

# **YOUNG PEOPLE, CANNABIS USE AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

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## SUMMARY

This report by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, King's College London, presents findings of a study on young people, cannabis use and anti-social behaviour. To date few research studies have focused on the question of whether young people's cannabis use has any influence on the incidence or frequency of any anti-social behaviour or criminal activity they may engage in. This research intended to yield a more nuanced understanding of young people's cannabis use and any associations this use may have with anti-social behaviour.

### **The study found that:**

- Most of the sixty-one young people questioned acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, but felt capable of making rational and informed decisions about its use.
- Most young people, and around half of the eighty community respondents, knew that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. Two in three professionals opposed the decision to reclassify.
- Most of the nineteen professionals interviewed felt that young people smoking cannabis in public caused problems for local residents. However, less than half of young people saw this as anti-social, and two-thirds of residents said they were unaffected by this behaviour.
- Almost all young people believed that their age group was routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been.
- Young people believed ASB could be reduced if there were more opportunities and facilities for them. Respondents to the community survey also thought under-investment in local facilities had exacerbated the area's problems.
- Young people wanted a clearer definition of what constituted ASB and better advertising and education about cannabis use. Some professionals supported this, and favoured an integrated approach to tackling deprivation, education, training and employment, and sexual health as well as drugs and ASB.
- Opinion amongst residents was divided on whether there is a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB. Less than half of the professionals thought that cannabis use predisposed young people to anti-social behaviour.
- Many community respondents believed that the burden of tackling young people's cannabis use and ASB should not rest with any single agency. Professionals supported a multi-agency approach to tackling ASB but questioned local agencies' ability to do this.

## **Young people and cannabis use**

Sixty-one young people were interviewed for this study; thirty of whom were under the supervision of the Youth Offending Service (YOS). All the young people interviewed reported that cannabis was the first illicit drug they had used. There was little to suggest that the regular use of cannabis had increased their exposure to, or experimentation with, other substances. Nearly half of the young people interviewed mentioned that they usually smoked cannabis and drank alcohol together. Pocket money and work were the most common sources of funding cannabis use. Only eight young people mentioned committing crime to fund their use, seven of whom were YOS clients.

Most acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, emphasising the risk to physical and psychological health of sustained or prolonged use, and from the enhanced potency of different strains. However, most young people interviewed for this study believed that they were capable of making rational and informed decisions about their use of cannabis

All of the young people interviewed reported having ever engaged in at least one activity or behaviour that might be considered anti-social. Fewer than half stated that they *had* engaged in any activity they would regard as anti-social after smoking cannabis. Very few seemed to suggest that there was any form of direct link between their cannabis consumption and subsequent engagement in ASB, tending instead to emphasise the role played by alcohol.

Almost all believed that young people were routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been, and attributed this labelling to the negative perceptions and stereotypes that the public generally hold towards young people. Around three-fifths were aware that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. More than half claimed that the threat of being stopped and searched by the police *did not* put them off carrying the drug.

## **The professionals' perspective**

We interviewed 19 professionals working in the Burngreave area of Sheffield. Most felt that young people smoking cannabis in public places caused problems for local residents and that this behaviour raised anxiety levels about other attendant problems. The most common activities which were thought to cause problems in the area for residents were riding 'mini-

motos' late at night, smoking cannabis in public and being racially abusive. However, less than one in three said they would describe smoking cannabis in public as anti-social.

Less than half thought that young people who use cannabis were more likely to engage in other forms of ASB. Most were wary or unconvinced about the existence of any links, suggesting that the two behaviours were instead associated through a shared common cause rather than being directly related. However, there were concerns that cannabis use might facilitate links with existing criminal networks for some.

Most of the participating professionals agreed that it was appropriate to treat young people differently to adults when it came to dealing with cannabis possession. These respondents tended to emphasise the need for appropriate education rather than a reliance on punishment and deterrence. Only one in three professionals supported the decision to reclassify cannabis. Most felt that the move had changed young people's view of cannabis and left many confused about current legislation. More than half said they would welcome any attempt to reclassify cannabis back to a Class B drug.

### **The community perspective**

Eighty local Burngreave residents were interviewed for this study, most of whom felt a strong attachment or sense of belonging to the area. Multiculturalism and the diversity of the local population were considered by some to be the most endearing or positive of its features. However, concerns about crime and disorder featured prominently too. Many considered that the area's problems had been exacerbated further by deprivation, poor infrastructure and under-investment in local facilities, a shortage of appropriate and affordable housing, and a perceived lack of strategic leadership from the local authorities. Despite this, just under three-quarters of residents regarded it as a good area in which to live or work.

Respondents to the community survey offered a broad and inclusive definition of ASB. Opinion seemed divided on a number of important issues: the extent to which young people openly smoked cannabis in public; whether or not this behaviour had increased during the last two years; and, whether there was a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB in Burngreave. Two-thirds indicated that they were unaffected by young people smoking cannabis in public and very few avoided local areas because of this.

While highlighting the individual responsibilities of all sections of society, many believed that the burden of tackling these and related issues should not rest with any single agency or

group. Around half the Burngreave residents were aware of the Class C status cannabis had now acquired, and a similar number supported the Government's decision to make this change.

## **In conclusion**

Based on the various samples interviewed for this study, evidence for a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB is slim. For the majority of these respondents, cannabis use by young people does not constitute or cause ASB. Rather, behaviour that is regarded as ASB is engaged in by many young people, a proportion of whom, in turn, smoke cannabis in public places – and drink alcohol. On the whole, respondents' comments suggest that cannabis use does not lead to ASB (or indeed to criminal behaviour), and that police resources would be better focused elsewhere.

This is not to say, however, that ASB, cannabis use in public, and the actions of young people (criminal, anti-social or otherwise) do not present problems in Burngreave. Our research clearly indicates that community members are concerned about a range of activities which they regard as anti-social; that young people freely admit to engaging in these activities without necessarily acknowledging their impact on others; and, that professionals felt that a range of interventions needed to be introduced or improved if young people's cannabis use and ASB are to be addressed more fully.

## **Recommendations for policy and practice**

- Credible campaigns offering education and advice about cannabis need to be introduced. Any such plans would benefit from the involvement and regular input from a range of professionals and perhaps young people themselves.
- Strategies should be developed to reduce the negative perceptions that press stories create in the public's mind about young people. If promoted by local agencies working together, this may have the added benefit of promoting the type of integrated services that some respondents felt was lacking in Burngreave.
- In moving towards a shared and wider understanding of what ASB means, and how it might be minimised, mediation may have a role to play.

- Young people's alcohol use needs further examination. In particular work needs to be undertaken which examines the problems young people experience with their use and any links their alcohol use has to anti-social behaviour and offending.
- Professionals working with young people need to be provided with up-to-date accurate information about the legal status and health effects of cannabis if they are to provide young people with credible information.
- Offering young people information on the medical effects of drug use (as opposed to the criminal consequences that can result from it) has the potential to provide young people with informed choices rather than criminal records.
- There may be scope to convene a Sheffield-wide multi-agency group to co-ordinate the work currently being undertaken by agencies working with young people, young offenders, agencies conducting work on ASB and agencies working with communities.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To date few research studies have focused on the question of whether young people's cannabis use has any influence on the incidence or frequency of any anti-social behaviour they may engage in. Whilst there are a number of studies which examine young people's attitude to drugs (Parker et al., 1998; Perry 6 et al., 1997) and young people's involvement in both criminal activity and anti-social behaviour (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Harradine et al., 2004) there are a lack of studies which have specifically addressed the issue of young people's cannabis use and any bearing this use has on anti-social behaviour. To fill this gap in our knowledge, South Yorkshire Police, in collaboration with the Drug Intervention Programme, commissioned the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR) at King's College London to examine the issue. This piece of research is intended to yield a more nuanced understanding of young people's cannabis use and any associations this use may have with anti-social behaviour.

## Background

Over the last 40 years the public's attitude towards cannabis has become far more relaxed, and use of the drug far more widespread. The British Crime Survey shows that nine and a half million people aged between 16 and 59 have ever tried cannabis. Unsurprisingly, use is highest amongst late teenagers and young adults (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Miller and Plant, 1996; Parker et al., 1998; Flood-Page et al., 2000; MORI, 2002, 2004; Budd et al., 2005). Cannabis use is not, however, confined just to older teenagers. Younger age groups are also reporting increasing cannabis use; 12 per cent of school pupils in England between the ages of 11 and 15 reported having used cannabis within the last year (NCSR/NFER, 2006). Surveys conducted by MORI in 2002 and 2004 also suggest the average age for young people trying cannabis is 14 (MORI, 2004). The NCSR/NFER survey also found that a quarter of 11-15 year olds have been offered cannabis. Ogilvie and colleagues (2005) recently reported that by the age of 15, two thirds of young people say they know where to buy cannabis; unsurprisingly a quarter reported that this was at school (Ogilvie et al., 2005).

The most recent Offending, Crime and Justice Survey conducted by the Home Office found that young people aged 10 - 25 who were identified as vulnerable<sup>1</sup> were more likely to use

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<sup>1</sup> Home Office vulnerable groups include: school truants, excludees, those 'looked after' by local authorities or in foster care, homeless, young people from substance misusing families and young offenders.

drugs than those not defined as such. Those defined as vulnerable were also more likely to report having used cannabis (Budd et al., 2005; Becker and Roe, 2005).

Although the press has consistently voiced concern that young people's drug use, and in particular cannabis use, is on the increase, the BCS shows that over the last ten years cannabis use has in fact remained fairly constant. Use 'last year' amongst 16-24 year olds gradually increased during the 1990s, peaking in 1998 (28 per cent) and declining since then to 24 per cent in 2006.

