

The Findings 2013

The Role Of Police
An investigation by London Youth Involvement Project Youth Advisors into young people's perceived role of police in alcohol and drug prevention.

SAFER ON THE STREETS

Mentor's three-year London Youth Involvement Project allows young people to help improve drug and alcohol prevention in the city by building their confidence, skills and knowledge to share their research, views and expertise with policy makers and influencers.

During Autumn 2012, the volunteer Youth Advisors hosted focus groups with their peers to explore the views of young Londoners around key aspects of alcohol and drug prevention, in particular parents and the police. Their views were captured via audio recordings and scribing, then transcribed and analysed. Youth Advisors helped devise the questions, led the focus groups and contributed to analysis of transcripts to identify emerging themes and recommendations.

This paper reports their findings around the role of the police.

In November and December 2012, Youth Advisors hosted focus groups with peers to find out their views the role of the police in preventing alcohol and drug harms to their children.

They met youth councils in Haringey, Southwark and Hammersmith and Fulham.

More than 40 young people were involved, aged between 13 and 18.

Recommendations

- Police and trading standards should liaise more closely to enforce ID policies around alcohol sales.
- There should be a more visible police presence in areas and at times where there is a high number of drinkers, drug users and drug dealers.
- Ways to increase and improve communication between young people and the police should be identified and put into practice, for example:
 - training;
 - close work with schools to enable Schools Liaison Officers to have more opportunities for positive communication with students;
 - improved relationships between local youth clubs and organisations and community police officers;
 - identification of ways to feed back to young people how the police are making their area safer for them.

Messages from the focus groups

1. The presence of drugs and alcohol on the streets make young people feel vulnerable;
2. It is relatively easy for young people to access drugs and especially alcohol;
3. Young Londoners believe the police have a role to play in making them feel safe and reducing availability of drugs and alcohol; and
4. Young Londoners perceive a tension between the police and young people.

Alcohol, drugs and feeling vulnerable

Young people, almost unanimously, identified drugs and alcohol as contributing to them feeling unsafe on London's streets. Young people called drunken adults, "unsafe", "dangerous" and "unpredictable". Some spoke of being harassed by drunken adults and feeling too intimidated to protest.

Drug dealing also made young people feel unsafe. Those who had witnessed drug dealing said they would, "try not to look" and "move away from where it's happening." One young person worried that dealers may try to draw young people into using drugs:

"I think in a way it's quite unsafe for young people [...] old people that actually use drugs and traffic and stuff suck young people into [using drugs]."

The most problematic times were pub closing times and late at night, especially at weekends. Young people also identified certain locations that made them feel vulnerable because of drinkers and drug users or dealers, including outside pubs where drinkers may gather to smoke, parks and specific 'hot spots' within their own communities. Young people felt that police could work closely with their community's youth to identify where these 'hot spots' might be.

Accessing Drugs and Alcohol

Young people report that accessing alcohol is easy. The majority of young people we spoke to said that they obtained alcohol from shops. They said they bought it while underage from small shops where they were not required to show ID. They also said that young people who looked over 18 would buy alcohol for their friends. Some also reported asking older friends to buy alcohol for them, or asking strangers who were over 18.

Getting alcohol from home was discussed, either taking it without parents' knowledge or being given it by parents. Alcohol featured heavily at parties:

"If you go to a party and there's no alcohol, it's not 'live'."

Most young people also felt they had easy access to drugs. While street dealers were referenced, the vast majority said personal networks were the main way young people get hold of drugs. These networks included friends, who may be older, as well as school networks. Young people were aware of who the 'go

"You're only ever one person away from getting weed."

to' groups or individuals were in school should they wish to access drugs. One young person spoke of gangs as a gateway to alcohol and drugs.

“A lot of gangs give minors alcohol and drugs and obviously, 'cause they've got drugs and alcohol, they can consume them a lot of the time and usually the gang members force the minors into this kind of situation, therefore forcing them to drink and take drugs.”

