

## INCB Civil Society Hearing 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019

### Statement by Anna Quigley, Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign (Ireland)

#### Exploratory research on potential model of working with Young People involved in the Illegal Drugs Trade

Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign facilitates a network for Community Drug Projects and Community Youth Services that operate in communities across Ireland and the issue of drug-related intimidation and its impact on the community has been a key issue on the agenda of the projects for a number of years. In 2016 Citywide carried out an audit with Community Drug Projects to look in more detail at the nature of drug-related intimidation and how it impacts on people who use drugs, their families and the wider community. [https://www.citywide.ie/download/pdf/citywide\\_demanding\\_money\\_with\\_menace\\_drug\\_related\\_intimidation.pdf](https://www.citywide.ie/download/pdf/citywide_demanding_money_with_menace_drug_related_intimidation.pdf)

Based on the findings of that report, Citywide identified a number of areas requiring further discussion and evidence and one of these areas relates to the experience of young people.

*Young people and gangs: The importance of early intervention with young people is evident and there is a need to further examine as a matter of priority how best to prevent involvement, and to intervene where young people become involved, in gangs and the drugs trade.* Citywide has led a piece of exploratory research with practitioners in the Community Drugs Projects and Community Youth Services in collaboration with Dr. Matt Bowden (Technological University of Ireland) who carried out the research to look at this issue in more detail.

[https://www.citywide.ie/download/pdf/2019\\_the\\_drug\\_economy\\_and\\_youth\\_interventions.pdf](https://www.citywide.ie/download/pdf/2019_the_drug_economy_and_youth_interventions.pdf)

#### Aims of the research.

1. To explore the experience of youth services and community drug projects who are engaging with young people involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the illegal drugs trade

2. To gather information on the approaches they are taking to working with the young people
3. To identify key elements of a potential model for working with the young people, that can be further examined for its fit with existing European or international models

The participants in the research project were those working in Community Drug Projects and Youth Services who are engaging on a daily basis with young people involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the illegal drugs trade. Their services are based in economically disadvantaged communities where the drugs market is now a deep-rooted, embedded and visible part of the local economy and in this way is “normalised”. Young people are growing up with the “normalisation” of the reality of an organised drug economy operating in their community and so becoming involved in the drug economy does not seem strange or shocking to them.

## **Experience of Community Drug Projects and Youth Services**

### The economic context in our communities.

Participants reported that the local drug economy is viewed as a type of work which is made attractive to young people and they see young people’s aspirations being channelled into considering drug selling as an alternative to precarious work and as a means of accessing consumer goods. Participants emphasise that the young people are being given the messages that if they stay in school, finish their education and go on to college they will have more opportunities available to them in the future, but what they see in reality in their communities is that the employment that is available consists of precarious and low-paid labour. They see the labour deal involving hard work, saving, deferred gratification, years of preparation to acquire qualifications and training, competitive labour markets and all without guarantees of decent employment at the end of it. So, a young person weighs up the choice between this unattractive labour market and the drugs market, which offers them immediate access to the prizes of the consumer society.

Participants described the young people who are involved in selling drugs as falling into two different categories. The *resilient* (with jobs, education and prospects) see drug work as means of accessing cash to ‘party’; this is part of the fast moving, globalised, consumer world where status is what you are wearing and how you can show off on social media all the nice things that you have. For the *vulnerable*, it is more about basics - clothes, food - and young people coping with unstable home lives find that the drug market becomes a viable alternative for meeting their needs.

#### The changing nature of the drugs trade.

The shift to polydrug use over the last decade has transformed the simple binary of roles played by those involved in the drug trade, namely that the distinction between drug user/drug dealer no longer operates. The networked organisation of drug distribution is based upon peer-to-peer selling which involves young people selling drugs to each other.

As one of the research interviewees said: *‘Sometimes the image is the evil drug dealer, the evil guy, but a lot of the time it’s that the person welcomes the three hundred credit and they welcome... that they’re giving the drugs to their mates... and the drug dealer is liked by the people he’s giving the drugs to’*”.

Initiation to the drug economy goes unrecognised and can materialise from what appears to be ‘random’, innocent or innocuous connection or request e.g. being asked to run an errand to the shops This was referred to by some as a type of inculcation which can begin in an unconscious way and progress to testing loyalty to more fully conscious and active grooming. While there was a reluctance to suggest that such initiation was active or conscious ‘grooming’, it was nonetheless seen as a type of relationship building that might progress towards requests to holding money, drugs or weapons.

