

RCSF & NIRP

Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use Submission 2023

Produced for
Ringsend Community Services Forum
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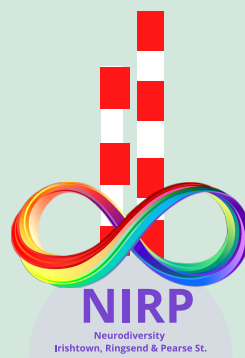


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Neurodivergent individuals face unique challenges related to drug and alcohol misuse, which can have harmful impacts on individuals, families, communities, and wider society. To address these issues and promote the resilience, health, and well-being of neurodivergent individuals, a comprehensive approach is required.

Key strategies for reducing the harmful impacts of drug and alcohol misuse on neurodivergent individuals include increasing awareness and education, implementing early intervention programs, enhancing specialized treatment services, improving access to mental health support, and fostering collaboration between various stakeholders.

To increase resilience, health, and well-being among neurodivergent individuals, it is crucial to ensure timely access to early intervention services, provide appropriate mental health support, promote inclusive education, develop employment support services, offer social skills training, encourage community-based programs and activities, and provide resources and support for parents and caregivers.

A focus on public awareness, education, and research is essential for fostering a more inclusive and supportive society that better understands and addresses the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals.

By working collaboratively and investing in targeted interventions and services, we can create a more equitable and inclusive society that promotes the well-being of neurodivergent individuals and their families.

- Early intervention is vital: Timely support helps build coping skills and resilience in neurodivergent individuals.
- Specialized mental health support: Tailored services improve well-being by addressing co-occurring mental health issues.
- Inclusive education and employment: Promoting inclusivity fosters resilience and overall well-being.
- Comprehensive approaches to address misuse: Collaboration between stakeholders is key to reducing drug and alcohol misuse impacts.
- Include neurodivergent voices: Their input ensures targeted interventions and effective support services.

5 KEY FINDINGS

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ABOUT RCSF

The network was set up in 2006 it began as a local initiative to build a network of community, social, environmental and sporting groups who work within the locality of the Ringsend & Irishtown area. The focus of the network is to empower and assist groups to participate in local decision-making, event planning, and cross-agency collaboration through information sharing and training & development.

The main object for which the Company is established is to support community services and groups in Ringsend and Irishtown to come together for the purpose of cooperation and collaboration.

Our Functions:

- Provide a platform for local community services to engage in active citizenship, prevention and education.
- Provide a space for member groups to share information about work.
- Provide opportunities for members to explore and analyze issues of mutual interest
- Provide opportunities for members to undertake collective work initiatives in the interest of the most disadvantaged members of the communities of Ringsend and Irishtown.
- Provide peer support to the staff of community services and groups in Ringsend and Irishtown.

Our proposed solution is creating a strategic plan to encompass all these needs. The value will be prevention, education, and overall well-being within the community of Ringsend & Irishtown, enabling a collaborative approach to provide wrap-around supports within the locality to affect change and encourage progression.

It does this by connecting the services to support the community through the complete life cycle. Doing this reduces harm, decreases trauma and encourages wellbeing through understanding lived experiences, connections and research.

ABOUT NIRP

NIRP is a community group consisting of 48 families from the Irishtown, Ringsend, and Pearse Street areas in Dublin 4 and Dublin 2.

Our mission is to advocate on behalf of neurodivergent children and individuals, working tirelessly to secure better access to services, education, and awareness within our community.

Neurodiversity is a concept that embraces the wide range of neurological differences among people as natural variations in human brains.

These differences include various types of spectrum disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and others. Neurodivergent individuals often face unique challenges and barriers in their daily lives but also possess exceptional talents and abilities that contribute significantly to the diversity of our society.

NIRP, are dedicated to promoting understanding, inclusion, and acceptance of neurodivergent individuals. We seek to create an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive, ensuring that our community is well-informed and equipped to support those with diverse neurological needs.

THE IMPACT

Neurodivergent individuals (e.g., those with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and other neurological differences) may be at a higher risk for substance misuse and addiction.

There is a growing body of research examining the links between neurodiversity and substance use.

