



# The demon druggies

Stigma is hitting drug users hard. Ruth Goldsmith examines the damage done by their depiction as the modern folk devil.

A cursory flick through the UK national newspapers on any given day will throw up numerous references to 'addicts', 'druggies' or 'junkies'. Drug users are big news: they push all the right buttons, offering deviance, disease and death, all packaged up with a healthy dose of granny-mugging, bad parenting and work-shy skiving thrown in for free. Drug users generate headlines because there's nothing the British press loves more than a bit of moral outrage.

A quick glance through the papers from the last six months throws up headlines such as 'Junkie given 30 years for killing pregnant girl' (*Daily Express*, 14 March 08) '4 years jail for junkie car thief' (*Sun*, 8 February 2008), and even 'Junkie donor organs shock' (*Daily Star*, 11 December 2007). 'Junkie' has become an accepted piece of journalistic shorthand – in the tabloid lexicon alongside 'vice girls' and 'crazed killers'. A 'junkie' is a worthless individual, deserving no more than our condemnation.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in a short article in the *Mirror* from January of this year. The piece was carried on page 26 of the newspaper – hardly a top billing – and merited only 100 words or so. Headed 'Neighbours 'murdered junkie thief'', the report opens:

*ANGRY neighbours beat a burglar to death when they found him raiding one of their flats, a court heard yesterday.*

*Drug addict Alan Harris, 37, was attacked by five men after stealing a TV, DVD player and DVDs.*

*Prosecutor Christopher Hotten QC said: "It was a despicable crime to burgle a neighbour. He was to pay the ultimate price."*

The *Mirror* reported that the five men accused denied murder. The prosecution argued that the defendants dragged Mr Harris up to the fifteenth floor of the block of Wolverhampton flats where he was found with serious head injuries. It was alleged that the defendants doused Mr Harris with bleach as he lay dying "in a bid to clean the scene".

Usually in reportage of a murder trial, the victim's family is given a voice, along with a condemnatory comment from the police, or the prosecution, about the crime. In this report, the "despicable crime" in the quote ascribed to the prosecuting QC is not the murder, but the petty burglary that preceded it. Any nuance intended by Christopher Hotten QC in his comments, reported more comprehensively in local news outlets, has been lost by the *Mirror* and therefore by its readers. Why? Because the clear subtext of this article is that Alan Harris, 'junkie thief', deserved what was coming to him.



Replace the word 'junkie' in any of the above examples from the recent press with 'nigger', 'poof' or 'cripple'. Uncomfortable, isn't it? In the UK, discriminating against an individual on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or disability is not only unacceptable, it's illegal. So why is the British press allowed to continue to use a lexicon of degradation when referring to drug users?

'For one thing,' the red tops would argue, 'drug users are acting illegally.' But this defence doesn't stand up to much examination. The demonisation of drug users started at a time when drug use was legal; as Harry Shapiro writes in *Shooting Stars*, "all the lines of attack we see today in the media were in place before 1914." If drugs were ever decriminalised, the stigma attached to drug users wouldn't simply disappear overnight. Shapiro argues that the imagery and language associated with drug users – 'deadly drugs' and 'dope fiends' – was formed in the tabloids of William Randolph Hearst. It developed over the course of the 20th century into a deep-seated cultural trope that has entered the 21st century in good health and it's showing no signs of disappearing any time soon.



Winehouse: enemy of the *Daily Mail*

'Forget illegality, then,' the red tops would continue, 'it's because drug users choose to take drugs – they bring their problems on themselves.' In December last year, the *Daily Mail* asked and answered a burning question in their headline: 'Why isn't anyone saving Amy? Amy Winehouse is a junkie. For that she deserves our scorn.' The columnist qualified any sympathy she may feel for the singer with the definitive assertion that 'pity should be reserved for

those who have tragedy inflicted upon them, like young cancer victims, not self-destructive junkies such as Amy.' (Liz Jones, *Daily Mail*, 4 December 2007). According to this school of thought, a "young cancer victim" has had their bad luck thrust upon them: Amy has sought hers out.

But while some people choose to smoke cigarettes, they don't choose to get lung cancer. The 'choice defence' is a smokescreen that conveniently ignores the complex causation that lies behind most people's experience of becoming drug dependent. Mental health problems, poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, lack of opportunity in education or training, poor housing, trauma in childhood or adulthood – all are among the recognised 'risk factors'. Some (or all) of them are likely to apply to many of those who are dealing with a drug problem. Of course, the path to dependency is as individual as the person who is using. But in a civil and humane society, we should surely be capable of recognising that drug dependency and its attendant problems are, for most people at least, not a 'lifestyle choice'.

Unfortunately, the consistent sociocultural positioning of drug users as deviants and outsiders contributes to a public discourse of moral judgement that is by no means limited to the media. Even the brand new drug strategy is entitled *Drugs: protecting families and communities*. Protecting them from what? From drug users?

The government is continuing to emphasise the drugs/crime link, despite growing evidence that the links

between drugs and crime are not as straightforward as they may seem (see 'Chain reaction' p6, 'Missing link' p8, March/April *Druglink*). The continued emphasis on the links between drug use and crime – however necessary to justify the millions put into drug treatment – clearly stigmatises an already marginalised and vulnerable group still further.

In fact, the word 'stigma' does not appear once in the 67 pages of *Drugs: protecting families and communities*. 'Discrimination' is mentioned a few times, but only in the context of making drug services accessible to those problem drug users who may face discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. At no point does the strategy explicitly tackle the stigma and discrimination faced by drug users as they seek employment, training, primary healthcare or housing. It isn't just female drug users, those who are from BME groups or who are gay who face discrimination in this country.

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In mental health, stigma and discrimination are recognised as important contributing factors to mental distress and as potential barriers to treatment. In response to the positive work of mental health charities and the growing service user movement, the Department of Health (DH) funded 'MindOUT for mental health', the first government-backed anti-stigma initiative in 2001. 'MindOUT' was replaced by the current DH backed-campaign, 'SHiFT' in 2004. The Scottish Executive has been supporting the extremely successful 'See Me' campaign in Scotland since 2004. Thus the UK government is complementing the work of charities and other civil society groups in combating stigma and discrimination in mental health. The funding could always be higher and the support stronger, but the fact remains that the establishment is contributing to social progress.

So when will we get legislation and a centrally-funded government campaign to challenge the stigma faced by drug users? Certainly not until the government itself has stopped contributing to the problem. Of course, organisations like *DrugScope* will continue to speak out to government, the general public and the media and challenge the status quo. But until stigma is acknowledged as a fundamental barrier to progress and until it is addressed at a central government level, the cycle of despair and deprivation that we know fuels dependency will continue unbroken.

The RSA got it right in *Facing Facts*, its report on drugs published last year, when discussing society's "habitual demonisation" of drugs and drug users: "Demons are diabolical, evil spirits, and are therefore to be slain. Using such language and thinking... is childish, if not medieval. It stifles rational and realistic debate and makes it harder, not easier, to deal with the very serious matters at hand."

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