



What do youth in Barbados think of drugs?

Focus group study on the perceptions
of young Barbadians towards drug use
and drug prevention strategies

BACKGROUND

Youth in the Caribbean are confronted with a number of social ills such as unemployment, poverty, violence, drugs and HIV/AIDS (CARICOM, 2000). Drug abuse and crime are substantial concerns in the region; it is widespread among young people to various degrees in the different countries. To tackle these problems a new approach needs to be required: young people should be viewed as part of the solution, not just as part of the problem (CARICOM, 2000). In fact, youth are crucial in the fight against drugs and crime, their actions and perceptions have a central role in policy and practice.

A number of Caribbean countries have undertaken quantitative assessments of drug trends involving youth, which provide an overview of the scale of the problem and facilitate the identification of prevention practices. However, the existing research is mainly based on quantitative surveys. Although these surveys give a reliable portrait of the extent of the problem, qualitative methods provide an in-depth understanding of the causes of a problem.

Also, quantitative research on drug abuse in the Caribbean is usually conducted via school surveys. For instance, studies conducted in The Bahamas (Smart and Paterson, 1990), Trinidad and Tobago (Sing and al., 1999), Guyana (Ministry of Health, 1997) and Jamaica (Douglas, 1998) focus on primary or secondary school students. As a result, it portrays a partial analysis of the overall problem affecting the youth. Although school surveys target a major part of the adolescent population, they nonetheless neglect a segment of this group, for instance adolescents who do not necessarily attend school such as the: homeless, street children, unemployed, out of school youth, sex workers, etc. These vulnerable groups tend to be marginalized from society and are considered to be 'at risk'. Their problems and needs may differ significantly from the youth attending school.

In view of this information, the UNDCP Caribbean Regional Office conducted a pilot focus group research in Barbados in order to assess directly from the young people their perceptions on the drug abuse situation. Therefore, through a qualitative approach, a preliminary analysis on the perspective of youth 'at risk' towards drug use and drug prevention strategies was completed. This study focuses on drug use among youth including the causes and effects of drug consumption as perceived and described by young Barbadians. It also includes their views towards the existing prevention strategies and recommendations for future practice.

The findings and messages from the youth presented in this report offer a powerful insight for drug prevention and crime reduction initiatives. Also, this qualitative study will complement the findings from the school surveys being undertaken in Barbados providing therefore a better understanding of drug use problem and how it affects young people.

METHODS

The qualitative approach

Focus group discussions with boys and girls, between the ages of 12 and 25, were completed in order to better comprehend the perspective of youth towards drug use and drug prevention strategies. Considering the exploratory and descriptive nature of this study, a qualitative approach was therefore required.

To begin the discussion, participants in the focus groups were asked a general question and were expected to elaborate. The facilitator then proceeded by reformulating questions according to what was said during the discussions and by taking into account the objectives of the study as well as the themes to be explored. Prior to the discussions, a list of questions was prepared in order to ensure that all themes related to the objectives were explored during the focus groups with the youth. Discussions were therefore guided by prepared questions covering different aspects of drug use. This list was only used when the participants did not address instinctively the topics to be examined by this study.

Characteristics of the participants

The study focused mainly on the perceptions of youth 'at risk' towards drug use and drug prevention strategies. Youth 'at risk' was defined according to two selected criteria:

- ⇒ Youth living in a deprived community¹
- ⇒ Youth who are out of school
- ⇒ Youth with delinquent tendencies

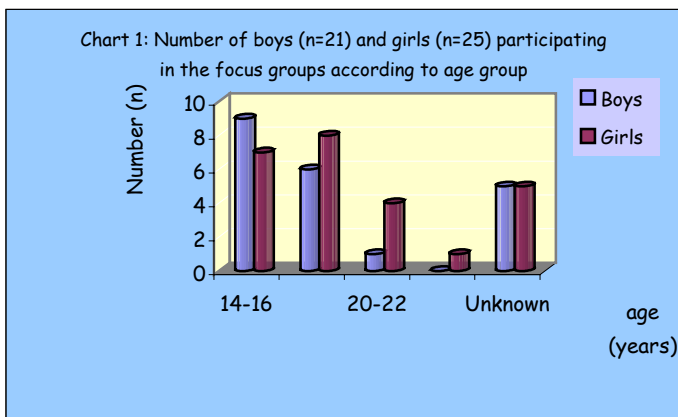
A total of seven (7) focus group discussions were completed:

- ⇒ two (2) focus groups with youth in school living in a deprived community,
- ⇒ four (4) focus groups with out of school youth who were following programmes developed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports
- ⇒ one (1) focus group with juvenile offenders.

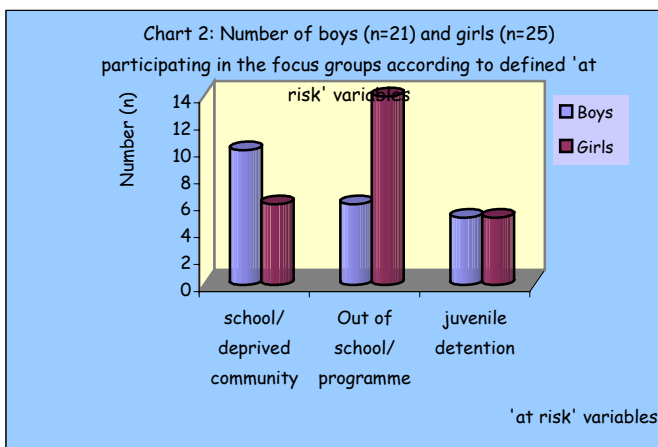
The discussions were held in classrooms at the schools and at the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Sports. A total of 46 youth participated in the focus group discussions, which included 26 girls and 21 boys.

