

Substance Use Among Young People in Urban Environments

Edited by

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FOREWORD

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been interested in the health of young people since its founding in 1948. The constitution of the organization recognizes that the healthy development of the child depends on his or her ability to live in harmony with a changing environment. All over the world, and especially in developing countries, the environments in which children and adolescents live have been changing rapidly in the past several decades. Many of these changes have been good and have led to improved standards of living and social harmony, but many others have been injurious to health and have caused dislocation in the family and community.

One of the negative aspects of social change has been increased availability and use of psychoactive substances by youth. Substance use by young people and the problems associated with this behaviour have been part of human history for a long time. What is different today is increased availability of a wide variety of substances and the declining age at which experimentation with these substances takes place.

The factors associated with this are many and varied, comprising individual predispositions, family characteristics and complex social and environmental determinants. One of the social factors often implicated in a changing pattern of adolescent substance abuse is urbanization, a process of increasing urban populations and the experiences of living in urban areas. Urbanization is a growing phenomenon. It is expected that by the year 2007 half of the world will live in cities and the number of cities with a population of 10 million or more will increase from 15 in 1995 to 26 by the year 2015. Most of the growth will be felt in developing countries and will not be accompanied by the physical, economic and social resources needed to sustain harmonious existence in these urban environments. How the combination of social, economic and political factors, which define life in towns and cities, contribute to the etiology of substance use is an important research topic with implications for preventive policies and interventions.

In 2000 the World Health Organization (WHO) initiated a project on urbanization, youth and risk factors for substance abuse to help in advancing knowledge in this area. The first meeting of this project was held in the year 2000 at the WHO Centre for Health Development, Kobe, Japan with more than 20 participants from 12 countries, including representatives of WHO regional offices and other UN agencies. The project then progressed to support reviews of this area and eventually developed an instrument that was used in a multi-country field study to collect some preliminary data on the relationship between substance abuse among youth and urbanization.

This volume contains the material developed within this WHO collaborative project. It includes revised and updated reviews written by a multidisciplinary group of scholars from seven countries in different parts of the world. It also summarizes the results of the field work conducted in nine countries. What these

contributions highlight is that though substance abuse is a problem in many urban and rural populations, there are urbanising influences which increase the risk of psychoactive substance use by young people in urban areas. The results are preliminary, but they provide some basis for interventions to reduce the prevalence of these problems.

We believe that this volume will serve as a valuable new resource to researchers, students and public health professionals who seek better understanding of the relationship between urbanization and problematic substance use among youth.

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