

How effective are media campaigns?

Trying to determine the impact of media campaigns on attitudes to particular issues is not easy.

Trying to determine whether people have changed their drug taking because they saw a campaign is near impossible to measure. Many surveys about drugs show that most people's main source of information about drugs is the popular media. Most media output is intended to be informative or entertaining. The general public is unusually dependent on the media for information about any new phenomenon. An example of this, the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s, led to all sorts of negative images and press sensationalism providing false messages and information that proved difficult to dislodge.

The media often exaggerates or misrepresents reports of drug use and users. For example, in portraying heroin use, they often use stereotypical images, such as spotty, skinny, ill and deceitful user, living a life of crime and poverty. No more is this evident than in a recent campaign in January 2000 by Barnardos, who used heroin use as means for shocking people. In asking why a young man injects heroin due to a lack of care early on in his life, the poster shows a baby injecting himself with heroin while sitting in his own faeces in a dirty back street. The combination of a young vulnerable baby and drug use is a common tool for eliciting horror, sympathy and abhorrence.

These campaigns are deliberate attempts to use the media as a tool for preventing drug use, by communicating the potential horrors of heroin addiction. While not being wrong (in the sense that the images can and do represent the consequences of heroin use in many instances), they are unhelpful as a way of understanding much about drug use and addiction.

One obvious consequence of these media campaigns is that media reporting of drugs in the more sensationalist forms is given added credibility. Research that estimates the impact of such campaigns indicates that those who are anti-drugs in the first place have their feelings confirmed, but there is little to indicate that any sort of scare campaign actually stops somebody experimenting with drugs.

One unintended effect of scare campaigns, which give such massive prominence and visibility to drugs such as heroin, is that they may actually increase experimentation. In its 1984 report *Prevention*, the government's own advisory body, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs warned, 'Whilst we accept the need, in appropriate circumstances, for education to include factual information about drugs and their effects, we are concerned about measures which deliberately present information in a way which is intended to shock or scare. We believe that educational programmes based on such measures on their own are likely to be ineffective or, at the very worst, positively harmful'. Thus, for some young people, branding the use of mysterious and dangerous substances as antisocial and deviant may (especially if they have seen peers using these drugs with few of the effects sensationalised by the media) provide a focus and new outlet through which their frustrations may be vented and their resistance demonstrated, while for others it may merely spark their curiosity.

Campaigns are, however, useful if targeted properly. For instance campaigns that draw attention to dangerous injecting techniques or that draw attention to booklets or services that can give useful information or help, can help change people's drug using behaviour. A campaign by Study Safely campaign in London, issued booklets and posters on drugs and ways to avoid danger or getting into trouble at college. Students found the booklet informative and proved information that proved useful in avoiding harm or unwanted experiences.

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