Since the introduction of the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) the number of people coming into contact with the police for offences of cannabis possession has also increased. The number of people cautioned or convicted for possessing cannabis peaked in 1998 at 84,310. The next four years saw the number of formal police contacts for a possession offence decline. Coinciding with the announcement in 2002 that consideration was to be given to reclassifying cannabis, formal police action again started to rise. In the first year of policing cannabis as a Class C drug (2004) arrests dropped to just under 50,000 and whilst street warning data were unavailable for the first three months of 2004, in the last nine the police issued 27,520 street warnings.

### **Anti-social behaviour**

The term 'anti-social behaviour' (henceforth ASB) usually covers minor crimes and near-criminal behaviour causing public annoyance, anxiety and disruption to daily life.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, the government has introduced a range of new powers for tackling those problems of ASB that cause greatest concern to the general public. Agencies at a local level are making greater use of these powers, and placing a heavy emphasis on ASB within the community safety agenda.

#### *ASB as a policy issue*

As Millie *et al* (2005) have noted, several reasons account for the priority currently placed on ASB in Britain. One view is that current problems of ASB reflect the broad cultural shifts that Britain has undergone over the past 50 years. Second, specific social developments have occurred, such as increasing levels of binge drinking and use of illicit drugs. Third, the effects of five decades of social and economic policy should not be ignored (Thorpe and Wood, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> See Millie *et al* (2005) for a fuller discussion of the definitional issues relating to ASB.

Since 1997, politicians and practitioners in England and Wales have paid increasing attention to ASB. The police reform White Paper highlighted high levels of public concern about disorder (Home Office, 2001). The first National Policing Plan (Home Office, 2002) also emphasised the need for effective action against ASB, as did a series of Acts of Parliament (notably the 2003 Anti-social Behaviour Act). The Government set up an Anti-Social Behaviour Unit (ASBU) in 2003, which launched its TOGETHER campaign in the autumn of that year. The Home Office's five-year strategic plan, published in July 2004, promised new powers for the police, such as curfews, specialist prosecutors and anti-social behaviour response courts, and support for communities (Home Office, 2004b). The Respect Task Force was established in September 2005 as a cross-Government strategy to tackle anti-social behaviour. Some specific measures that may now be taken against ASB include:

- *Intervention Orders (IOs)*: Given to those aged 18 or over and can be attached to an ASBO. Designed to tackle anti-social behaviour as a result of drug misuse. IOs should prioritise the prevention of further drug-related anti-social behaviour.
- *Agreements and contracts*: Formal, non-legal interventions such as behaviour contracts or agreements (ABCs or ABAs). Such contracts ensure tenancy agreements cover ASB issues and parenting contracts.
- *Penalty notices*: These notices act as one-off penalties for environmental offences, e.g. litter, graffiti, dog fouling (through Fixed Penalty Notices), and more serious offences, e.g. throwing fireworks, drunk and disorderly behaviour (via Penalty Notices for Disorder)

The goal of any action, notes the ASBU, is to protect victims, witnesses and the community; enable perpetrators to understand the consequences of their behaviour; and make sure the perpetrator changes their behaviour.

As a result, tackling ASB is now high on the government's agenda. Local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) throughout the country are now engaged in a range of activities focused on problems of ASB in their areas. Action to address ASB issues may be initiated by the police, local authorities, registered social landlords, housing trusts and youth offending teams. More emphasis has also been placed on balancing enforcement strategies with preventive work to tackle ASB, as suggested by, for example, Millie *et al* (2005) and the head of the National Audit Office (NAO, 2006). A review commissioned by

the NAO (Rubin et al, 2006) noted that investment in preventive measures to tackle ASB represents good value for money.

### *ASB and young people*

The Home Office has developed a typology of anti-social behaviour which provides a guide to the categories of behaviour generally assumed to be anti-social by practitioners and the public (Harradine et al, 2004). The typology did not include a youth category, as it was felt that ASB should be defined by the nature of the activity.

Nevertheless, for some, young people and ASB are strongly linked; Nicholas and Walker (2004) found that 25 per cent of the public perceive teenagers hanging around as the biggest ASB problem in their local area. Findings from the April 2004 Office for National Statistics (ONS) Omnibus Survey showed that, in the North of England, “rowdy teenagers in the street” and “drug use/dealing” were the ASB issues that most affected respondents’ quality of life (mentioned by 21 per cent).

ASB interventions focused specifically on young people include:

- *Individual Support Orders (ISOs)*: These are court orders for those aged 10-17, for attachment to an ASBO. ISOs are designed to tackle the underlying causes of a young person’s ASB.
- *Youth Inclusion Programmes*: These are programmes designed for young people aged 13 - 16 who are either committing crime or at risk of offending, truancy, or social exclusion.

One of the six strands of the Respect Action Plan is “the funding of constructive activities for young people such as youth intervention projects and sports programmes”. Specific aims are to:

- develop Britain’s first national youth volunteering service
- establish a sports champion mentoring programme
- continue to support existing mentoring projects
- expand the Youth Opportunity Fund<sup>3</sup>
- pilot Youth Opportunity Cards<sup>4</sup> in a number of areas

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<sup>3</sup> A Government-funded initiative involving young people in identifying positive activities and supporting their role as decision makers, grant givers and project leaders.

<sup>4</sup> An initiative led by the Department for Education and Skills, providing teenagers with cards which could be topped up with cash by parents, family members or themselves to spend on positive activities. There is some doubt as to whether this will be rolled out nationally (<http://www.24dash.com/news/57/17226/index.htm>).

### *ASB, young people and cannabis*

Data from the 2003 Offending Crime and Justice Survey show that, for 10- to 16-year-olds, serious and minor anti-social behaviour were two of the eight factors associated with taking any drug. For those aged 17-24, ASB was one of six variables associated with taking any drug.

Millie *et al* (2005) found that the general population tends to equate ASB with problems they associate with young people, drug taking being one of these problems. Cannabis use by adolescents was said by Millie *et al*'s respondents to be common. Among the concerns noted were:

- young people in groups – cannabis smoking often being a group activity;
- fear provoked by visible drug use and the unpredictable and offensive behaviour associated with drug consumption; and
- the impact on children who come across drug misuse in public places.

Several of Millie *et al*'s respondents also referred to groups of youths who sat around outside a community centre and smoked cannabis, making others feel nervous about going in and out of the centre (2005:16).

### **Aims of the research**

This project has examined young people's cannabis use and the impact this use has on any anti-social behaviour and/or other criminal activity. Initially the project focused on the Burngreave area of Sheffield; however, a second sweep of interviews with young people (n=30) was conducted and included respondents who did not reside in the Burngreave area. The aim of the research was to provide local statutory and voluntary agencies with a greater understanding of young people's cannabis use and how young people perceive their cannabis use to impact on their involvement with illegal or anti-social activities. The research aimed to document young people's involvement and satisfaction with voluntary and statutory services whilst also seeking to elicit the views of local residents and professionals about young people's cannabis use and the effect this use has on anti-social behaviour.

These aims translated into the following objectives:

- To examine young people's cannabis use;

- To develop an understanding - from the perspective of young people - of the extent of cannabis use in Burngreave and the wider Sheffield area;
- To assess the relationship between young people's cannabis use and other crimes and/or anti-social behaviour;
- To establish what resources are available to young people in their local areas, in particular Burngreave, and young people's perception of these resources;
- To determine the attitudes of young people, professionals and local residents towards enforcement against cannabis possession; and
- To establish the validity (or otherwise) of the belief that cannabis use exacerbates anti-social behaviour.

## **Methods**

In attempting to understand the relationship between young people, cannabis use and crime we adopted a multi-method approach. We conducted semi-structured interviews with:

- 61 young people (30 of whom were under the supervision of the Youth Offending Service (YOS))<sup>5</sup>
- 80 local residents
- 19 professionals

We recruited 30 young people through Sheffield Youth Offending Service and 31 young people using 'snowball' techniques, starting with people located via youth organisations. Respondents were interviewed under conditions of confidentiality, and confirmed in writing that they had given their informed consent to be interviewed. Professional respondents were purposively selected based on either their knowledge about young people and/or anti-social behaviour and criminal activity in the local area. Finally we carried out a small 'snapshot' survey of local residents to assess perceptions of the effects cannabis use has on the level of anti-social behaviour in the area and the extent to which young people's cannabis use concerns them. The 80 street interviews with local residents and business residents were quota sampled and set to reflect the local population.

### *Young people interviews*

Most of the young people interviewed were single (37), males (37) with an average (mean) age of 16 years (range 13 to 20 years). Most (38) described their ethnic origin as 'non-white'.

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<sup>5</sup> Robbery was the most common offence (7) which brought these young people into contact with the YOS.

Many (28) had acquired formal qualifications and were still in contact with the education system, attending school (14), college (14) or university (1). Forty-eight had been excluded from school at some point in the past, mostly as a result of fighting, although three respondents specifically mentioned a cannabis related incident resulting in their expulsion. The remainder stated that they were enrolled on a training course (5), in paid employment (7) or unemployed (16). One was attending a Pupil Referral Unit at the time of interview. Most were living with their parents (49). Twelve had previously lived in secure accommodation, five with a foster family, and four in a children's home.

The average (modal) age at which young people first drunk alcohol was 15. While nearly half (29) mentioned that they usually smoked cannabis and drank alcohol together – with no significant differences observed between YOS respondents and others, nine out of ten (53) recalled having drunk alcohol regularly (at least twice a week) in the past. At the time of interview, most were consuming alcohol on either a daily basis (3) or at least once a week (35) – usually at weekends. Eleven said they drank less frequently than this and ten did not drink alcohol at all. When this group of young people did drink, however, they tended to consume spirits (25) and in excess of the recommended daily limits for men and women.

All reported cannabis as the first illicit drug they had used. The average (mean) age of 13 years at first use (ranging from 7 to 17 years) is younger than the 17 years reported by cannabis users to the Youth Lifestyles Survey (Pudney, 2002: 9). Respondents supervised by the YOS reported first using cannabis at a significantly younger aged (12 years) than those not (14 years) ( $p < 0.001$ ).