Factors contributing to substance misuse among neurodivergent individuals:

- Self-medication: Neurodivergent individuals may use substances to cope with the challenges associated with their condition (e.g., anxiety, social difficulties, sensory overload, etc.).
- Impulsivity: Some neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with ADHD, may have higher levels of impulsivity, which can contribute to substance misuse.
- Social isolation: Neurodivergent individuals may experience social isolation, which could lead to substance use as a way to cope or fit in with peers.
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Prevention and intervention strategies:

- Early identification: Identifying neurodivergent individuals early in life can lead to better access to appropriate support services, potentially reducing the risk of substance misuse.
- Tailored interventions: Programs and therapies specifically designed for neurodivergent individuals may be more effective in addressing substance misuse.
- Social support: Providing a supportive social network for neurodivergent individuals can help reduce feelings of isolation and the risk of substance misuse.
- Education and training: Educating healthcare professionals, educators, and caregivers about the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals can improve the overall support system and reduce the risk of substance misuse.

The Harmful Effects of Drug and Alcohol Misuse on Neurodivergent Individuals, Families, Communities, and Wider Society

Drug and alcohol misuse has long been a pressing issue affecting individuals, families, and communities across the globe. However, its impact on neurodivergent individuals, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, and other neurological differences, is a topic that demands more attention and understanding.

Neurodivergent individuals may be more susceptible to the harmful effects of drug and alcohol misuse due to the unique challenges they face in their everyday lives.

Emerging research has suggested that neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with ASD, may be more likely to use recreational drugs to self-medicate their mental health issues (University of Cambridge, n.d.).

This tendency may stem from the difficulties that neurodivergent individuals often experience in social situations, sensory processing, and executive functioning. Additionally, a study conducted by Harvard University has explored the possible link between autism and addiction in teenagers, further highlighting the potential vulnerability of this population to substance abuse (Harvard Gazette, 2022).

The harmful effects of drug and alcohol misuse on neurodivergent individuals can be devastating, with consequences that extend beyond the individual to their families, communities, and wider society. In particular, substance abuse can exacerbate existing mental health issues, lead to deteriorating physical health, and strain relationships with family and friends.

This burden on families may result in financial and emotional stress, as well as increased rates of caregiver burnout.

Communities and the wider society also bear the impact of drug and alcohol misuse among neurodivergent individuals. The costs of healthcare, law enforcement, and social services can rise significantly as a result of substance abuse.

Additionally, the lost potential and productivity of neurodivergent individuals who struggle with addiction can have lasting effects on society.

To mitigate the harmful effects of drug and alcohol misuse on neurodivergent individuals and those around them, it is crucial to promote awareness, understanding, and support. By fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society, we can help to ensure that neurodivergent individuals have access to the resources and services they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

CURRENT SERVICES & POLICIES

This analysis does not provide a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of legislation, policy, and service delivery for neurodivergent individuals in the Irish system, it highlights some areas that work well and others that require improvement.

What works:

1. Recognition of neurodiversity: The Irish government has made progress in recognizing and supporting neurodiversity, with initiatives such as the National Autism Strategy and the National Disability Inclusion Strategy. These strategies aim to improve the quality of life for neurodivergent individuals and their families by promoting inclusion and equal access to services.
2. Legislation supporting disability rights: Ireland has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which provides a framework for promoting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities, including those who are neurodivergent. The Disability Act 2005 and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 are examples of national legislation that support the rights of individuals with disabilities.
3. Multidisciplinary approach: The Irish system has made efforts to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to supporting neurodivergent individuals, involving collaboration between health, education, and social services. This approach helps ensure that the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals are better understood and met across various domains of life.

