



The Community Story

- An Introductory Document



**A project of Citywide
Drugs Crisis Campaign**

June 2023

Background to the Community Story

The Citizens' Assembly on Drugs, which began in April and runs until October, is considering how Ireland should respond to the issue of drugs, at a time when there is general agreement that our existing approach is not working.

To help us to understand why it is not working and what kind of change is needed, we would like you to hear the stories of people who are living with the impact of our current approach, people who use drugs, their family members and community activists, who are working together to bring about change.

These individual stories are shaped by what is happening in our communities, so we'd like to start by introducing you to our Community Story...

Almost one quarter of the adult population in Ireland, about 900,000 people, have used an illegal drug at some point in their lifetime. A significant majority do not go on to develop an addiction problem, indicating that recreational drug use is quite common. According to the HRB "there is little difference in the levels of drug use between areas that are most and least deprived." However, "**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

This disproportionate negative impact is not due to individual character failure in working class communities, but is the result of the state's failure to respond to long term poverty, the community trauma that results and an approach to drugs policy that has made things worse – an approach that is based on **blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation**.

Our story begins in Working-Class communities...

The disaster of mass unemployment in urban working-class neighbourhoods during the 70s, 80s and 90s, resulted in entire communities losing not just their wages but their sense of identity and dignity. With no plan put in place by the state to replace the jobs, people had to depend on welfare payments to survive and whole communities became labelled with a new negative identity as lazy, not wanting to work and being "scroungers." Unemployment soon carried on into a second generation, and then into a third, with young people growing up in homes where it was normal for no-one to have a job.

At the same time, housing policies were leading to displacement of people from settled working-class communities to newer estates on the outskirts of cities and towns, built without proper services or facilities. The poverty, the labelling and the negative identity carried over into the newer estates, along with the trauma of losing the networks of extended family and neighbours that kept people going day-to-day as they struggled to get by.

It is a hardly a surprise that when drugs arrived into these already traumatised communities they took hold, took root, and never left. Across our communities we see

...people using drugs to self-medicate to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression, and with mental health conditions that are not diagnosed and they don't even know they have

...people using drugs to self-medicate to cope with the impact of trauma that they don't know they are living with, because, well, it's just normal life

...young people using drugs because it's now been part of their family and/or community experience of how to cope for 3 or 4 generations, yes, it is just normal life

...women using drugs to self-medicate so that they can keep going as carers, as mothers, as the people who keep the family together and carry the burdens.

But exactly because they are the carers, women are judged more harshly for using drugs, in particular if they are mothers. They feel the shame of being judged a "bad" mother for using drugs and live with the fear that their children, who they love very much, will be taken from them. The separation of children from their mothers leads to further trauma across generations, both for families and for the community.

The ultimate trauma for our communities is the loss of so many lives to drug-related causes. The grief and pain of so many deaths, deaths related to drug use, deaths related to the drugs trade. So many of them young people, long lists of names, names of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, friends, neighbours, remembered on local memorial plaques and at community commemoration services.

Without a proper plan in place to respond to the economic impact of long-term unemployment, the illegal drugs trade and the activities around it filled the vacuum and put down roots. It would be hard to overstate the profound and devastating impact that this has had, and is continuing to have, on community life.

In communities where your neighbours have always been like your extended family, people start deciding to “mind your own business,” they withdraw from public spaces and becoming more isolated within their own homes. “Keep your eyes down, don’t look around you, don’t get involved.”

There are people living every day with the fear of violence and intimidation, mothers, fathers, grandparents, terrified that their children and/or grandchildren will get caught up in it and what the consequences might be. People go on to the housing transfer list so that they can move away, often from the community that their family has lived in all their lives.

The connections and the bonds that have managed to survive through generations of struggle and trauma are splintering - the trust, the neighbourliness, the solidarity, the mutual support that is at the heart of community life and community survival is being undermined.

We are seeing how our failure to address poverty and our failed approach to drugs have combined to trap people in a cycle of **blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation**. We blame them for taking the drugs, we shame them for bringing pain to their family and community, we stigmatise them with horrible and demeaning names, and we define them and treat them as criminals.