¹Deprived community is defined according to the lack of appropriate infrastructure, high unemployment rate and high crime rate.

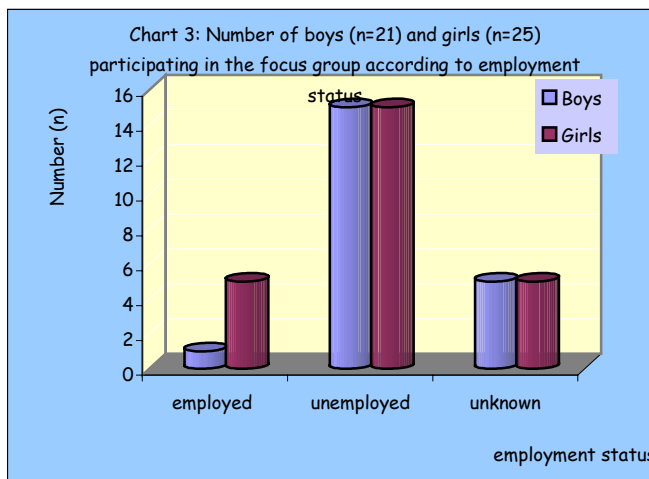
Chart 1 shows the age of the young people participating in the focus groups. In total, the girls and the boys were between the ages of 14 and 24 years old. Thirty-five percent (35%) of the sample (43% of the boys and 28% of the girls) was between the ages of 14 and 16 and approximately one third (28% of the boys and 32% of the girls) were between 17 and 19 years old. A minority of the participants was over the age of 20 (5% of the boys and 20% of the girls). The exact age of 10 persons (5 girls and 5 boys) in the sample was unknown, they were nonetheless between the ages of 13 and 17. According to Chart 1, most participants were adolescents and therefore over the age of 14 and under 19 years of age for both the girls and the boys.



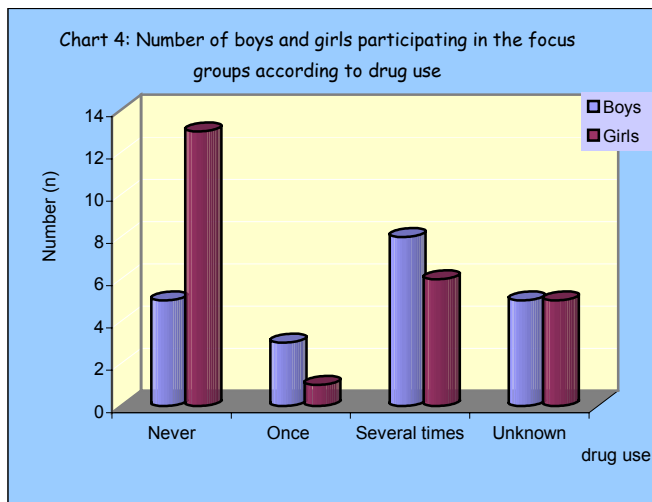
When examining the variables chosen to define the 'at risk' group of young people (Chart 2), we notice that most of the sample (43%) were out of school and enrolled in a programme. Approximately one third (35%) were registered in a school from a deprived community and 22% were detained in a juvenile facility. The majority of boys were enrolled in school from a deprived community (47%). A little under one third of the boys were out of school and enrolled in a programme (28%) and 25% were in a juvenile detention facility. The majority of girls (56%) however was out of school and enrolled in a programme. Sixteen girls (24%) were in school from a deprived community and 5 girls (20%) were detained in a juvenile facility.



Since most of the youth participating in the focus groups were out of school and enrolled in programmes (43%), the employment status of the participants was also considered. Chart 3 shows that the majority of the participants (65%) were unemployed: 71% of the boys and 60% of the girls. Only one boy (5%) and five girls (20%) were working while in school or while following a programme.



Participants in the focus groups were also asked to answer anonymously on an information sheet the question: Have you ever tried an illegal drug? (Chart 4) A little less than half of the sample (39%) mentioned that they never tried an illegal drug, which represents 52% of the girls and 24% of the boys. Three boys (14%) and a girl (4%) declared to have tried a drug once. Almost one third (30%) of the sample admitted to have tried a drug on several occasions. Among this group, 38% were boys and 24% were girls.



FINDINGS

To find out how young people perceived drug use and drug prevention strategies, they were asked to focus on a number of specific issues. These included their perceptions on the

- ⇒ type of drugs used in the community,
- ⇒ favorite drugs among young people,
- ⇒ age of initiation,
- ⇒ size of the young people population using drugs,
- ⇒ frequency of drug use
- ⇒ causes of drug consumption,
- ⇒ consequences of drug use,
- ⇒ impact of drug prevention strategies and
- ⇒ recommendations for future practices.

