



Journeying with fear: Young people's experiences of cannabis use, crime and violence before treatment entry

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Abstract

Problem: The experiences of crime and policing from the perspective of adolescent cannabis users before treatment entry are not often understood by practitioners.

Methods: A qualitative design within an interpretivist paradigm was used. Data were collected using one-to-one semi-structured interviews. A convenience sample was recruited through two treatment centers in Dublin, Ireland in 2015. A deductive thematic analysis was used.

Findings: In-depth interviews with eight young people were conducted. At the individual level, there was a common theme of naïve crimes with the introduction of debt and developing violence. Young people often stole from their families and obtained credit from dealers. Policing was initially viewed as benign. Families suffered as a result of the drug debts but young people also spoke of intergenerational drug use. As the young person's use progressed, the oppressed became the oppressor, young people were entrapped, violence escalated and real fear of incarceration and remorse was expressed.

Conclusion: Findings highlight the commonality of fear and the seriousness of personal and familial violent harms. The need for targeted developmental preventions in vulnerable settings is proposed. Parents and professionals need to have an awareness of money in the home and the role of intergenerational substance use.

KEYWORDS

cannabis, parents, policing, treatment, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Cannabis policy across the globe is undergoing a paradigm shift and the impact of this on practitioners working with adolescents is yet to be fully understood. According to the World Drug Report, 13.8 million young people aged between 15 and 16 years old used cannabis in 2016 (UNODC, 2018). In terms of drug possession offenses, the vast majority of offenses for personal drug possession and use in the EU were for cannabis use, with over 600,000 offenses reported in 2016 (EMCDDA, 2018). Young people who used cannabis represented 5.6% of all 15–16 year olds worldwide. Regardless of the policy context, in terms of practice Lange et al. (2018) have highlighted the concern within the World Health Organization for the mental health of youth using substances and how this impacts not only on their

health and wellbeing but school performance and truancy. Hall et al. (2016) explore the impact of substance use on young people globally and concluded that many adverse health and social outcomes have been associated with different types of substance use. Rowland, Jonkman, and Steketee (2019) reiterate this and in a multi-country study highlighting that problem behaviors including substance use often manifest in the early adolescent years and are predictive of an array of harmful consequences later in life. Toumbourou et al. (2007) also stressed that a major proportion of the disease burden and deaths for young people in developed nations is attributable to the misuse of alcohol and illicit drugs. Within Ireland the National Drug Strategy (2017) has articulated a vision to provide health led response to drug and alcohol use and as a consequence will review the international evidence on differing legal approaches to the illegal use

of substances including cannabis. To inform these international debates, the need for greater insight into the personal experiences of recreational cannabis use from the perspective of young people is clear. Given this need, the aim of this study was to seek to understand the perceptions and experiences of crime and policing of adolescents who used cannabis before their treatment entry.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Research design

A descriptive qualitative research design with an interpretivist paradigm was used. The goal of interpretivist research is to understand the world of human experience from the perspective of the person experiencing it (Cronin, Coughlan, & Smith, 2015).

2.2 | Data collection

Data was collected using one to one interviews. The interview guide consisted of 12 questions. These were:

- Tell me about the first time you used cannabis? What age were you? Where did you get it? What was it like? Why did you do it? Tell me how your cannabis use developed from this first use?
- How much did your cannabis use cost at its height and how did you pay for it?
- When, if ever, did you first become aware that it might be causing you some problems? How did you know?
- What effects has it had on your emotions/feelings?
- What effects has it had on your family relationships?
- What effects has it had on your peer relationships?
- What effects has it had on your school/work?
- What effects has it had on your health?
- Have you ever had any difficulties with the gardaí or courts as a result of cannabis? Tell us about it.
- What has the experience of coming for treatment been like? What was good/bad?
- Looking back now what is your view or opinion of cannabis?

This paper focuses on the findings arising from question on cannabis use, the police, the courts, and the law. Specifically, the responses arising from the question, "have you ever had any difficulties with the gardaí (police) or courts as a result of cannabis? Tell me about it." The length of the interviews ranged from approximately 15–42 min with an average interview time of 33 min.

2.3 | Sampling and recruitment

A convenience sample of participants was recruited through two treatment centers in Dublin, Ireland in 2015. Inclusion criteria were,

aged 15–18 years; attending a service for the treatment of cannabis use and parental consent for those under 18 years. The study received ethical approval. In addition, children assented. Parents could be present if they or their child wished. Interviews were carried out in a private room in the treatment centers. Interviews were anonymous and no names or identifying information was required to be recorded. Parents, children, and young people were given information leaflets at least 1 week in advance of consent. Interviews were carried out by a highly experienced clinical nurse specialist working with children and young people who use drugs and their parents. The children recruited were not patients of this nurse. After eight interviews the clinical nurse specialist decided to complete the interviewing process as no new data was emerging within the interviews and it was believed that data saturation was obtained for this specific group of young people.

