



CITYWIDE DRUGS CRISIS CAMPAIGN

Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use



CityWide
Drugs Crisis Campaign



Support
&
Future



CityWide
Drugs Crisis Campaign



Then & Now



NOTE: Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign is a national network of community organisations that are involved in addressing the drugs issue and it represents the community sector on the National Oversight Committee of the National Drugs Strategy (NDS).

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CITYWIDE SUBMISSION SUMMARY

In Ireland, we have a history of using moral judgement as a basis for shaping policy on key social issues, leading to blame, shame, stigma, and ultimately criminalisation and we know that the negative impact of these punitive policies falls most on people experiencing poverty and/or on minority groups. In recent years, the work of Citizens' Assemblies has played a key role in helping us as a society to move away from this type of moral judgement and the CA on Drugs provides us with an opportunity to do the same in relation to our policy on drugs.

KEY AREAS FOR ACTION:

1. Re-establish a Combat Poverty Agency independent of government and empowered to hold government to account.

The relationship between poverty and drug-related harms is well-established. But it's not enough just to recognise this, we need to take action on it, with a national anti-poverty campaign that engages communities & underpins our approach to drugs.

2. End criminalisation of people who use drugs, full stop.

As long as we criminalise people who use drugs, we are causing them additional harm and reducing the effectiveness of any initiatives or services we put in place. We cannot respond effectively to other issues while we continue to do this.

But, while ending the criminalisation of people who use drugs is essential, it is only a first step, and it has to be implemented hand in hand with other key actions, including adequate funding for Community Drug Projects and related state services.

3. Invest in an independent Community Development programme to support and underpin a central role for community voices in decision-making structures.

We welcome the CA's focus to date on the crucial importance of having community voices at the heart of our response to drugs - people who use drugs, their families and the wider community – and we need to build on & strengthen this approach.

4. Open up a discussion about the impacts on our communities of the current legal framework under which drugs are controlled and whether it is fit for purpose.

As with drug use, harms related to the drug trade impact most severely in poor and minority communities. We need to acknowledge that the levels of fear generated as a result of intimidation & violence are preventing the normal criminal justice process from working and start a discussion on how we can best address this reality.

1. The Community Context

“There is little difference in the levels of drug use between areas that are most and least deprived, but it won’t be a surprise to hear that **communities with high levels of deprivation are disproportionately impacted** by the negative effects of drug use activities in their local area.”

HRB Irish National Drug & Alcohol Survey 2019-2020

A community drug problem develops when there is a high concentration of drug problems in a particular area and a lack of resources to address it, and it results in a negative impact on all aspects of community life.

We have seen how these negative impacts can lead to division and conflict within our communities and this is why it is so important that our response to drugs is informed by people who use drugs, their families and members of the wider community, working together in solidarity to improve life for everyone in our communities.

Problem drug use in Ireland first emerged in the late 70’s & 80s and then into the 90s in communities experiencing serious social and economic deprivation and our failure to address this poverty and inequality has led to the drugs problem in these communities becoming chronic, deep-rooted and embedded. Citywide was set up in 1995 to bring community leaders together to campaign for a state response to the devastating impact of the heroin crisis in our communities, and following the tragic murder of journalist Veronica Guerin in 1996 the state finally responded with the publication of the Rabbitte Report in the same year.

As our community networks have extended over the years, we have seen how every part of the country is now experiencing the impact of the drugs problem. Having taken root in disadvantaged urban areas, the problem has spread out from the cities into towns and villages, and into isolated rural areas. One pattern that is common across all settings from urban to rural and across all parts of the country, is that the worst impact of drugs is experienced in the most disadvantaged parts of the community. [We know that the link between problem drug use and poverty has remained consistent and persistent from the 1970/80s up to this day](#) and this is supported by the findings of research carried out for the Dept of Health in 2016 and the HRB in 2019.