#### *Professional respondents*

We interviewed 19 professionals. Most were police officers (7) or substance misuse workers (5). The former were largely drawn from the Safer Neighbourhood team and included constables, sergeants and inspectors. The remainder worked for a range of statutory and voluntary services and included youth workers, housing officers and service managers. On average (mode) this group had been employed in their current post for 2 years (range 3 months to 27 years). Almost all (17) came into direct contact with young cannabis users through their jobs.

#### *Community respondents*

Community respondents were evenly split between males (43) and females (37). They ranged in age from 16 to 64 years, with an average age of 39. Half (41) described their ethnic origin as white. Most (54) were resident in the Burngreave area of central Sheffield

(14 were also employed locally). Work brought others into the area (19) while a small number (7) considered themselves frequent visitors. On average this group had lived in, worked in or had been visiting Burngreave for 12 years (mean 16 years; ranging from 1 month to 59 years). We can therefore be reasonably confident that they had developed a sound knowledge and understanding of the issues facing the area.

Just under two-thirds (52) were employed, either working for themselves (3) or an employer on a full- (42) or part-time (7) basis. Twelve were unemployed. The remainder were retired (2), permanently sick or disabled (2), looking after family (4), and students (5). Thirty were owner-occupiers. A similar number rented property either privately (22) or through the council/housing association (10). Over half (43) had no dependent children (under the age of 17) living with them.

### **Structure of the report**

Chapter 2 explores the attitudes of young people towards cannabis use and anti-social behaviour and considers their views on policing and cannabis legislation. Chapter 3 describes our findings with professionals working in the Burngreave area; in particular it examines their views of young people's cannabis use and their perceptions of the links between young people's cannabis use and anti-social behaviour. Chapter 4 presents the findings from a survey of 80 local residents and assess their perceptions of the effects cannabis use has on the level of anti-social behaviour in the area and the extent to which young people's cannabis use concerns them. Finally, Chapter 5 outlines our main findings and examines possible policy and practice recommendations stemming from this research.

## CHAPTER 2: YOUNG PEOPLE AND CANNABIS USE

In this chapter we explore the attitudes of young people towards cannabis use and ASB, describe their experiences of using the drug and their involvement in ASB, and conclude by considering their views on policing and cannabis legislation.

### **Cannabis use**

Three-quarters (47) recalled that they had been first introduced to cannabis by their friends. The remainder had first been exposed to the drug by parents (4), siblings (7) or another close relative (2). Most (56) of the young people questioned had used cannabis during the three months leading up to their interview; 29 used the drug at least once a week, and 25 did so on a daily basis.

Consistent with findings from other studies (Pudney, 2002: 27; House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2006: 25-26), there was little to suggest that, to date, the regular use of cannabis amongst the sample had increased their exposure to, or experimentation with, other substances: less than one in four (14) reported having tried another drug besides cannabis; while nearly three-fifths (35) did not think that cannabis use would lead to more harmful drug use. Fourteen respondents reported previous use of mushrooms (3), solvents (4), powder cocaine (7), speed/amphetamines (9) and ecstasy (10). YOS respondents were significantly more like to report daily use of cannabis than others ( $p < 0.05$ ) and having ever tried another drug besides cannabis ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Parker et al (1998) highlighted the sharp distinction young people often make between what they consider to be acceptable (cannabis) and unacceptable (heroin) drug use, and illustrated how most substance use was funded almost exclusively through legitimate means. In a similar vein, 54 of the young people surveyed said that they enjoyed smoking cannabis, mainly as a way of relaxing (39) and to improve their state of mind (22), but also because they enjoyed the 'buzz' from using the drug (11), it acted as an aid to socialising (10), or because cannabis helped induce sleep (3). Pocket money (38) and work (18) were the most common sources of funding cannabis use. Eight respondents – seven of whom were under the supervision of the YOS - mentioned committing crime as a means of financing their use, including shoplifting (6), robbery and burglary (2), theft from family members (1) and selling cannabis (1).

Those who stated that they *did not* enjoy using cannabis (5) continued to smoke it either to alleviate boredom or because they found it increasingly difficult to resist. Almost all of those interviewed believed that cannabis use was either 'very prevalent' (48) or 'quite prevalent' (11) amongst young people in their area; more than four-fifths (52) said that most of their friends used cannabis.

While 37 of those interviewed felt that using cannabis *did not* present any problems for them, 23 believed that their use had some problematic aspects. Half (12) of them expressed concerns about the frequency of their use and the likelihood of developing addictive patterns of use. One female respondent described how she felt that her use of cannabis had now become compulsive:

*"I'm addicted. If I don't smoke it I get upset; I don't enjoy smoking but I need to do it."*

A few felt that excessive or prolonged use of cannabis had adversely affected their ability to concentrate or perform (2) or aggravated an existing health problem (1). Others commented that their use of cannabis had become problematic either because it had started to become a defining feature of their relationships with friends (*"with friends we'd have no conversation which didn't involve weed."*) (1); or because being caught in possession had resulted in disciplinary or legal problems (2). The remainder expressed concerns about how their frequent use of cannabis had led to financial problems (3) or an inability to acquire the drug had adversely affected their behaviour (2).

Most (44) acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, emphasising the risk to physical and psychological health of sustained or prolonged use, and from the enhanced potency of different strains. When asked to consider what factors were likely to make them stop using cannabis, not being able to afford the drug (21); becoming pregnant (18); getting a job (18); starting to feel paranoid as a result of using (17); and, no longer enjoying the effects of cannabis (12) were the most commonly cited reasons. This suggests that many of the young people questioned felt capable of making rational and informed decisions about their use of cannabis. By contrast, few seemed concerned about the prospect of being arrested by the police (4) or being deterred by the introduction of drug testing at school/college (5).

## Acquiring cannabis

'Weed' (35) was the most common form of cannabis used by the sample, followed by 'skunk' (20). None of the interviewees reported smoking 'resin' while six had no preference. No respondents reported growing or cultivating their own supply of cannabis (cf. Hough *et al.*, 2003). Friends were the most common source for buying cannabis (48), followed by purchasing from someone off the street (19). Almost all (55) considered it either 'very easy' (39) or 'fairly easy' (16) to buy cannabis in their local area.

## Social dynamics of cannabis use

Three in five (37) of the young people interviewed felt that their use of cannabis *did not* form an important part of their social life; 16 smoked cannabis alone. Nevertheless, most respondents frequently used the drug in the company of their friends (58), relatives (26) and boyfriends/girlfriends (13).

The sample appeared just as content to smoke in public as in private settings. The most commonly reported public areas for consuming cannabis included parks (38), on the street (36), in stairwells (19)<sup>6</sup> and when gathering outside local shops (18). Others chose to smoke cannabis either at the house of a friend (34) or at their own homes, irrespective of whether their parents were home (18) or not (19).

## Defining ASB

The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes ASB was apparent amongst our sample of young people when they were asked to define it. Based on their responses to 16 pre-defined activities and behaviours, young people clearly perceived there to be a range of problems that might be considered anti-social. The most common forms of misbehaviour included:

- smashing bus stop/telephone box glass (58);
- being racially abusive (56);
- throwing stones/heavy objects at passers by or shops (55);
- mistreating other people's property (50);
- shouting obscenities/loud rude behaviour (48);
- graffiti (45); and,

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<sup>6</sup> YOS respondents were less inclined to smoke cannabis in stairwells (4) compared to others (15).

- young people drinking alcohol in public (44).

Gathering on street corners (22) or in groups wearing 'hoodies' (24) were less likely to be labelled as such by this group, but YOS respondents were more likely to consider these as forms of ASB than others ( $p < 0.01$  and  $p < 0.05$  respectively) and less likely to see being racially abusive ( $p < 0.05$ ) in this way.

Most (50) accepted that ASB increases people's fear of crime, and acknowledged that the sight of young people smoking cannabis could be intimidating for some members of the public – with no significant differences between YOS respondents and others. However, only half (31) considered smoking cannabis in public to be a form of ASB, and more than one-third (23) insisted that they would continue to hang around in groups smoking cannabis, even if this frightened or intimidated some local residents. Again, there were no differences in attitudes or opinions between the two groups in this regard.

### **Engaging in ASB**

All of the young people interviewed reported having ever engaged in at least one activity or behaviour that might be considered anti-social, although not necessarily by them. The most common forms of ASB included:

- smoking cannabis in public (53);
- gathering in groups wearing 'hoodies' (50);
- dropping litter (48);
- spitting in the street (46);
- playing loud music in public (44); and
- drinking alcohol in public (42).

YOS respondents engaged in a wider range of ASB (mean 9) compared to others (mean 6) ( $p < 0.01$ ) and were more likely to report having ever engaged in graffiti ( $p < 0.01$ ), drinking alcohol in public ( $p < 0.05$ ), smashing bus stops/telephone box glass ( $p < 0.05$ ), mistreating other people's property ( $p < 0.05$ ) and throwing objects at passers by or shops ( $p < 0.05$ ). There was no difference between the two groups in the likelihood of reporting having ever smoked cannabis in public.

While four in every five respondents (49) felt that ASB was either 'very prevalent' or 'quite prevalent' in Burngreave and the wider Sheffield area, many seemed to engage in these

activities because they found them to be enjoyable or fun (24); because their friends also did them (22); or, because they saw no wrong in doing these things (18). Some indicated that drunkenness (11) or boredom (11) had precipitated their involvement in ASB. With the exception of YOS respondents reporting that they were less likely engage in forms of ASB because they considered it fun ( $p < 0.01$ ), there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of their reasons and motivations for engaging in ASB.

There did however appear to be a group dynamic at play: only one interviewee stated that he mainly engaged in ASB alone. Almost all (54) believed that young people were routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been, and attributed this labelling to the negative perceptions and stereotypes that the public generally hold towards young people. The reasons given for involvement in ASB are consistent with the 'kids will be kids' perspective put forward by Millie and colleagues, reflecting "an age-old tendency for young people to get into trouble, challenge boundaries and antagonise their elders" (2005: viii).

