

## Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

### Press Release

#### Pathways to Problems

Hazardous use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs by young people in the UK and its implications for policy

14 September 2006

This important new report, published today, takes a comprehensive look at the use of psychoactive drugs - including tobacco and alcohol - by young people in the UK today. Using new and recently published research, it tackles these questions:

What are the trends?

Why do only some young people use drugs, and of these only some become hazardous or dependent users?

How and where do young people get drugs?

Can hazardous drug use be prevented?

It then looks at the relevant Government policies. Whilst it supports much that is currently being done, it concludes that more can be done to reduce the risks of harm to young people caused by drugs. A wide-ranging series of 24 recommendations follows.

#### **Main findings**

- With the exception of cigarette smoking by boys, the use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis among 15 year olds in the UK is among the highest in Europe. Around 20-25% are regular smokers, with females outnumbering males; 40-50% are drinking at least weekly; and 20-25% have used illegal drugs in the past month.
- In the late teens and early twenties, the use of almost all types of drugs becomes more common, particularly after leaving school. Tobacco, alcohol and cannabis dominate but significant numbers begin using stimulants such as ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamines and depressants such as heroin and tranquillisers.
- Among the 6.8 million 16-24 year olds in the UK, almost a third are daily smokers, nearly 30% drink more than twice the recommended daily alcohol limit at least once a week, and 1 million have used an illegal drug in the past month. Multiple drug use is common at all ages. Young tobacco smokers are much more likely to use illegal drugs than non-smokers.
- Of all the drugs, alcohol has shown the most recent growth in use and causes the most problems among young people in the UK today. The most alarming recent development has been the growth in the number young women who are drinking frequently and to

excess. In the past decade the proportion of women drinking more than twice the recommended weekly limit has doubled.

- Many factors influence whether or not young people use tobacco, alcohol or other drugs hazardously. The most important include early life experiences, family relationships and circumstances, and parental attitudes and behaviour.
- Young people have little difficulty in obtaining tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs. The age-of-purchase regulations for tobacco and alcohol are rarely enforced. Of all the psychoactive drug producers, the alcohol industry has the greatest scope for marketing its products.
- Although drugs education is now part of the curriculum of most schools in the UK, available research indicates that it has little if any impact on future drug use.

### **Main recommendations**

- The Government should do more to ensure that young people are aware of the real hazards of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, using a variety of routes including the media, the school system and higher education.
- The age of legal purchase of tobacco should be raised from 16 to 18 years, in line with alcohol. This new limit should be strictly enforced, as should the current age-of-purchase limit for alcohol.
- In order to reduce the overall consumption of alcohol, the Government should seriously consider progressively raising the excise duty on alcohol.
- A much stricter code of alcohol advertising and sponsorship should be established.
- Given the higher accident rates among young drivers, consideration should be given to reducing the maximum legal blood alcohol level for drivers under the age of 25 from the present 80mg per ml to 50mg per ml.
- The current arrangements to control the supply of illegal drugs should be reviewed to determine whether any further cost-effective and politically acceptable measures can be taken to reduce their availability to young people.
- The Government should continue to invest heavily in protecting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people throughout the UK.
- The ongoing debate about how to bring up children should take account of the evidence that good parenting and stable family life can reduce the risks of hazardous drug use by young people.
- There should be a careful reassessment of the role of schools in drug misuse prevention. Universities, colleges and major training institutions should also take more responsibility for encouraging

and enabling young people to minimise the hazardous use of tobacco alcohol and other drugs.

- Accessible services for young people with serious tobacco, alcohol or other drug problems should be developed throughout the UK.

### **Notes to editors**

1. The report “‘Pathways to Problems’; Hazardous use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs by young people in the UK and its implications for policy” will be available on [www.drugs.gov.uk](http://www.drugs.gov.uk) from 9:30am on Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> September 2006. For media enquiries, please call the ACMD Secretariat on 020 7035 0454.
2. Hard copies of the report are available from the ACMD Secretariat on 020 7035 0459.
3. The ACMD is established under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to keep under review the drug situation in the United Kingdom and to advise Government Ministers on measures that they feel should be taken for preventing the misuse of drugs or for dealing with the social problems connected with their misuse. They publish highly influential reports.
4. This report was produced by the Prevention Working Group, a sub-group of the ACMD, chaired by Dr Laurence Gruer. The Prevention Working Group carries out intensive inquiries on important topic areas every 2-3 years. Its most recent report, “Hidden Harm” was about responding to the needs of the children of problem drug users.