



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

URGENT NEED FOR ACTION ON DRUGS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Vulnerable groups are the key challenge

(30.10.2003 LISBON) There is an urgent need to investigate and monitor drug use and vulnerability factors among young people who may be at significantly greater risk of developing chronic drug problems. This warning comes from the **EU drugs agency**, the Lisbon-based **EMCDDA**, as it publishes the latest edition in its ***Drugs in focus*** series, out today.

Entitled 'Drug use amongst vulnerable young people – Prevention strategies need to target young people most at risk', the document aims to focus the attention of **EU** policy-makers on the issues involved in this sensitive area.

The policy briefing is being launched to coincide with the **European conference on drug use and young people**, being held from 30–31 October in Malaga, Spain. Initiated by the **European Parliament** and held in collaboration with the **EMCDDA** and **high-level Spanish partners**, the event aims to encourage an open discussion and exchange of expertise among some 130 policy-makers, scientists and experts in the drugs field from across Europe.

The conference will analyse the extent and patterns of drug and alcohol use among young people in Europe and explore risk factors that may explain why some groups of young people are more vulnerable than others. Attention is also being concentrated on the evaluation of policies and intervention strategies addressing young people.

Today's publication dovetails into this conference, dealing as it does with developing protective factors in groups of young people most vulnerable to becoming problem drug users. It considers ways of complementing universal drug prevention strategies by providing selective interventions that target those most at risk.

Needs of the vulnerable often neglected

The **drugs agency** says that, while experimentation with drugs is increasingly widespread in Europe, levels of drug use and the risks of developing drug-related problems are much higher amongst vulnerable groups.

But, it adds, groups of young people vulnerable to developing drug problems – and settings where young people are most at risk – are rarely identified explicitly in national drug-prevention strategies. Recent European policy documents recommend that this be redressed and also call for targeted evidence-based action to reduce risks.

Most young people who experiment with drugs or use them recreationally – at parties for example – do not develop serious drug problems. For these young people the greatest risks of harm are associated with having an accident, getting into a fight or into trouble with the police, or having unprotected sex while under the

influence of alcohol or illegal drugs. However, a small but significant minority of young people who experiment with drugs do become intensive drug users and develop serious drug-related health problems.

Research has identified a range of risk factors for developing drug problems. Some risk factors are associated with characteristics of the individual while others are linked with family or neighbourhood characteristics.

Children living in families with high levels of parental conflict, poor family relationships and discipline or where parents themselves have drug- or alcohol- related problems are at greater risk of drug abuse. Young people who are homeless, who have been excluded from school or who have stopped attending school, young offenders and young people who have been in institutional or foster care – all these are more likely to experiment with drugs at an early age and develop drug-related problems. These factors are highly interconnected and are best understood as a ‘web of causation’.

Universal, school-based prevention programmes are in place in most European countries, says the **EMCDDA**. However, these do not address the specific needs of young people most vulnerable to becoming problem drug users. The briefing stresses that selective prevention that seeks to address the needs of vulnerable groups is a vital complement to universal prevention programmes.

Within Europe there *are* examples of good practice in relation to selective prevention for vulnerable groups. But provision is patchy.

Some **Member States** have established selective prevention projects directed at intervening early in socially-deprived families and neighbourhoods where the risks of developing drug-related problems are higher.

The **drugs agency** concludes that: ‘Rigorous evaluation of the outcome of selective prevention programmes is vital to ensure that projects achieve their objectives – and for checking there are no unforeseen negative consequences’.

Notes to editors

- For further details on the **conference** and programme see: <http://www.emcdda.eu.int>
- Policy briefing No 10 **Drugs in focus** can be downloaded in 12 languages from: <http://www.emcdda.eu.int/infopoint/publications/focus.shtml>
- For more on drugs and young people see **2003 EMCDDA Annual reports**:
<http://annualreport.emcdda.eu.int>
<http://candidates.emcdda.eu.int>
- See also **news release** No 13:
<http://www.emcdda.eu.int/data/docs/55en.pdf>
- **Definitions:** *Universal prevention* refers to strategies that address an entire school population or community with the aim of preventing or delaying drug use. *Selective prevention* refers to strategies that target specific groups at greater risk of developing drug-related problems than others. It targets the entire group regardless of the degree of risk of any one individual in the group.