Improved access to recreation and leisure facilities can be an important component of any local ASB strategy. Many (44) of the young people interviewed appeared to have a good knowledge of local services and seemed to make frequent use of them, including All Saints (16), Rainbow House (15), Cornerstone (1), or some other - usually unspecified - facility (30). However, YOS respondents were significantly less likely to know about, or report making use of, local recreation and leisure facilities in their area ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Many respondents felt much more could be done locally to improve provision for young people. Suggestions included more and better youth club provision, opening for longer, with better facilities and catering for a wider age range; more accessible open spaces, including football facilities; a music studio; and, a local gym and swimming pool. Others were unable to suggest any improvements or seemed sceptical about the value of increasing local provision, as the following interviewee highlighted:

*"None, cos everyone would just wreck it all."*

*Do young people see a link between ASB and cannabis smoking?*

Less than half (26) the respondents stated that they *had* engaged in any activity they would regard as anti-social after smoking cannabis, but with YOS respondents being more likely to report this than others ( $p < 0.05$ ). Those that had engaged in forms of ASB tended to have committed public order type offences: fighting, shouting and throwing objects, while a small

number (5) described involvement in more serious offences following their use of cannabis, including shoplifting, burglary and robbery. But few suggested that there was any form of direct link between their cannabis consumption and subsequent engagement in ASB<sup>7</sup>, tending instead to highlight the influence of alcohol:

*“Because I smoked and drank together. I wouldn’t do it if I smoke cannabis alone cos it’s different. When you’re drunk you behave differently.”*

One 18-year-old female, for example, claimed to have committed a serious violent offence, but attributed this to the range of substances she had consumed immediately before the offence rather than to cannabis:

*“I slashed a girl’s face with a glass, but it wasn’t only cannabis. I was drinking, taking ecstasy and cocaine. If I was smoking cannabis alone I just would go to sleep or watch telly.”*

A range of suggestions were put forward by the young people interviewed for reducing the number of calls the police and council receive regarding ASB. The most commonly raised suggestion was to create more opportunities and facilities for young people in the local area (31). Others identified the need for a clearer, more consistent definition of what constitutes ASB which would need to be communicated to all relevant agencies, including the wider community (8). Sixteen respondents suggested a more enforcement-orientated approach with the use of curfews for the most ‘troublesome’ and persistent ASB offenders. Ironically, it was YOS respondents who were more likely to espouse a punitive approach to tackling ASB ( $p < 0.05$ ). Others generally called for a change in policing style to better engage this section of the community. This approach was only outlined broadly, but stressed the need for a more informal, sympathetic and empathetic approach.

This difference in attitudes and proposed responses merely serves as a microcosm to illustrate the wider challenges faced by those attempting to deliver a responsive form of policing to a diverse population with disparate views about crime and disorder issues and the best approaches to tackling them (Fitzgerald et al., 2002).

### **Views of policing and cannabis legislation**

While just under three-fifths (35) of the young people questioned were aware that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug, slightly more (40) claimed to know

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<sup>7</sup> When questioned less than half the YOS respondents (13) felt that their cannabis use had any effect on their offending behaviour.

that young people are policed differently to adults when found in possession of cannabis – unsurprisingly, a distinction which most (40) felt was unfair.

Eighteen respondents had previously been arrested for cannabis possession (a total of 32 arrests), with no differences observed between the two groups. Those who had been arrested tended to report having their cannabis found during a routine police stop and search or following an arrest for an unrelated offence. More than half (34) claimed that the threat of being stopped and searched by the police *did not* put them off carrying cannabis. Again, there were no differences observed between YOS respondents and others in terms of the deterrent effect of being stopped and searched.

Most young people questioned (47) believed that the local area was heavily policed, with around half (29) stating that policing activity had a direct impact on how they acted and behaved. Those who felt that an increase in police activity had changed their behaviour cited how a more visible police presence had increased the likelihood of them being stopped and searched. Although this may have served as a general deterrent for some young people to gather or congregate in groups on the streets, it may also have heightened their distrust of the police, and contributed to perceptions of disproportionate police treatment of young black and minority ethnic groups:

*“They feel I’m suspicious and watch what I’m doing; it makes me so mad. So I shout at them and they come up to me. I think they target black people.”*

*“They harass me, bother me; they stop and search me because I wear a cap. They stop me because I’m a young black male.”*

Respondents were asked to identify sources to which they would refer if they felt they needed further help or advice around health issues associated with cannabis use. Most (41) indicated that they would seek this from one of the local services they already had contact with or knew about locally. Other potential sources ranged from the internet – including the FRANK advice service (22) – to family (9) and friends (2). Only one was inclined to ask a teacher for advice.

YOS respondents were also asked where they would go or who they would ask for legal facts about cannabis. Most (12) indicated that they would seek advice from their YOT worker or interestingly, a police officer. Others identified different local services (6), the internet (3), family (1), friends (2) and their school/college (1) as potential sources of legal information. Eleven felt unable to identify a suitable source to who they would turn for such information.

Finally, the young people interviewed were asked to consider how the government might better communicate the message that cannabis is illegal and that there are harms associated with its use. Most (27) commented on the need for more and better advertising and education about cannabis use which, in order to ensure credibility with its target audience, had to be delivered in an impartial and balanced way (10):

*“More adverts on TV telling you the effect and what it means. The brain ad on FRANK is useless.”*

*“Stop over-rating it. Stop saying that if you have [a] spliff you’re gonna be mentally ill for the rest of your life.”*

Respondents also made a number of suggestions regarding what they perceived to be the best way of providing information about cannabis use to young people. These included more input by drug workers and ex-drug users rather than a reliance on education being provided solely by youth workers, teachers, or police officers (3):

*“Don’t just leave it to books or leaflets – get workers or even better ex-addicts to come in. Real life things.”*

*“Use people that use the drug. It’s no good if it’s someone that’s never tried it.”*

Delivery of this education should also be more imaginative and engaging (13), incorporating group discussions and multi-media technology. Respondents also suggested that more information about substances should be displayed within schools from an earlier age:

*“They need to start education at school sooner. I got it but only at the start of secondary school.”*

Around one in four (17) called for tougher enforcement measures to deter young people from experimenting with cannabis and those caught dealing:

*“Young people have the wrong idea of drugs and cannabis. Make it more serious if you’re caught with it. You need to scare people.”*

By contrast only two respondents thought possession of cannabis should be legalised. A further nine were unable to offer any suggestions on how the government might better engage young people around cannabis related issues.

## **In summary**

All the young people interviewed for this study reported cannabis as the first illicit drug they had used. Most had been first introduced to the drug by their friends. Around half used cannabis at least once a week; two out of five did so on a daily basis. YOS clients were significantly more likely to report daily use of cannabis than non YOS clients. There was little to suggest that the regular use of cannabis had increased exposure to, or experimentation with, other substances. However, YOS respondents were significantly more likely to report daily use of cannabis than others and having ever tried another drug.

Nearly half of young people interviewed mentioned that they usually smoked cannabis and drank alcohol together. At the time of interview, most respondents were consuming alcohol on either a daily basis (3) or at least once a week (35) – usually at weekends. When this group of young people did drink they tended to consume spirits (25) and in excess of the recommended daily limits for men and women.

Many said that they enjoyed smoking cannabis, mainly as a way of relaxing and to improve their state of mind, but also because they enjoyed the ‘buzz’ from using. Pocket money and work were the most common sources of funding cannabis use. Only eight young people mentioned committing crime to fund their use, seven of whom were YOS clients.

Cannabis use was considered to be prevalent in the local area and more than four-fifths said that most of their friends used the drug. Most acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, emphasising the risk to physical and psychological health of sustained or prolonged use, and from the enhanced potency of different strains. Data from our interviews with young people suggests that many felt capable of making rational and informed decisions about their use of cannabis. By contrast, few seemed deterred by the prospect of being arrested by the police or the introduction of drug testing at school/college.

Friends were the most common source for buying cannabis followed by purchasing from someone off the street. Almost all considered it easy to buy cannabis locally and used in a range of public and private settings.

All of the young people interviewed reported having ever engaged in at least one activity or behaviour that might be considered anti-social. The most common forms of ASB was smoking cannabis in public, though only half actually considered this to be anti-social. While YOS respondents engaged in a wider range of ASB compared to others, there was no

difference between the two groups in the likelihood of reporting having ever smoked cannabis in public. Less than half stated that they *had* engaged in any activity they would regard as anti-social after smoking cannabis, but with YOS respondents being more likely to report this than others. Few seemed to suggest that there was any form of direct link between their cannabis consumption and subsequent engagement in ASB, tending instead to emphasise the role played by alcohol

Almost all believed that young people were routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been, and attributed this labelling to the negative perceptions and stereotypes that the public generally hold towards young people.

Many appeared to have a good knowledge of local services and seemed to make frequent use of them, though YOS respondents were significantly less likely to know about, or report making use of, local recreation and leisure facilities in their area. Creating more opportunities and facilities for young people in the local area was the most common suggestion raised for reducing the number of calls the police and council receive regarding ASB.

Around three-fifths were aware that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. With less than one third having been previously arrested for cannabis possession, more than half claimed that the threat of being stopped and searched by the police *did not* put them off carrying the drug. While increased police activity may serve as a general deterrent for some young people to engage in ASB, it may also have heightened their distrust of the police, and fuel perceptions of disproportional police treatment of young black and minority ethnic groups.

The young people questioned also highlighted the need for more and better advertising and education about cannabis use which, in order to ensure credibility with its target audience, had to be delivered in an impartial and balanced way.

## CHAPTER 3: THE PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter we describe the findings of interviews with 19 professionals working in the Burngreave area. Our sampling strategy for interviewing these professionals is described in more detail in chapter 1. We sought to include individuals and groups representing a range of perspectives relevant to the issues under consideration. These discussions explored practitioners' views and experiences of young people's cannabis use; whether they perceived there to be any links between cannabis use and ASB and other criminal activity; and, considered their assessment of the effectiveness of current legislation and professional responses to these issues.

