



**Addiction
is a health
issue not
a crime**

stopthestigma.ie

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**“They see the addiction. They don’t see us”
People who use drugs amongst the most stigmatised in society**

Stigma experienced by people who use drugs prevents many from seeking help and support, making it extremely difficult for people to move beyond their addiction and pushing them into further isolation and danger, according to research underpinning Ireland’s first campaign to address drug related stigma.

Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign, which has developed the new Stop the Stigma campaign, the first of its kind in Ireland, said that unless stigma was addressed and challenged, it could undermine the ambitions of the health-led approach of the new National Drugs Strategy.

Irish and International research shows that people who use drugs are amongst the most vilified in society. In focus groups with over 70 people who are using, or who have used drugs, Citywide found that people are acutely aware that they are looked down on by society in general. They said that the stigma they feel makes them feel worthless, depressed, demoralised, ashamed, degraded and powerless, for example. In all focus groups, people said that experiencing stigma made them want to use drugs again.

Ann Quigley, Co-ordinator with Citywide, said that stigma hurts everyone and costs the state money.

“Stigma destroys lives, families and futures,” she said. “It drives people into isolation, danger and back into addiction. It labels families and neighbourhoods. And it costs us all money because it is the biggest barrier there is to people seeking the help and support systems and policies we are putting in place with our new National Drugs Strategy.”

In Ireland, public attitudes towards drug addiction are largely negative and hostile. In a Red C market research survey, commissioned by Citywide, nearly two thirds (64%) of the Irish population said that it would bother them to live near somebody who has a drug dependency. Just over half of the population said that they felt “scared” of people with a drug dependency. Nearly 90% believe that drug related crime is a major problem in Ireland.

Research shows that one of the key reasons for these high levels of stigma is that people who use drugs are perceived as being solely to blame for their addiction. Charlie Lloyd of the University of York, and one of the guest speakers at the launch, said that the risk factors for addiction are complex, including genetic predisposition and early family trauma , often exacerbated by poverty and marginalisation.

“Thinking that people who use drugs can just stop using if they want to betrays a lack of understanding of the complex nature of addiction,” he said. “If we want to stop the stigma that is having such an impact on people's lives, we have to understand more about addiction. And the first thing we have to do is debunk the blame.”

He pointed particularly to the stigma that people often experience in their interaction with healthcare and medical services or with the police. Citywide said that a key part of its response to the impact of stigma will be to work in collaboration with healthcare, medical and policing services to ensure greater understanding of the negative impact of stigma and discrimination.

For more information contact:

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Wiping Away the Stigma – Five Things that Can Make A Difference

1. Change our language – stop using the word junkie.
2. Develop education and training programmes in collaboration with healthcare staff.
3. Support stronger community drug programmes
4. Understand more about the complexity of addiction
5. End the criminalisation of people who use drugs.