

# The impact of heavy cannabis use on young people's lives

Findings  
Informing change

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This research explored the impact of heavy cannabis use on the lives of young people.

## Key points

- There was no consensus among the young people interviewed about what constituted 'heavy' use, and wide variation in the amounts that heavy users consumed.
- Most young people smoked 'skunk' through choice and preference. Skunk was widely and easily available in both research sites.
- Most young people attributed a range of positive effects to their cannabis use, but some thought it had impaired their school performance and/or led to difficulties in relationships with parents.
- How young people thought about heavy use and its impacts depended on their situation and comparisons they made with other users.
- Lack of opportunity to make the transition to higher-status roles appeared to lead to high levels of cannabis consumption, which in turn impeded the ability to make these transitions.
- Some young people were ambivalent about using cannabis, but continued to do so.
- Many considered the legal status of cannabis to be an irrelevance, and would continue to smoke regardless of its classification.
- Young people could modify, reduce and/or stop their cannabis use without too much difficulty when their circumstances improved and/or their priorities changed.
- Professionals across a range of services may be underestimating the potentially negative impacts of cannabis use. Police responses also varied across the two geographical areas studied, which was confusing for both young people and professionals.
- The research findings suggest a need for opportunity and problem-oriented interventions to tackle young people's cannabis use. Professionals may also need to improve their understanding of the difficulties created by cannabis use, such as impairment of school performance.

## The research

By a team led by Dr Margaret Melrose at the University of Bedfordshire, and based on interviews with 100 heavy cannabis users aged 16-25.

## Background

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit substance among young people, and prevalence rates in the UK are among the highest in Europe. Relatively little is known, however, about why young people use cannabis, what they might consider 'heavy' use, what benefits they might attribute to using cannabis, or what they consider the personal and social costs of regular cannabis use to be.

This research explored the impact of heavy cannabis use on young people's lives, through interviews and questionnaires with 100 young people and data from practitioners.

### Varieties of heavy use

A majority of the young people smoked 'skunk' rather than other types of cannabis because they preferred the buzz. Most tended to smoke 'joints' – i.e. cannabis mixed with tobacco. They quite often chipped in with friends to buy cannabis and then smoked it between them. Across the study participants, the average age of beginning to use cannabis was 13.7.

While all participants were regular users (more or less on a daily basis), some appeared to be more controlled in their use. A minority were less controlled and their use sometimes appeared to be compulsive.

"It's a habit, that even if I don't feel like smoking it, I have to have it. When it comes to the night I just feel like having a joint, you know, always the feeling that I don't want one but just 'go on', just got to have one."

Tyrone (18, basic training scheme)

On the whole, those who were living in hostels, experiencing problems in relationships with parents, unemployed or engaged in basic training schemes and with few if any educational qualifications were more compulsive in their use. Those who were in further education or higher education were generally more controlled.

There were wide variations in the amounts consumed or spent on cannabis per week. This led the research team to classify heavy users into three groups: light-heavy users, spending up to £40 per week; medium-heavy users, spending £41-£100 per week; and high-heavy users, spending £101 and above. Participants consistently cited a price of £20 for 3.5 grams of skunk.

The high-heavy group experienced the greatest number of social problems. They were characterised by low educational achievement, family problems, hostel dwelling and unemployment. The low-heavy group contained a preponderance of students in further and higher education, whose social circumstances were more secure.

Not all participants the research team classified as high-heavy users considered themselves to be heavy users. On the other hand, some of those classified by the researchers as light-heavy users considered themselves to be heavy users.

Oscar: I'd probably buy about an eighth a week, but I'm not sure how much of that I would use to myself, probably about half of, probably about 20 per cent I smoke to myself.

Interviewer: Would you consider yourself to be a heavy user?

Oscar: Yeah, at the moment I am.

Oscar (21, HE student) spending £20 per week

Many young people compared their cannabis use with Class A drug use, which enabled them to represent their cannabis use as relatively unproblematic.

"I don't see smoking weed as bad though as like taking crack or anything. Like because my dad he used to take crack and all that. I wouldn't starve myself or my son to buy a draw. Not like crackheads."

Tasha (18 years, training scheme)

Some found it difficult to quantify how much cannabis would constitute heavy use (in terms of either money spent or amounts consumed in a week). They tended instead to define it qualitatively, in terms of personal and social impacts. Young people spoke, for example, of heavy users as "someone who depends on it and smokes it everyday and can't go a day without getting moody," or someone who "spends their last bit of money on it". When young people did offer quantitative measures, these varied a great deal. One would regard spending £40 a week on cannabis as heavy use, while another would regard £200 a week as heavy.

## Heavy cannabis use and youth transitions

Most of the young people attributed a range of positive effects to their cannabis use, but had greater difficulty in identifying negative impacts.

In terms of its benefits, young people said that cannabis enabled them to relax, relieved their stress and/or allowed them to forget their worries. They found cannabis to be good for socialising and having a laugh with friends. Some said that smoking cannabis enabled them to manage their anger, and because they were calm or 'chilled out' they avoided getting into other sorts of trouble. Young people also said that smoking cannabis relieved boredom and enhanced otherwise mundane, everyday activities.

Despite these benefits, for some young people there were negative personal and social impacts. These were described in terms of the potentially deleterious effects on their mental and physical health, academic attainment, relationship with their parents – including leaving or being 'thrown out' of their home – and the possibility of getting a criminal record.

