and people with learning disability are falling foul of the law due to drug use;
- Develop innovative approaches to get low-level dealers who are not drug users into 'dealer exit programmes'.

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The full version of this briefing, and the accompanying full reports, are available at www.ukdpc.org.uk/reports/shtml