How do young people define drugs?

To better comprehend the perspective of young people towards drug use and drug prevention strategies, it was important to first understand their description and their definition of the terminology 'drugs'. Therefore, discussions initiated by asking young people on what they considered to be a drug.

Youth participating in the focus groups generally define drugs as any legal or illegal substance that affects a person physically and psychologically. It was emphasized however that drugs affect primarily the psychological state of the user, a substance that modifies their cognitive and emotional states:

A drug is a product, legal or illegal, that affects the frame of mind; it turns you into a state you normally wouldn't be in. Basically, it's a substance that makes you feel happier or sadder or whatever. Drugs have an influence on your body and mind. (girls and boys, 17-22).

A minority of the participants perceive drugs according to the illegal classification of the substance. Legal products such as alcohol, tobacco and prescription drugs were not considered to be drugs; all other illegal substances, for instance, cocaine, heroin and marijuana were stated as drugs.

Marijuana, however, was not always classified by all youth as an illegal drug. Some participants perceive it to be a 'safe' and positive drug (the consequences of drug use are presented in a later section of this report) :

Marijuana is not bad because it cures, it relaxes. (boys, 15-16).

There is nothing wrong with marijuana. (girls and boys, 17-22)

Marijuana makes you feel good (boys and girls, 13-17)

Drugs are also classified by the youth according to the nature of their use. In fact, any substance that is abused, specifically a product that causes an addiction, is perceived to be a drug. Abuse appears to be related to the behaviour of the drug user. If a person is unable to function properly on a daily basis without the use of drugs, according to the youth, this person is addicted to and abusing the substance.

Anything that you overuse is a drug, whether it is legal or illegal, like prescription drugs. That's drug abuse, when you can't control it, when you are addicted. That's drug abuse. (boys, 17-19)

The participants in the focus groups made a distinction between users and abusers; users are perceived to be capable of controlling the quantity of drugs consumed unlike abusers:

It's okay to use marijuana but it depends on the use, it's like drinking, you could drink to a certain extent but not over do it. You know you're not necessarily addicted and that's not bad. (boys, 15-16)

Some of the young people in the focus group believe that 1 out of every 5 young persons are addicted to drugs and more specifically marijuana. Others consider that proportion to be much higher by stating that approximately half of the young drug users are addicted to drugs.

Perceptions of young people towards drug use

More specific questions on drug use among young people were raised during the focus group discussions. This includes the perceptions of the participants on the common drugs used in their community and the favorite drugs of young people. Furthermore, the profile of young users, the age of initiation and the frequency of drug use were explored. The young participants also examined the major locations where drugs are consumed and purchased. These findings are presented in this section.

Drugs used among young people

Several substances were mentioned as being consumed in the community. According to most young people in the focus groups, the main drugs used were marijuana and alcohol. Cocaine and/or crack, heroin and ecstasy were also cited as used but its consumption is less significant.

The use of combined drugs was revealed during the focus groups. The most common combination identified was the mixture of cannabis with cocaine, a combination labelled "blackies". The mixture of cannabis and tobacco was also indicated in a focus group.

In every focus group, there seems to be a consensus on the favorite drug of young people: marijuana. As stated by the majority of youth, marijuana appears to be widely accepted by young people in the community.

Most young people smoke, not all of them right, but most. There is a lot. (boys, 15-16)

They feel good about it [marijuana], it's accepted, you know. (girls, 14-16)

Marijuana is very good for you. It makes you see, it makes you see above all. (boys and girls, 12-17)

Furthermore, it was revealed that different types of marijuana are preferred. In fact, "weed" is categorized according to its source and depends on the country it is imported from. According to the youth, cannabis from Jamaica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is favoured among young people, it is considered to be more potent.

During the focus group discussions, alcohol was also mentioned as being widely used by young people. However, alcohol is perceived as a bigger problem in the community than marijuana:

Alcohol is worse than marijuana. It's a big problem. It causes more problems, like liver problems. Everyone drinks alcohol. A lot of young people are drinking. It's not good for the body; the effects are bad, such as violence and suicide. (girls, 19-25)

Alcohol is worse [than marijuana], everybody drinks alcohol in Barbados, many people have real problems with alcohol. It can kill you, I tell you there are so many people hooked on rum out there. (boys and girls, 13-17)

Profile of young users

No specific profile exists among the young people who use drugs. In fact, it was said by the participants that any young person is capable of using drugs.

A consensus emerges among young people in the focus groups on the perceived age of initiation to drug use referring mostly to alcohol and marijuana. According to most of the youth, young people start using drugs as of the age of 10 and, in some cases, as early as 5. Apparently, this occurs when a family member consumes drugs. Early drug use also appears to depend on the involvement of young persons with the 'block'. Young persons acquainted with or related to someone from the 'block' are more likely to start using drugs at a younger age:

It depends where they come from, if they know someone on the block, if someone from the family is on the block; you could start around 5 or 6. (boys, 17-19)

The frequency of drug use

The frequency of drug use was also discussed during the focus groups. The dialogue was however focused on marijuana use. Generally, most young people in the focus groups declared that marijuana is used on a daily basis and furthermore throughout the day:

It is used often. Every minute, no, no, more. It's every second of every minute, of every hour, of every day, you get the picture right! (boys, 17-19)

It's the first thing you do in the morning and the last thing you do at night. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Some young persons in the focus group, although a minority, perceived the consumption of marijuana on a more occasional basis, for example when they are just 'liming' or 'breezing' with friends.

