

Buzzed, broke, but not busted:

How young Australians perceive the consequences of using illicit drugs

Using an online sample of young Australians, this paper explores perceptions of the likelihood of 10 consequences of illicit drug use, including both positive and negative outcomes. Pleasure and concern about financial and school/work problems were perceived to be the most likely consequences to arise from illicit drug use (much more so than trouble with police). These results, although exploratory, provide a nuanced understanding of young people's attitudes towards illicit drugs, and how these attitudes are shaped by the world around them. The results also represent a challenge for public policy, as these notions are largely marginalised from discourse about drug use.

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Young people are historically the group most likely to engage in illicit drug use. Yet with each generation of young people, new and different cultural, social, political and economic factors affect the way they perceive the world around them (Wyn & Woodman 2006). Broadly defined, the current generation of “young people” includes people classified as Generations X and Y (1966–1986) and the iGeneration (1986–2006) (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2009b). They have been defined by the proliferation of mass marketing and mobile technologies but also shaped by the post-September 11 era and, more recently, the global financial crisis (McCrindle 2009). Changing trends in relation to drug use have also been identified. It has been suggested that, for this generation, drug use has become increasingly “normalised”, due to the availability and acceptability of drugs within this group and the role that drugs play within youth subcultures (Duff 2003; Holt 2005; Wilson et al. 2010). Given the permeating influence of these factors, Duff (2003) argues that it is important for research to look beyond merely tracking the epidemiology of young people's drug use and examine the meaning of drug use within young people's lives and their attitudes towards drug issues (for further discussion, see also Moore 1990). Such knowledge can inform the design of effective policy interventions, such as education and prevention campaigns and harm reduction messages (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing 2011; Moore 1990).

Rarely examined are concurrent concepts of risk and acceptability, or what underpins notions of risk/acceptability.

Surveys have found that drug issues are a concern for young Australians. For example, surveys by Mission Australia reveal that young people rate alcohol and other drugs to be one of the most important issues facing Australia today (Mission Australia 2010, 2011) and as one of their top personal concerns (Mission Australia 2011). At the same time, epidemiological surveys including the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/national-drugs-strategy-household-surveys/>) demonstrate high levels of acceptability and use among this population. For example, those aged 18 to 29 years were most likely to report using an illicit drug in the last 12 months and 14% approved of the regular personal use of cannabis (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011). However, it is unclear from these survey data how attitudes of concern relate to the prevalence and acceptability of drug use within this population. Surveys such as these, as well as those conducted internationally (for example European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2011), tend to focus broadly, exploring concern about illicit drugs, perceptions of risk or acceptability, and views about different drug types. Rarely examined are concurrent concepts of risk and acceptability, or what underpins notions of risk/acceptability. This limits our understanding of young people's attitudes to drugs and how these perceptions influence their decision to use or not use.

Previous studies have demonstrated a correlation between risk-perception and prevalence of drug use (e.g. Bachman, Johnston & O'Malley 1990, 1998). However, researchers have called for more investigation of young people's perceptions of the positive effects associated with drugs, such as social benefits or pleasures (Boys, Marsden & Strang 2001; Jarvinen & Ostergaard 2011; MacLean 2008; Moore 1990). Understanding the attitudes of sub-populations of young people is also important, as research has shown that different sub-populations will have diverse attitudes towards risk-taking, pleasure-seeking and drug use (Carroll 2000; Holt 2005; Hughes et al. 2010; Jarvinen &

Ostergaard 2011; Lindsay 2003; Reilly & Homel 1988; Spigner, Hawkins & Loren 1993). We contend that it is important to continue to unpack the complexity of young people's attitudes towards drugs, and explore how young people perceive the possible impacts of drug use, and conceptualise the likelihood of these outcomes.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to start to explore how young people perceive the likelihood of specific consequences in their lives, as a result of illicit drug use. Using a sample of young Australians, we explored perceptions across both negative and positive consequences, and a range of domains including health, legal, financial and social outcomes. We then analysed differences between sub-populations by comparing responses by lifetime drug-use history, sex and age. In doing so, we explored which outcomes are perceived as likely or unlikely, and by whom, with a view to informing future research and policy interventions aimed at young people.

