
The Two Charlies

Building a rock cocaine scarecrow

*"Pull up a chair and buy me a drink
For I've a tale to please,
About one fat lad called Charlie Chalk
One thin called Charlie Cheese*

*So listen to the Robber's dog
While I spout my witty ditty
Our story starts one starless night
In a pub in Salford City"*

Although geographically joined at the hip, unlike neighbouring Manchester, the development of crack cocaine markets in the City of Salford is a relatively recent phenomenon. As is commonly reported in other areas of the country, the use of Heroin amongst the poorest, most socially marginalised communities in Salford is heavily negatively stigmatised, even among those young people who regularly commit crime to pay for other drugs. It has been argued that direct observation and experience of Heroin users in these communities has led to a 'scarecrow effect'. The 'image' of a heroin user is not something any self-respecting young scally would aspire to and the use of the drug would lead to a loss of face or rejection from peers. Exactly what influence these beliefs and 'sub-cultural norms' (what you're mates think is acceptable) have on drug choice and consumption is unclear, but it is reasonable to assume that they have some effect; they may act as a barrier to (or at least delay the onset of) heroin use in some people.

Cocaine and Crack do not as yet appear to have developed the negative identity associated with heroin, cocaine is still considered acceptable among those who might reject heroin. However, if we look toward a country with a much longer history of crack use, the USA, we find that crack now occupies a similar position to heroin as regards its identity in those communities which have been most affected,

"If you were raised in a house where somebody was a crack addict, you wanted to get as far away from that drug as you could," said Selena Jones, a Harlem resident whose mother was a chronic crack user. "People look down on them so much that even crackheads don't want to be crackheads anymore."

(CRACK'S LEGACY - A SPECIAL REPORT. New York Times 1999)

This was backed up by a longitudinal ethnographic study undertaken in New York examining the rise and fall of the New York crack markets and exploring this

change in perception and the corresponding drop in use (Agar, 2003). This provided the starting point for a hypothesis. Put simplistically (ish): The perception of crack cocaine, amongst those most likely to use it, is unrealistic and will inevitably change over a period of time and become much more negative because of direct observation and experience, reinforced by cultural sub-norms. If this were true, was it therefore possible to speed up this process by an intervention?

After successfully gaining funding, we set out to test this hypothesis. We interviewed around 40 crack users from a number of different areas in Salford, who had arrived at crack use in a number of different ways. Most of the older heroin users also used crack (either occasionally or regularly). Some had become regular heroin users as a result of their crack use. Another group were amphetamine users had also started to use crack and a third group were primarily powder cocaine users who did not consider their use problematic. It was reported that this last group used crack as well as powder and that some dealers were offering both forms of the drug.

We were able to form a smaller '**core group**' of up to twelve, from one specific area, this comprised of heroin and crack users and user dealers. This core group had been involved with drugs and criminal activity from an early age and most of their use was funded by dealing and crime. We met regularly for five months and although a number dropped out or were jailed during this period (others joined the group as on release) this group was central in informing and shaping the proposed intervention.

They reported that the availability of crack had increased generally over the last five years with a significant increase in the last two years. The jailing of one particularly 'influential' individual, who had reportedly stopped the open sale of heroin and crack locally, was said to have been a major factor in this recent rise. There had been periods in which some of the users had 'washed' cocaine themselves, but since they were using at the time this only served to increase their use making it an unprofitable venture. There was no open market, indeed those selling crack cocaine and heroin did not know many or in most cases any individuals from outside their culture. They were literally unable to describe what people might be like who used drugs recreationally; for them people were either 'straight heads' or users.

Although some of the core group had become tired of using crack, and experience had taught them all that the drug caused as many problems for them as heroin, in general crack cocaine was talked of in nothing but positive terms. For those still using, the downsides, chiefly the means and methods to pay for it and for some the feeling of being constantly 'wired', did not outweigh the intense pleasure which crack cocaine gave them.

One of the core group who had acted as our 'sherpa', introduced us to a group of younger people (mid teens) who he knew were using cocaine powder and thought might be dabbling in crack cocaine. They were pooling money earned from part time jobs or from petty crime to buy a gram of cocaine powder at the weekend. In recent times they had been buying rocks of crack cocaine instead, reflecting what the dealer had available. A number of the young people said that they preferred powder as its effect lasted longer. The entire group had very negative views on heroin and heroin users (although they 'knew some who were all right'), but they categorised crack cocaine with cannabis, since they all had first smoked it in a joint. The levels of ignorance about crack cocaine were alarming; with a number of the young people not knowing that the 'stone' they were smoking was a cocaine product.