### *Priority issues*

Those able to (11) identified a wide range of local issues they felt needed to be tackled. These included: concerns about the adequacy of local facilities and infrastructure (5); unemployment and the lack of opportunities available locally (4); substance misuse issues (4); and, community cohesion and integration (3). Fewer expressed negative views about the activities or behaviour of young people specifically (2) or crime more generally (2).

### **Cannabis use in Burngreave**

Almost all the professionals questioned thought that cannabis use amongst young people in Burngreave was either 'very prevalent' (10) or 'quite prevalent' (6). Around two-thirds (12) believed that young people smoking cannabis in public places caused problems for local residents. This usually arose from the intimidation residents felt when confronted by large groups of young people, but with anxiety levels amplified by the presence of cannabis. Other professionals felt that such encounters could lead the public to fret, often unnecessarily, over other attendant problems like open dealing or street robbery:

*"Residents don't like drugs being smoked near them but the media fuel the fire by reporting that all young people who smoke cannabis do robberies or are street dealers."*

*"There's a perception that the public hold that any group of young people is intimidating; using cannabis is seen as an aggravating factor. I don't accept this perception. Most are very valuable, law-abiding members of the community."*

The issue of whether there were particular public or semi-public areas where cannabis was sold and used in the Burngreave area appeared to divide the group. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

those who were able to identify these areas (8) tended to be police officers (5). These respondents were able to single out several areas, locations or venues which served as 'hotspots' for such activity.

Of those expressing an opinion on the issue of young people's alcohol use (11), most considered it to be problematic (8) and associated with increased criminality, including violence; a loss of control and inhibitions, and an increase in risky behaviours which in turn can lead to longer-term health problems (e.g. sexual transmitted infections, teenage pregnancies). As with cannabis use, the public nature of some young people's alcohol consumption made it something of a nuisance behaviour.

### **Cannabis use and ASB**

Consistent with respondents to our community and young people's survey, the professionals questioned as part of the current study also offered a wide-ranging and comprehensive definition of ASB which covered an array of activities and behaviours that might adversely affect people's quality of life:

*"A behaviour likely to cause people distress, nuisance, feeling threatened or worried mentally, physically and emotionally. But what is seen as ASB can shift over time."*

*"It is basically anything that pisses people off, but then that doesn't mean it's anti-social. Being a nuisance in the area, dealing in drugs on the street, begging and anti-social drinking, rowdy behaviour, bullying, etc..."*

Based on their responses to 16 pre-defined activities and behaviours, this group clearly perceived a range of problems as anti-social. From the professionals' perspective, the most common of these included:

- causing damage to a bus stop or telephone box (8);
- throwing objects (8);
- riding 'mini-motos'<sup>8</sup> late at night (8);
- shouting obscenities/loud, rude behaviour (8);
- mistreating other people's property (8); and,
- being racially abusive (8).

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<sup>8</sup> A mini-moto is a small motorcycle with a low frame and small wheels and elevated handlebars.

By contrast, less than one in three (6) said they would describe smoking cannabis in public as anti-social. From this list, the most common activities thought to cause problems in the Burngreave area were riding 'mini-motos' late at night (6); smoking cannabis in public (6); and, being racially abusive (6).

Just under two-fifths (7) felt that young people who use cannabis were more likely to engage in forms of ASB. Others were more cautious, suggesting that the two behaviours had an association arising from a shared common cause rather than being directly linked:

*"I don't think it's the cannabis that makes people anti-social but many kids who act in an anti-social way often smoke cannabis."*

The issue of whether young people who use cannabis are at greater risk of offending divided the sample: around half (9) thought that using the drug amplified the risk of further criminality including theft, car crime, robbery, burglary, and drug dealing. Others highlighted how engagement in these activities might help young people in Burngreave establish contacts within existing criminal networks whose deviant value system is likely to consider cannabis use and criminality as acceptable, normal and inevitable behaviour (cf. Burr, 1987):

*"Because of the company they keep and the fact they access criminal groups to buy."*

*"When buying cannabis young people start to enter criminally active groups."*

Respondents were able to identify a range of offences which they thought were a concern for the local community. More than half highlighted the following offences:

- class A drug dealing (16)
- burglary (15)
- gun crime (13)
- car crime (10)
- robbery (10)
- cannabis dealing (10)

Around two-thirds (13) of the professionals questioned felt that at least some of these offences were linked to young people's cannabis use, while almost all (18) thought that groups of young people smoking cannabis in public areas served to increase – at some level – people's fear of crime in Burngreave:

*“For some people the witnessing of young people smoking an illegal drug will increase their feeling of things being out of control.”*

Some suggested that these fears were in turn fuelled by media portrayal of ‘hoodie’ gangs and the public’s tendency to view all illicit drugs in the same way:

*“It’s possibly not due to cannabis use, but people find groups intimidating. It’s media driven too: ‘beware of the hoodies’.”*

*“People often think that all drugs are the same – when they hear the term ‘drugs’ they list all the drugs together.”*

### **The effectiveness of current legislation**

Most of the participating professionals were aware that young people are policed differently to adults when found in possession of cannabis (15) and agreed that it was right and proper to treat young people differently to adults on this issue (13). While accepting that experimentation and risk taking were inevitable features of youth culture, advocates of this approach nevertheless highlighted their concerns about young people’s ignorance of the dangers posed by cannabis use and, in particular, the potency of different strains. These respondents tended to emphasise the need for appropriate education rather than a reliance on punishment and deterrence:

*“Because often they are not aware of the dangers. Because it is almost expected that young people will experiment with substances. It should be taught in schools from year 1.”*

*“Try to educate them rather than punishing. Education is for life, punishment is short-term.”*

Some expressed concerns that the way in which cannabis offences had been handled in the past has served to undermine police legitimacy and adversely affect relations with young people. These respondents generally welcomed moves which gave the police greater discretion in responding to young people on a case-by-case basis:

*“Potentially you’re criminalising young people – that’s not a good idea. It’s a matter of degree. If the use is discreet – not in people’s faces – just telling them to move on would be ok. Police heavy-handedness may backfire and lead to a bad reaction.”*

Those who felt it was inappropriate to treat young people differently justified the need for statutory agencies to act *in loco parentis* given the apparent absence of appropriate guardianship in many young people's lives:

*"Because values must be installed into them. They need to know the difference between right and wrong; if their parents aren't doing it then another agency has to tell them what is and isn't acceptable."*

Most of the professionals surveyed (15) felt that the reclassification of cannabis to a Class C drug had changed young people's view of it and around three-quarters (14) believed that young people were now confused by current legislation. With only one in three (6) professionals supporting the Government's recent moves to reclassify cannabis, this approval rating was considerably lower than the 48 per cent of Burngreave residents who supported the change (see chapter 4).

These findings are consistent with a recent study conducted in four areas of England which revealed that over half of the 150 police officers questioned also thought the Government was wrong to reclassify cannabis (May *et al.*, 2007). However, over half of May *et al.*'s respondents were not in favour of changing the drug's status back to Class B.

Given this level of disapproval with the downgrading of cannabis in early 2004, more than half (10) of the Burngreave professionals indicated that they would welcome any attempt to reclassify cannabis back to a Class B drug. Many believed that the change had undermined previous efforts aimed at raising awareness about the potential for harm posed by cannabis use. From an enforcement perspective the change not only sent out mixed messages to both users and the wider public, but operationally it had undermined the ability of an officer to arrest in most situations and thus detect other offences:

*"Class C gave it a green light and a lot of young people are not aware of the possible ill effects. All it did was to make people feel it was legit."*

*"It has confused the majority of users and they have the impression it's legal. It should be arrestable in all circumstances...If you arrest and get a search warrant as has happened...you find further cannabis, Class As. It also makes it clearer to the public that they're not supposed to be using it."*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In an earlier study, May and colleagues analysed custody records in four study sites and found that in "8 per cent of cases a cannabis arrest led to the detection of another offence. However, in many cases, this was by accident rather than intent, and the detected offences were almost all relatively minor" (2002: viii).

Others went further, suggesting that the current system of classification was itself unhelpful, not because it failed to reflect the relative harms caused by different illicit drugs, but rather because it undermines a prohibitionist ethos which aims to discourage any use of illicit psychoactive substances:

*“Cannabis can do as much harm as any other drug. It’s addictive and illegal. If anything I think it should be an A. This approach is what caused lots of problems. We shouldn’t have different classes; they should be all in the same group.”<sup>10</sup>*

Those against reclassifying cannabis to a Class B drug highlighted the confusion that yet another change would generate, and appeared to endorse the original motivations behind reclassification – namely to better enable the police to focus their attentions on Class A drugs:

*“Having worked with young people and police, it’s a drug that on the whole doesn’t create a great deal of ASB. Police time should be spent on class A drugs.”*

*“I know why they did it: other drugs causing more harm. But it caused a lot of confusion and a lot of the cannabis is stronger, meaning underlying mental health issues. Leave it as it is and make sure the effects are publicised. Reclassifying would just confuse people more.”*

#### *Tackling ASB and cannabis use*

Around three-quarters (14) believed that the media had a negative impact on the public’s perception of young people. Respondents overwhelmingly focused on the tendency for the media to overly report on the negative aspects of both youth culture and cannabis use:

*“They always report of small elements of ASB as headline news. Young people’s achievements are not reported. Everyone gets the negative side of young people.”*

*“The media don’t represent young people positively. They fuel the problem and only report on problems of hoodies, young people and gun crime. They don’t look at the wider issues faced by young people. They are a lot less empowered now.”*

An identical number (14) indicated that they would support the development of a Cannabis Intervention Support Programme modelled along the lines of the Kent Drug Intervention Support Programme (DISP)<sup>11</sup> to help redress this balance.