Police Role in Keeping Young People Safe

A majority of young people we spoke to believed that the police could help to keep them safe from alcohol and drug harms; by limiting accessibility and also by reducing the unease they felt when confronted by drinkers, drug takers and dealers. Many young people called for a greater visible police presence in areas and at times when drinking and drug taking/dealing were especially prevalent.

“If there are drunk people outside a pub and the police are patrolling you feel safe because you know they have the power to do something about it.”

There were also suggestions that alcohol-free zones and signs in “high risk” areas which alert the public that police regularly patrol may be deterrents.

The main ways police might be able to limit underage access to alcohol were identified as close monitoring of shops and targeting those selling to minors . Several young people acknowledged a link between police presence in a school and reduced drug dealing and using within it. However, most young people considered policing alcohol and drugs a very difficult issue to tackle. Street drinkers, drug users and drug dealers were said to simply move elsewhere if police tackled problem areas.

“You're not going to do drugs or get drunk where police is, so they only have control of the specific area they're around.”

Young people thought it would be hard to prevent them from drinking because of the different routes for them to access alcohol. The hidden nature of drug dealing meant it too was considered very difficult to police. Young people did, however, believe that police should target drug dealing as opposed to possession.

Perceived Tension between Young People and Police

Despite a clear call from young people for a greater visible police presence and a belief in their potential to help limit access to alcohol and drugs, the vast majority of focus group members also perceived a tension between young Londoners and the police. A minority reported negative personal experiences:

“I've had zero positive meetings with the police.”

Whilst the majority of young people we spoke to had not personally experienced negative encounters with the police, this “bad perception” was pervasive.

A minority suggested this was because the police were unfairly targeting young people, citing, for example, stop and search. A small number also spoke of the institution as both corrupt and racist. However, the vast majority of young people we spoke to identified poor communication between police and young people as significantly contributing to the tension. This included how the police communicate with young people and what they communicate. Young people spoke of not feeling listened to by the police and said police needed training in how to interact with them.

They felt that casual interaction – “just smiling, saying hello or just asking young people if they’re ok” – would help, as well as positive relationship-building in schools and youth clubs:

“If they go into schools and talk, I think that will improve [trust].”

While there were young people who cited extremely positive relationships with their School Liaison Officer(s), others said that they found theirs unfriendly and unapproachable. Young people we talked to also believed that the police needed to “promote they’re there to protect you and make you safe,” and not only that “they get you into trouble.”

Discussion

The ease of access to alcohol is clearly a problem in terms of ensuring young people’s safety. It is especially worrying that many young people said they knew shops in their area which would sell alcohol to customers who are clearly minors. No young people, however, discussed accessing alcohol in pubs or from supermarkets, which suggests that their strict ID policies have been successful. Close liaison between the police and trading standards with better monitoring of **all** shops to ensure that customers prove their age before purchasing alcohol, could help to further reduce the numbers of young people accessing alcohol underage.

Mentor is the UK’s leading charity dedicated to protecting young people from alcohol and drug harms. We review research from around the world, test promising approaches and work to translate best policy and practice into evidence based national and local services.

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The most common suggestion for making young people feel safer was a more visible police presence. Young people believed this would make them feel less intimidated by drunk adults, and would also help limit drug dealing and street drinking. Some young people also saw the presence of police in schools as reducing drug use and dealing within them.

For the great majority of young people we spoke to, there was a belief that the police have a role to play in keeping them safe from harms cause by alcohol and drugs, including ensuring they feel safe on the street and limiting access to drugs and alcohol.

However, it was recognised that this task is not straightforward and that there needs to also be a focus on improving the relationship between young people and the police. A sense that the police were ageist towards young people, targeting them unfairly, was felt by a vast majority of young people we spoke with even if they had not personally experienced this.

Communication appeared to lie at the heart of the issue. Young people who had regular positive contact with police officers in their schools were far more positive about the police. This contact was informal, informative and made young people feel they were being listened to.

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