Our Story extends to other communities...

We know that people in less deprived areas do not experience the impact of drugs in the same way at a collective community level. However, their stories tell us how, as individuals and families, they too get caught in the fallout of an approach to drugs that is based on blame, shame and criminalisation.

While alcohol has been the recreational drug of choice for generations, younger people are making choices to look at options other than, or additional to, alcohol. Under our current approach to drugs, this change to use of a different drug carries with it the risk of shame, stigma, and possible criminalisation, so as a society, we act like it’s not happening and don’t talk about it.

There is often a huge silence around drug issues in middle-class communities, “this doesn’t happen in areas like this” and “this doesn’t happen in families like ours.” It brings with it a fear that the person using drugs will be labelled as “bad,” a “bad influence” and seen as someone to be avoided. There is a fear of the family being blamed and being seen as having failed to meet the requirements of a “good family.”

And even in the awful pain of grief, where drugs have played a role in a loved one’s death, families can feel they have to hide the truth about what has really happened.

There is fear of what your child or family member might become involved in as part of buying drugs, fear of the police coming to the door or, even worse, fear of a drug seller coming to the door looking for money. In the face of what is a personal and family trauma, people are caught with having to deal with blame, shame, and the fear of criminalisation.

The reality is that every community across Ireland is now affected by drugs; in towns, in villages, in isolated rural areas. People who are active in the community in regional towns can see how drugs are a part of everyday life in the town, in the pubs, in the GAA clubs, in the rugby clubs, drug use is happening in every walk of life. As in the cities, the worst impacts are being felt in the poorest areas of the town.

Again, the fear of blame and shame is leading to a massive silence; people do not talk publicly about what is happening in the town, if you do, you will be seen as someone who is "giving the town a bad name," and "labelling everyone who lives here," and there will be a backlash against you. It's better to stay quiet, even if around you, you can see the impact of drug-related harms getting worse.

Community activists talk about the shame and stigma around drugs in rural communities, with families trying to hide what is happening to them for fear of how they will be judged, both within their own families and in the wider community. There is silence around drug use, and the silence leads to people feeling isolated, feeling like they are on their own, like they are the only people in their community that this is happening too.

Across every part of Ireland people are being affected by the impact of **blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation.**

Our Story includes our Young People...

Young people across every part of our society are living in a world where availability and use of a wide range of drugs, including alcohol, is common and widespread and the view held by their parents or grandparents' generation that drug use is something that can be "stopped" or "ended" does not make any sense to them.

Across our communities, our current approach is denying our young people the opportunity to have an honest and open discussion about how they experience drugs in their lives. Messages that threaten young people and warn them of the potential punishments that can result from drug use are seen as insulting. How can we expect to hear about the reality of young people's drug use when we are telling them it's a crime? If we are not allowing them to talk about their reality, then it's no surprise our approach isn't working.

Our community experience is reflected in the report prepared for the Citizens' Assembly which sets out the desire of young people to see an end to the criminalisation of people who use drugs and to consider making drugs legally available. It is crucial that change in our current approach is informed and shaped by the experiences of young people and that we have an approach that is relevant to their lives, in particular young people from the communities most affected.

Young people who become involved in the drugs trade are labelled in a particularly negative way in our public discussions on drugs and are often regarded as pariahs who we should no longer care about. We know these young people and we do care about them, and we have to keep engaging with them to maintain relationships, even if, and when, they do get actively involved in the drugs trade. We must not lose another generation to **blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation**.

Our Story includes our Minority Communities...

Along with the Community Drug Problems that have developed and taken root in our working-class communities, we know that Community Drug Problems are also experienced by minority groups in Irish society who live with everyday discrimination, stigmatisation and hate simply because of their identity, because of who they are – Travellers, Migrants & Ethnic Minorities, LGBTI+ and Trans communities.

