Background Noise: Drugs, poverty and inequality
Acknowledgements

- April Shaw, James Egan & Morag Gillespie, Scottish Drugs Forum
  - *Drugs and Poverty: A Literature Review*

- Professor Julian Buchanan, Glyndwr University
The short version

- Drugs produce harms
- Drug control produces harms
- We cannot fully understand these harms without examining the role of inequalities.
- So reducing harm also means reducing inequality
The growth of inequality: international

Drugs, poverty and inequality
Growth of inequality: UK

- 1979 to 2000 – the poorest got poorer, the rich got richer.
- 2000 -2007 – the poor kept up with the rich, maintaining high levels of inequality.
- ‘New’ heroin epidemics took place during the increased inequality and unemployment of the Thatcher years.

Source: Brewer et al 2008
### Equality in drug use versus Inequality in dependence

#### Survey of Psychiatric Morbidity: Drug use and dependence by indicators of deprivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator of Deprivation</th>
<th>Used drugs in last year</th>
<th>Any indicator of drug dependence in last year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income &lt; 60% median v &gt;60% median</td>
<td>15.8% v 16.7%</td>
<td>6.3% v 5.4%**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social renter v other housing tenure</td>
<td>18.1% v 15.9%*</td>
<td>7% v 5.4%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No qualifications v some qualifications</td>
<td>11.1% v 17.2%**</td>
<td>5.9% v 4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class IV or V v other social classes</td>
<td>15.2% v 16.2%</td>
<td>6.7% v 5.3%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in education or employment v active</td>
<td>14.9% v 16.6%</td>
<td>7.9%* v 5.3%**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, *p<0.01

**Purple** text is used where the indicator of drug use is more commonly reported by the more deprived group.

**Blue** text is used where the indicator of drug use is less commonly reported by the more deprived group.

Drugs, poverty and inequality
Inequality in drug-related problems

• Death
  - Australian men classified as manual workers more than twice as likely to die from drugs than non-manual workers (Najman, Toloo, & Williams, 2008)
  - Drug related deaths 82% higher in the most deprived census tracts of New York than in the least deprived (Hannon & Cuddy 2006)

• Drug related emergency hospital admissions
  - 30 times higher in most deprived areas of Glasgow than the least deprived (Gruer, Murray & Boyd, 1997).

• Crime
  - Over half of all property crime is found in the poorest one fifth of communities in England and Wales (Hope 2001)
  - 68% of a European sample of drug users in treatment reported being a victim of crime in previous year (Stevens et al 2007)
Links from relative deprivation to harmful drug use

• Housing policies and markets
  ▷ ‘Clustering’ of social problems

• Discounting of future prospects

• Response to stress (cortisol)

• Low social capital
  ▷ Less access to health information, services and support

• Reverse causation
  ▷ Drug use causes deprivation

• Local cultures
Inequality in drug control harms

• Massive over-representation of poor, unemployed and visible minorities in populations of arrested and imprisoned drug offenders.

• USA (King, 2008)
  ▪ 225% increase in rate of drug arrests per 100,000 of black people between 1982 and 2003.
  ▪ Compared to 70% increase for white people.

• England & Wales (Stevens, 2008)
  ▪ Black people 6 times more likely to be arrested and 11 times more likely to be imprisoned for drug offences than white people.
Why do drug control harms fall on the poor?

- Because they can’t kick back.
- Drug users and dealers classed alongside the ‘suitable enemies’.
- Usefulness of drug control as an instrument of social control:
  - Physical control (police force, prisons, military operations)
  - Ideological control (reinforcing the justification of inequality)
Current policy approaches

- Drug harms are to be dealt with as either:
  - Disease, or...
  - Crime.

- Both approaches:
  - Leave inequality untouched.
  - Risk increasing the social control and stigmatisation of drug users.

- They therefore strengthen the link between inequality and drug problems.
Conclusions

- Reducing drug related harms must include the reduction of (economic, social, ethnic, spatial and gender) inequalities.

- Potential solutions include:
  - Stimulus spending on social infrastructure (e.g. social housing, education, healthcare)
  - Reducing inequality by taxing the rich.
  - Defending and expanding welfare benefits for all who need them.

- Linking harm reduction advocacy to campaigns for social equality.