2.4 | Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by author P. J. This initial transcription was checked by authors C. C. and B. S. Author C. C. coded and analyzed the data for this paper. This analysis was reviewed and findings checked by author P. J. and B. S. Thematic analysis were employed to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The original research questions were realist ones, we were interested in the participants to own accounts of their experiences. This determined the interview questions and management as well as the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between a top-down or theoretical thematic analysis, that is driven by the specific research question and a bottom-up or inductive one that is driven by the data itself. Our analysis was driven by the research question and was deductive and top-down rather than bottom-up. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke, is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. We adopted the six-phase guide to thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), enabling us to capture the qualitative wealth of the data by preserving the respondents' voices, while grouping these into themes that facilitated handling and presentation of the data. In conjunction with this, during the analysis process, we utilized consistently the 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) which covers the process of transcription, coding, analysis, overall timing, and writing up findings.

Initial themes were identified by the first author and reviewed and corroborated independently by the second and third authors. The analysis was driven by the research question, "What are the experiences of adolescent cannabis users of crime, the police, and the law?"

3 | FINDINGS

Eight young people (five male and three female) were interviewed in-depth, all were in treatment for cannabis use and ranged in age from 15 to 18 years. Age of first use of cannabis ranged from

11 to 15 years and participants had been using for a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 5–6 years. Seven of the eight participants had used cannabis on a daily basis. All findings are presented using pseudonyms with names chosen using an alphabetical order from pseudonym Andrew to pseudonym Irene.

4 | THE INDIVIDUAL

A summary of three themes was drawn from the young people's individual experiences. These reflected the varying journeys the participants had experienced and ranged from the early days and early crimes through to later days, getting caught and varying consequences. While the findings are discussed under each of these themes collectively they illustrated the progression of the young people's experiences from the early days to severe consequences to themselves and others.

5 | EARLY DAYS—EARLY CRIMES, DEBT, AND DEVELOPING VIOLENCE

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that each participant was on a similar journey but at different stages. Many spoke about early, seemingly naive thefts. This can be seen in the words of Derek,

"One of my mates was always smoking it, ..., we were smoking cigarettes, and he came down and we were all eleven and twelve at the time, he said I am after robbing this for my brother, so we smoked that."

(Derek, male, aged 17, 5–6 years using)

Taking from family to pay for cannabis was evident. This may not always have been an obvious theft but the theft could progress. This was explained by Andrew in the following words,

"I used to make a load of excuses, we were going to the cinema or school trips or need school books but all them excuses rang dry like ... and I ended up stealing money from my Ma first. It was €50, she didn't notice so I done it a few more times. ... and it kind of went on from there, ...,she didn't realize I was in the grips of smoking weed everyday like but I started then selling after a while."

(Andrew, male, aged 17, using 4–5 years)

Progression in terms of funding personal cannabis use often moved on from within the family to borrowing money to buy cannabis to selling cannabis to support personal use. Both female participants spoke about being given cannabis in advance of payment and incurring debts. Irene spoke about encouraging friends to buy with her but still getting into debt,

"I was kind of like trying to get my friends to go in on it with me ... I could be late with the money, your man, he

was like giving me weed but I was only giving him half the money so he was like running me into debt with him, so he was giving me an endless amount like."

(Irene, female aged 16, 2 years using)

Similarly, Barry spoke of initially successfully selling cannabis to friends,

*"When I started off in 1st or 2nd Year, I would fund my bag by, taking someone wanting a bag of weed and someone else wanting a bag of weed and someone else wanting a bag of weed so I would take three bags off one bloke and he would give me one for free ... and then one day goes alright I will get a half bar and I sold that in a day and I was like what, that was so f***ing easy, why didn't I do that before."*

(Barry, male, age 17, 5 years using)

However, as time progressed debts and consequences mounted. Many of the participants were subjected to personal intimidation and violence, even kidnapping. Andrew spoke of his experiences,

*"I got a good few hidings (beatings) along the way, people kicking the absolute b*****s out of me, pulling me into cars 'cos I owed them money, ..., I got myself out of a lot of sticky situations by just talking absolute shite to them."*

Derek also mentioned the threat of being taken away when he said,

"...it was either give me the money or we are taking him and that was the way it was."

