



National Committee for Addiction Treatment

FACT SHEET

JULY 2010

Does criminalising young people's drug use help or hinder?

"We think that there needs to be a much greater emphasis on drug treatment."
The Law Commission

NCAT'S POSITION ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND TREATMENT

- Many young New Zealanders use alcohol and other drugs at problematic levels.
- This comes at a high cost to young individuals and to society.
- Making young substance users criminals fails to address the underlying problem.
- Without intervention young people with alcohol or drug problems will get worse, not better.
- We need a more balanced approach that focuses on reducing demand which in turn reduces supply.
- Treatment options must be widespread, flexible, diverse and firmly evidence-based.



YOUNG PEOPLE AND DRUG USE

Recent studies have found:

- Nearly 10 percent of 16-24 year olds suffer from an alcohol or drug use disorder.
- The highest rates of substance use disorder occur among 18-25 year olds.
- Young people experience higher rates of harm from alcohol and drug use than adults.
- Alcohol related harms impact disproportionately on Māori and Pacific young people.

Judge John Walker estimates alcohol or drug issues are connected to 80 percent of young people's offending.

COSTS TO INDIVIDUALS

Problematic substance use can have devastating effects upon young individuals and their families including:

- mental, physical and sexual health issues
- relationship breakdowns
- violence and crime
- interrupted education or employment
- increased suicide risk.

COSTS TO SOCIETY

"Abuse of drugs and alcohol is a major issue for the overwhelming majority of young people appearing in the Youth Court."

Principal Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft

Costs to society include healthcare and treatment, policing, road accidents, injury and lost productivity. Costs will only increase if these young people are not helped to get better.

A SOCIAL NOT A CRIMINAL ISSUE

"We end up putting people in prison for relatively short periods. They often end up getting access to drugs in prison. There is nothing we do to deal with their dependency, they come out and the cycle starts all over again."

Law Commissioner Warren Young

Treating substance misuse solely as a criminal matter is not effective because it:

- fails to deter drug use
- fails to address the underlying factors of drug use
- further alienates young people from society
- increases barriers to treatment and rehabilitation.

NCAT views problematic substance use as primarily a health and social issue. Young drug users need to be diverted out of the criminal justice system and into effective treatment.

NCAT supports the Law Commission's recommendation that treatment options be greatly increased to help reduce alcohol and other drugs demand and to limit their costs and harms.

TREATMENT WORKS

"There is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of drug treatment."

The Law Commission

Studies have found that treatment for young people:

- increases self-esteem and involvement in positive activities
- improves academic performance
- reduces problem behaviour and crime
- improves mental health
- improves family relationships.

Interventions are cost-effective. Each \$1 spent on treatment returns \$4-7 in economic benefits to society.

Youth treatment requires a youth specific approach:

- Treatment interventions work best when they motivate young people and underscore their value.
- Initiatives that involve family and peers work best because they help young people reintegrate into society.
- Residential facilities must be available for those without supportive family.
- Programmes must be ethnoculturally responsive.
- That young people are involved in the development and delivery of youth specific service.



TREATMENT OPTIONS WORRYINGLY INSUFFICIENT

"The number of treatment services does not appear to be sufficient to meet demand. ...Treatment services available to the court system are also insufficient."

The Law Commission

The Law Commission recently reviewed three key pieces of alcohol and other drug legislation: the Sale of Liquor Act, the Misuse of Drugs Act and the Alcoholism and Drug Addiction Act. Each review highlighted a worrying shortage of treatment services.

They noted judges were concerned at the lack of treatment services to which they could refer offender and that lack of treatment sector capacity often delayed interventions. These are missed opportunities for young offenders to get help.

They found capacity problems were worse in some regions and for some types of services than others and that youth are particularly affected by gaps in availability.

WHAT'S NEEDED

"Treatment has really been the poor cousin of supply control and we need to do something to get a better balance between the various limbs of drug policy."

Law Commissioner Val Sim

To successfully divert people away from the justice system we must have an extensive range of interventions and treatment options available everywhere.

Our justice, social and treatment sectors must be aligned so that whenever a young person comes before the courts or in contact with a social service, they can be promptly referred to nearby treatment.

In particular we need to invest in:

- **Residential treatment options.**
These are essential for young people with severe problems. The Law Commission says residential treatment is particularly lacking for young people.
- **Community based treatment interventions.**
These provide assessment and ongoing treatment in the majority of cases and must be diverse enough to meet specific needs – e.g. those of youth, Māori or Pacific people. Currently there are insufficient services available, and none at all in many regions.
- **Prevention.**
To support prevention strategies there must be an effective regulation framework that reduces the availability of alcohol in the community.

For an annotated version of this position statement see www.ncat.org.nz/statement.html



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