Yet despite the evidence, our approach to drugs in recent years has lost the focus on addressing the underlying issues of poverty and marginalisation. As a result of this policy shift, the communities most affected are under even greater pressure and facing even greater drug-related harms. We’ve done enough talking about the link between poverty and drugs, and we now need to take practical actions to address it.

Recommendation 1

Re-establish a Combat Poverty Agency independent of government with a mandate to ensure that our response to drugs is underpinned by a community led anti-poverty strategy.

2. The Impact of Criminalisation

As well as the link between poverty and drug harms, we are also well aware of the link between poverty and criminalisation. People from communities affected by poverty are more likely to be criminalised in general and are also more likely to experience the harms of the current policy of criminalising people who use drugs and people who sell drugs.

Citywide first highlighted the concern in our communities about the negative impact of criminalising people for using drugs back in 2013, and, based on our extensive experience and ongoing engagement with the issues since then, we believe it is wrong that any person should be deemed a criminal because he/she uses a drug.

We now understand very clearly the harm that is caused by a policy that criminalises people.

- In the absence of adequate mental health supports and services in our communities, drug use is often a way of self-medicating to cope with mental health issues and with the impact of trauma. How can we still think in this day and age that it is acceptable to make criminals of people in these situations?
- Nearly 70% of convictions for drug offences in Ireland are for possession of drugs for personal use and between 1996 and 2020 there have been more than a quarter of a million (257,765) recorded crimes for possession of drugs for personal use. There is a significant cost to the state through policing, legal aid, probation, DPP and court resources that could be better invested in health and social services.
- Drug convictions have a potential negative impact for a person's whole life and across many aspects of their lives, including employment, accessing training or education, being able to travel, securing housing. It makes no sense that services are working to support people to make progress in their lives while, at the same time, we put up barriers to their progress by criminalising them.
- Criminalisation is a major barrier to the full participation of people who use drugs and stops them from being front and centre of our response.

Citywide launched the anti-stigma campaign <https://stopthestigma.ie/why-stigma-matters/> in 2019 to highlight and address the devastating stigma and discrimination that is experienced by people who use drugs. Ending criminalisation is one of the four key actions to tackle stigma that are set out in the campaign document. Our friends and partners in the Family Support network also identify the crushing impact that drug-related stigma has on families and how it is a major barrier to people seeking help and support.

People often think that if we end criminalisation of people who use drugs it will lead to an increase in overall levels of drug use, but in fact this is not the case. Many countries across the world now have some form of decriminalisation for personal use and the evidence shows that it does not lead to an overall increase in drug use.

The World Health Organisation (‘WHO’) states *“there is **no clear link** between punitive enforcement and lower levels of drug use ... moves towards decriminalisation are **not** associated with increased use”*.

Portugal is the most common example given of a country that no longer criminalises people for possession of drugs for their own use. Portugal does not overclaim for decriminalisation and they do not present it as a solution to the drugs problem. We are also very clear that decriminalisation will not “solve” the problem, but what it will do is end the very significant harms that are being caused by the current policy of criminalisation, which is only serving to make things worse.

Citywide believes that we should use the decision to introduce decriminalisation in Ireland as an opportunity to engage with all of our community voices, to refocus and re-invest in our community drug services and to launch a national education campaign on drug-related stigma.

Recommendation 2

End criminalisation of people who use drugs and roll out a National Anti-Stigma Campaign.

3. Engaging Our Community Voices

At the core of our approach to the impact of drugs is the empowerment of the people most affected to lead out on the responses. [The crucial importance of the community's expertise has been highlighted since the 1996 Rabbitte Report](#) which recognised the need to address the link between drugs and poverty through a community development approach, and set up the Drug Task Force structures to involve local communities [in making decisions about what needs to be done in their areas](#). Across the country, the local knowledge of how the drugs issue is impacting and of the specific challenges in responding to it in different locations is crucial to developing the responses that will work in our communities.