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<sup>10</sup> These views seem inconsistent with the findings of a House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report published in July 2006, which concluded that the current system of classification should be replaced with one that more closely reflects the harm posed by different substances – both licit and illicit; a finding endorsed more recently by the RSA Commission (2007).

In terms of specific policies and approaches for tackling ASB, the proposals put forward ranged from tougher enforcement, through to more education and awareness raising about cannabis use, a renewed focus on parenting skills, and provision to expand support for mentoring and developing role models for young people. Most stressed the need, at a strategic level, for a long-term commitment to funding and improving local provision in order to tackling these complex and inter-related issues. This would require integrated strategies incorporating policies aimed at tackling not just ASB, but deprivation, education, training and employment, sexual health and drugs. Others hinted at the need for a clearer definition of ASB which was agreed and shared by all stakeholders, including the local community and young people.

*“Provision of things for young people on a much wider basis. Places to go, things to do and put money in. It might seem like you’ll get little in return – but it’s a long-term gain. Also make things affordable – regenerate the area.”*

Effective multi-agency work – involving central and local government, housing, the police and youth services – was universally considered to be the key to successfully tackling ASB and reducing the incidence of many of its related problems:

*“Not any particular one agency. There should be interlinking of services – everyone’s got a bit to offer.”*

Many of the strategies that agencies could develop to divert young people from harmful cannabis use were complementary to those already identified and proposed for tackling ASB. A central strand of both strategies was the need for an integrated system of support for young people. This included more of an emphasis on diversion activities after school and during summer holidays. Such provision would also need to be supplemented with a range of ancillary support services in the community (such as sexual health information for young women, and parental guidance for younger/single parent families). Some identified the need for more proactive and consistent input from community leaders and representatives (e.g. Imams, priests, youth workers) in order to reinforce this work:

*“Too much is left to the police. Many of the agencies we ‘work’ with don’t really want to be seen work with us. It would be better if partner agencies supported us and helped us to get across the negative effects of cannabis/drugs.”*

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<sup>11</sup> Under this programme, those found in possession of Class B or Class C drugs could receive information about substance misuse. Completion of the programme results in no further action, and no reprimand or final warning is issued.

Schools, youth clubs and related services, drug projects and the police were considered to be amongst the most important and appropriate channels for informing young people about the law as it relates to cannabis. By contrast, the Black, Shed and Burngreave drug projects, along with local primary health care, the youth offending team and adolescent mental health services were considered to be the most likely sources of information about the health risks associated with cannabis use for young people in Burngreave. There was, however, some uncertainty about the nature of support offered by these services and concern about the appropriateness of referring young cannabis users to them:

*“I’m not sure what they do at the moment. The drug agencies focus in my opinion on class A drugs.”*

Finally, the professionals surveyed were asked what should be done in the Burngreave area by local services if young people’s cannabis use is indeed causing or contributing to ASB. Responses ranged from developing more early intervention work which incorporates education and advice and, where possible, working closely with parents, through to calls for a zero-tolerance approach from the police to tackle the issue of cannabis use and ASB. Others stressed the need for more consultation with young people in order to gauge their views and perspectives on these and other issues:

*“Not an awful lot is done at the moment. For me, the police should take a zero tolerance approach to policing cannabis and deal robustly with the anti-social behaviour that it causes.”*

*“We need to get someone who is able to converse with young people and talk to young people on their wavelength. We need to use the correct tools to resolve problems. We’re not sure what tools should be used because we haven’t asked them.”*

Some questioned the current emphasis on cannabis use and its links with ASB. This group of professionals believed that cannabis use was merely a symptom rather than a cause of young people’s behaviour and subsequent engagement in ASB. Furthermore, there appeared to be some scepticism about the ability of effective joint working between local agencies to address these issues:

*“Is it a priority? There may be education, family values underlying it. Making plans, strategies with others; that would be lovely but it just doesn’t happen.”*

*“Partnership doesn’t work! It’s grassroots people like us that work. Partnership is just political. I say that from having been in the system. It’s about meeting targets, not offering help.”*

## **In summary**

The professionals interviewed believed that cannabis use was prevalent amongst young people in the Burngreave area. Most felt that young people smoking cannabis in public places caused problems for local residents and that this behaviour raised anxiety levels about other attendant problems. The issue of whether there were particular places where cannabis was sold and used in the Burngreave area appeared to divide the sample.

The most common activities which were thought to cause problems in the area for residents were riding 'mini-motos' late at night, smoking cannabis in public and being racially abusive. However, less than one in three said they would describe smoking cannabis in public as anti-social.

Less than half thought that young people who use cannabis were more likely to engage in other forms of ASB. Most were wary or unconvinced about the existence of any links, suggesting that the two behaviours were instead associated through a shared common cause rather than being directly related. However, there were concerns that cannabis use might facilitate links with existing criminal networks for some.

Most of the participating professionals agreed that it was appropriate to treat young people differently to adults when it came to dealing with cannabis possession. These respondents tended to emphasise the need for appropriate education rather than a reliance on punishment and deterrence. Only one in three professionals supported the decision to reclassify cannabis. Most felt that the move had changed young people's view of cannabis and left many confused about current legislation. More than half said they would welcome any attempt to reclassify cannabis back to a Class B drug.

In terms of specific policies and approaches for tackling ASB and cannabis use, this group of professionals highlighted the need for integrated strategies incorporating a range of policies aimed at tackling not just ASB, but deprivation, education, training and employment, sexual health and drugs. A central strand of these strategies was the need for an improved and integrated system of support for young people. Others hinted at the need for a clearer definition of ASB which was agreed and shared by all stakeholders, including the local community and young people themselves.

Effective multi-agency work was universally considered to be the key to successfully tackling ASB and reducing the incidence of many of its related problems. However, some questioned the ability of local stakeholders to work in such a way.

## CHAPTER 4: THE COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter we present the findings from a survey of 80 local residents, to assess their perceptions of the effects cannabis use has on the level of ASB in the area and the extent to which young people's cannabis use concerns them. In addition, the survey also asked residents: what they liked about the area and the extent to which they felt attached to it; how they defined ASB; whether current legislation was equitable and appropriate; and, which agencies were best placed to tackle these and related issues.

### **'Attachment' to Burngreave**

Any community with a degree of mutual trust and solidarity amongst its residents will undoubtedly have a greater capacity to identify and tackle local issues. This may be cyclical, with trust and solidarity – or collective efficacy – empowering communities, whose citizens, in turn, feel a greater sense of belonging or attachment to their local area (see Sampson and Raudenbusch, 1999). Three-quarters of residents said that they felt either 'very attached' (31) or 'fairly attached' (30) to the Burngreave area.

When asked to identify the most endearing or positive aspects of the area, multiculturalism and the range of diversity within Burngreave featured prominently:

*"People who've been here a long time stick together, whatever their colour or class."*

As a result many valued the sense of community that had been nurtured in the area; as a way of enhancing people's sense of community safety. The accessibility of local amenities, including schools, shops, transport and commerce, all contributed to improving people's satisfaction. Others described how they valued having established local bonds, links or friendships.

Numerous aspects of Burngreave life conspired to undermine social cohesion, and respondents would seek to change these, given the opportunity. Concerns about crime and disorder featured prominently. Residents referred to their anxiety about violence, gun crime, drug dealing, gangs, race crime and prostitution. Four expressed disquiet about young people engaging in various forms of ASB:

*"Kids getting together making noise, it's frightening. They throw stones at each other. I don't like it."*

*“Crime: a new generation of kids not respecting their elders.”*

*“Bad people giving it a bad reputation. Young people hanging about with nothing to do.”*

*“Gangs, young people standing on corners.”*

Some believed that the area’s reputation had suffered as a consequence, and that many of these issues were exacerbated further by deprivation; poor infrastructure and under-investment in local facilities; a shortage of appropriate and affordable housing; and, a perceived lack of strategic leadership from the local authorities. Respondents were also irked by traffic congestion, road works, the lack of parking, rubbish and litter. These issues and concerns, however, could hardly be considered unique to the population of Burngreave (Wood, 2004).

Most (64) local residents felt that Burngreave had undergone significant changes in the past two years. However, the picture that emerged was not clear-cut. Positive changes were: much-needed regeneration and investment; more employment opportunities; new construction developments; improvements to infrastructure (e.g. roads); and, a range of crime reduction initiatives. These were offset by conventional – and at times paradoxical – grievances about too much crime, drugs, congestion, and immigration, and not enough housing, local amenities or policing, to name a few. When asked to consider the most serious problems that needed tackling in the area, three topics were prominent: drugs, crime, and a perceived lack of social support (including scope for expanding education, training and employment support, and provision for young people). Despite these issues and concerns, nearly three-quarters (57) saw Burngreave as a good area in which to live or work.

### **ASB and young people’s cannabis use**

As with the young Burngreave residents in chapter 2, respondents to our community survey offered a broad and inclusive definition of ASB. This ranged from what might be considered minor incivilities (noise nuisance) to more serious criminal offences (drugs or violence), but typically related to what was considered to be intimidating, rowdy or inconsiderate behaviour involving groups of youths.

Opinion seemed divided as to whether Burngreave had a problem with young people openly smoking cannabis in public, with little difference between those who felt it did (38) and those

who said it did not (37), or were unsure (4). There was equal uncertainty about whether the incidence of young people smoking cannabis in public places had increased during the last two years: around half (38) thought it had.

There appeared to be greater clarity about the public's attitudes towards young people smoking cannabis in public, with more than two-thirds (56) indicating that they were unaffected by this. Those perturbed by such activity tended to emphasise how a group of young people smoking cannabis could be unpleasant and intimidating for residents. However, only three respondents said they avoided local areas because of concerns about young people smoking cannabis (these were central Burngreave at night, Fir Park and Pitsmoor).

Despite this, when residents were asked whether they saw a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB locally, no clear consensus emerged. Many (37) thought the two were unrelated, and six were unconvinced there was a link.

