

Youth drug use—more than just a health issue

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An Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) report “Structural Determinants for Youth Drug Use” has highlighted the economic, social and environmental issues that increase or decrease the risks of young people using illicit drugs.

Chairman of the ANCD, Major Brian Watters, said “Young people use drugs for a range of reasons and this report emphasizes that prevention efforts need to recognize that drug use is not an isolated behaviour. It is often the result of many negative influences – both personal and environmental. What we need is co-operation between the many different social programs that aim to prevent crime, suicide, and homelessness in order to make effective and efficient use of resources.”

The Report also emphasizes that economic disadvantage, high levels of crime and unemployment tend to occur together in some communities and this increases the risk of drug use for children growing up in these areas. However, the Report recognizes that the health sector does not have control over all of the policies and programs that apply to these broad social issues which are seriously affecting young people’s lives and the choices they make about drugs.

Speaking at a recent International Conference on Youth and Drug issues Professor Margaret Hamilton, an Executive Member of the ANCD, gave this perspective; “Early childhood is one of the most critical periods for the development of life skills and this development is affected by economic, social and environmental circumstances. There is growing evidence that the contributing causes for drug use are the same as those for criminality, anti-social behaviour, unemployment and suicide. Research also shows that early childhood interventions can be effective in reducing these problems, particularly when they are targeted at high-risk populations.”

Major Watters added; “The Council has always advocated an emphasis on prevention, and this report is timely given a national prevention strategy is currently being developed. The ANCD has already ensured that the key elements of this report have been communicated to governments and key decision makers.”

Mr Gino Vumbaca concluded by stating “The Report clearly identifies the need for investment in core infrastructure and a review of a range of macro-economic policies including education, taxation, urban planning and employment if we are to address youth drug use. In effect, governments need to institute a strategy to conduct ‘health impact studies’ for major areas of public policy, similar to those it conducts for the environment”

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The Australian National Council on Drugs is the peak advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in 1998.

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