

Aiming for a work-life balance? Young people, drugs and work

More Choices and More Chances

In 2008 Crew was funded by the City of Edinburgh More Choices – More Chances partnership to investigate the role of drug use in young people's transition from school to college and work and their ability to secure and sustain a positive destination. Crew's experience of working with many young people who use drugs and alcohol, was that many of them regard substance use as recreational and part of a 'normal' young adult lifestyle. Yet we were also aware that some young people's use of substances affected their wellbeing and their motivation or ability to work or learn.

Crew undertook a small study of young people, to explore further how we might make a stronger connection with young people who may be beginning to find that their substance use is affecting their ability to work or study, with a view to supporting efforts in the City of Edinburgh to reduce the numbers of young people who are not in education, training or employment. Crew will now use this information to develop specific information for young people who may be experiencing difficulties in managing their substance use while holding down a job, training or college place.

This report summarises the findings of our study and of Crew's service data to shed light on how young people are experiencing the 'work-life balance' of drug use and work or study, and suggests avenues for further service development.

Acknowledgements

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and the Jack Kane Centre all supported the study by encouraging young people to participate.

Crew's counselors and support service staff provided case study material from their work with young adults using our services.

Crew conducts an annual survey in its shop and outreach services.

In terms of availability and accessibility young people have **more choices** in terms of recreational substance use than ever before – but how do these choices affect their **chances** in the workplace, at college or at school?

Crew meets many young people who do manage a work-life balance of employment, training or learning and recreational substance use. Whether they 'work to play' or simply regard substance use as part of a good time and a rite of passage while they achieve qualifications or start their careers, they feel the need for little support other than accessible, credible information on substances.

But some young people do report having lost work opportunities or taking time off studies as an effect of their substance use. Many of these young people are experiencing a range of negative effects on their wellbeing.

Crew's support has helped those that finally realize they are no longer managing a 'work-life balance' to get 'back on track', but earlier and more targeted intervention may help more young people avoid difficulties that affect

Choice and Control

15% of working young people said they had lost work as a result of using drugs

21% of students said that they had taken time off from their studies as a result of their substance use

23% of working young people reported that they sometimes take drugs at work

42% of students said that they sometimes take drugs at college or school

Crew Outreach Survey 2007

For many years Crew has monitored changing trends in drug use, in which some drugs have become regarded by many young people as 'mainstream'.

Our surveys show that over a quarter of working young people report using alcohol daily (28%) and cannabis daily (26%) while a smaller number report daily cocaine use (5%) and ecstasy (3%). In Crew's experience, daily use of cocaine and ecstasy would be difficult to sustain without some impact on wellbeing and daily lifestyle.

Fewer students report daily use of most drugs, but well over half report using alcohol daily (68%) and just under a third use cannabis daily (31%). As many as 15% of students reported using cocaine daily, a level of use which must impact on finance and wellbeing.

However, weekend bingeing can have as much of an impact on wellbeing and lifestyle as daily use. Crew's services

are increasingly finding that young people mix and match their drugs, using substances with 'downer' effects to counteract the 'wired' sensation after a heavy weekend of stimulant use.

Crew observes a 'perception gap' where young people show obvious signs of the negative effects of drugs for a while, before being ready to acknowledge that their substance use has got beyond their choice and control.

Crew believes that help and support can only be effective when a person chooses for themselves to use it. But during the 'perception gap' there may be more that teachers, lecturers, employers and others can do, to increase the likelihood that a young person will approach services like Crew when they are ready, to prevent losing present and future chances.

The reality of the balancing act

Crew provides therapeutic support to people who decide that their drug use has got beyond their choice and control. These pen pictures show the challenges of a lifestyle of substance misuse and work or college.

Mike had experienced a bereavement he found hard to handle just as he was starting his adult working life. He got heavily into cocaine and used cannabis to calm down. **He realised things were getting difficult and that he was putting himself and others at risk by using the heavy machinery at work while he was still feeling the effects of drugs.** Following a programme of counselling Mike stopped using cocaine and felt a positive impact in getting promoted at work. Now looking forward, Mike fancies starting his own business.

