

Joint Committee on Drugs Use - Family & Community

Youth Workers Against Prohibition

Thank you chair, deputies and senators for the invitation. My name is Karl Duques and my colleague Eddie D'Arcy are here today on behalf of Youth Workers Against Prohibition.

We came together in 2021 as a group of independent, experienced youth workers to raise our concerns about the policy of drug prohibition in Ireland. At present youth workers are supporting over 380,000 young people in communities across the country. We see first-hand, on a daily basis, the untold damage that criminalising young people has on their life opportunities. We see the devastation that unregulated drugs are inflicting on communities as young people have no idea of the content, purity or consequences of what they are taking (Hutton 2021; Measham 2020). Prohibition drives our young people who use drugs underground, it isolates them and places them in danger. We believe that the policy of Prohibition/Criminalisation has failed and is not the way forward.

We fully support decriminalisation, but we feel it doesn't go far enough to tackle the issue we see. Decriminalisation of all drug possession and cultivation for personal use is an important first step, but it will still leave the supply of drugs in the control of criminal gangs, and young people will still be at risk using unknown, unregulated substances (Taylor et al 2016).

The time has come to regulate all drugs (not just caffeine, alcohol and tobacco), and to create a model that keeps our young people in Ireland safe. A model that protects people who use banned drugs from the present vagaries and removes the stigma for those who are affected by addiction, treating them instead with compassion and care, will keep our children and communities much safer. (Douglas & McDonald 2012).

Under the current policy of prohibition, the drugs market is run by criminal gangs who operate through fear, intimidation and the exploitation of youth. Under Prohibition there is, and always will be, a thriving unregulated drug market and the longer we continue to hold on to the illusion of beating it, the longer we will have to see young people, families and communities suffer the consequences.

Despite the record level of seizures of drugs and drug money there is no shortage of availability on the streets (UNODC 2021). Indeed, evidence indicates that tougher enforcement measures that disrupt the market by removing suppliers actually results in increased community tensions and violence as new suppliers take over (Werb et al 2011). Drugs are so prevalent that young people find them easier to obtain than alcohol or cigarettes (Petter, 2018).

While the use of banned drugs is spread fairly evenly across all sections of society, in contrast drug law enforcement targets poor and disadvantaged users (Buchanan 2006), indeed, our prisons are full of young people from poor and disadvantaged communities caught up in the illegal drug trade. Their drug convictions condemn them to a lifetime of difficulty gaining employment, housing, community participation, insurance, relationships and travel (Taylor et al 2016). 70% of the State's prison population, which currently stands at over 3,700 people, report having addiction issues; the figure is 85% for women (IPRT, 2021). Our failed drugs policies impose devastation on disadvantaged communities and they represent a bad investment for society as a whole. It costs in the region of €75,000 to imprison an adult for one year and the cost is €340,000 for juveniles. (IPRT 2021;

Oberstown 2015) This is money that would be more effectively invested in community programs to produce better outcomes for young people and society as a whole.

Defeating the drug gangs and ending their regimes of fear will only happen if we remove the lucrative drug market they thrive on by legally regulating all drugs. Contrary to popular belief, regulation does not introduce drugs to young people, those drugs are already just as available as alcohol and tobacco, and neither decriminalisation, nor regulation result in increased drug use among young people (Hughes & Stevens 2011; Hall & Lynskey 2020). What drug reform does mean is that young people are not criminalised, are less likely to overdose, less likely to be poisoned by contaminants and more likely to seek help if they need it. Drug gangs don't ask for identification, they don't practice quality control and they don't necessarily care what happens to the people they have sold to.

Our primary motivation as youth workers is keeping young people safe and encouraging their development. Regulation will also help remove the shame and stigma that has for too long been associated with addiction and problematic drug use in this country. Among so many young people addiction is a presenting problem, but the real underlying issues that need to be addressed often precede drug use; deep seated trauma such as physical and sexual abuse, exclusion from school, being looked after by the state, incarceration, poverty, neglect disadvantage and isolation, self-harm and mental ill health, unmet learning difficulties and blocked futures (Buchanan 2004). Prohibition adds new problems, compounds existing issues and captures these vulnerable young people in an underground web of crime (Barrett 2015).

Our communities and our young people deserve better than this archaic and woefully damaging system which criminalises them, limits their future prospects and propels them further into a cycle of addiction, debt and criminality.

There is evidence internationally. Portugal, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland and parts of the United States have seen the positive impact that taking an evidence based approach to drug policy can have. For example, in 2001 Portugal decriminalised all drug possession and since then has seen drug-related deaths remain below the EU average (Hughes & Stevens 2010). The proportion of prisoners in Portugal sentenced for drugs related offences has fallen from 40% to 15% and rates of drug use in the country have not increased but remained consistently below the EU average (Slade 2021). It has meant that the police and criminal justice system have more time and resources available to catch criminals. In 2018 Canada went one step further and legalised cannabis (as opposed to simply decriminalising the drug). Canada did so for two main reasons (i) to reduce its availability to young people; and (ii) to destroy the illegal trade of the drug. Since legalisation, studies show that cannabis use among young people pre and post legalisation is down to 10% (from 20%) among those aged 15-17 (Kaufmann 2020). In Iceland they have successfully delayed the onset of teenage drug/alcohol use by investing heavily in children and young people's recreation during out of school hours (North 2021). The model did this by aligning policy, research and practice.

We believe, in line with the evidence above, that after decades of the harms caused by prohibition, it is vital we rethink our approach to the 'war on drugs'. Prohibition has been ineffective and devastatingly counterproductive for the communities where we work.

In our view, society would be best served by adopting an evidence-based drug policy that places social care and public health, not the criminal justice system, at the heart of the governmental response. A responsibly regulated market and a health-led response to drug use will produce more informed individuals, stronger communities and healthier, happier families. This approach also recognises that drug addiction is rooted in traumatic adverse

early childhood experiences and will be treated as such. Revenues from tightly controlled and regulated drugs markets can be invested into community policing, public health campaigns, youth and community services and evidence based drug treatment.

Continuing with the war on drugs is costly and ineffective and the human cost is too much to bear.

As a group we recognise that this is a significant and drastic policy change, but after 50 years of devastating harm caused by Prohibition a move to evidence based drug policies is long overdue. This move would help Ireland be on the right side of history as the global shift away from Prohibition gathers momentum.

We are calling for all drugs to be regulated, so that violent criminal gangs are put out of business and that people who use drugs are safer from harm. We ask the committee to give this serious consideration. Communities and families cannot continue to be subjected to fear, crime and violence under the existing paradigm of Prohibition. **We need effective intervention and we need it now.**

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