In spite of its successes, the community-led partnership approach that worked well for a number of years has not been maintained. In recent years, the lack of investment in community networks has placed a huge strain on community participation, both in the role of Community Reps on the Task Force structures and in broader community responses to emerging issues. We have learnt that without community leadership, without the expertise that people who are using drugs, their family members and the wider community can bring, our response to drugs will not be effective. Task Forces are recognising the need to engage in new initiatives at a local level to encourage and support community participation and it is essential that this work be resourced

Recommendation 3

Make sure that we have strong community voices at the heart of our response to drugs by investing in independent community networks through a programme of community development supports.

We have learnt from our friends and partners in the Traveller community about how the link between poverty and drug-related harms impacts on their communities, and about how their ongoing experience of racism adds to and compounds these harms. More recently, we are learning from our friends and partners in migrant communities about the range of experiences in relation to drugs amongst different ethnic groups, but also the common experience of how they are being impacted by the link between marginalisation, racism and drug-related harms.

[It is crucial that we recognise the distinct and destructive influence of racism on the experience of Travellers and migrant communities and that we learn from them about how this interlinks with the drugs issue](#). We need to be standing with them and supporting them to lead out on the responses that can best meet the needs within their own communities

The LGBTI+ community has a long and proud history of leadership and innovation in peer led harm reduction in relation to health issues in the community. Since the early 2000s, we have been working with our LGBTI+ partners and friends to support a peer led harm reduction approach in responding to their community experience of the impact of drugs. LGBTI+ young people have higher rates of mental health issues, suicide and self-harm as a result of the

ongoing stigma, discrimination and homophobia that is directed at the LGBTI+ and Trans communities and, in turn, this adds to and compounds the risk of drug-related harms.

It is crucial that we recognise the distinct and destructive influence of prejudice experienced by members of the LGBTI+ and Trans communities and ensure they are supported in leading out on responses that can best meet their community needs.

Recommendation 4

Ensure the voices of all our communities are included at every stage of developing and implementing responses to the impact of drug-related harms.

4. The Role of Community Drug Projects

The unique strength of our Community Drug Projects is that they deliver an integrated approach to service delivery based on the understanding that people's drug-related problems cannot be addressed in isolation from the wider issues that are impacting on their lives.

1. Their work ranges across all relevant issues e.g., housing, legal issues, family support, mental health, childcare, education, training etc.
2. They can adapt and respond quickly to the changing and emerging needs in their communities e.g. the ability to adapt and innovate to deliver community outreach services during Covid.
3. They promote peer-led working so that people using the services can contribute their own knowledge and understanding to improving existing responses and developing new ones.
4. They support and promote the reintegration of people back into the community and support a positive community response to the drugs issue.

Community Drug Projects continue to innovate in developing specific programmes to address a range of issues e.g., mental health, domestic violence, alcohol use, recovery coaching etc. Our community networks have recently begun looking at the emerging issue of the link between neurodivergence and drug use and how to develop responses that can begin to address the issue at a local community level.

[The Saol Project](#) has led the way in developing innovative peer-led services for women, recognising and responding to the very specific and distinct experience that women have around drug use and drug services, where women who are using drugs experience even higher levels of stigma. As part of the Anti-Stigma Campaign, an anti-stigma training programme was co-designed with the women in Saol to address the stigma experienced by people who use drugs when they access addiction services, social services and justice services.

Young people across our society are living in a world where availability and use of a wide range of drugs, including alcohol, is common and widespread and, as with all other age groups, the impact of drug-related harms on young people is most damaging in poor and minority communities. [Community Youth Services are involved in a range of initiatives to provide young people with a voice in relation to how drugs impact on their lives and what kind of responses they feel are needed.](#) The value of this work also needs to be recognised and funded at a level that reflects its crucial importance to our communities.

[Community Drug Projects play a crucial role in an effective community response to drugs, but because they are operating at a very local level the importance of the role they play has often been overlooked.](#) A report carried out by the Dept. of Health on the impact of Covid identified how effectively the local projects were able to respond and adapt in a crisis and the Dept finally recognised the Community Drug Projects as being essential services.