*"People that are anti-social will probably be more so after smoking, but I don't think all young people who smoke [cannabis] are anti-social."*

*"Until you define anti-social behaviour you can't really answer the question. My personal view is that it [cannabis use] doesn't make people anti-social."*

Where residents remarked on a perceived link between cannabis use and ASB they tended to reiterate concerns about links with addiction, loss of control, wider criminality and mental health problems:

*"When they've been smoking they start to cause trouble, starting on people, trying to rob people."*

*"When they've smoked it they don't try to rationalise things and that makes them less thoughtful."*

## **Tackling ASB**

Only 16 residents knew of any recent police or council activity aimed specifically at tackling cannabis smoking in public. These residents referred to their awareness of an increased police presence and a number of high profile arrests, raids and operations (e.g. Operation Gulliver). Others acknowledged joint work being undertaken in conjunction with local drug services and youth centres. While recognising the individual responsibilities of all sections of

society (from parents, schools, youth projects, the local community, charities, the police, and drug services, through to central and local government), many residents believed that the burden of tackling these issues should not rest with any single agency or group.

### **The appropriateness of current legislation**

Around half the Burngreave respondents (42) knew that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. A similar number (38) felt that the Government had been right to make this change. In reaching this decision many appeared to have distinguished the potential risks and harms posed by cannabis from a range of licit and illicit drugs:

*“Cannabis is not a drug that can kill you. It doesn’t harm you in the same way as heroin and crack.”*

*“It’s widespread, there’s a hypocrisy about alcohol use compared to cannabis. If they did reclassify they would have to address alcohol as it is as harmful/anti-social.”*

*“People need to be educated, not criminalised.”*

Those against the move opposed any change that might – intentionally or otherwise – create an environment where cannabis use was tacitly accepted or condoned. Others were concerned about the link between cannabis and mental health issues; three could not articulate why they felt this way or said they were confused by the current system of classification. For many of the same reasons, 25 said they would welcome any efforts aimed at reclassifying cannabis back to a Class B drug.

### **In summary**

Most residents felt a strong attachment or sense of belonging to the Burngreave area. Multiculturalism and the diversity of the local population were considered some of the most endearing or positive of its features. However, concerns about crime and disorder featured prominently too. Many considered that the area’s problems had been exacerbated further by deprivation, poor infrastructure and under-investment in local facilities, a shortage of appropriate and affordable housing, and a perceived lack of strategic leadership from the local authorities. Despite this, just under three-quarters of residents regarded it as a good area in which to live or work.

Respondents to the community survey offered a broad and inclusive definition of ASB. Opinion seemed divided on a number of important issues: the extent to which young people

openly smoked cannabis in public; whether or not this behaviour had increased during the last two years; and, whether there was a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB in Burngreave. Two-thirds indicated that they were unaffected by young people smoking cannabis in public and very few avoided local areas because of this.

While highlighting the individual responsibilities of all sections of society, many believed that the burden of tackling these and related issues should not rest with any single agency or group. Around half the Burngreave residents were aware of the Class C status cannabis had now acquired, and a similar number supported the Government's decision to make this change.

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This research has examined young people's cannabis use in Sheffield, and explored whether this use has any bearing on anti-social behaviour. We have shown that drug use and the behaviour of young people in public places are the ASB issues that respondents to recent, large-scale public surveys are concerned about. Over the last ten years, policy makers and practitioners have paid increasing attention to ASB. Within the Sheffield 1 policing area, 100 phone calls a week are reportedly received on ASB in any given week, compared with only a handful of robbery and burglary reports (South Yorkshire Police, 2007).

In this chapter we offer a summary of our key findings, followed by some key messages to emerge from them. Some of our findings and recommendations are specific to Burngreave others can be considered more generally.

### Key findings

- Most young people acknowledged the potential for harm posed by cannabis, but felt capable of making rational and informed decisions about their use.
- Most young people, and around half the community respondents, knew that cannabis had been reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. Two in three professionals opposed the decision to reclassify.
- Most professionals felt that young people smoking cannabis in public caused problems for local residents. However, less than half of young people saw this as anti-social, and two-thirds of residents said they were unaffected by this behaviour.
- Almost all young people believed that their age group was routinely accused of acting in an anti-social way, even when they had not been.
- Young people believed ASB could be reduced if there were more opportunities and facilities for them – respondents to the community survey also thought under-investment in local facilities had exacerbated the area's problems.
- Young people wanted a clearer definition of what constituted ASB and better advertising and education about cannabis use. Some professionals supported this, and favoured an integrated approach tackling deprivation, education, training and employment, and sexual health as well as drugs and ASB.
- Opinion amongst residents was divided on whether there is a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB. Less than half of the professionals thought that young

people who used cannabis were more likely to engage in other behaviour that they regarded as anti-social.

- Many community respondents believed that the burden of tackling young people's cannabis use and ASB should not rest with any single agency. Professionals supported a multi-agency approach to tackling ASB but questioned local agencies' ability to do this.

Our findings are based on the views of those who use cannabis, professionals who work with young people and local residents. They offer important messages about young people, ASB and cannabis use. Some of these messages are not new; the status of both young people and cannabis users as 'folk devils' has been well documented for some time (see Cohen, 1972 and Young, 1971 for respective examples). Whilst our work was mainly set in one area of one city, the messages are relevant to both practitioners and policy makers nationally.

### **Policing young people found in possession of cannabis**

Whilst many professionals in the Sheffield area disagreed with the government's (2004) decision to classify cannabis to a Class C drug, many also believed that any attempt at re-classification (to a Class B) would simply deepen the confusion that already exists. Police officers, in both this study and previous policing cannabis studies conducted by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (May et al, 2007), have, however, explained the difficulties they sometimes face when confronted by a group of 16 to 19 year olds smoking cannabis. Issuing half the group with a cannabis warning whilst being expected to arrest the remainder sometimes places officers in both awkward and confrontational situations. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), in their 2006 guidance, are now encouraging operational officers to consider other less intrusive ways of processing young people rather than arresting them. The current ACPO guidance on policing cannabis possession offences states that:

*It is accepted that in some cases a police officer may find it necessary to arrest that [young] person in order to obtain the admission/evidence required. However, consideration should be given to less intrusive means if possible such as taking the young person home, verifying their name and address and referring the case for a disposal decision*

Whilst the outcome is likely to be the same as before, in that the young person may be reprimanded, given a final warning or charged there now appears to have been a shift in

emphasis - away from entangling a young person in the criminal justice process to actively keeping them away from an arrest situation and therefore a police station.

In light of the new emphasis found in the ACPO guidance Sheffield Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership may want to consider the approach currently being implemented by Kent Drug Intervention Support Programme (DISP), an inter-agency approach aimed at tackling drug use amongst young people under the age of 18. The programme aims to provide drugs education and prevention advice to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. In accordance with the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 the decision regarding the final disposal of the case is made by the police. The final disposal decision is, however, usually based upon the circumstances of the offence, the young person involved and the perceived likelihood of their re-offending. Successful completion of the DISP often leads to a request that the crime report be endorsed as detected, but not in the public's interest to prosecute. This model strikes us as a sensible balance between informing young people about the health and criminal justice consequences of smoking cannabis whilst protecting them from the formal youth justice system. Policing young people in this way may also reduce the number of confrontational situations between the police and young people, perhaps increasing the likelihood of young people feeling as if they have received fair and balanced treatment from the police<sup>12</sup>.

### **Communicating the facts about cannabis**

Two main points emerged regarding the presentation of information on cannabis. The first is related to the drug's Class C classification. This was not widely understood by our samples of young people or community members; nor was it favoured by many professionals. However, it does not automatically follow that there was support for reclassification back to Class B. Whilst reclassification to Class B was seen, by some, as desirable on the grounds that cannabis is as harmful as any other drug, it was also opposed on the grounds that this would be confusing and deflect attention away from targeting Class A use.

The second point concerns the possible physical and psychological effects of using the drug. Many young people were critical of the nature of the advice and information currently available, seeing it as often portrayed as more dangerous than their own experiences, and those of their peers, had led them to conclude. More credible campaigns offering education and advice about cannabis were suggested by young people, and it appears from

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<sup>12</sup> The Kent model is able to be applied regardless of whether cannabis is a Class B or a C drug.

professionals' responses that these would benefit from the involvement of greater and more regular input from a wider range of professionals and perhaps young people themselves.

While both points are important, we regard the second as most critical. Although ideally, uncertainty about legislative status should be avoided completely, confusion amongst the young people we interviewed did not extend beyond its classification (none believed cannabis possession was now legal). On the other hand, offering young people information on the medical effects of drug use (as opposed to the criminal consequences that can result from it) appears to us a way of potentially providing young people with informed choices rather than criminal records. Of course, as things stand, criminal involvement by virtue of cannabis possession could constitute one means of accessing factual information about cannabis effects. The support offered by the majority of professionals in Burngreave for the DISP initiative suggests there may be scope for using it in the area.

For any information campaign to be effective it needs to reach a diverse audience and provide instant impact. It is clear from the last information drive that to achieve this aim the Government needs to devise new and innovative approaches. Coupled with the Government's drugs information website FRANK, radio and newspaper adverts were effective at reaching some young people. Hard-to-reach groups, in particular those likely to come into contact with the police, those unlikely to have access to the internet, those who have difficulty reading and those who do not want to listen to a government information bulletin will need to be captured in other ways. Alternative forms of communication could include: sending text information to young people's mobile phones, and placing reclassification literature in alternative retail establishments that sell clothes, CD's and DVD's. Professionals working with young people could also be encouraged to provide them with information, including: detached youth outreach workers, YOT workers, health workers/visitors, teachers and staff at Young Offender Institutions. Whilst we are unqualified to state what information young people and the general public should receive, we can highlight that in light of the widespread confusion caused by the initial campaign whatever information is provided it must be easy to understand and easier to remember.