John was on a mechanics course at college. A lot of his mates were unemployed and **he found it easy to get drunk with them, take plenty of 'e's at the weekend and feel so bad by Monday morning he couldn't be bothered with college** – eventually he dropped out. Although John found a job stacking shelves in the supermarket – earning to play hard at the weekends – his drug use meant he was often late and took frequent breaks, sometimes smoking cannabis at work, and finally got sacked. Through counselling with Crew John realised he wanted a good future for himself and cut down his drug use with a view to starting college again.

Darren used Crew's support to cut down and stop his drug use to help him prepare for going to college to study social care. Darren felt his school work and chances of qualifications had suffered, as **he had been using alcohol and cannabis regularly since the age of nine.**

Sean had a promising career in a good job but **he recognised the quality of his work was suffering because of his poly-drug use** (using several different substances). With the help of Crew counsellors he regained control and achieved promotion at work.

Working young people who reported having lost work as a result of their substance use were more likely to experience a range of effects on their wellbeing. The majority experienced between 7 and 9 different negative effects on their wellbeing:

The most common experience was 'feeling down' (60%)

Sleep problems were also common (43%) followed by paranoia (42%) and anxiety (35%).

Over a quarter experienced violence (28%) and weight loss (28%).

Crew Outreach Survey 2007



While enabling young people to regain control over their lives Crew has recognised the potential loss of tremendous talent and potential to our schools, colleges and workplaces.

Kenny tells his own story of how he managed to study to a high academic level in spite of persistent substance use, eventually reaching a barrier he as yet to overcome.

"I completed my A-levels aged 16-18 despite daily drug use and being kicked out of home for (mainly) drug use and continual questioning by teachers over drug use.

I went on to complete a degree aged 18-21. I managed this even with daily multiple drug use and heroin addiction from age 19-20. I was kicked out of university accommodation in my 1st year for drug use.

I spent a period of time immersed in drug culture. I did not get my first job until I was 24 or 25 years old. I had no desire to work. I worked in a fish factory production line for 4-5 weeks. I quit when people started calling me "smack-head" behind my back.

I took a post graduate degree in law, still with a heroin addiction. I received quite a good attitude, especially from my personal tutor. I passed all the coursework.

Three days before my final exams I was remanded in custody even though I had been on bail for over two years. The judge remarked "Mr Smith will have plenty of time to study in jail". I failed my exams two years later after a long break from studying and worsening drug problems.

I went to Holland, and worked for 4-5 weeks washing pots at an Irish pub. I was sacked after kicking off whilst in the middle of a drugs binge. I then worked for 6-7 weeks in a restaurant. I was sacked from there after dipping into the till to fund my drug use. I then worked for 2-3 months selling weed [cannabis] in a coffee shop. I had to hide my opiate drug use, as it was understood by everyone that this would lead to instant dismissal – "no junkies allowed". However all other drug use was tolerated. I lost that job due to a problem I had related to a drug meant to treat alcoholism and addiction.

Since I was about 27/28 years old I have often tried to get work that is more than menial, but have never been successful. This is partly due to having no experience (I have worked a total of no more than 4-5 months in my life – paid work) which is mostly due to drug abuse and partly due to a lengthy criminal record which is almost exclusively drug related.

In the last 5-6 months I have been doing some volunteering work as a welfare rights advisor. I was unable to get a good reference from this due to drug induced behaviour. I would certainly have been sacked if it was a paid position and the boss was not a friend of a friend of my mother".

What about the 'perception gap'?

