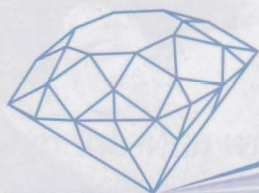


# Commercial breakdown



The biggest ever US government drive to turn children away from drugs featured an arsenal of high profile adverts across the American media. But, as **Mike Ashton** reveals, the campaign could have backfired

**I**n 1998, with bipartisan support, US Congress created the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, with the goal of preventing and reducing youth drug use in America. The flagship multi-media drive was heralded by the US Office of National Drug Control Policy as being “the most visible symbol of the federal government’s commitment to youth drug prevention” to date. “Visible” it was and still is: the billion dollar campaign is estimated to have reached nine in ten US teenagers. But “prevention”? Not according to the US government’s own evaluators.

The campaign’s big idea was to get broadcasters to donate as much airtime again as the government bought for its anti-drug ads. Soon it became mired in accusations of financial and other irregularities, yet for the US citizen in the street, all might have been forgiven had it saved at least a few youngsters from drugs. But if it has, they have eluded the researchers. Zero impact seems a fair assessment, with hints that some children actually became more inclined to drug use as a result of seeing the ads.

## SHOCK RESULTS

The bad news started in earnest in 2002 when official US evaluators reported on their national surveys of young people and parents. Parents may (it was not possible to be conclusive) have responded as intended, talking more to their children about drugs and monitoring them more closely. If they did, their children were unmoved. There were no statistically significant declines in cannabis use or improvements in beliefs and attitudes about the drug and, most tellingly, no tendency for children who recalled seeing more of the ads to hold stronger anti-cannabis beliefs.

There was worse. A year to 18 months later, children who had recalled seeing more of the ads consistently recorded attitudes and beliefs associated with increased cannabis use. In particular, they were less likely to absolutely rule out using the drug or to

be confident that they would resist an offer. This ‘delayed effect’ analysis was the one which got closest to establishing a causal link between the campaign and how children thought and behaved, and it suggested that the link was a negative one.

Also, the more children had been exposed to anti-drug ads in general (including those from the campaign), the more of their friends and age-mates they thought used cannabis and the less disapproval they expected to face if they did the same. The researchers cautioned that these attitudes and beliefs were potent harbingers of increased use.

“Is it possible”, they asked, “that the campaign, while its explicit message is anti-drug, provides a second implicit message – that drugs are a big problem and their use is widespread ... and that resistance [to using them] may be difficult?” Why else, the youngsters might subliminally have reasoned, would the government be so keen to warn us of the consequences of their use and to think we need help to resist them? Beyond this was the possibility that while most young people were unaffected by the ads, some resented being ‘told what to do’ and reacted negatively.

## CANNABIS FOCUS

Partly in response to these findings, in 2002 the youth component of the campaign shifted to what was called the Marijuana Initiative. The focus sharpened to the negative consequences of cannabis use and the primary targets moved up the age range from 11 to 14-year-olds to 14 to 16-year-olds.

The same research team reported on the consequences. Again, parents might have reacted largely as intended, but this time there was no evidence of improved monitoring of their children – worrying, because this was the focus of the parental campaign. Regardless of the possible impacts on parents, there was no evidence that their children’s beliefs or behaviours around drug use had changed.

Most dispiriting was the finding that, as before, among teens yet to try cannabis, those most exposed to the campaign were no more likely than the rest to express beliefs or intentions indicative of continued non-use.

The researchers’ conclusion? Their results were consistent with the revised campaign having no effect at all on young people. The Office of National Drug Control Policy countered with what it saw as more promising results from other studies, but the attempt failed to reassure US Congressional scrutineers or to silence the critics.

One of the other changes introduced by the Marijuana Initiative was to more rigorously test ads before releasing them. Researchers showed how important this was when they tested 30 ads produced by the Partnership for a Drug Free America, the non-profit company which produced most of the US government’s campaign ads.

Mike Ashton is editor of *Findings* magazine



# Boot Camp America

He won't fall a foot.



'compared to simply neutrally watching TV, they [the adverts] were seen as actually promoting drug use'

The study recruited 3608 US middle and high school pupils to view the ads and assess how effectively each would turn their peers away from using drugs. Their effects were compared with just watching a neutral programme about video and news production techniques. Amazingly, six were seen as less effective than this comparator – or, put another way, compared to simply neutrally watching TV, they were seen as actually promoting drug use.

Only just over half performed better than a programme not intended to be anti-drug at all and which included only a few incidental shots vaguely related to the topic. Given the campaign's later focus on cannabis, it was not a good portent that just two of the ads which outperformed the comparison programme focused on cannabis.

### BOOMERANG EFFECT

One of the two cannabis ads which did somewhat impress the young viewers was a dramatic depiction of the 'gateway theory' – a teenage girl recounting how the first drug she'd used was cannabis, thinking "I'd never have a real problem with it", only to develop an appetite which soon escalated to "crack ... angel dust, everything".

A sub-study conducted a more detailed analysis of this tactic. From schools in Philadelphia, 418 pupils were randomly allocated to view one of four versions of a TV programme. One included a sequence of ads which explicitly rammied home the gateway message: four graphic depictions of the consequences of 'hard' drug use ending with the teenage girl's account of how it can all start with cannabis. Reactions to this sequence were compared with reactions to the TV programme without the ads.

Amazingly, on all the many measures of how the children reacted, the hard-hitting gateway sequence left them feeling more positive about cannabis and more likely to use the drug. It happened at least partly because the bulk of children unlikely to use cannabis anyhow were unmoved by the ads, while those most likely to use (most may already have done so) tended to "move towards disbelieving that regular marijuana use has negative consequences".

The researchers conjectured that these children rejected the gateway depiction because it was contradicted by their own experiences, a speculation strengthened by the fact that these youngsters were indeed the ones most sceptical about cannabis leading to harder drugs. The upshot was that children who had little room to become more anti-cannabis were unaffected, while those with a more pro-cannabis profile were moved in the wrong direction.

For would-be media campaigners, the campaign seems an object lesson in the difficulty of moving those who hold anti-drug attitudes even further towards the anti-end, and the risk that in the process, those less convinced by these arguments will be activated to reject them, producing an effect opposite to that intended. •



Boomerang effect: two of the posters which aimed to turn children away from drugs.