

# **YOUNG PEOPLE, CANNABIS USE AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

**Tim McSweeney, Tiggey May and Ian Hearnden**

**The Institute for Criminal Policy Research  
King's College London**

**September 2007**

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Summary</b>	v
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	1
Background	1
Anti-social behaviour	2
Aims of the research	5
Methods	6
Structure of the report	8
<b>Chapter 2: Young people and cannabis use</b>	9
Cannabis use	9
Acquiring cannabis	11
Social dynamics of cannabis use	11
Defining ASB	11
Engaging in ASB	12
Views of policing and cannabis legislation	14
In summary	17
<b>Chapter 3: The professionals' perspective</b>	19
Cannabis use in Burngreave	19
Cannabis use and ASB	20
The effectiveness of current legislation	22
In summary	27
<b>Chapter 4: The community perspective</b>	29
Attachment to Burngreave	29
ASB and young people's cannabis use	30
Tackling ASB	31
The appropriateness of current legislation	32
In summary	32
<b>Chapter 5: Implications for policy and practice</b>	34
Key findings	34

Policing young people found in possession of cannabis	35
Communicating the facts about cannabis	36
Communicating definitions of ASB	38
Implementing a multi-agency approach	39
Contradicting media portrayals of young people and ASB	40
Regenerating the area	41
In conclusion	42
Summary of recommendations	42
<b>References</b>	<b>44</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

The research on which this report is based was conducted for South Yorkshire Police and the Drug Intervention Programme. We are very grateful for their support throughout the lifetime of this research. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of either funding organisation.

This study was only possible with the dedication and commitment of a considerable number of people who gave up their time, provided us with important insights into their work and helped us in numerous other ways. In particular we would like to thank Chief Superintendent Jon House for his invaluable support and help throughout the lifetime of the project. We are also grateful for the support provided by Courtney Stirling, Aisha Wilson, Zane Abdulla, Johnny Gavigan, Sam Martin, Louise Potter, Carol Fordham and all the staff from Sheffield Youth Offending Service.

We would like to express particular thanks to colleagues at the Institute for Criminal Policy Research; to Stefano Cossalter, Martin Duffy and Liz Rowlands for their invaluable assistance with interviewing; to Siân Turner and Lesley Jenkins for their administrative assistance throughout the project and to Paul Turnbull, our Deputy Director, for his helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

Finally, we would like to extend our special thanks to all the professionals and young people who gave up their time to be interviewed.

**Tim McSweeney**

**Tiggey May**

**Ian Hearnden**

**September 2007**

## SUMMARY

This report by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, King's College London, presents findings of a study on young people, cannabis use and anti-social behaviour. To date few research studies have focused on the question of whether young people's cannabis use has any influence on the incidence or frequency of any anti-social behaviour or criminal activity they may engage in. This research intended to yield a more nuanced understanding of young people's cannabis use and any associations this use may have with anti-social behaviour.

### **The study found that:**

- Most of the sixty-one young people questioned acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, but felt capable of making rational and informed decisions about its use.
- Most young people, and around half of the eighty community respondents, knew that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. Two in three professionals opposed the decision to reclassify.
- Most of the nineteen professionals interviewed felt that young people smoking cannabis in public caused problems for local residents. However, less than half of young people saw this as anti-social, and two-thirds of residents said they were unaffected by this behaviour.
- Almost all young people believed that their age group was routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been.
- Young people believed ASB could be reduced if there were more opportunities and facilities for them. Respondents to the community survey also thought under-investment in local facilities had exacerbated the area's problems.
- Young people wanted a clearer definition of what constituted ASB and better advertising and education about cannabis use. Some professionals supported this, and favoured an integrated approach to tackling deprivation, education, training and employment, and sexual health as well as drugs and ASB.
- Opinion amongst residents was divided on whether there is a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB. Less than half of the professionals thought that cannabis use predisposed young people to anti-social behaviour.
- Many community respondents believed that the burden of tackling young people's cannabis use and ASB should not rest with any single agency. Professionals supported a multi-agency approach to tackling ASB but questioned local agencies' ability to do this.

## **Young people and cannabis use**

Sixty-one young people were interviewed for this study; thirty of whom were under the supervision of the Youth Offending Service (YOS). All the young people interviewed reported that cannabis was the first illicit drug they had used. There was little to suggest that the regular use of cannabis had increased their exposure to, or experimentation with, other substances. Nearly half of the young people interviewed mentioned that they usually smoked cannabis and drank alcohol together. Pocket money and work were the most common sources of funding cannabis use. Only eight young people mentioned committing crime to fund their use, seven of whom were YOS clients.