Favorite places to use

The location where drugs are consumed is also indefinite. It seems that drugs can be used in any type of environment. Certain places or occasions appear to be nonetheless favoured by young people. Clubs and the young person's residence are mentioned as locations where drugs are mostly consumed. Using drugs in schools also seems to be common according to some youth in the focus groups:

You can use drugs in school, in the bathroom, outside somewhere hidden, in the science lab, it's done. (boys and girls, 13-17)

Young people are also more likely to consume drugs at parties, during picnics and while 'liming'. A recurrent main location for drug consumption revealed by the youth in the focus groups is the 'block':

They will be on the block liming. There is not one block that doesn't smoke. (girls, 18-19)

Drugs, and more specifically, marijuana appear to be easily accessible. In all the focus groups most young people stated that drugs can be purchased "anywhere" in Barbados. Nevertheless, most young people procure their drugs from friends, in schools, off the streets or on the 'block'.

Perceptions of youth towards the causes of drug use

In order to identify the perspective of youth on the causes of drugs use, the participants in the focus groups were asked why they believed that youth consume drugs.

Peer pressure

A recurring motive for using drugs, and more precisely marijuana, seems to be associated to negative peer pressure. During the focus group discussions, it was stated that adolescents would use drugs as a result of pressure from their friends. Peer pressure seems to be associated to fear of rejection by their friends. To be part of a group is crucial and in order to feel included, many young people will consume marijuana:

If you are in school and your friend is smoking weed, you wanna do it too because you don't want to feel left out, so you are gonna do it too. (girls, 14-16)

In order for adolescents to integrate in a group or to be able to identify with their peers, they feel they need to possess a certain image. The image of each youth becomes fundamental. Taking drugs such as marijuana creates an image compatible to their peer group. As the young people state:

Some people take drugs for image. You know image is important. You need to be cool, you know like your friends. Like it is cool to take drugs, you know. (girls, 19-25)

Peer pressure, the fear of rejection and the importance of being included seems to be highly associated to the family environment. In fact, the young people explained that peer pressure would play an important role when there is a presence of problems within the family of the young user. In fact, it was stated that when young people feel neglected in their homes, they tend to turn to friends for support:

You know you have problems at home; you just can't talk to anyone in your place. The only ones you can talk to are your friends, so your friends are important. (girls, 14-16)

To experiment

It was relayed during the focus group that a person would sometimes use marijuana or alcohol because they see their friends doing it; peer pressure is not necessarily employed. Young participants explained that observing friends taking the substance arouses their curiosity. It was stated during the discussions that by watching their friends, young people sometimes get the impression that smoking marijuana is, for example, enjoyable. For these reasons, they are willing to experiment. Therefore, as the youth convey, mimicking others who use drugs may lead to consumption, especially if the youth admires this person. It was said that such a young person would imitate the conduct in order to identify with the person using drugs:

They follow a pattern... Say you're 12 and you got a big brother that is a big shot on the block, he acts fresh and you feel that nobody likes you... It will start off as them wanting to like their big brother. Most people smoke because they see other people doing it and they wanna be like that person. (girls, 18-19)

To escape

According to the participants, young people take drugs as a mean to escape from their problems. Drug consumption is a method used by young people to cope with difficulties in their lives. Marijuana, more specifically, is perceived by young people as the drug that enables you to relieve stress during the more difficult moments in your life. Smoking marijuana is apparently relaxing. The substance is therefore taken in order to access tranquillity. Marijuana is not only believe to be a product that relieves stress but it also enables young people to think clearly:

After smoking, I feel better, I feel good, it makes me think clearly. If I am vexed or stressed, or I get into a fight, I take a spliff and I will calm myself down. I can think straight and clear. It relieves the stress. (girls, 18-19)

Marijuana makes you feel good, it expands the mind. (girls and boys, 13-17)

People just take marijuana to be more alert. So they will use it in the morning as soon as they wake up. Marijuana helps me think clearly. (boys, 17-19)

To rebel

Since taking drugs is illegal and is not accepted by the general public, this apparently will tempt young people to try it. It was mentioned during the focus group that the prohibition of drugs arises their curiosity and will entice them to try it:

If you keep saying don't drink, don't do that, don't take marijuana. You are going to raise curiosity and you may wanna do it because you can't do it. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Furthermore, the accumulation of problems and difficulties will sometimes compel young people to exercise 'a don't care attitude' or to rebel against society which justifies the use of marijuana. This 'don't care attitude' is associated to feelings of worthlessness. It was described that young people sometimes simply receive negative comments or remarks from others; this has an impact on the perception of the young person towards himself. After repeatedly hearing pessimistic comments, the young person starts to believe that he is worthless and develops a 'don't care attitude'. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that young people sometimes feel like no one cares about them:

you just don't care anymore. You feed on the person, it's got to be true, you don't hear anything positive, it's got to be true. What a life for a worthless nobody. Nobody cares about you, you are like a disease. Your best option is to die. You have no reinforcements, so you do whatever it takes. When you get hurt often you don't care about others feelings. So you don't care what happens to you. So if you smoke you just don't care what happens anyway. (boys, 17-19)