"if I'm stoned the night before school, it's harder to get up and I'm tired"

"if I go out and get a bit wrecked I often hurt myself and then I can't work"

"when I'm mentally unhappy I indulge more"

"in control if they can hold down a job"

"working five days a week means you are entitled to party at the weekend"

Our 2007-08 action research identified the need to make more effort to enable young people to identify potential links between substance use and difficulties at work or at college/school, and for them to get appropriate help when they do recognise they need this:

- Young people are more likely to mention money and relationships as the areas most affected by their drug use. Yet both are also inextricably linked to work and learning.
- Young people identified that 'not being able to stop' was a key factor which turned recreational drug use into problematic use. Yet our annual surveys show that young people often continue to use drugs despite significant negative effects on wellbeing, including losing work and taking time off studies
- Young people felt signs of problematic drug use would include changes in physical appearance and presentation, in behaviour and in relationships with

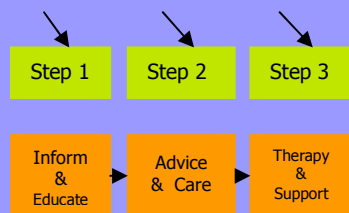
other people. Loss of work or lost study time did not feature as a concern.

- Although young people were clear that a young person has to want to help themselves before they can be supported to move forward, they were less clear about what kind of 'trigger' a young person might experience to push them into seeking help. It seems from Crew's annual surveys that loss of work or loss of study time is not necessarily a trigger in itself.
- Young people felt that a range of factors in young people's lives might be involved in their drug use becoming problematic. We can assume, then, that sometimes unhappiness or problems at work, college or school may be a factor, and also that young people's motivation to resolve problem drug use may not always focus on work or studies.



Crew provides services to young people to promote their health and wellbeing and enable them to make informed choices about substances.

Our support is offered in a stepped care approach.



People can access any step of our service when they need to. They may use one or more steps. Choice and flexibility are essential.

In **step 1** Crew aims to provide credible information through our shop to young people using, or thinking about drugs. We do not judge young people's choices, our focus is on enabling them to be safe and healthy, whatever their choice.

In **step 2**, we reach out to young people at times and locations where drug use is likely (festivals, clubs etc) and provide advice and care when young people's experiences are negative or when they need further advice. In our shop, we also provide time and space to listen and some alternative therapies to promote health and wellbeing.

In **step 3**, we engage with young people who ask for support or counselling to help them regain control over their drug use. We take a holistic approach and work in partnership with other agencies to ensure young people regain a sense of health and wellbeing, and access any further services they may need.

Crew: the lowest threshold to information, help and support

Crew aims to provide 'low threshold' access to information, help and support. This means that the majority of our service users decide for themselves to access our services, knowing them to be user-friendly, non judgemental and expert in our knowledge of drugs and their effects. However, many professionals also refer young people to us, respecting our specialist experience in psychostimulants and poly-drug use.

Our city centre shop premises ensures we have a strong profile with many young people, and our outreach work brings us into contact with a wider range of young people actively involved in drug use.

Nevertheless, the work sponsored by the More Choices More Chances partnership has raised the following questions for Crew:

- How can we raise awareness amongst young people that among the negative effects of drug use, loss of work or study opportunities can affect their future chances?
- How can we better promote positive health and wellbeing amongst young people whose drug use is becoming a barrier to progress at work, college or school?
- How might we help employers, trainers, teachers or lecturers to encourage young people to seek help, if they see signs that a young person is experiencing negative effects of drug use?

Our recommendations to the More Choices More Chances Partnership, in light of these questions are:

- To consider a further partnership with Crew to target information and education work in step 1 to young people at work and on training schemes, in colleges and schools, promoting health and wellbeing in the context of 'Health at Work' and 'Health Promoting Schools and Colleges', and raising awareness of drugs and their potential effects on work and study
- To strengthen our therapeutic and counselling services in step 3, for those young people who have recognised their substance is out of control, by enabling extended programmes of counselling (over the average 20 weeks) for young people that need this; and enabling us to spend more time supporting young people who have regained control onto pathways towards social networks, work and learning opportunities that can help them sustain their control, health and wellbeing.
- To consider ways of enhancing Crew's support to other partners working with young people not in education, employment and training, to develop their skills in informing, education and supporting young people with problematic drug use.

These developments are well within our experience but beyond our current capacity.