Methods

The data for this study were collected as part of a wider project examining young people's attitudes to illicit drugs (for full report see Hughes et al. 2010). The survey data were obtained from a purpose-built web-based survey called the 'Drug Media Survey', conducted in 2010, targeted at young people aged 16–24 years who lived in Australia. An array of recruitment methods and sites were used with the aim of attracting a broad, national sample of Australian youth. These included university and TAFE career websites; online chat forums and blogs; government and youth-oriented websites; and advertisements in newspapers and magazines and on Facebook. Media releases were also issued to Australian media outlets nationally.

The survey collected demographic information including gender, age, residential status and educational attainment. Participants were asked questions about their lifetime and recent use of licit and illicit drugs, adapted from the 2007 NDSHS (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008). The other survey

questions of relevance to this study were derived from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) 'Beliefs about Consequences' instrument (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2004). This instrument had not been used previously in Australia. Specifically, participants were asked: "How likely is it that each of the following would happen to you, if you were to use illicit drugs in the next month?" The consequences measured can be categorised into six negative consequences ("get into trouble with the police", "become an addict", "have money problems", "have problems at school/work" and "have problems with my friends") and four positive consequences ("feel more relaxed", "have more fun", "be more popular" and "be more confident and outgoing"). Fixed Likert-type responses were used for the attitudinal measures.

Frequency distributions were used to examine the demographics and responses to each outcome measure. For ease of analysis, responses to the 'Beliefs about Consequences' instrument on the five-point scale were collapsed into three categories: "Very likely" and "Likely" collapsed into "Likely"; "Very unlikely" and "Unlikely" collapsed into "Unlikely"; and "Neither likely nor unlikely" remained unchanged. Results were analysed across the sample as a whole, and also within sub-groups comparing differences by lifetime drug-use history, sex and age. Pearson's chi-square was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between groups. Where the overall Pearson's chi-square was significant, an adjusted residual for each subcategory was computed. An adjusted residual score of greater than 2.0 or below -2.0 for a given subcategory indicated that the subcategory differed significantly.

Results

Demographics

Between 4 January 2010 and 20 April 2010 a total of 3,187 respondents accessed the online survey and 72% completed the survey. The final sample comprised 2,296 young people who had a mean age of 20.0 years (SD = 2.6 years). The sample was evenly spread

across the target population (16 to 24 years): between 9.6% and 12.9% of the sample fell into each of the nine age groups. The sample was, however, dominated by females (67.4%) and people who lived in metropolitan areas (67.3%). Just over 80% of the sample was from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, with the next most populous states being Western Australia (7.1%) and South Australia (6.1%), which is approximately representative of the population distribution of 15- to 24-year-olds by state and territory in Australia, as estimated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009a).

Drug use history

Lifetime use of alcohol and tobacco was reported by 90.4% and 56.2% of survey participants respectively. A substantial proportion of the sample (51.1%) reported having tried an illicit drug in their lifetime. Of those illicit drug types, lifetime use was most frequently reported for cannabis (48.5% of participants) and ecstasy (29.2% of participants).

Perceived consequences of illicit drug use

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the consequences of illicit drug use by indicating how likely it would be for 10 different outcomes to occur if they were to use illicit drugs in the next month. As shown in Table 1, over half of participants reported that it was likely that they would have money problems (57.0%), have problems with school/work (55.1%) or get into trouble with parents (51.5%). A smaller, albeit sizeable, proportion of participants reported having more fun (45.3%) as a likely consequence of illicit drug use. The consequences deemed as less likely to occur included getting into trouble with the police (33.6%), becoming an addict (33.4%) or becoming more popular (8.2%).

There were significant differences between those who had ever used an illicit drug and those who had never used an illicit drug regarding the perceived likelihood of every consequence measured (see Table 2). Compared to those who had used an illicit drug, those with no lifetime history of drug use were more likely to perceive negative outcomes as a consequence of illicit drug use.