Family influences

As previously mentioned, in some cases, young people would start using drugs as of the age of 6. Family influences were cited as the main reason for early initiation to drug use, specifically alcohol and marijuana use; when a family member uses these substances it encourages the young person to consume as well. From the perspectives of the youth, drug use therefore develops into a lifestyle:

Most families that will be smoking, the kid will start too. Or even when the father sells drugs, well then they may take as well. You know its normal for him, to use. It's part of their everyday life. (boys, 15-16)

Parents drink alcohol, sons' follow (boys and girls, 13-17)

Perceptions on the impact of drug use

During the focus groups, youth were questioned on the impact of drug use. The participants conveyed their views on the physiological and sociological effects. HIV/AIDS, violence and gangs were also discussed as consequences related to the use of drugs.

Physiological effects

Physiological and psychological effects of drug use were discussed during the focus groups. It was stated that drugs have a physiological impact, mentioning that most drugs have a negative effect on the body and the health. However, the impact of drug use was mostly discussed on a behavioural level. In fact, most young people conveyed that drugs affect the conduct of the user. According to the youth, drugs alter a person's state of mind affecting therefore his or her actions. The change in the users behaviour is perceived negatively. In fact, young people associated drug use with aggressiveness and loss of control. Alcohol and hard drugs, mainly cocaine, are perceived as having worse effects than marijuana. Cocaine and alcohol causes people to become more aggressive and to lose control. However, according to the youth in the focus groups, marijuana has an opposite effect, it generates serenity and peacefulness:

Marijuana doesn't have an affect or the effects are very mild. It doesn't affect anybody in that kind of way. Just chill out. Maybe if you talk about cocaine or even alcohol. In that case, well then you loose control, you get aggressive but not with marijuana. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Some young people during the discussions emphasized that the conduct of a person is not necessarily associated to the type of substances consumed. The changes in behaviour depends moreover of each individual and their personality. If a person, for example, has aggressive tendencies without the use of drugs, this person will continue to behave aggressively under the influence as well.

The difference in behaviour among young people is also explained by their reactions towards the effects of the drugs consumed. Each individual responds differently to the drugs and its effects, some will react more negatively than others. It was said that a number of people do not know how to handle their effects.

Others will state that the diversity in behaviour depend on the quantity of the substance taken. Some people do not know when to stop using and this makes them react more aggressively:

When you are smoking and you feel high, then you know to stop. Some know when to stop others just keep smoking and smoking and smoking, and then they get upset and aggressive and out of control and stuff. (girls, 18-19)

Impact on the family, friends and school

Young people mentioned during the focus group discussions the impact of drug consumption on the family. Most will say that this causes tension and conflicts within the family. The tension and conflicts in the family may sometimes also cause the user to get thrown out of the home, which in turn is believed to aggravate the situation. There also appears to be a stigma associated with drug consumption that can further cause problems within the family as stated by the participants in the focus groups. It is in fact mentioned that once the family realizes that their child is using drugs, they feel ashamed and embarrassed in their community.

Drug use may not only have a negative effect with the family but also with friends. Some young people mentioned that drug use would sometimes break up friendship. This happens when the friend or the family's friend does not agree with drug consumption. However, the majority of young people in the focus group mention that drug use may affect friendships positively among young people. It was perceived that drug use may bring young people closer together. Friends will in fact get together in a group to smoke for example:

It gets you closer with your friends, because you all get together and smoke you know. (girls, 18-19)

The participants in the focus groups discussions relayed that drug use may have a negative impact on the adolescent's academic performance. Drugs alter the cognitive state of the young person affecting their concentration level:

At school, you don't perform, you won't be able to do thing properly, you can't think straight (boys, 15-16)

However, since marijuana is perceived as a substance that helps relieve stress and to think clearly, some young people mentioned that it is consumed before taking exams for school:

Some will take it before taking a test. To think clear, to get rid of the jitters. (boys, 17-19)

Ganja makes you concentrate better. (boys and girls, 13-17)

Drugs and HIV/AIDS

When discussing the changes in behaviour, in some focus groups, the topic of HIV/AIDS was mentioned. Most young people feel that taking drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviours, that can in turn lead to HIV/AIDS. In fact, some stated that smoking or drinking would sometimes lead to sex, and more specifically unprotected sex. According to the young people in the focus groups, precautions in order to prevent pregnancies or HIV/AIDS are not always taken when under the influence of drugs:

You know you lose control after drinking or smoking and you don't think, you don't think about condoms, so drugs have a big impact on AIDS. (boys and girls, 17-22)

People on drugs don't think about using condoms, they just think of getting sex. (girls, 14-16)

In certain focus groups, it was even stated that marijuana or alcohol was used in order to increase sexual stimulation:

Drugs pump up the hormones, if you are thinking about it, you smoke, it gives you a booster, you only want the hormones to go up. Your head is beyond you can't do nothing. (boys, 18-19)

You take alcohol to get a little more horny. Yeah, alcohol can get you horny, you know. And sometimes when you are drunk or high, you don't think of the consequences, you don't think of using a condom, you just want it and that's it. So you are not thinking about AIDS, you are not thinking about pregnancies and stuff. (boys and girls, 17-22)

