

Briefing for school staff

Wider impacts of drug use

(with thanks to Mat Weeks of James Allen Girls' School for contributing to this article)



Anyone who has been in a DSM Foundation workshop will know that the personal impacts of drug use are laid bare through the telling of Dan's story. This is a useful way of drawing young people into the evidence-based information and skills building that follows, as few are unmoved by the recounting of the events surrounding Dan's death and all can picture themselves in a similar situation in one way or another. Further impacts are also explored during sessions – for example, touching on how someone who has had too much to drink has made themselves vulnerable to accidents, assault, robbery and public embarrassment is perhaps more relatable than talking about the harm it can cause to the liver – but questions may be asked about wider impacts. This is a huge topic, but some headlines are as follows:

- [Physical impacts](#) vary according to the drug and the way it is being used. For instance, snorting cocaine brings with it significant risks, not limited to but including raised blood pressure (which brings with it an increased chance of heart attack and stroke), damage to the inside of the nose and so on. Injecting introduces a whole new host of potential issues, from damage to blood vessels to blood-borne disease such as HIV and hepatitis.
- [Mental health impacts](#) can be profound. Someone who self-medicates with cannabis to help them relax, for example, put themselves at increased risk of depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions – and this will be the case regardless of their initial motivation for drug use. Underlying and/or undiagnosed illnesses may be brought to the surface, and any substance can be dependence-forming, if not physically then certainly psychologically (and particularly so if it is used as a coping strategy)... and nobody uses something for the first time thinking that addiction lies in their future.
- [Societal impacts](#) include the amount of healthcare funding that is spent on dealing with drug-related incidents (and the individuals delivering the care may be put at risk, both physically and emotionally, for the work they do), the physical harms it can cause, and treatment services. Social care costs can spiral if someone's life becomes chaotic or they become disabled as a result of drug use, and the loss of productivity has a broader

impact on the wider economy, as can any involvement with the criminal justice system. A 2020 report put the cost to society of illegal drugs in the UK at [£20 billion per year](#), and this will have increased since.

- [Social impacts](#) tend to stem from a deterioration in day to day functioning, which can lead to dropping out of education and/or employment, and becoming isolated from friends and family. Drug use can also be expensive, with the potential to lead to financial hardship for individuals as well as the wider societal costs already touched upon.
- [Criminal impacts](#) can extend beyond possession, production and supply of drugs, into offences involving driving, aggressive and antisocial behaviour, and sometimes yet further into acquisitive lawbreaking such as theft and robbery in order to pay for a drug habit. Having a criminal record can have far-reaching consequences, for example, causing issues when applying for a job, places at educational institutes or visas required to travel to certain countries.
- [Organised crime](#) is inextricably linked to the drugs trade, fuelling gang culture, exploitation of vulnerable individuals as part of trafficking (including county lines), funding terrorist groups, and even taking over governments as has been the case in several West African countries. The costs of policing and enforcement are eye-watering, and the individuals involved in this work often put their personal safety on the line.
- [Environmental impacts](#) may not be at the forefront of someone's mind, but can be significant: around 5 million disposable vapes are discarded each week in the UK, wasting a huge amount of plastic and precious metals such as cobalt and nickel in the batteries. Another example is the intensive nature of cocaine farming in South America which involves large quantities of toxic chemicals; not only are these inhaled by those working on production but they are also released into the atmosphere, causing untold damage.

There is much more that can be said on this topic, but the above should provide some useful conversation starters (or continuers) for school and college staff who feel this may resonate with their students. An important message is that while someone *may* escape personal harm from drug use, that £20 they are putting towards their Saturday night fun *will* cause societal harm as the impacts are much broader than just what it can do to an individual in both the short- and longer-term. Anything that gives young people pause for thought, and therefore increases the chances of them making more informed choices, can only be a good thing.