TABLE 1
Perceived consequences
of illicit drug use (N = 2,296)

	Likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Unlikely
Have money problems	57.0	12.1	31.0
Have problems at school/work	55.1	11.4	33.4
Get into trouble with parents	51.5	10.9	37.5
Have problems with my friends	44.0	15.5	40.5
Get into trouble with the police	33.6	16.9	49.6
Become an addict	33.4	16.8	49.8
Have more fun	45.3	25.9	28.8
Feel more relaxed	41.7	29.6	28.7
Be more confident and outgoing	32.0	28.9	39.1
Be more popular	8.2	29.4	62.5

The converse was true for positive consequences; participants with a history of drug use were more likely to perceive positive outcomes as a consequence of their drug use.

Non-users reported that use would lead to more problems crossing social domains, particularly trouble with parents (76.1%, compared to 28.0% of users) and problems with friends (67.6%, compared to 21.5% of users). Non-users were also significantly more likely to report that use would lead to trouble with police (50.4%, compared to 17.5% of users) and to becoming an addict (52.5%, compared to 15.1% of users). In contrast, those who had used illicit drugs were significantly more likely to report use would lead to more fun (65.8%, compared to 23.8% of non-users) and feeling more relaxed (57.3%, compared to 25.4% of non-users). Notably, while a larger proportion of non-users deemed financial problems as likely, both groups rated money

problems as one of the three most likely consequences (74.1% of non-users and 40.6% of users, respectively).

Perceived consequences of illicit drug use, by sex

There were also significant differences between how males and females perceived the likely consequences of illicit drug use. Compared to male participants, a higher proportion of females emphasised the negative consequences of illicit drug use. Across the outcomes, females were significantly more likely to attest to problems at school/work (63.2%, compared to 38.4% of males) and problems with friends (51.7%, compared to 28.2% of males). They were also somewhat more likely to believe they would have money problems (63.4%, compared to 43.7% of males) were they to use illicit drugs in the next month.

Conversely, compared to female participants, a larger proportion of males thought that positive consequences were likely, particularly that they would have more fun (58.6%, compared to 38.9% of females) or feel more relaxed (53.1%, compared to 36.2% of females).

Finally, males and females differed in their relative perceptions of the likelihood of different consequences occurring. For example, females perceived the likelihood of having more fun (38.9%) as being similar to the likelihood of becoming an addict or getting into trouble with the police (38.6% and 37.7% respectively). Males in contrast perceived fun as much more likely than either of these negative consequences.

Perceived consequences of illicit drug use, by age

The responses of participants were also compared by age, with the sample divided into a younger age group (16 to 19 years) and an older age group (20 to 24 years). There were significant differences between the responses of the two age groups across all negative outcomes measured; however, no significant differences were found regarding their perceptions of the likelihood of positive outcomes (see Table 4). Moreover, compared to the differences observed by