What doesn't work:

- **Insufficient funding and resources:** Funding and resources for services supporting neurodivergent individuals are often insufficient to meet demand, resulting in long waiting lists, inadequate support, and overburdened service providers. This can lead to delays in diagnosis, treatment, and access to necessary services.
- **Lack of specialized services:** There is a need for more specialized services tailored to the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals, including those related to mental health, substance misuse, and employment support. The current system often fails to provide appropriate support in these areas.
- **Inconsistent service provision:** The quality and availability of services for neurodivergent individuals can vary significantly across the country, resulting in a postcode lottery for access to support. This creates inequalities in service provision and may limit the potential for neurodivergent individuals to fully participate in society.
- **Limited training and awareness:** Many healthcare professionals, educators, and service providers lack adequate training and awareness of neurodiversity and the unique challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals. This can result in misdiagnosis, delayed support, and inappropriate interventions.
- **Insufficient engagement with neurodivergent individuals:** The voices of neurodivergent individuals and their families are often underrepresented in the development of policies and services. Greater engagement with these communities is needed to ensure that their needs and perspectives are adequately considered.

In conclusion, while the Irish system has made progress in recognizing and supporting neurodivergent individuals, there remain significant gaps and areas for improvement in terms of legislation, policy, and service delivery. Addressing these issues is essential for creating a more inclusive and supportive society for neurodivergent individuals and their families.

FINDINGS

To reduce the supply, demand, and harm of illicit drugs on neurodivergent individuals and families, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This approach should incorporate prevention, intervention, and harm reduction strategies, as well as collaboration between various stakeholders. Here are some recommendations:

- Enhance prevention programs: Implement targeted drug prevention programs for neurodivergent individuals, particularly in schools and community settings. These programs should be evidence-based and adapted to meet the unique needs and challenges faced by neurodivergent populations (Sizoo & Kuiper, 2017).
- Strengthen early intervention services: Develop early intervention services that identify and support neurodivergent individuals at risk for substance misuse. By providing timely and appropriate support, these services can help reduce the likelihood of individuals turning to drugs as a coping mechanism (Murphy et al., 2020).
- Improve access to specialized treatment: Enhance access to specialized substance misuse treatment services tailored to the needs of neurodivergent individuals. These services should incorporate evidence-based interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, social skills training, and sensory integration therapy (Kronenberg et al., 2015).
- Develop harm reduction strategies: Implement harm reduction strategies specifically designed for neurodivergent individuals who use drugs. These strategies may include supervised drug consumption facilities, needle exchange programs, and naloxone distribution initiatives, all of which can help minimize the negative consequences associated with drug use (Hawk et al., 2017).

- Foster collaboration between stakeholders: Encourage collaboration between health, education, social services, law enforcement, and other relevant stakeholders to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to reduce supply, demand, and harm. This may involve establishing multi-disciplinary teams, sharing best practices, and leveraging resources more effectively (Jones et al., 2014).
- Strengthen legislation and policy: Review and strengthen existing legislation and policies to better address the unique needs of neurodivergent individuals and their families. This may include updating drug laws to prioritize treatment and rehabilitation over punishment for neurodivergent individuals and increasing funding for specialized services (Buxton et al., 2020).
- Involve neurodivergent individuals and families: Actively involve neurodivergent individuals and their families in the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies and services aimed at reducing drug supply, demand, and harm. Their input can help ensure that these efforts are tailored to their needs and experiences (Pellicano et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is crucial to recognize the diverse needs of neurodivergent and disabled individuals, who are often underrepresented in research and policy discussions, such as those highlighted in the publications from the Health Research Board (HRB) in Ireland. Promoting a more inclusive and supportive society requires addressing the unique challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals through a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders, including healthcare professionals, educators, policymakers, community organizations, and families.

Continual investment in research is essential to better understand the specific factors contributing to the health, resilience, and well-being of neurodivergent individuals. This includes not only developing and evaluating targeted interventions and support services but also ensuring that neurodivergent and disabled people are adequately represented in the data collection and evidence used to inform policy and practice.

Additionally, it is vital to ensure that the voices of neurodivergent individuals and their families are heard and considered in the development and implementation of policies and services. This can be achieved by actively involving them in research processes and promoting their inclusion in policy discussions.

By working together to create inclusive environments, improve access to specialized services, and raise awareness of neurodiversity, we can foster resilience, health, and well-being for neurodivergent individuals and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

Incorporating the perspectives of neurodivergent and disabled people in research, such as those conducted by the HRB, is a necessary step towards achieving this goal.

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