

## **BULLETIN NO 15: POPULAR CULTURE AND THE PREVENTION OF ILLICIT DRUG USE**

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### **Rationale**

In terms of the four key strategies underpinning drug policy – law enforcement, treatment, harm reduction and prevention – prevention is arguably the weakest. It is currently narrowly conceived and does not have an effective guiding idea, in contrast to substitution therapy for drug treatment. It also does not have a dedicated practice sector, unlike law enforcement. It is noteworthy that popular culture is key in normalising attitudes to illicit drugs, and that this is largely ignored in the prevention literature. We are not suggesting that there is a simple or direct causal link, but instead that the cultural milieu can influence the acceptability of illicit drug use.

Our aim was to determine if it was feasible to investigate the impact of popular culture on illicit drug use and we therefore undertook a pilot study on popular music.

### **Approach**

The project has five components: a literature review, pilot interviews with people involved in various aspects of the music industry, pilot interviews with 16-18 year olds about the music they listen to and its impact, mapping of the music scene, and identification of key researchers in popular culture in Australia.

### **Results**

Although much has been written about the music industry, including in Australia, little has been published about the association between popular music and illicit drug use. The exception is the literature related to ‘rave’ music which is closely linked to ecstasy and other psychostimulant drug use. Use of these substances is normalised and expected at events which feature ‘rave’ music.

We were successful in conducting 13 pilot interviews with people involved in the music industry in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, and Victoria. They included disc jockeys, record producers, managers, rave organisers, teachers and musical artists. They provided insights into a range of subcultures associated with different forms of popular music and with different acceptability of illicit drug use. At one end of the scale, we received

confirmation of the strong association between raves and psychostimulant use. Indeed budgeting for these events may include line items for illicit drug procurement and sales. We also heard about “bush raves”, which are associated with different drugs, mainly hallucinogens and cannabis. At the opposite end of the scale is ‘straight edge’ music, associated with a subculture that opposes illicit drugs, smoking, and promiscuous sex.

Pilot interviews were also undertaken with nine middle-class young people aged 16-18. They also represented a range of views, from believing there was no harm in illegal ‘party’ drugs (such as ecstasy), to being very censorious about the use of all drugs, including alcohol and tobacco. As expected, listening to music was an important free-time activity for these young people, occupying three to six hours per day. They also confirmed that drug use was associated with particular styles of music. They generally did not think that lyrics or the lifestyles of music stars had much influence per se.

We found that we were able to get good insights into the structure of the music business and we were able to make contacts with key individuals in the business relatively easily through snowball sampling. They were willing to reflect on their understanding of the music industry and its association with illicit drug use. Similarly young people were willing to be interviewed and forthcoming about their experiences. Overall a more detailed study of popular culture and drug use prevention is feasible. The music industry contacts, in particular, were strongly supportive of a study of this type.

## **Implications**

This pilot study illustrated that DPMP can successfully open up productive new areas for investigation to give a fuller picture of drug use in Australia. We see an on-going role for DPMP in doing this. In general though, the full development of new areas identified as productive will be funded through other sources. This is how we expect to further the research on popular culture and prevention.

## **Research team**

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