6 | LATER DAYS—INCREASING VIOLENCE, THE OPPRESSED BECOMES THE OPPRESSOR

As time progressed some of the participants switched from being the object of threats to being the one who threatened. Some were not comfortable with this role, as can be seen in Andrew's words,

"Having to go and collect money and doing all that kind of stuff like that, ...,and I would have other guys on my back wanting money off me as well, it was just a pain in the arse ... and after a while I felt like I was so far in that there was no way out of this,"

Others initially enjoyed the role and the power it brought, as can be seen in Barry's words,

*"At the start I loved the power and the respect and people wouldn't f**k with you, because they knew who you were*

working with and they knew they would get what was coming to them."

Threats and aggression transcended previous friendships and were part of the practicalities as explained by Derek,

"...when I was the dealer and a friend owed me money, it didn't matter that he was my friend or not..., so I ended up breaking his jaw, and I told him keep your €50 and no one ever took lay (cannabis on credit) off me again."

Participant's experiences of the consequence of their using, buying or dealing cannabis and related events varied, depending again on their individual situations and level of crime involvement. These varying consequences are discussed below.

7 | GETTING CAUGHT—VARYING CONSEQUENCES, FROM CAUTIONS TO CUSTODY

Both male and female participants acknowledged that the consequence of getting caught by the police with cannabis depended not only on the particular police but how you as an individual reacted to the situation and how much cannabis you had in your possession. In some sense, they felt they could manage the situation, as can be seen in Fiona's comment,

"I mean if you are nice to them, if you are going to give them grief and make their job hell, they are going to do the same for you."

(Fiona, female aged 17, using 4 years).

Ed thought similarly,

If you know how to talk to them they can be alright. '

(Ed, male, aged 18, using 4 years)

In the early days, as a result of being in contact with crime, some of the young people had received a juvenile caution and had a Junior Liaison Officer (JLO) assigned to them. Some saw this initially as a minor thing, as described by Derek,

"You just got a JLO, like a slap on the wrist..."

However, as time and involvement in crime progressed there were real fear and regret expressed. Again this was articulated by Derek,

*"When everyone is going around saying I have four JLOs, f*** I have eight..., I will be in court next week saying b*****s, I could get locked up you know, it's not a nice thing.I committed an armed robbery and got caught..."*

Pretty much to pay for a debt and ...I am just thinking if I had never started smoking weed I wouldn't be in this position."

This fear was also expressed by Andrew,

*"...and I was in the passenger seat and I was like so I like I am f***, my hands were shaking like, sweating, I thought that would have been me screwed and your man would have been screwed for letting me in the car with drugs."*

Harry spoke of regret also, he said,

"I never really realized how much you can get in trouble from you know associating with it, being with a dealer,..., but it's actually the case that if you are with a fellow with a large amount you are going to get charged with dealing as well."

(Harry, male, aged 17, using 2 years)

Overall participants felt that the police made a judgment on how to proceed with someone who was caught with cannabis depending on the amount, the circumstances of the situation, the personal experience of the police officer and how one, as an individual reacted to being caught.

8 | FAMILY AND OTHERS

In terms of family and others, two aspects of the young person's experiences were evident and these were first family debt and effects on others and, secondly, family history of drug use.

9 | FAMILY DEBT AND EFFECTS ON OTHERS

Consequences of the debts owed by the young person brought threats upon family members from younger siblings to parents. Andrew recalled being worried about his 12-year-old brother when he said,

"I started getting worried about it 'cos the threats were like, we are coming to the house, do you want your little brother involved and he was 12 or 13 at the time,..., I worried he would get caught up in my mess."

Andrew also recalled trust being broken as he took advantage of the fear his mother had for his debts, he recalled,

"Trust broke down, yeah 'cos my Ma start realizing I was robbing her ...I owed money and people were talking about coming to the house, she was terrified of that and offered to pay some of my bills, ...and that went on for a

couple of months and she drew the line and I couldn't take it anymore."

Finally, Andrew realized he and his family couldn't handle the threats and very succinctly said,

"... I don't want to go back there, I don't think I will be able to handle it and my family won't be able to handle it, its mean shit, nasty stuff you know."

The strain on the family with debtors coming to the family door was also articulated by Derek who said,

".. it's not nice having your ma to pay your bills for you or having your family deal with it or having even someone come at your own door looking for money..."

Fiona also experienced debtors coming to her family home, she said,

"...then I had people knocking on my door for 300 or 400 euro."