TABLE 2

**Perceived consequences of illicit drug use,
by lifetime drug-use history (N = 2,296)**

	Ever used an illicit drug	Likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Unlikely	p-value
Have money problems	No	74.1	9.9	16.0	<.0001
		(16.2)	(-3.1)	(-15.1)	
	Yes	40.6	14.1	45.2	
		(-16.2)	(3.1)	(15.1)	
Have problems at school/work	No	77.9	9.0	13.1	<.0001
		(21.4)	(-3.5)	(-20.2)	
	Yes	33.4	13.7	52.9	
		(-21.4)	(3.5)	(20.2)	
Get into trouble with parents	No	76.1	7.7	16.2	<.0001
		(23.0)	(-4.9)	(-20.6)	
	Yes	28.0	14.1	57.9	
		(-23.0)	(4.9)	(20.6)	
Have problems with my friends	No	67.6	15.2	17.1	<.0001
		(22.3)	(-0.3)	(-22.3)	
	Yes	21.5	15.7	62.9	
		(-22.3)	(0.3)	(22.3)	
Get into trouble with the police	No	50.4	19.3	30.2	<.0001
		(16.7)	(3.1)	(-18.1)	
	Yes	17.5	14.5	68.1	
		(-16.7)	(-3.1)	(18.1)	
Become an addict	No	52.5	20.7	26.8	<.0001
		(19.0)	(4.8)	(-21.5)	
	Yes	15.1	13.1	71.8	
		(-19.0)	(-4.8)	(21.5)	
Have more fun	No	23.8	30.2	46.0	<.0001
		(-20.2)	(4.6)	(17.7)	
	Yes	65.8	21.7	12.4	
		(20.2)	(-4.6)	(-17.7)	
Feel more relaxed	No	25.4	33.3	41.3	<.0001
		(-15.5)	(3.8)	(13.1)	
	Yes	57.3	26.1	16.6	
		(15.5)	(-3.8)	(-13.1)	
Be more confident and outgoing	No	22.1	26.0	51.9	<.0001
		(-9.9)	(-2.9)	(12.2)	
	Yes	41.5	31.6	26.9	
		(9.9)	(2.9)	(-12.2)	
Be more popular	No	7.2	20.0	72.8	<.0001
		(-1.7)	(-9.7)	(10.0)	
	Yes	9.1	38.3	52.6	
		(1.7)	(9.7)	(-10.0)	

Note: Adjusted residual frequencies appear in parentheses below observed percentages.

TABLE 3
Perceived consequences of illicit drug use,
by lifetime drug-use history (N= 2,296)

	Sex	Likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Unlikely	p-value
Have money problems	Male	43.7	15.4	40.9	<.0001
		(-8.9)	(3.4)	(7.2)	
	Female	63.4	10.5	26.2	
		(8.9)	(-3.4)	(-7.2)	
Have problems at school/work	Male	38.4	14.6	47.1	<.0001
		(-11.2)	(3.3)	(9.6)	
	Female	63.2	9.9	26.9	
		(11.2)	(-3.3)	(-9.6)	
Get into trouble with parents	Male	39.0	13.4	47.6	<.0001
		(-8.3)	(2.6)	(6.9)	
	Female	57.6	9.8	32.7	
		(8.3)	(-2.6)	(-6.9)	
Have problems with my friends	Male	28.2	17.1	54.7	<.0001
		(-10.6)	(1.5)	(9.6)	
	Female	51.7	14.7	33.7	
		(10.6)	(-1.5)	(-9.6)	
Get into trouble with the police	Male	25.1	15.5	59.4	<.0001
		(-6.0)	(-1.2)	(6.5)	
	Female	37.7	17.5	44.8	
		(6.0)	(1.2)	(-6.5)	
Become an addict	Male	22.5	14.8	62.7	<.0001
		(-7.7)	(-1.8)	(8.6)	
	Female	38.6	17.8	43.6	
		(7.7)	(1.8)	(-8.6)	
Have more fun	Male	58.6	21.1	20.3	<.0001
		(8.9)	(-3.6)	(-6.3)	
	Female	38.9	28.2	32.9	
		(-8.9)	(3.6)	(6.3)	
Feel more relaxed	Male	53.1	27.0	19.9	<.0001
		(7.7)	(-1.9)	(-6.4)	
	Female	36.2	30.9	32.9	
		(-7.7)	(1.9)	(6.4)	
Be more confident and outgoing	Male	38.2	30.2	31.6	<.0001
		(4.4)	(1.0)	(-5.2)	
	Female	29.0	28.2	42.8	
		(-4.4)	(-1.0)	(5.2)	
Be more popular	Male	10.3	36.2	53.5	<.0001
		(2.6)	(5.0)	(-6.2)	
	Female	7.2	26.0	66.8	
		(-2.6)	(-5.0)	(6.2)	

Note: Adjusted residual frequencies appear in parentheses below observed percentages.

