

Ruby Lawlor - Statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Drugs

I am Ruby Lawlor, the Executive Director of Youth RISE, an international network of young people who use drugs and/or young people affected by punitive policies. I have worked on drug policy reform and harm reduction in Ireland, and more recently, in the global drug policy sphere, advocating at various United Nations meetings and highlighting the challenges and human rights violations faced by young people who use drugs and the need for drug policy reform and youth tailored health and harm reduction.

Youth RISE was established 18 years ago, and has been a key global organisation in ensuring the fulfilment of the health and human rights of young people who use drugs. We have produced reports, position papers, and research on the impact of drug policies on our population, and working with decision makers to prioritise our needs. Earlier this year, I presented at the Mayor of Amsterdam's Dealing with Drugs Conference to inform Mayors from around the world about how to put young people at the centre of legalisation and regulation efforts.

The War on Drugs has been waged in the name of protecting young people, and yet, young people are among the most severely affected by systemic health and human rights violations as a result of punitive drug policies. These policies have not protected young people, they have made them vulnerable to receiving criminal records, criminal sanctions and being incarcerated, they have pushed young people away from vital support systems, including family, education, and health services, and they have violated their human rights. Further, drug use amongst young people is consistently rising, regardless of doubling down on failed criminalising policies that are supposed to deter us from using drugs.

Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and communities are being manipulated and sometimes forced into the illicit drug trade, a drug trade that was created and flourishes because of punitive drug policies.

Young people in these communities and those who have been in contact with the criminal justice system report greater distrust in the Gardaí, a body that is also meant to protect them. Young people from marginalised communities are being disproportionately stopped and searched by the Gardaí, and for what? Drug use isn't decreasing, meanwhile the harms caused by punitive policies are increasing.

Criminalisation of drugs in reality means criminalisation of marginalised communities. The growth and influence of the illicit drug trade, particularly in these communities, puts young people in danger, and organisations like Youth Workers Against Prohibition work to actively combat this through advocating for regulation of all drugs, undercutting the criminal market and significantly reducing the power that criminal gangs have in these communities.

Further, punitive drug policies violate human rights, as recently reported by the OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, and just this week, by Amnesty International.

Each of these reports give special mention to the disproportionate impact of punitive policies on children and young people.

The impact of criminal records on children and young people is devastating, resulting in stigma and discrimination, diminished access to education, housing and reduced prospects for future employment, and negative impacts on family relationships..

Ireland's own Garda diversion scheme provides some insight into the benefits of diverting young people away from criminal systems, with a vast majority of adolescents who go through this scheme not re-offending in their lifetime, evidence that investing in personal development, instead of punishment, works.

Punitive policies have severe impacts on children's rights, the right to non-discrimination, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to education, the right to health and health services, the right to protection from neglect and violence to name a few. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that appropriate measures to protect children from drugs must be rights-compliant, and effective, and include the development of accessible and child-sensitive harm reduction services and drug dependence treatment, providing accessible, appropriate, and evidence-based information to children about drugs, and refraining from criminalizing children because of their drug use or possession of drugs for personal use.

We are seeing more and more in Ireland, the risks that unregulated drug markets pose and the devastation they have already caused, overdose rates in Ireland are skyrocketing in comparison to the rest of Europe, and Ireland is yet to respond to this crisis with effective measures. Ireland needs to legalise and regulate all drugs to disrupt the illicit drug market and adulterated drug supply. In Ireland we are experiencing an overdose crisis due to Nitazines in the drug supply, and as seen across the pond with the devastating impact of unregulated drug markets in the USA and Canada. The heavier we prohibit and criminalise drugs, the more drugs seep into the market, and the more accessible drugs are to young people, and the less likely young people are to seek support, drug treatment, and life saving harm reduction services.

To truly ensure everyone's safety, health and wellbeing, Ireland must decriminalise drug use and possession, and legalise and regulate all drugs, and this must be done while investing heavily in communities, youth friendly harm reduction services, evidence based drug education, and non-coerced or forced drug treatment.