Most acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, emphasising the risk to physical and psychological health of sustained or prolonged use, and from the enhanced potency of different strains. However, most young people interviewed for this study believed that they were capable of making rational and informed decisions about their use of cannabis

All of the young people interviewed reported having ever engaged in at least one activity or behaviour that might be considered anti-social. Fewer than half stated that they *had* engaged in any activity they would regard as anti-social after smoking cannabis. Very few seemed to suggest that there was any form of direct link between their cannabis consumption and subsequent engagement in ASB, tending instead to emphasise the role played by alcohol.

Almost all believed that young people were routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been, and attributed this labelling to the negative perceptions and stereotypes that the public generally hold towards young people. Around three-fifths were aware that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. More than half claimed that the threat of being stopped and searched by the police *did not* put them off carrying the drug.

## **The professionals' perspective**

We interviewed 19 professionals working in the Burngreave area of Sheffield. Most felt that young people smoking cannabis in public places caused problems for local residents and that this behaviour raised anxiety levels about other attendant problems. The most common activities which were thought to cause problems in the area for residents were riding 'mini-

motos' late at night, smoking cannabis in public and being racially abusive. However, less than one in three said they would describe smoking cannabis in public as anti-social.

Less than half thought that young people who use cannabis were more likely to engage in other forms of ASB. Most were wary or unconvinced about the existence of any links, suggesting that the two behaviours were instead associated through a shared common cause rather than being directly related. However, there were concerns that cannabis use might facilitate links with existing criminal networks for some.

Most of the participating professionals agreed that it was appropriate to treat young people differently to adults when it came to dealing with cannabis possession. These respondents tended to emphasise the need for appropriate education rather than a reliance on punishment and deterrence. Only one in three professionals supported the decision to reclassify cannabis. Most felt that the move had changed young people's view of cannabis and left many confused about current legislation. More than half said they would welcome any attempt to reclassify cannabis back to a Class B drug.

### **The community perspective**

Eighty local Burngreave residents were interviewed for this study, most of whom felt a strong attachment or sense of belonging to the area. Multiculturalism and the diversity of the local population were considered by some to be the most endearing or positive of its features. However, concerns about crime and disorder featured prominently too. Many considered that the area's problems had been exacerbated further by deprivation, poor infrastructure and under-investment in local facilities, a shortage of appropriate and affordable housing, and a perceived lack of strategic leadership from the local authorities. Despite this, just under three-quarters of residents regarded it as a good area in which to live or work.

Respondents to the community survey offered a broad and inclusive definition of ASB. Opinion seemed divided on a number of important issues: the extent to which young people openly smoked cannabis in public; whether or not this behaviour had increased during the last two years; and, whether there was a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB in Burngreave. Two-thirds indicated that they were unaffected by young people smoking cannabis in public and very few avoided local areas because of this.

While highlighting the individual responsibilities of all sections of society, many believed that the burden of tackling these and related issues should not rest with any single agency or

group. Around half the Burngreave residents were aware of the Class C status cannabis had now acquired, and a similar number supported the Government's decision to make this change.

## **In conclusion**

Based on the various samples interviewed for this study, evidence for a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB is slim. For the majority of these respondents, cannabis use by young people does not constitute or cause ASB. Rather, behaviour that is regarded as ASB is engaged in by many young people, a proportion of whom, in turn, smoke cannabis in public places – and drink alcohol. On the whole, respondents' comments suggest that cannabis use does not lead to ASB (or indeed to criminal behaviour), and that police resources would be better focused elsewhere.

This is not to say, however, that ASB, cannabis use in public, and the actions of young people (criminal, anti-social or otherwise) do not present problems in Burngreave. Our research clearly indicates that community members are concerned about a range of activities which they regard as anti-social; that young people freely admit to engaging in these activities without necessarily acknowledging their impact on others; and, that professionals felt that a range of interventions needed to be introduced or improved if young people's cannabis use and ASB are to be addressed more fully.

## **Recommendations for policy and practice**

- Credible campaigns offering education and advice about cannabis need to be introduced. Any such plans would benefit from the involvement and regular input from a range of professionals and perhaps young people themselves.
- Strategies should be developed to reduce the negative perceptions that press stories create in the public's mind about young people. If promoted by local agencies working together, this may have the added benefit of promoting the type of integrated services that some respondents felt was lacking in Burngreave.
- In moving towards a shared and wider understanding of what ASB means, and how it might be minimised, mediation may have a role to play.

- Young people's alcohol use needs further examination. In particular work needs to be undertaken which examines the problems young people experience with their use and any links their alcohol use has to anti-social behaviour and offending.
- Professionals working with young people need to be provided with up-to-date accurate information about the legal status and health effects of cannabis if they are to provide young people with credible information.
- Offering young people information on the medical effects of drug use (as opposed to the criminal consequences that can result from it) has the potential to provide young people with informed choices rather than criminal records.
- There may be scope to convene a Sheffield-wide multi-agency group to co-ordinate the work currently being undertaken by agencies working with young people, young offenders, agencies conducting work on ASB and agencies working with communities.