



Title: Drug Treatment Services for Young People: A Systematic Review of Effectiveness

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SCS topic headings: Personal Safety, Evaluation and Monitoring, Offending Management, Safety of Vulnerable Groups

[This document is a systematic REVIEW of the effectiveness of treatment and care services for drug using young people.](#)

Summary of the intervention's aim

This report presents the findings of two reviews. **Part one** contains the findings of a systematic review of published research into the effectiveness of treatment and care services for drug using young people up to the age of 16 years. It describes the services that have been assessed using moderately strong research studies and their effectiveness in five key areas:

- Reducing drug use
- Reducing the physical harms associated with drug use
- Improving the psychological well being of young drug users
- Improving family and social relations of young drug users
- Improving the uptake of other health and social services among young drug users.

The findings are followed by an outline of the factors associated with success of the interventions. The conclusion and discussion section at the end highlights the key issues and the applicability of the findings to service provision in the UK.

Part two contains the findings of a separate literature review of the current statutory framework that might affect the provision or take up of drug treatment services for young people under the age of 16 years in Scotland. The possible impact on drug service provision and uptake in Scotland is discussed.

Interpretation of statutes or case law requires legal expertise and is beyond the scope of this review. The review will, therefore, concentrate on identifying and summarising literature that provides authoritative guidance to the existing legal

framework in Scotland and may apply to clinical situations involving young people. Legislation relating to drugs and law enforcement is also out with the remit of this review.

Outcomes

How effective are drugs services in reducing drug use among young drug users?

- There is fairly strong evidence that the following interventions reduce drug use: Behaviour therapy; Culturally sensitive counselling; Family therapy; 12-step Minnesota programmes.
- Interventions also effective in reducing drug use, although less successful are: General drug treatment programmes; Therapeutic community and residential care; School based programmes that use life skills development and are targeted at high risk groups.
- Purely educational programmes are generally ineffective in reducing drug use and there is an indication that some life skills interventions for school children might increase drug use among males.

How effective are drugs services in reducing the physical harms associated with drug use among young drug users?

- There were no studies identified that assessed the effectiveness of interventions in reducing the physical harms associated with drug use among young people.

How effective are drugs services in improving the psychological wellbeing of young drug users?

- There is fairly strong evidence that family therapy is effective in reducing psychological problems of young drug users.
- Other interventions although successful have a weaker effect and include: Behaviour therapy; General drug treatment services; Family problem solving for young people with low levels of depression who have harmed themselves or overdosed; Therapeutic community offering coping and skills development; School based interventions that provide life skill development.
- Family problem solving for young people with high levels of depression who have harmed themselves, or taken an overdose, is ineffective in reducing suicide ideation. Similarly school based counselling and support is not effective in reducing depression or suicide ideation. There is also an indication that older school children exposed to life skills training are more receptive to the idea of using drugs.

How effective are drugs services in improving the family and social relations of young drug users?

- There is fairly strong evidence that the following interventions are effective in improving family or social relations: Family therapy; Family teaching; Non-hospital day programmes; Residential care services; School life skills interventions.
- Interventions also effective in improving family and social relations, although less successful are: Behaviour therapy; Community based psycho-education; Family therapy in relation to drug arrests and improving school grades; School-based interventions such as counselling, academic support and life skills.
- Interventions shown to be ineffective in improving family or social relations are: Hospital in-patient programmes; Family problem solving for young people who have deliberately harmed themselves or taken an overdose; Some school based programmes that did not take account of negative peer or family pressure.

How effective are drugs services in encouraging the uptake of other health and social services?

- Only two primary studies address this question. One study indicates that family therapy reduces the length of stay in prison or residential treatment. However there was no effect on the use of medical services, which were contacted by approximately 33% those exposed to the intervention. The second study demonstrated that parents and young people exposed to a specialist drug treatment service that offers counselling and residential care actually increased their use of medical services.