In focus groups with the girls, it was even said that certain boys would strategically use drugs to get a woman to engage in sexual activity with them. Boys would in fact offer women marijuana, and in some cases it is mixed with cocaine (blackies) under the pretence that it is only marijuana, in order to take advantage of them:

When you get high or you get sleepy, some guys will take advantage of that. You know, you could be at a party and all of a sudden 7 guys brought me some marijuana, they do this so that they can get you high and take you home with them. Sometimes they will mix marijuana and cocaine and not tell you. (boys and girls, 17-22)

During a focus group with the girls, the link between drug use and HIV/AIDS was reflected as a consequence of forced sexual activities. In fact, the girls expressed that when the guy and/or the girl is under the influence of drugs, this may lead to rape and in some cases unprotected sexual relations:

Some people get raped, and the guy don't use no condom, no nothing and then you get AIDS or get pregnant. When you take drugs anybody can have sex with you. And as a man you can rape a girl and not know that she has AIDS. Some will then get aggressive, fight and rape. (girls, 18-19)

Apparently, the occurrence of rape is commonly related to drug use. However, girls will not disclose the event mostly due to fear of retaliation from the offender:

There are rapes out there but people don't come out, they are afraid to come out. They are afraid that the guy will come after them again. It will be in the newspaper and then everyone knows you know they print your name and everything. (girls, 18-19)

Violence, crime and drugs

In every focus group, discussions about the relationship between drugs and crime, and more specifically violence took place. Violence and crime is perceived by the youth as a consequence of drug use. Under the influence of drugs, certain people may become violent or break the law. Violence and crime seems to result from feelings of aggressiveness and loss of control associated with drug use. As mentioned by the participants in the focus group, the manifestation of aggressiveness and loss of control subsequent to drug consumption appears to turn into violence or anti-social behaviour. Fighting, robberies and destruction were violent behaviours mostly mentioned during the focus groups:

You have people that'd be smoking and having a beer, the next thing you know they are causing trouble. They get aggressive; they break things, they fight. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Violence is not only perceived as a consequence of drug use but as a result of conflicts arising during the drug trade. Disputes between drug dealers and the drug users are said to often take place. According to the focus group participants, these conflicts appear to be associated to overdue drug payments by the drug user. Drug pushers will resort to violence in order to receive their payments from the person in debt:

People sell, they want their money, if they don't get, well they do whatever it takes. (boys, 15-16)

Another consequence of drug use is related to thefts or robberies. Young people in the focus group believe that drug users may sometimes engage in illegal activities to maintain their habits. It was explained by the participants in the focus groups that drug users might sometimes be unable to pay for their drugs and therefore will steal, rob or even kill in order to obtain the money to pay for them:

Sometimes users don't have an income, they want then more money to get more drugs and they will steal, or rob someone, just for the drugs. (girls, 19-25)

However, violence for some young people is associated mainly with the use of hard drugs, such as cocaine. Marijuana is believed to be a relaxing drug that does not lead to violence or crimes:

They could get aggressive; break things, fight, but this is more for cocaine users. Marijuana users don't necessarily cause trouble because when you take weed, you are mellow, you don't want to fight, you just wanna lime and relax, you know. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Not ganja but dope causes crime (girls and boys, 13-17)

Gangs, crime and drugs

The presence of gangs in Barbados was also revealed during the focus groups discussion. In fact, some young people considered the 'blocks' as gangs, which were highly associated with the violence and crimes in their community:

Everyday we see violence and fights, you know, with the gangs. Yeah there are gangs here. They are a group of people looking for trouble. Like fighting on the block. They hang mostly there on the blocks. (girls, 14-16)

As perceived by the young people, some gangs or some blocks are involved in the drug market. In fact, many members of these gangs or blocks will be selling drugs and are much involved with violence and crimes in the communities. The violence and crimes will sometimes result from the drug trade involving gangs or blocks. These acts of violence appear to be mostly related to battles over territories. Violence seems to occur when a gang starts selling drugs on another gang's territory:

The violence that emerges with gangs is mostly drug related, you know. Somebody from this area will be from the other area, and you know you have some people backing them. (boys and girls, 17-22)

The violence is described by most young people in the focus groups as wars between the gangs. These 'wars' are strongly related to the drug trade:

Sometimes a gang will sell, you know, somewhere and then another gang want to take it, so it causes a war between the gangs, you know it's about their turfs and stuff. It could be territorial. (boys and girls, 17-22)

The young people in the focus groups differentiate however two types of gangs. It was emphasized that not all gangs or blocks are involved with illegal activities. Some groups keep to themselves and do not get involved in any type of violent behaviours:

Some gangs don't do any foolishness, you don't hear about them. But there are particular ones, others will fight (girls, 18-19)

Gangs could be good and could be bad. Some gangs all they do is sit down, smoke and talk. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Impact of prevention strategies

To better understand the perceptions of young people towards the impact of drug prevention strategies, it was essential to identify the practices that they are familiar with. The majority of young people during the focus group discussions were unaware of any type of programmes or strategies that existed. Nevertheless, two types of prevention programmes or strategies towards drug use were mentioned in some focus groups. Educational programmes in school and advocacy programmes through advertisements (posters, television commercial, radio announcements, etc.) were mostly mentioned. Most young people characterised these programmes as ineffective:

