

Using news to keep youth drug-free

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Media reports on illicit drugs "reduce acceptability and increase perception of risk" among young people, study finds.

Mainstream [media](#) reporting is far more likely to deter [young people](#) from using illicit drugs than encourage their use, a new Australian study has found.

But the study also found that types of reports most likely to have the strongest impact on young people – those on social and health consequences of drug taking – were underrepresented in the media.

The study by the Drug Policy Modelling Program at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of NSW, and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, measured the impact of media reports on illicit drugs on the attitudes of over 2,000 young people aged 16 - 24.

The study also analysed 4,000 newspaper reports referring to illicit drugs and found that just over half focussed on criminal justice and legal issues, while only 24 per cent highlighted the health or social problems associated with drug taking.

Participants were shown eight different types of reports and their responses were measured.

Chief Investigator of the study Dr. Caitlin Hughes, a Research Fellow at NDARC's Drug Policy Modelling Program (DPMP), said that while

drugs are one of the most common motifs in popular culture and one of the most frequently reported on there is very little research anywhere in the world on how media reporting on illicit drug issues influences attitudes or behaviour on illicit drug use.

“We know from related fields that media messages can influence people’s knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

“It is commonly assumed that [news media](#) can incite drug use,” said Dr. Hughes.

“Our research has found that the opposite is the case. Most media portrayals appear to reduce interest in illicit drugs, at least in the short term.

“They increase perceptions of risk, reduce perceptions of acceptability and reduce the reported likelihood of future drug use,” said Dr. Hughes.

”But the irony is that the messages that are most effective at deterring youth interest in drugs are currently under-represented in Australian news media,” said Dr. Hughes.

News items which focussed on the health and social issues - for example evidence about cannabis and psychosis or cannabis and poor educational outcomes - were more likely to have a deterrent effect than reports on drug busts and arrests.

“Our results show clearly there is an opportunity to better harness the media to shape young peoples’ attitudes to illicit drugs.

We are not saying news media is the silver bullet in drug prevention, but given news media is so pervasive we do think it ought to be recognised, both within Australian and internationally, as a potentially powerful tool

for preventing illicit drug use.”

Key points:

- A total of 2,296 youth aged 16-24 years completed the survey
- All youth were shown 8 different media messages about drugs (on the two most commonly used drugs in Australia - cannabis and ecstasy)
- 66.4% and 86.5% of participants had weekly or more frequent contact with television news, online news, radio news and/or print newspapers
- Most news media messages elicited moderate to large impacts on youth attitudes. Negative health or social messages elicited large impacts on youth attitudes.
- Messages on ecstasy had greater impact on youth than messages on cannabis
- Females more likely to be deterred from use than males
- People who have never used drugs more likely to be deterred than current users
- Reports on criminal arrests significantly less persuasive than reports about negative health or social consequences
- Across all drugs, criminal justice/law enforcement topics accounted for 55% of all topics
- 60% of articles emphasised that [illicit drugs](#) lead to legal problems. 14% health problems, 10% social problems, 10% cost to society and 6% other (4% neutral and 2% benefits)
- Tabloids were more likely to emphasise legal problems: 71% compared to 61% for broadsheet
- 11 newspapers, one national, seven major metropolitan, in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth and three local in Geelong, Newcastle and Sydney were reviewed

What they said: (comments from the focus groups).

Re: power of media to dissuade youth drug use:

“Media is probably one of the few ways that prevention message(s) can keep being pushed.” (20 year old female)

“When I was younger... the way that that was portrayed in the media totally shaped the way that I saw drugs.” (22 year old female)

Re: fatal overdose of a young person:

“I think that would convince me not to take drugs. Just „cause.....I feel sorry for her.” (17 year old male)

Re: drug bust:

“Another drug bust...oh who cares, it just happens so often.” (17 year old male)

More information: *Media reporting on illicit drugs in Australia: trends and impacts on youth attitudes to illicit drug use.* Drug Policy Modelling Program, September 2010. It can be accessed through:
www.dpmp.unsw.edu.au

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