Drug policy and treatment:
The importance of users’ perspective

Sveinung Sandberg
Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law
University of Oslo
Punitive approach

![Graph showing trends in Drug Offences and Aggravated Drug Offences from 1994 to 2010.](image)

- **Drug Offences (Section 162, Subsection 1)**
- **Aggravated Drug Offences (Section 162, Subsection 2-3)**
Harm reduction

- From psychosocial treatment to opioid maintenance treatment (OMT)
- Methadone, and buprenorphines (subutex and suboxone)
- Dramatic increase the last decade in all Nordic countries
- Norway: 7-9000 injecting heroin users and 7000 enrolled in OMT-programs
Duel track policy
• Any inquiry based on the view of stories as instigating, sustaining or effecting desistance from harmful action.
Stories of cannabis culture

• ‘It makes you happy’
• ‘I don’t really like that boisterous high from alcohol. Hash makes you more peaceful’
• ‘It is sharpening your senses, in a way it gets creative thoughts going’, and it is ‘mildly spiritual’.

(Cannabis users, group interview)
Stories of cannabis culture

• ‘No, that’s not what I think, right. It can influence my ambitions so that I don’t have, or accomplish, the same goals I would have if I wasn’t smoking. It influences my whole life, right. Then the question is: Is that a problem? Is it a problem if I’m a happy guy walking around smiling, and not an ambitious real estate broker?’

(Cannabis user)
The dark draw of drugs

- ‘But I have no problems with illegal drugs! I don’t see the point in drawing a line between what’s good and bad. (. . .) What’s destructive can also be positive, because it helps you break something down.’

(Amphetamines user)
Problems: Punitive approach

- Huge black economy
- Large-scale imprisonment
- Harms of other punitive measures
- Uncertainty of purity levels and content
Black economy - marginality

‘I am staying here for several reasons. First, I don’t have money. Second, I’m almost nobody. Because I don’t have citizenship, I don’t have my own clothes, a place that I can travel to, somewhere I can get a job. Nothing, nada, null. Actually, I’m nobody. The government, they just left me somewhere.’

(Ali, street drug dealer)
Black economy - marginality

• ‘I was a child protective services kid. You get a little affected by the others who are there. We came up with a plan to escape. We were going to piss off the adults, get into some trouble. It was fun, I remember! And that’s how it went down for a long time, because I just kept meeting more young people from really messed up environments where the parents were either drug addicts or dead.’

(Female cocaine smuggler)
«Leakage» of OMT-drugs

- ‘A tablet of Subutex may be divided in two: The patient takes his half, and that’s enough for him. The other half may be divided in four, and that’s enough to give four other inmates a relaxed afternoon, if they’re not heroin addicts, that is.’

(imprisoned heroin user)
Problems: Harm reduction

- Buprenorphine and methadone used illegally
- Explosion of these drugs on the street
- Little reduction in lethal overdoses
- Medicalization of social problems
- Creation of victim identities
Stigma of OMT drugs use

• ‘Some are so high on methadone that they sit sleeping in the living room, or fall asleep with their face in the porridge or in the cornflakes’

(imprisoned amphetamine user)
På rett vei
Styrke - Tillit - Rettigheter - Innflytelse - Livsglede - Ressurser - Muligheter

BLIMED
I den største brukerforeningen for oss i LAR
Medicalization

- ‘I have a defective CB1-receptor. It doesn’t send signals to the cells. There are 60 to 70 different cannabinoids. Some of them help with such defects, some are good for posttraumatic stress syndrome. They actually help take care of the good memories and delete the bad ones. The body produces such substances itself, but my body produces too few, and I have to add them from an external source.’

(Cannabis user)
Conclusion

• Policies do not influence drug use directly, but are taken up in a cultural universe that fashion drug use.

• We need to understand the perspective of users to:
  - Understand why people use drugs
  - Understand the effects of drug policy
References

- Clausen, Thomas (2014). Hvor godt virker LAR, og hva er utfordringene?: *Norsk Farmaceutisk Tidsskrift*.
- Pedersen, W., S. Sandberg, & H. Copes (unpublished): Destruction, fascination and illness The intertwined meaning and uses of heroin and opiate maintenance treatment drugs