As an Irish ethnic minority, generations of Travellers have lived every day with the traumatic impact of racism and the bad policies that are shaped by racism and interlinked with poverty and exclusion. Travellers have seen their traditional work and ways of earning a living disappear while housing policy treats them as a "problem" to be dealt with in the interests of other people, leading to an approach to housing that effectively criminalises the Traveller way of life.

It is no surprise that for Travellers too drugs have taken a hold and taken root in their communities. They have similar experiences of using drugs to self-medicate to cope with stress, anxiety and depression, and with mental health conditions that are not diagnosed and for which no services are available.

The Traveller community continues to experience a shocking level of premature deaths and an increasing rate of deaths by suicide, which leads in turn to further self-medication to cope with the trauma. Again we have a community experiencing the grief and pain of so many deaths, including drug-related deaths, so many of them young people, long lists of names, names of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, friends, neighbours.

For Travellers already living with the ongoing and continuing trauma of structural racism, the community drug problem is another part of the same story, and, because we have failed as a society to address racism against Travellers, this failure risks being repeated in the experience of people from ethnic minorities who live in Ireland or are coming to live here from different parts of the world.

Members of our migrant communities face the challenge of negotiating new and unfamiliar relationships and networks in a new home country while, at the same time, having to cope with the traumatic impact of experiencing racist abuse and hate which has become more open, obvious and blatant. Members of the community are identifying issues with drug use within the community that are related to experiences of racism and discrimination, and of poverty and exclusion.

There is a wide range of cultures that are represented in our migrant communities; for parents and families from some cultures, drug use is seen as something that brings shame and needs to be kept hidden. In other cultures, there is more freedom to talk about it but it is still seen as something that will reflect very badly on the family. The challenges involved with "fitting in" are already enough to cope with without being identified as having a "drug problem."

For some young people from migrant communities they can see it in a different way to their parents, in particular if they are living in areas where drugs are openly available and visibly used. In this case, using drugs can be seen as a way of "fitting in" to Irish youth culture, a view that makes sense to the young people but opens up a generational divide in families, bringing even greater stress.

While there has been really positive change for our LGBTI+ community in recent years, the reality is that, at a time when people's lives should be so much better, they are having to cope with the ongoing trauma of being stigmatised and marginalised and being the target of hate campaigns that are being directed at our LGBTI+ and Trans communities. The level of mental health problems, self-harm and suicide is increasing amongst young LGBTI+ people and many of them are not feeling safe; using drugs is part of what people do to help them to cope with and/or escape from the devastating impact of hate and homophobia.

We recognise the traumatic and long-lasting impact of racism on our Traveller and Ethnic Minority communities and the similar impact of homophobia and transphobia on our LGBTI+ community. We recognise that drugs and drug use are a part of how people cope with this trauma and yet, we are making things worse for them by responding to their pain and struggle with **blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation.**

Untold Stories

As a society, we are adding to the burden of our policy failures on key social and economic issues with an approach to drugs that increases **blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation**. This blame, shame, stigma and criminalisation leads to labelling of individuals, families and communities and acts as a barrier that leads to silence.

But the good news is that there is another part of our community story that is both positive and powerful. It's about the strength of the bonds between us, the resilience of people who have been through a lot, the determination to keep going, the courage to stand up for people who are struggling and the belief that things can be so much better for all of us.

There are, and always have been, amazing, strong, inspiring people who are active and engaged as leaders in our communities, keeping the tradition of community support and solidarity alive and renewing it for further generations.

These strong and inspiring leaders are out there on the ground in our working-class communities, in our Traveller community, in our Migrant and Ethnic minority communities, in our LGBTI+ and Trans community. Our community activists include people who use drugs, their family members and members of the wider community, working together in solidarity to bring about change in our current approach to drugs.

We invite you to listen to our stories and to join the national conversation about why we need change.

It's time to bring an end to the shame, blame, stigma and criminalisation that results from our current approach to drugs

- ✓ By increasing understanding of why people use drugs
- ✓ By looking at how our current approach is increasing drug-related harms, in relation to both drug use and the drugs market
- ✓ By looking at the underlying causes of drug-related harms and how we can address them more effectively

To find out more, go to www.citywide.ie