TABLE 4
Perceived consequences of illicit drug use,
by age in years (N = 2,296)

	Age in years	Likely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Unlikely	p-value
Have money problems	16 to 19	60.3	14.5	25.3	<.0001
		(2.9)	(3.2)	(-5.3)	
	20 to 24	54.3	10.1	35.5	
		(-2.9)	(-3.2)	(5.3)	
Have problems at school/work	16 to 19	58.5	14.2	27.3	<.0001
		(2.9)	(3.7)	(-5.6)	
	20 to 24	52.4	9.2	38.4	
		(-2.9)	(-3.7)	(5.6)	
Get into trouble with parents	16 to 19	60.8	12.7	26.5	<.0001
		(8.0)	(2.4)	(-9.8)	
	20 to 24	44.0	9.5	46.5	
		(-8.0)	(-2.4)	(9.8)	
Have problems with my friends	16 to 19	48.2	17.8	34.0	<.0001
		(3.6)	(2.7)	(-5.7)	
	20 to 24	40.6	13.6	45.8	
		(-3.6)	(-2.7)	(5.7)	
Get into trouble with the police	16 to 19	36.2	19.2	44.5	<.0001
		(2.4)	(2.7)	(-4.3)	
	20 to 24	31.4	14.9	53.6	
		(-2.4)	(-2.7)	(4.3)	
Become an addict	16 to 19	34.0	20.7	45.3	<.0001
		(0.6)	(4.5)	(-3.9)	
	20 to 24	32.9	13.7	53.5	
		(-0.6)	(-4.5)	(3.9)	
Have more fun	16 to 19	43.7	27.4	28.9	<.238 (NS)
		(-1.4)	(1.5)	(0.1)	
	20 to 24	46.6	24.6	28.8	
		(1.4)	(-1.5)	(-0.1)	
Feel more relaxed	16 to 19	41.7	28.5	29.8	<.455 (NS)
		(0.0)	(-1.0)	(1.1)	
	20 to 24	41.7	30.5	27.8	
		(0.0)	(1.0)	(-1.1)	
Be more confident and outgoing	16 to 19	30.8	30.8	38.5	<.186 (NS)
		(-1.2)	(1.8)	(-0.6)	
	20 to 24	33.0	27.4	39.6	
		(1.2)	(-1.8)	(0.6)	
Be more popular	16 to 19	8.3	29.2	62.5	<.978 (NS)
		(0.2)	(-0.1)	(0.0)	
	20 to 24	8.1	29.5	62.4	
		(-0.2)	(0.1)	(0.0)	

Note: Adjusted residual frequencies appear in parentheses below observed percentages.

Young people's concern about drug issues may not reflect concern about drug use per se.

drug use history and sex, smaller differences were observed.

Compared to 20- to 24-year-olds, a larger proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds reported it was likely that negative consequences would result from their illicit drug use. For example, 60.8% of 16- to 19-year-olds said it was likely that they would get into trouble with parents, compared to 44.0% of 20- to 24-year-olds.

Discussion

This study offers a “snapshot” of how young Australians perceive the likelihood of a range of possible consequences of illicit drug use. The findings show that negative consequences were generally perceived as being more likely than positive consequences. By examining young people’s perceptions across numerous domains, we identified that financial problems, problems at school/work and problems with parents are perceived to be the three most likely consequences to arise from illicit drug use. Critically, these findings reveal that problems in social domains were considered more likely in young people’s lives than consequences such as addiction or getting into trouble with the police. That said, a substantial minority of participants reported that it was likely that illicit drug use would help them to feel more relaxed and have more fun. These findings confirm that drug use fulfils a number of positive functions for young people (Duff 2003). Importantly, and in accordance with the extant literature, the findings also demonstrate that young people are not a homogenous group and attitudes will differ between sub-populations. Thus some of the consequences perceived as less likely to occur, such as addiction, were rated as much more likely by females and those who had never engaged in illicit drug use. The smallest differences in perceptions were identified between the younger and older age groups. This suggests that drug use history and sex may be greater influences upon young people’s perceptions of illicit drugs.