These negative effects appeared to be closely associated with pre-existing personal and social problems and the current social circumstances of the young people. However, many of the participants were living in hostels, had few educational qualifications, were unemployed and were experiencing family problems. When young people were experiencing these difficulties, the amount of cannabis they used tended to increase.

**“Once I get a job I’m not going to smoke this much. ... I don’t have to have a joint every day if I’m working. It’s just the fact that there’s no job at the minute, and that’s it really I suppose.”**  
Kenny (18 years, unemployed, hostel dweller, ex-crack user, has been to prison)

But this also worked the other way round, in that heavy cannabis use tended to worsen their social situation, family relationships, academic attainment or ability to get and keep a job. The study thus identified a reciprocal or circular relationship between heavy cannabis use and youth transitions, particularly in relation to young people in difficult social circumstances.

**“Yeah, (smoking cannabis) does stop me like getting motivated. ... I’m not stupid or nothing, I know what to do, it’s just sometimes I can’t be bothered (laughs) to be truthful with you. Like when you go and get a job and you hand in your CV you get a letter back saying ‘Sorry, no, sorry, blah, blah’ and that disheartens you ... Once you**

**get so many ‘no’s’ it’s like, ‘fuck you, I can’t be bothered to get a job’ and just get stoned.”**  
Kenny (18 years, unemployed, hostel dweller, ex-crack user, has been to prison)

For young people in more socially secure situations, their cannabis use did not seem to interfere with their studies or relationships with their parents, not least because in some instances parents were not aware that their child was using cannabis. These young people therefore appeared to be on track to make successful transitions, particularly from education to the labour market.

## Young people’s attitudes towards cannabis

The young people’s attitudes towards cannabis were complex and sometimes contradictory. They were reluctant to seek help in relation to cannabis use, although some expressed a desire to stop. Most thought they would be able to stop using cannabis when and if they chose to.

A majority thought that cannabis should be legalised, but others thought it should only be legally available to people over a certain age (often older than the age at which they had started using it themselves). For the majority, the legal status of cannabis was an irrelevance and had no bearing on their decision to use it or not.

**“I don’t give a stuff about the law. If I wanna smoke it, I wanna smoke it, legal or not.”**  
Billy (23, unemployed)

Most had begun using cannabis because they were curious about the effects and because “everyone else was doing it”. Many had therefore actively sought out the experience and drug-using peer networks.

## Changes in young people’s cannabis use over time

Repeat interviews with young people revealed that positive changes in their social circumstances sometimes presaged a reduction or cessation of use. At the time of the second interview, eight out of 52 young people had stopped using, and 13 had reduced their use in the intervening period. This was usually without external intervention, and was true of young people in the least socially secure situations as well as those in the most secure circumstances.

**“I don’t actually really (smoke cannabis) anymore ... I just thought of different things and ways I could**

still get a buzz but not doing that. So like football, I really like playing football and scoring goals and things like that. Kept my mind off the whole smoking and doing me good at the same time.”  
Craig (16 years, employed and with different friends by second interview)

While young people’s cannabis use remained the same for the majority, one or two had increased their use and two had started using Class A drugs. Some young people thought they would stop using cannabis in the future when they had settled down, but some had no intention of stopping.

## Responses by professionals and the police

The study found that many professionals working directly with young people tended to regard cannabis as less harmful than the young people did. This suggests that they may not be taking young people’s cannabis use as seriously as, for example, Class A drugs. They may therefore be underestimating the potentially negative impacts of excessive use. The study also found variations in police responses to young people’s cannabis use in the two areas in which the study was conducted.

## Policy and practice implications

The research findings strongly suggest that to tackle young people’s cannabis use, interventions that are both opportunity and problem-oriented need to be developed. Vulnerable young people need to be supported in making transitions by providing them with opportunities to move to higher-status roles, as well as focusing on how their cannabis use might be preventing them from doing so. A holistic approach is needed, locating the young person’s cannabis use in its educational, family and social context, with a service response calibrated to the level of cannabis use.

Children’s Trusts may offer the ideal vehicle for such a response.

Responses that further marginalise already vulnerable young people by, for example, excluding them from school or evicting them from hostels need to be avoided. In light of the reclassification of cannabis, there may be a need to revisit the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 so that hostels, in particular, are able to offer responses and impose sanctions that stop short of eviction.

Professionals may need to probe young people’s cannabis use in more depth to understand what may or may not be damaging about it. They also need to listen carefully to the difficulties that young people say their cannabis use creates for them.

There may be a need to develop services to plug the gap that practitioners identified in service provision for those over 18 who may be experiencing problems with cannabis. In addition, the police may need to develop a more homogeneous response, so that young people are not receiving inconsistent messages.

## About the project

The study was carried out by a team from the University of Bedfordshire, and was conducted between 2005 and 2007 in two shire counties. It involved semi-structured interviews with 100 young people aged between 16 and 25. Young people also completed questionnaires. Almost three-quarters of the participants were young men and almost three-quarters were white. Approximately two-thirds were in the 16-18 age group. Almost half of those who took part had also tried or used a range of other drugs. Fifty-two young people took part in follow-up interviews conducted between four and six months after the initial interview. The study also collected data from 30 practitioners working in a variety of social welfare agencies, schools and colleges.

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## For further information

The full report, **The impact of heavy cannabis use on young people: Vulnerability and youth transitions** by Margaret Melrose with Penny Turner, John Pitts and David Barrett, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

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