



# Clearing the fog on cannabis crime

As Prime Minister Gordon Brown considers returning cannabis back to Class B, claims about its links to criminal behaviour in young people have come thick and fast. But, as **Tiggey May** reports, new research reveals a different story.

Over the last 40 years the public's attitude towards cannabis has become far more relaxed, and use of the drug far more widespread. But in light of the intense media and political attention that cannabis use attracts, the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR), King's College London, was commissioned to undertake a study on young people, cannabis use and anti-social behaviour.

To date few research studies have focused on the question of whether young people's cannabis use has any influence on the incidence or frequency of any anti-social behaviour or criminal activity they may engage in. *Young people, cannabis use and anti-social behaviour*, produced for South Yorkshire Police and the Drug Intervention Programme, intended to yield a more nuanced understanding of young people's cannabis use and any associations this use may have with anti-social behaviour.

Sixty-one young people from Burngreave, an inner city district of Sheffield, were interviewed for the study. Half were under the supervision of the youth offending service. All the young people interviewed reported that cannabis was the first illicit drug they had used.

There was little to suggest that the regular use of cannabis had increased their exposure to, or experimentation with,

other substances. Nearly half of the young people interviewed mentioned that they usually smoked cannabis and drank alcohol together. Pocket money and work were the most common sources of funding cannabis use. Only eight young people mentioned committing crime to fund their use.

Most of the people we interviewed acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, emphasising the risk to physical and psychological health of sustained or prolonged use, and from the enhanced potency of different strains. However, most young people in our sample believed that they were capable of making rational and informed decisions about their use of cannabis.

Fewer than half stated that they had engaged in any activity they would regard as 'anti-social' after smoking cannabis. Very few believed that there was any link between their cannabis consumption and subsequent engagement in anti-social acts. Instead they emphasised the role played by alcohol.

Almost all believed that young people were routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been, and attributed this labelling to the negative perceptions and stereotypes that the public generally hold towards young people.



## Pocket money and work were the most common sources of funding cannabis use. Only eight young people mentioned committing crime to fund their use

In addition to speaking to young people, we interviewed 19 professionals working with young people in Sheffield. Most felt that young people smoking cannabis in public places caused problems for local residents and that this behaviour raised anxiety levels about other problems such as riding mini-motorbikes late at night and being racially abusive. However, less than one in three said they would describe smoking cannabis in public as anti-social.

Less than half thought that young people who use cannabis were more likely to engage in other forms of anti-social behaviour. Most were wary or unconvinced about the existence of any links, suggesting that the two behaviours were instead associated through a shared common cause rather than being directly related. However, there were concerns that, for some, cannabis use might facilitate links with existing criminal networks.

Most professionals agreed that it was appropriate to treat young people differently to adults when it came to dealing with cannabis possession. These respondents tended to emphasise the need for appropriate education rather than a reliance on punishment and deterrence.

Eighty residents from Burngreave were interviewed for the study, most of whom felt a strong attachment or sense of belonging to the area. Multi-culturalism and the diversity of the local population were considered by some to be the most endearing or positive of its features. However, concerns about crime and disorder featured prominently too. Many considered that the area's problems had been exacerbated by deprivation, poor infrastructure and under-investment in local facilities, a shortage of appropriate and affordable housing, and a perceived lack of strategic leadership from the local authorities. Despite this, just under three-quarters of residents regarded it as a good area in which to live or work.

Opinion seemed divided on a number of important issues: the extent to which young people openly smoked cannabis in public; whether or not this behaviour had increased during the last two years; and, whether there was a link between young people's cannabis use and anti-social behaviour in Burngreave. Two-thirds indicated that they were unaffected by

young people smoking cannabis in public and very few avoided local areas because of this.

Based on the various samples interviewed for this study, evidence for a link between young people's cannabis use and anti-social behaviour is slim. For the majority of people, cannabis use by young people does not constitute or cause anti-social behaviour. Rather, behaviour that is regarded as anti-social is engaged in by many young people, a proportion of whom, in turn, smoke cannabis in public places – and drink alcohol. On the whole, respondents' comments suggest that cannabis use does not lead to anti-social behaviour (or indeed to criminal behaviour), and that police resources would be better focused elsewhere.

This is not to say, however, that anti-social behaviour, cannabis use in public, and the actions of young people (criminal, anti-social or otherwise) do not present problems in Burngreave. Our research clearly indicates that community members are concerned about a range of activities which they regard as anti-social; that young people freely admit to engaging in these activities without necessarily acknowledging their impact on others; and, that professionals felt that a range of interventions needed to be introduced or improved if young people's cannabis use and anti-social behaviour are to be addressed more fully.

■ **Tiggey May** is a senior researcher at ICPR and one of the authors of the study.

### CLACK-HANDED CRUSADE

"Reclassification of cannabis 'fuels youth crime wave'." This was the *Independent on Sunday's* take in November on the findings of the report featured in this article.

The story, at best a ridiculous exaggeration and at worst a cynical distortion of the facts, is one of a stream of inaccurate 'stories' about cannabis the paper has published since it decided in March last year – on the basis of faulty data – that it would carry out a u-turn on its previously liberal stance on the drug.

A systematic dismantling of the *Independent on Sunday's* skewed coverage of cannabis can be found at <http://transform-drugs.blogspot.com/>

### THE LOWDOWN: CANNABIS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The British Crime Survey (BCS) shows that nine and a half million people aged between 16 and 59 have ever tried cannabis. Unsurprisingly, research shows use is highest amongst late teenagers and young adults. Cannabis use is not, however, confined to older teenagers. Younger age groups are also reporting increasing cannabis use: 12 per cent of school pupils in England between the ages of 11 and 15 reported having used cannabis within the last year. Surveys conducted by MORI in 2002 and 2004 suggest the average age for young people trying cannabis is 14.

Although the press has consistently voiced concern that young people's drug use, and in particular cannabis use, is on the increase, the BCS shows that over the last ten years cannabis use has in fact remained fairly constant. Use 'last year' amongst 16-24 year olds gradually increased during the 1990s, peaking in 1998 (28 per cent) and declining since then to 24 per cent in 2006.

Data from the 2003 Offending Crime and Justice Survey show that, for 10- to 16-year-olds, serious and minor anti-social behaviour were two of the eight factors associated with taking any drug. For those aged 17-24, anti-social behaviour was one of six variables associated with taking any drug.

Millie *et al* (2005) found that the general population tends to equate anti-social behaviour with problems they associate with young people – drug taking being one of these problems. Among the concerns noted were: young people in groups – cannabis smoking often being a group activity; fear provoked by visible drug use and the unpredictable and offensive behaviour associated with drug consumption; and the impact on children who come across drug misuse in public places. Several respondents also referred to groups of youths who sat around outside a community centre and smoked cannabis, making others feel nervous about going in and out of the centre.