As with any study, there are a number of limitations. The results are limited by the particular instrument adopted. The awkward language used for some domains (for example “be more popular” or “become an addict”)

may have skewed results. The instrument also does not address all the domains with equal emphasis. For example, the only question regarding health outcomes pertained to addiction, which limited the potential to explore young people’s perceptions of the likelihood of other (positive and negative) health consequences, and particularly short-term health consequences, such as anxiety or non-fatal overdose.

The use of an online survey meant the sample was limited to people who are computer literate and have internet access. The survey also relied on self-report, which, like all surveys, is open to bias (Mallick et al. 2007). The sample was not selected on the basis of stratified population sampling. Compared to representative samples of this cohort (such as the NDSHS), a larger proportion of our self-selected sample reported having used an illicit drug in their lifetime (for comparison see Hughes et al. 2010). However, higher prevalence of drug use has been found in many other online surveys, perhaps due to the anonymity the method affords (Duncan, White & Nicholson 2003; Miller & Sønderlund 2010; Ramo, Hall & Prochaska 2010).

Nonetheless, this exploration of the attitudes of young people towards illicit drug use offers a number of findings of relevance for policy and practice. First, although other surveys have found that drug issues are of concern to young Australians (Mission Australia 2010, 2011), our findings suggest that young people’s concern about drug issues may not reflect concern about drug use per se. Concern, rather, may reflect the impact of specific negative consequences on aspects of their lives. It is in the financial and social domains where the negative consequences of drug use are perceived to be greatest. When comparing sub-populations, it was these same financial and social consequences that resonated even among those with a lifetime history of drug use.

Second, as the youth studies literature suggests, each generation of young people is located within its own social, economic and cultural experience (McCrindle 2009; Wyn & Woodman 2006) and young people’s attitudes are therefore shaped by the world around them. This is reflected in the way young

people perceive the likelihood of particular consequences of drug use impacting on their lives. The pre-eminence of concern about financial problems across all sub-populations of participants, as well as of problems with school/work among most, is perhaps understandable for this generation in light of the economic climate globally, and the changing shape of the education sector and labour markets (Wyn & Woodman 2006). We contend that it is important to recognise that this generation's attitudes towards illicit drugs are likely to differ subtly to those of the generations of "youth" who have come before.

Finally, we know that if policy responses are to be effective they need to address the needs of and resonate meaningfully with the target population. While it was beyond the scope of this study to examine to what extent each of the consequences was more or less important to young people (for example is getting into trouble with the police, although perceived as less likely, of more concern than getting into trouble with parents?), it is clear from the results that detection by law enforcement is not deemed a likely consequence by this population. Indeed, half of participants reported that getting into trouble with the police was unlikely (this proportion was even greater for those with a history of drug use). Conversely, both pleasure and negative financial and social consequences were perceived as more likely outcomes. These findings have important implications for researchers and policymakers alike, given that financial and social consequences, and especially notions of pleasure, are largely marginalised from much of public policy discourse about young people's drug use (Keane 2009; Moore 1990) and social marketing campaigns in particular. Arguably, this creates a problematic "gap" between young people's experience of drug use and public campaign prevention messages that largely emphasise health harms or criminal justice deterrence.

Conclusion

The findings of this study offer insight into how young people perceive the likely consequences of illicit drug use in various

areas of their lives. Although this study was only exploratory, the results provide a more nuanced understanding of young people's attitudes towards illicit drugs, and how these attitudes are shaped by the world around them. We contend there is considerable opportunity for future research to better understand the complexities of young people's attitudes towards illicit drugs. In particular we see a need for a more refined exploration of perceived consequences, across different health, legal, financial and social domains. Such research is required first and foremost because failure to unmask how young people perceive the consequences of drug use (and weigh up the likely outcomes) hinders opportunities to develop effective, evidence-informed policy responses that will resonate meaningfully with this generation and future cohorts of young Australians.

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It is clear from the results that detection by law enforcement is not deemed a likely consequence by this population.

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