The factors contributing to the success of interventions for young drug users and might enhance future service development are:

- Low pre-treatment substance abuse
- Reduced psychopathology
- Peer and parental support (including peer-led support)
- Self-motivation and completing the programme
- Having better coping and relapse skills
- Better school attendance and school performance
- Comprehensive interventions i.e. not just concentrating on drug use but tackling the wider cultural issues including life skills training, stress and coping
- Carefully planned interventions with clear aims, objectives and target audience
- Well-funded interventions; long term with booster sessions
- Having school facilities for high-risk groups or targeting high risk groups e.g. dropouts
- Using experienced and well trained staff with low turn over
- Multi-agency working.

Summary of evaluation conclusions

The small number of papers included in the review (7 reviews and 11 primary papers) indicates that there is a lack of good quality studies on the effectiveness of drug interventions for young people up to the age of 16 years. Nevertheless, they provide useful insights into the types of interventions that have been evaluated using moderately strong research designs.

As such the review provides the best available evidence for the effectiveness of these interventions for this population. The interventions range from in-patient treatments to school-based programmes and are aimed at reducing drug use and the problems associated with drug use. The review focuses on secondary prevention rather than primary prevention. Practically all of the studies are conducted in North America or Canada.

The work presented in this report forms one element of research to review existing knowledge about, and service provision for, the treatment and care of young people with developing or existing problems with drug misuse. The findings of this research are presented in the EIU report 'Drug Treatment services for young people: a research review' of which a summary of the key findings from the above reviews forms part.

How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions

The text demonstrates excellent preparation and analysis of the material that informs this research. The document illustrates thorough explanations as to the rationale for the authors' approaches.

Part 1 methodology- A systematic review of the effectiveness of treatment and care services for drug using young people

Pages 17-20 (and Appendices 1-4) detail the step-by-step process through which publications were assessed and appraised for the systematic literature review undertaken by the authors. This selection process identified 104 suitable papers, including 34 reviews, which were accepted for detailed appraisal on which to form findings and conclusions. The review focuses on studies that are conducted with young people who are 16 years or under. The material search strategy and publications sources are identified too.

Part 2 methodology- A review of the legal framework

Pages 98-99 explain the systematic search undertaken to identify literature relating to the current statutory framework that might affect drug treatment services for young people in Scotland under the age of 16 years for the years 1990-2001. From 698 publications initially identified, 87(12%) were selected for further assessment.

Details of the search strategies appear in Appendix 5, and details of websites and number of experts contacted appear in Appendix 6. All types of publications, including reports, research papers, commentaries and books, were considered.

Study strengths

- The scope of the review is extremely wide. It includes a broad range of interventions and settings and is therefore comprehensive in its coverage of services that have been the subject of research
- It employs a comprehensive search strategy which encompasses electronic libraries, databases, expert opinion and a hand search of journals all of which resulted in uncovering a large number abstracts (approximately 6000). It is therefore unlikely that a substantial amount of relevant literature was missed
- The assessment and appraisal of papers was conducted, at least in part, by two independent reviewers who used appraisal tools adopted in previous reviews. The aim of doing so is to minimise selection bias
- Only well designed primary research studies and reviews were accepted. For primary papers this meant including only experimental, quasi-experimental or controlled observational studies. For reviews this meant including only systematic reviews that contained good quality studies. We are therefore confident that the review provides the best available evidence for the effectiveness interventions for young drug users.

Study limitations

- There may be interventions that are not yet the subject of research and therefore not included in the review e.g., motivational counselling
- The review contains studies that are of moderately strong designs and as such research using weaker designs is excluded. These studies may contain valuable information about the context or limitations of some interventions and thus the findings may be missed
- It was evident in reading some reviews that the original studies may have measured outcomes that are of relevance to the present review, but these were not reported
- Finally, almost all of the studies included in the review were conducted in the USA or Canada. This means that the results may not automatically transfer to Scotland.

**Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request.
Date added to the SCS website: July 2010 (RC)**