Recommendation 5

Engage with the Community Drug Projects to develop and put in place an efficient, reliable and sustainable funding arrangement that reflects the value of the work they do.

5. The impact of the illegal Drugs Market

A major challenge that has emerged for our communities over the years has been how to respond to the impact of the intimidation and violence that is associated with the illegal drugs market. In the 1980s and 90s the day-to-day activities of the drugs trade were resisted and openly opposed, but thirty years on, the levels of intimidation associated with the trade have made it far more difficult for communities to organise and respond.

Our Citywide research in 2016 into drug-related violence and intimidation and further research carried out by Ana Liffey Drug Project in Dublin's North Inner City in 2021 both show similar findings, with only 18% of people who experience intimidation reporting it to anyone and, of the 18% who do report, only a small number of them report to An Garda Síochána. The main reason given for not reporting is fear of reprisal.

Our Citywide research in 2019 on young people's involvement in the drugs trade highlights the serious challenge for our Community Youth Services in engaging with young people who are becoming involved in the trade and highlights the need to hear more directly from the young people about what is going on in their lives. There is a need for solid engagement and relationship building with young people currently involved in drug distribution networks and their experiences need to inform our responses, or the responses won't work.

We have seen over 25+ years the grief, pain, trauma and desolation that results from the activities of the illegal drugs trade and its impact in our communities continues to be devastating. We have been involved in initiatives, partnerships and programmes in related to drug-related intimidation, but we have not as a society been able to come up with a way of removing the fear that is generated by an illegal market.

[Youth Workers Against Prohibition](https://www.ywapireland.com/) is a network of workers who are engaging day-to-day with young people whose lives are significantly impacted by drug use and the drugs market, and they are calling for an open discussion on how we can develop a better response. <https://www.ywapireland.com/>

The 2021 NEIC report also recommends opening up a discussion on changing the legal framework and considering whether the current regulatory framework under which substances are controlled is fit for purpose. We now need to take the opportunity provided by the CA to open up this discussion.

Recommendation 6

The Citizens' Assembly should play a key role in opening up and leading out on a discussion on the impact of our current legal framework and whether it is fit for purpose.



References

Mongan D, Millar SR, and Galvin B (2021) The 2019–20 Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey: [https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34287/1/HRB Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey 2019 20.pdf](https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34287/1/HRB_Irish_National_Drug_and_Alcohol_Survey_2019_20.pdf)

The 'Rabbitte Report' <https://www.citywide.ie/resources/1996-ministerial-task-force-on-measures-to-reduce-demand-for-drugs/>

Community Drug Indicators <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/6203/1/CommunityStudyReport.pdf>

CSO Recorded Crime Statistics: <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/crimeandjustice/recordedcrime-statisticsunderreservation/>

Citywide Research: Demanding Money with Menace- Drug Related Intimidation 2016:¹ <https://www.citywide.ie/resources/2016-demanding-money-with-menace-drug-related-intimidation/>

Citywide Research 2019: The Drug Economy and Youth Interventions <https://www.citywide.ie/resources/2019-the-drug-economy-and-youth-interventions/>

Ana Liffey Research: Debts, Threats, Distress and Hope – Towards Understanding Drug Related Intimidation in the NEIC 2021: https://www.aldp.ie/content/uploads/2021/01/Debts-Threats-Distress-and-Hope_Towards-Understanding-Drug-Related-Intimidation-in-Dublins-North-East-Inner-City_Ana-Liffey-Drug-Project.pdf

Thank you to our community partners and friends

UISCE: <https://myuisce.org/>

National Family Support Steering Group

Pavee Point Drug & Alcohol Programme: <https://www.paveepoint.ie/project/drug-and-alcohol/>

Belong To: <https://www.belongto.org/youngpeople/support-services/drugs-alcohol/>

New Communities Partnership: <https://www.newcommunities.ie/>