#### *Young people and alcohol*

Alongside any initiative to educate young people about cannabis South Yorkshire Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership should also consider exploring young people's awareness of alcohol. In our sample a number of young people believed that most of their criminal and anti-social behaviour was linked to their use of alcohol rather than cannabis; outside the formal interview few respondents when asked, were aware of the recommended weekly

allowances or the health risks associated with heavy use and a number were exceeding the recommended allowance on a regular basis.

### *Supporting professionals*

Whilst it is important to communicate both the health and legal facts about cannabis to young people it is equally important to ensure that the professionals tasked with disseminating this information are provided with the most up-to-date accurate information. Supporting professional, by providing them with clear concise information, is vitally important particularly as many of the messages reported by the print media have been, and continue to be, inaccurate and misleading. The information currently issued by South Yorkshire police to operational police officers to inform them about the legal status of cannabis and possible disposal options is easy to understand and informative; using this information for other professionals who work with young people is one possible option. Similar information on the health implications of using cannabis should also be made available to professionals working in this field.

### **Communicating definitions of ASB**

When the Government launched the TOGETHER initiative it deliberately avoided precision when defining ASB, to allow as wide as possible a range of interventions to be used to tackle many issues. For local agencies, however, this open-endedness is at odds with the clarity about roles, resources and monitoring strategies needed to implement effective strategies to combat ASB. Our professionals mentioned a range of issues as falling into the category of “anti-social”, as did the young people and community members we interviewed.

For some, any definition of ASB is itself problematic, as it immediately seeks to bring objectivity to a process that is intrinsically subjective and rests upon the moral outlook of the individual. The Respect agenda<sup>13</sup> assumes that at least some of the behaviours that are grouped as ASB are well understood, noting that “Most people have an idea of what is an acceptable standard of behaviour...the key is the enforcement of standards.” Based on all our respondents, however, we would suggest that there is scope for publicising more widely what comprises ASB. This is all the more important given that, along with the Home Office typology of ASB categories, CDRPs are also advised to identify which behaviours are affecting local people and therefore require attention.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.respect.gov.uk/members/article.aspx?id=7534>

In moving towards a shared and wider understanding of what ASB means, and how it might be minimised, mediation may have a role to play. This approach rests on encouraging individuals or groups with differing perspectives to adjust (or move towards adjusting) these viewpoints. In this case, young people, a group who traditionally find it difficult to have their voice heard, and concerned residents, who may otherwise have no discussions with each other, could meet and ideally reach an understanding of why some behaviour is considered intimidating or harmless by either party. Of 11 professionals asked, nine supported the use of mediation to help tackle ASB amongst young people.

However, Pitcher *et al* (2006) note that any mediation work that is undertaken should ideally sit within a multi-agency support framework – a point we discuss below. If the idea of mediation with young people is to be pursued it would require South Yorkshire Police, Sheffield City Council and other key partners to work and support such a framework.

### **Implementing a multi-agency approach**

Jacobson (2003) argues that three interdependent elements are essential for partnership work:

- Knowledge: partners' understanding of what it is undertaking and why;
- Commitment: partners' willingness to undertake the work; and
- Capacity: partners' ability and available resources to undertake the work.

In Burngreave, we were told by some professionals that some agencies (usually their own) lacked support from representatives of other organisations; we suspect this criticism will not be unique to Burngreave but will apply to many other areas. Rather than joint work taking place, some believed that effective action relied on the efforts of single agencies, rather than a combined approach. This is especially disappointing given that one of the main principles of partnership work is that the agency that identifies a problem need not be the agency that provides the solution. Its importance for addressing ASB should not be underestimated, given the Government's intention to extend the scope of partnerships to include ASB through provisions in the Police and Justice Bill.

Inclusion of residents in this process is also important, and here the situation in Burngreave may be more encouraging. An Audit Commission report (2006) on community safety by local agencies noted that:

*“Addressing crime and anti-social behaviour must be linked to other improvements in the environment...CDRPs need to work with other partners to develop short- and long-term solutions based on local knowledge of what people really want.”*

This process has already been under way in Burngreave for some time in the form of Burngreave New Deal for Communities (BNDfC). Respondents in our community survey, though not unqualified in their praise, had noticed improvements in the area. No strong dissatisfaction was expressed by residents about the quality of the work being carried out. The community itself emerged as having a bond with the area, which in many cases dated back several years. Although outside the scope of our original questionnaire, it may be that some Burngreave community residents are amenable to informing the new direction in which CDRPs are expected to work to reduce ASB. Such a situation is one that both the BNDfC and Sheffield CDRP should perhaps try to capitalise on.

#### *Co-ordinating multi-agency work*

Whilst there are a number of agencies carrying out particularly good work around ASB, drug use, young people, young offenders and work with communities, there appears to be a need for greater co-ordination. At present, there is no Sheffield-wide (or South Yorkshire) group linking agencies together or providing the wider community with any information about what is currently being done. To complement the work currently being undertaken by Sheffield CDRP and the local statutory and voluntary agencies, a local task force group could prove to be a useful addition. If established, the group could act as a central reference point for agencies working in Sheffield around the issues of cannabis use, young people and ASB, and provide valuable feedback to local residents about the work being undertaken by local agencies. The group could also provide support to local projects and statutory agencies and provide a platform for debate about the issues as they arise. A good lead agency for this work might be the Council’s Youth Services directorate.

#### **Contradicting media portrayals of young people and ASB**

As we noted in chapter 1, the current policy drive on ASB owes much to a series of developments that can be traced back decades. Local and national media coverage is critical to sustaining this drive. The responses of professionals we interviewed show the negative impact of the media on the public’s perception of young people. The effect of this is to create an increase in perceived criminal or anti-social behaviour, whereby greater attention is paid to problems that were previously minor or, indeed, not seen as problems at all (defined by Wilkins, 1964 as “deviancy amplification”). Adapting Wilkins’ work to the

modern-day issues of young people and ASB, a cyclical pattern emerges (shown in Box 1) whereby an increasing range of non-criminal behaviour is viewed as disruptive and worthy of civil law intervention.

**Box 1: Amplification of the problem of ASB**

Less tolerance of ASB, leading to...

...more acts being defined as ASB, resulting in...

...more action against young people engaging in this behaviour, meaning...

...more alienation of young people, prompting...

...more ASB by young people, causing...

...other members of the community to be less tolerant of young people.

News media values are unlikely to change and negative press coverage of young people will continue to have more prominence than positive accounts of youth activities. However, we think there is scope for a type of “harm minimisation” approach, whereby strategies are developed to reduce the negative perceptions that press stories create in the public’s mind about young people. If promoted by local agencies working together, this would have the added benefit of promoting the type of interlinking of services that some respondents felt was lacking in Burngreave.

**Regenerating the area**

Effective strategies to tackle ASB strategies must take account of the factors that underlie ASB. Young people saw the creation of opportunities and facilities for them as the main way of reducing ASB. Although Burngreave has historically suffered from deprivation, regeneration work undertaken as part of the BNDfC initiative had made a difference to the surroundings. As responses from some community respondents indicated, more work was, in some areas still needed. However, the £52 million awarded to BNDfC in 2001 has another four years to run, and the initiative’s website lists “informing local residents and organisations and involving them in our work” as a main component of how the programme is delivered, with ‘Children and Young People’ as one of four priority areas.

Some young people interviewed felt that relationships between themselves and the police were in need of improvement; meanwhile, some professionals saw a need for more consultation with young people. We therefore regard the BNDfC work as a good opportunity

for local police officers to engage with the services used by young people, and plans exist to include voluntary and statutory agencies as part of BNDfC projects. Provided that young people's expectations are kept realistic, and that they are provided with an explanation if any planned initiatives and facilities fail to materialise, this strikes us as a promising development.

### **In conclusion**

Based on the various samples interviewed for this study, evidence for a link between young people's cannabis use and ASB is slim. For the majority of these respondents, cannabis use by young people does not constitute or cause ASB. Rather, behaviour that is regarded as ASB is engaged in by a proportion of young people, a proportion of whom, in turn, smoke cannabis in public places, and indeed alcohol. On the whole, respondents' comments suggest that cannabis use does not lead to ASB (or indeed to criminal behaviour), and that police resources would be better focused elsewhere.

This is not to say, however, that ASB, cannabis use in public, and the actions of young people (criminal, anti-social or otherwise) do not present problems in Burngreave. Our research clearly indicates that community members are concerned about a range of activities which they regard as anti-social; that young people freely admit to engaging in these activities without necessarily acknowledging their impact on others; and, that professionals felt that a range of interventions needed to be introduced or improved if young people's cannabis use and ASB are to be addressed more fully.

### **Summary of recommendations**

- BNDfC work could provide local police officers with an opportunity to engage with services used by young people. Any plans to improve the relationship between the police and young people should include both voluntary and statutory agencies.
- In moving towards a shared and wider understanding of what ASB means, and how it might be minimised, mediation may have a role to play.
- Credible campaigns offering education and advice about cannabis need to be introduced. Any such plans would benefit from the involvement and regular input from a range of professionals and perhaps young people themselves.

- Young people's alcohol use needs further examination. In particular work needs to be undertaken which examines the problems young people experience with their use and any links their use has to anti-social behaviour and offending.
- Professionals working with young people need to be provided with up-to-date accurate information about the legal status and health effects of cannabis if they are to provide young people with credible information.
- Offering young people information on the medical effects of drug use (as opposed to the criminal consequences that can result from it) has the potential to provide young people with informed choices rather than criminal records.
- The support offered by the majority of professionals in Burngreave for the Kent DISP initiative suggests there may be scope for using it in the area.
- There may be scope to convene a Sheffield-wide multi-agency group to co-ordinate the work currently being undertaken by agencies working with young people, young offenders, agencies conducting work on ASB and agencies working with communities.
- Strategies that are developed to reduce the negative perceptions that press stories create in the public's mind about young people should be encouraged. If promoted by local agencies working together, this may have the added benefit of promoting the type of interlinking of services that some respondents felt was lacking in Burngreave.

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