Our core group of users all wistfully described how just a few years earlier they were exactly the same as these young people, and believed that sooner or later at least some of this younger group would be smoking heroin to come down after using crack and some would inevitably develop a habit. It was clear that general messages about crack cocaine had not reached the younger group and since they displayed low levels of literacy it was unlikely that they would read up on the subject. There was however, a culture of gossiping and relaying personal anecdotes, so we decided to focus on getting a message across orally and informally.

When we asked the core group why they had not simply explained to the younger group what the drug was like, it became apparent that a major reason was that they simply did not have the appropriate language. Where as the negative consequences of heroin was very simple to understand: heroin means addiction, needles, HIV, overdose etc. The negative consequences of crack were much more difficult to describe.

We did initially have some concerns that in stigmatising crack, you would stigmatise crack users and would be making things worse for those people who used. However, the message was designed to only get to a very specific target audience, and the core group (backing up the recent findings of Prof David Clarke) felt that were already so marginalised and stigmatised by the rest of the community, that it wouldn't make any difference to them. In fact one incident saw our sherpa 'stoned' (in the throwing bricks sense) from one particular estate by a group of young cocaine users, as they didn't want 'bag heads' on their patch. The core group felt that stigmatising crack cocaine, might actually balance things up for heroin users.

The first idea was that since being street smart was a way in which respect was gained, a series of jokes or monologues drawing on local idiosyncrasies would be an effective way in which to stigmatise the drug. These jokes would be taught to the core group and spread throughout the (for want of a better expression)

'criminal sub culture'. We tried using professional comedians, who had experience of heroin use, to devise a series of monologues or jokes to convey the message, of the: *"Why did god create rock cocaine? Even Junkies need someone to look down on"* variety. But this did not work. Mainly as the message was too complex for simple jokes and the time we had with the comedians and the group too short to get around this.

The idea of orally telling jokes to get the message through to the target group was not forgotten, however. The core group were keen to produce a 'Lifeline style' publication and had suggested that giving a message out in the cells would be ideal, as they all ended up there on a regular basis with plenty of time on their hands. So began the design stage of the intervention.

We had examples of our 'walking scarecrows' (the core group). If the message were subsequently questioned, they would be ideal to vouch for its accuracy. We had an example of our target audience (the younger group) and a distribution point (when they were arrested and in the police cells). All we needed now was something that got over a quite complex message, that would be read, understood and passed around to a group with low reading skills and who existing messages and information had not reached successfully.

Using influences ranging from 'Dr Seuss' to 'Eskimo Nell' a format was devised that we hoped would get around these problems: a large format, rhyming storybook. It was designed to be read aloud and the pilot seemed to show that without being asked, young people from the target audience would gather around ('Listen with Mother' style) as a worker or a group member (who could read) read out the rhyme, while the group looked at the pictures. The story has a narrator the 'Robber's Dog', who tells the tale of 'The Two Charlies': Charlie Chalk, who has just got out of jail and his old time criminal associate 'Charlie Cheese'. They express the stereotypes of a heroin user through another character 'Julie Brown' (who it later turns out started out using cocaine). We then follow their adventures as the development of a crack habit is explained and compared to the heroin stereotype.

Originally the book was wrapped in a cardboard sleeve with a rhyming couplet on the front that read,

*"Open me up and read me
Go on you might as well
You've got fuck all else to do
Just stuck inside this cell"*

Unfortunately, the original idea of giving the book out in cells proved unfeasible. Instead the book was given out to arrestees who tested positive for cocaine by the Criminal Justice Interventions Team based at Salford Drug Service. The sleeve idea was kept however and turned into a content warning (illustrated).

This was intended to both keep the book clean (in the dirty stain sense of the word) and to make it appear of greater value, as we wanted the books to be highly prized, desirable and actively passed around. It also seemed useful having a warning sleeve to stop anyone from claiming they innocently opened it and had become “corrupted” by its content. An evaluation of the project is now underway.

Michael Linnell and Zoe Smith - Lifeline

References:

Agar, M. (2003) **The story of crack: towards a theory of illicit drug trends.** *Addiction Research & Theory*, 11 (1) February 2003, 3-29.

Professor David Clarke: **Prejudice against users and ex-users of heroin.** Research discussed in Drink and Drug News. January 2005.