They are useless. The posters are usually ripped down and upon the TV, they give you a number but nobody calls, the person using drugs, do you really think he calls. If someone does call it's the family. They can't give up weed. (girls, 14-16)

Can I make a confession... I smoke you know and I could really tell you, I have been smoking for a really long time now and I am a living example of all the programmes and all the seminars and talks, all the coaching and I didn't stop smoking yet. I don't think it makes a big difference you know. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Messages are perceived by the young participants also as contradictive. The slogan 'sports not drugs' was used as an example to explain that certain messages do not reflect reality. In fact, according to the participants in the focus groups even young people who practice certain sports will use drugs. Furthermore, it was said that getting involved in sports might even bring about drug use:

You know the 'sports not drugs' that don't work. It doesn't mean anything, because they can still play sports and take drugs. Some will even take more because they think it is going to make them play better. (boys, 15-16)

You know the 'sports not drugs' well that's not necessarily true. I know people who play football and they smoke. Actually, the fact of getting together and playing football is a reason to smoke. (boys, 17-19)

Messages are also said to target only a minority of people. It seems that messages will only reach those who don't consume. Furthermore, the young people in the focus groups feel that messages are effective when targeting non-users. The prevention programmes would in fact keep them from using drugs. Messages are also believed to reach young people who realise they need help.

In fact, people in the focus groups who use drugs and more specifically marijuana stated that messages do not get across. It seems that young users feel that drug use (or abuse) does not affect them and they are unable to identify with the messages that are sent or with the person relaying the message:

You feel funny, I say to myself, I will never go that far, you feel bad, it hurts people, the way it messed up their lives. But you don't think it's gonna happen to you. (girls, 18-19)

TV commercials, we make fun of them. Trevor, for example, that is not the information we need. We laugh at Trevor. (boys, 17-19)

What can be done?

The participants in the focus groups were also asked to convey their thoughts and needs concerning prevention strategies targeted at reducing drug use.

It was relayed during the focus groups that most young people are unable to identify with drug educators who have never experienced any illegal drugs. Drug educators are perceived to be unable to fully comprehend the drug problem due to their inexperience with drug consumption. In fact, most participants expressed that past drug users should be communicating prevention messages or provide educational programmes:

You need people who have used drugs to come and talk, you know. Because if you never smoke, you can't come and tell us what to do, you know, people with experience, not just someone who has never smoked. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Some young people felt that prevention programmes are ineffective since they do not correspond to their needs. During the focus group discussion, it was stated that youth should be part of the development process or at least should be consulted on their needs and perceptions before creating and implementing a project. Outreach work seems to be favoured, participants would prefer someone to approach them in their community to request their ideas and thoughts:

Programmes are not effective, we need more fieldwork. You can't just stay in an office and invent programmes. You need to go out there in the community asking us what we want, you need to befriend young people. You gotta get rid of the judgement, build trust. (girls, 19-25)

Early intervention was a recurrent suggestion by the youth for preventing drug use among young people. As they stated, young people start consuming drugs, or more specifically marijuana, as of the age of 10. According to the participants in the focus groups, programmes or messages should be conveyed before adolescence. In a focus group with boys, the importance of demonstrating the internal physical side effects of drug use was emphasized. In fact, they suggested that advertisements illustrate the effects of drugs:

Show what it does on the inside, the side effects, should happen on TV, so that people understand. It's not enough just to see the man, you need to see what it does to the brain cells. (boys, 17-19)

Nothing can be done

Some adolescents in the focus groups felt that there are no specific programmes or strategies that could help with the drug use problem, especially with marijuana. They stated specifically that it is the individual's choice to stop smoking marijuana or to use drugs:

It really up to each individual to change, they won't stop unless they have the will to stop. It's really up to themselves. (girls, 18-19)

You know it depends on everyone. I was a hardcore addict, I was a herbaholic but since smoking started affecting my voice, my voice is important for me to sing you know. By smoking, I developed the smoker's cough, which affects my singing, you know, so I decided to quit. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Since marijuana is seen as widely accepted by young people, others even suggested legalizing this substance:

In Barbados, they use a lot. It's accepted, so nothing can be done. (girls, 14-16)

I don't think it makes a big difference you know, because it's natural to smoke. I smoke and I don't cause trouble you know. There is nothing wrong with marijuana. It should be legal anyway. (boys and girls, 17-22)

Although, one of the girls in the focus groups mentioned to have followed the DARE programme and said that the programme had an impact on the way she perceived drugs, she still continues to view marijuana as harmless. She states:

An officer from DARE came to us about drugs and stuff. I learned that drugs are harmful. I think he had an effect on us, except for the stuff he said about weed. I do not think that weed is bad for you. (boys and girls, 17-22)

DISCUSSION

The participation and involvement of youth are valuable for the prevention of drug abuse and policy. In this section we will briefly review the results of the study and identify questions and problems arising from the findings.