Providing credit or ‘fronting’ drugs to young people for re-distribution or consumption is viewed as a widespread practice and this is seen as the underlying financial structure that underpins drug selling. Participants expressed serious

concern that - in the context of peer-to-peer drug distribution - this credit can be misunderstood by young people, *'that day-to-day supply through friendship connections is not a gift, it's an economic bond'*.

Helping young people to develop a critical practice around credit and debt is seen as key in this respect: in the context of peer-to-peer drug distribution, young people need to understand that credit is an economic bond and not an altruistic act. The research highlights the need for drug awareness and prevention work to include education on how debt and credit work in the drugs economy. Threats and physical violence are the means used to recoup debts and systemic intimidation is a critical experience for young people and their communities as captured in the interviews.

#### Drug-related intimidation and violence.

Participants identified how drug related intimidation (DRI) and drug debt intimidation (DDI) are key to how drug distribution networks are organised, involving 'disciplinary intimidation' as a way of controlling those involved in distribution networks and 'successional intimidation' in how young people are recruited. Parents come under pressure to pay drug debts and are sometimes advised to do so to de-escalate the threat of violence. Participants see how it also has a 'secondary effect' on the resilience of the overall community, making and keeping the community insecure, fearful and subordinate.

Males are primarily victims of intimidation according to our interviewees but young women are not protected by any form of paternalism and are potentially victims of violence and intimidation. Young women may have a distinct domesticated relationship within drug selling networks by 'servicing' those involved. In this regard, young women may be asked to provide sex to men in order to expunge debts. While it should be acknowledged that there is little definitive evidence of this practice there is sufficient concern and qualitative indications that warrants further consideration and investigation.

While this research is identifying very serious challenges for our work with young people, the research interviewees are passionate in presenting a strong message that there is hope for the young people involved. The research shows that many young people involved in selling drugs can be reached by services and are open to finding alternatives.

### **Key elements of a potential model**

Participants see it is as critical that, as those involved in the drugs trade are involved in relationship building with young people, so must services focus on the importance of providing young people with alternative positive relationships within their communities.

The research identifies the quality of the relationships that young people have with youth workers and drug services, together with family and other advocates, as crucial to enabling them to disengage from the drugs trade. Participants see that critical incidents serve as a means of creating insight which can ignite the disengagement process and open up an alternative conversation with young people about what the future might hold. In this context, they said that the ‘gangland’ narrative on the drugs trade is especially unhelpful to finding workable and practical solutions for these young people, as it tends to present them as outside of the bonds of normal human relationships, rather than open to influence from positive relationships. The services strongly reject the view that young men, in particular, are “untouchable” and listening to and understanding their experiences is an essential first step in addressing their situation.

It is essential to find workable models that can add value to the work already under way, maintain links with young people and provide real alternatives and pathways to work, education and career routes. Our participants are building these models drawing on their own experience and learning from the experience of others elsewhere.

One approach that has been adapted for use by Irish Community Projects comes from the *Lugna Gatan* ('Easy Street') model developed by the Fryshuset group in Sweden. The model involves young outreach workers acting as 'stewards' or hosts who intervene to prevent crime, mediate conflicts, and engage marginalised young people. The approach is based on outreach and bridging - making contact on the streets, building trust and then acting as a connecting node to enable young people to build wider social networks beyond the drug dealing / consuming groups they are currently in. There is also an emphasis on pro-actively building more positive relationships between young people and members of their own communities who have been damaged by their behaviour. This approach can also engage older young people for whom standard youth work approaches might not be appropriate. Investment is needed in the Community and Youth services that are developing and delivering these approaches on the ground and in evaluation that will enable us to learn from the work they are doing.

Finally, the research notes that we cannot speak about drug markets, distribution and consumption without talking about issues of health, housing, education and training. The current polydrug markets are providing an alternative stream of income and occupation that appear meaningful for young people and our research participants all stressed the need to create opportunities and pathways to enable young people to make the transitions to both education and labour market participation, with the chance to earn a decent living. They also stressed that the young people involved in the drugs trade are neither out of control nor untouchable and that as a society it is worth investing in them and including them.