

# An overview of the nature and extent of illicit drug use amongst the Traveller community: an exploratory study

## Research Conducted by:

The research was commissioned by the NACD and the contract was awarded to Vision 21 who carried out the fieldwork. Professor Jane Fountain from the University of Central Lancashire's Centre for Ethnicity and Health carried out the data analysis and prepared the final report.

## Aim:

Provide an overview of the nature and extent of illicit drug use among the Traveller community; to identify patterns of problematic drug use and drug-related risk behaviours; and to describe what interventions are needed to prevent and deal with the harmful health consequences of illicit drug use.

## Method:

A comprehensive literature search and review was conducted. The researchers engaged with 137 Travellers and 34 agency workers through focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Of the 137 Traveller participants that were interviewed for the study, 15 were current and former drug users (licit and illicit). The fieldwork was carried out in late 2003 and 2004. The data were analysed thematically, according to the themes that most consistently arose pertinent to the project's aims. Notes and tape recordings taken during interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed and all the comments made on a particular issue were collated.

## Key Findings:

Results showed that patterns of drug use amongst the Traveller community are similar to the general population.

- Cannabis, sedatives, tranquillisers and anti-depressants are the most widely used substances by the Traveller community as is the case with the general population.
- These substances are followed by cocaine and ecstasy.
- More men than women are reported to be using illegal drugs and it is largely confined to the younger adults aged 15 to 34.
- Polydrug use (use of two or more substances including alcohol) is common, again consistent with the general population.
- Travellers due to the risk factors associated with their interrelated social and economic circumstances

are at risk of problem drug use. The key risk factors for problematic drug use are: education, health, employment, accommodation, previous and current drug use, criminal justice, family, social networks, and the environment in terms of social deprivation.

- Lack of knowledge about drugs and drug services has hampered Travellers' responses to drug problems, including tackling drug dealing.
- Travellers have experienced a multiplicity of barriers to accessing drug services. These relate to: lack of awareness of the existence and nature of drug services; lack of formal education; stigma and embarrassment; lack of culturally appropriate services; discrimination; and stereotyping.
- The impact of drug use on Travellers who are drug users, on their families, and on their community can be exacerbated by the discrimination and social exclusion experiences that affect this tight knit community.

Overall, it is clear from the research that Travellers are indeed a vulnerable group for whom the considerable impact of drug use and its consequent problems is now emerging. Traveller groups and drug services reported increasing drug use, problematic use, anti-social behaviour, frustration by Travellers trying to access services and frustration by drug services trying to retain Traveller clients in treatment. Traveller groups have been trying to respond to these issues.

## Recommendations to Government:

1. The funding of specific drugs education and literature development for Travellers
2. Provide diversity training for Drug Services to assist them address and meet the needs of ethnic groups including Travellers
3. There should be engagement with the Traveller community working through the collaborative model of the drug task forces
4. All records and data collection methods should include ethnic monitoring
5. The implementation of equality proofing of drugs policy, drug service planning and delivery should help towards ensuring culturally appropriate services

Further research on drug related issues in the Traveller community is needed to address issues such as drug treatment take up and retention.