When analysing the perceptions of youth towards what they believe to be considered a drug, many of the youth participating in the focus group defined drugs, as any substance that is not abused. Does this type of reasoning justify drug use? For instance, do young people feel that it is acceptable to smoke marijuana as long as its consumption is moderate? Young people in the

focus groups associate drug abuse to drug addiction. However, there is a distinction. A person can abuse a drug without having an addiction. However, drug abuse is mostly related to the harmful use of a drug, whether it is physical, psychological or social. In order to better inform youth, prevention strategies should therefore address the distinction between use, abuse, dependency and addiction including its consequences.

Although different types of drugs were discussed during the focus groups, marijuana seems to be the preferred drug by young people and is part of a daily routine for some youth. Alcohol, which was also said to a commonly used drug, seems to be perceived as more harmful than marijuana, on a physical, psychological and social level. Is marijuana therefore considered to be a 'safe' drug, a drug with no major consequences?

Similar to alcohol, cocaine, heroin and other hard drugs are viewed as negative and their use appear to be frowned upon by young people. Although the use of cocaine seems to be unacceptable, many young people stated that marijuana is sometimes combined with cocaine; a combination labelled 'blackies'. Are 'blackies' a gateway to cocaine use?

According to the participants in the focus groups, the age of initiation to drug use is rather premature. Most of the youth in the focus groups mentioned that young people start using drugs as of the age of 10 and in some cases children start consuming drugs (mostly alcohol or marijuana) as of the age of 5. The Barbados Youth Tobacco Survey (2000) report similar results: at least 32% of the youth surveyed reported having experimented with alcohol between the ages of 8 and 11 and no less than 20.5% at the age of 7 years old or younger. These findings suggest that prevention programmes should target children at an early age, for instance, at the primary level. The main cause of early initiation to drug use reported by the youth in the focus groups was related to the use of drugs by family members. This indicates that prevention programmes should also target families.

Many reasons were given by the youth for drug consumption. Peer pressure was the main cause for drug use. Young people mentioned that friends influence others to use drugs. Why do peers play such a major role in the lives of youth? Why are peers so influential? In fact, in order to develop appropriate programmes for youth, understanding the role of peers and peer pressure related to drug consumption is vital.

Another major motive for drug use, according to the young people, was to escape from problems and to deal

with difficulties in their lives. This may lead us to think that young people who use marijuana may be lacking coping and life skills. Programmes should therefore be comprehensive to include other problematic areas.

When examining the impact of drugs, the participants in the focus groups convey three types of relationships between drugs, specifically alcohol and cocaine, and crime:

- ⇒ crime and violence resulting from feelings of aggressiveness and loss of control associated to drug use
- ⇒ crime and violence arising from drug dealing
- ⇒ engaging in illegal activities in order to maintain a drug habit

The occurrence of crime and violence is also related to the presence of gangs in the community that seem to be highly associated to the 'blocks' with some also involved in the drug trade. The National Council on Substance Abuse (NCSA) (2000) also reports " 'the block' emergea as the most popular environment for fighting to take place" (p.viii). Interventions and prevention practices require targeting this group. Due to the fact they are difficult to access, appropriate strategies should be developed. An understanding of the 'block' phenomenon is nonetheless indispensable. How do young people get involved with the blocks? Why do they join the blocks?

Another consequence of drug consumption is related to HIV/AIDS. Most young people expressed that drug use leads to unprotected sex. In some cases, it was stated that drugs, such as alcohol and marijuana, are used to increase sexual stimulation and to lure women by offering them drugs, more specifically 'blackies' (marijuana + cocaine). Agencies working in HIV/AIDS and agencies working with drug abuse need to further collaborate in order to conjunctionally prevent drug use and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The impact of prevention strategies was also discussed during focus groups. Most youth in the focus groups spoke about prevention education in schools and publicity. These types of strategies were viewed as ineffective to young people who are already using drugs. Therefore, secondary prevention approaches need to be reviewed in order to better target drug users as early as possible.

In order to prevent drug consumption, the youth in the focus groups recommended the employment of ex-drug users as drug educators and further outreach work. However, others felt that in relation to marijuana nothing can be done and that this substance should be made legal. A discussion forum on this topic should be established to provide young people with the opportunity to reflect on the legislation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consulting young people on their perspective of the drug situation and drug prevention practices offers therefore much reflection on the way forward, identifying future research and improving prevention efforts:

- ⇒ More research is necessary on the following topics:
 - ◆ the use of marijuana
 - ◆ the impact of peer pressure
 - ◆ the links between crime and drugs
 - ◆ the links between HIV/AIDS and drugs
 - ◆ 'at risk' youth
 - ◆ 'block' situation
- ⇒ Implement more drug education programmes targeted at out of school youth
- ⇒ Involve ex-drug users as drug educators for drug prevention programmes
- ⇒ Implement programmes at the primary level (target early)
- ⇒ Exercise more outreach work
- ⇒ Develop more training for youth workers with at risk youth
- ⇒ Include life skills and coping strategies in prevention programmes
- ⇒ Empower youth by increasing their participation in the development and implementation of prevention programmes
- ⇒ Increase the involvement of the community and parents
- ⇒ Develop prevention programmes targeted at families
- ⇒ Increase collaboration with drug control agencies and HIV/AIDS agencies.
- ⇒ Educate on the differences between use, abuse, dependency and addiction
- ⇒ Educate on the physiological, psychological and social effect of drug consumption.

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