

New research on impact of young people's cannabis use

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is today publishing the results of a research study entitled *The impact of heavy cannabis use on young people's lives: Vulnerability and youth transitions*.

Researchers at the University of Bedfordshire carried out 100 interviews with 16–25 year olds who were selected because they had been using cannabis on a daily basis for the past six months. Most young people questioned had been using skunk.

Key findings from the report include:

- the negative effects of cannabis use described by some young people included impacts on physical and mental health, academic attainment and personal relationships and the possibility of getting a criminal record;
- heavy cannabis use among vulnerable young people can exacerbate existing social problems such as low educational attainment, homelessness and unemployment;
- those young people who experienced the greatest number of social problems (including homelessness, family problems and unemployment) tended to smoke higher quantities of cannabis than those in more socially secure situations;
- heavy cannabis use seemed to worsen the social situation of the young people experiencing the greatest number of social problems still further;
- however, young people who were engaged in further or higher education and who were leading relatively stable lives seemed able to manage their cannabis use with fewer negative effects. Their cannabis use did not seem to interfere greatly with their studies or with personal relationships.

The report's author, Dr Margaret Melrose, said:

Young people may not be aware of the extent to which cannabis use might exacerbate their existing social problems, and professionals who have had experience of cannabis users in the past may assume the effects are relatively harmless if they take young people's assessment of the impact of cannabis use in their lives at face value. More probing may be required in order to explore the level and nature of cannabis use and how this may be adding to a young person's problems.

Martin Barnes, chief executive of DrugScope, welcomed the report:

The findings help us understand the reasons behind the heavy cannabis use of some young people. The negative effects of cannabis use – not just on mental and physical health but also academic achievement and personal relationships – seem to relate closely to pre-existing personal and social problems. Heavy cannabis use can exacerbate these difficulties still further.

Tackling cannabis use, particularly heavy use, among young people is a priority but we need to do so effectively. This research suggests that responses to cannabis use should focus on the young person, not just on the drug. Interventions should enable young people to explore why they are using cannabis and how it is affecting their ability to achieve their goals, as well as offering help and support to manage their problems.

For more information please contact Ruth Goldsmith in the DrugScope Press Office on 020 7940 7517 (07736 895563 out of hours) or at press@drugscope.org.uk

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