Interestingly Fiona also remarked about how her behavior also caused aggression and fighting within the family,

"I always had me Ma and Da fighting because like if I didn't have a joint all the time, I would be snappy and I would be shouting at ya and I would be screaming like and I just wouldn't be me, its like it turns you into someone you are not."

Carol also spoke about her family being effected, particularly her older brother,

"..., my brother doesn't smoke or drink or anything, he is older than me and when he hears it he doesn't like it."
(Carol, female, age 15, using 2 years)

Finally, the impact on family across the generations from siblings to parents to grandparents was clear and this theme of inter-generational drug use was evident as we see below.

10 | INTERGENERATIONAL DRUG USE

Four of the eight young people spoke of a family member, often a parent or a friend's parent using drugs. Carol spoke of her father using and her mother not being happy with it,

"me da used to smoke cannabis so me ma is not happy with me smoking it."

Barry spoke of his friends getting his father's joint to smoke,

"..having the odd blow and after coughing my lungs up as a little twelve-year-old does and one of the lads robbed a joint off his Dad.."

Andrew recalled a vivid memory of the smell of his father smoking,

"...as soon as I smelled it, my Da came straight into my head because that smell was always used to associated with him, ...,he was smoking joints all the time."

However, perhaps the most striking words in terms of inter-generational use and fear were also expressed by Irene who lived with her grandmother, she expressed an intergenerational fear of her grandmothers when she said,

"she (my grandmother) thought I was going to end up like my Ma 'cos my Ma has a drug history like heroin so she thought if I did cannabis I would go on to do heroin."

11 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to describe adolescents cannabis users' perceptions and experiences, in terms of crime and policing, before their treatment entry. The objectives were to describe these experiences within the context of the individual and of others. Within these contexts two overarching concepts summarized the findings, these were the collective progression of the young people on their journey with fear and secondly the sociopolitical contexts within which these young people were sharing their lived experiences.

It was clear that as the adolescent's journey progressed, fear emerged. This was seen in the expressed personal fears over debts, violence and aggression, both as a victim and latterly as an aggressor. Fears with being caught and impending serious consequences as crime progressed were also expressed. Young people also articulated the fears experienced by, and for, family members. The relationship between drug use and crime has been well documented (Anglin & Perrochet, 1998; Harrison & Gfroerer, 1992; Nurco, 1998). But less understood is the escalating journey of adolescent cannabis users from the pressure to pay off personal debts to participation in the criminal supply network and the fear expressed for themselves and their families. Volkow, Baler, Compton, and Weiss (2014) provide a review of the adverse health effects of marijuana use and while they clearly highlight the impact on mental health they do not mention these fears experienced by young people.

The young people's experiences described in this study were also influenced by a range of discourses operating in society and by the sociopolitical contexts. The notion of harm reduction has moved beyond treatment and into the area of prevention and wider drug policy. Within Ireland and elsewhere, the debate on decriminalization is under scrutiny. Csete et al. (2016) in a review of the evidence on international drug policy concluded that policies are failing. Within our findings, it can be seen that in the early stages of their journey with cannabis, use young people believed that the police could be

managed or negotiated on a personal level. It was crime progressed that they expressed real fear, regret, and remorse.

Given the broadening of the notion of harm reduction, it is prudent to return to Toumbourou et al. (2007) who integrated findings of systematic reviews to summarize the evidence on interventions to reduce the harm associated with adolescent substance use. These authors found that evidence of effective intervention was available within key areas. One being developmental prevention interventions that aimed to prevent the onset of harmful patterns in settings such as vulnerable families, schools, and communities. Developmental prevention interventions according to Toumbourou et al. (2007), aim to reduce pathways into drug-related harms by improving conditions for healthy development from the prenatal stage to adolescence. There is clearly merit in expanding developmental prevention interventions within the participant's communities and the services they and their families attend.

Results, however, must be interpreted in light of the limitations of the study. It could be argued that these young people were not representative of all young people who use cannabis. However, findings clearly highlight that the harms to these young people progressed as did their involvement in crime from perhaps naïve crimes to entrapment and control by drug suppliers as debts escalated. While we have highlighted the importance of reducing harm to these young people within policies there is also a clear message here for parents and families on the need for awareness of money in the home. While more research is clearly needed preliminary findings would suggest that for frontline healthcare professionals, general and psychiatric nursing professionals within community and specialist services there is a need for greater awareness of the wider role of intergenerational and familial substance use when treating young people who use drugs. Comiskey (2019) has provided a succinct summary on the potential physical, emotional, and behavioral problems of children in families who use drugs. However, there is a need for research exploring this phenomenon and mental health nurses should become involved in this challenge.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

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