



National Committee for Addiction Treatment

POSITION STATEMENT
JUNE 2009

Making alcohol and drug treatment for young people a priority is an essential investment in New Zealand's future.

Investing scarce resources in (alcohol and drug) treatment improves the lives of young people and their families.

Treatment must involve families and local communities.

THE STATISTICS AROUND YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS AND THEIR FAMILIES AFFECTED BY ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG PROBLEMS MAKE FOR SOBERING READING.

- Nearly 10% of 16-24 year olds suffer from an alcohol or drug use disorder.
- 25% of young people who drink say they drink "to get drunk".
- 41% will have been binge drinking in the last month.
- 39% have used cannabis with 8% using it at least weekly.
- 27% say they have been the passenger of a drunk driver.
- The highest rates of substance abuse and dependence occur among 18-25 year olds.
- Maori are disproportionately affected.

"My last treatment I was both scared and relieved. It felt a bit "here we go again." But also it was a welcome relief to escape all the crap that was happening in my life."

John, 19 years

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS – YOUTH HARMS

Substance misuse has devastating effects upon youth and their families. Most young people seriously underestimate how vulnerable they are to harm from intoxication. E.g. the most common cause of alcohol-related deaths for young people is car accidents.

"Treatment wasn't all about drugs, in fact not that much at all. For me it was about why I used, what was going on inside and changing my perspective on life."

Charlie, 20 years

TREATMENT INTERVENTIONS REDUCE HARM ESPECIALLY WITH HEAVY USERS

There is compelling evidence that alcohol and other drug treatment interventions can be effective with young people. Studies have found intervention can:

- reduce problem behaviour
- increase confidence, self-esteem and involvement in positive activities
- improve academic attainment and school attendance
- improve mental health
- improve family relationships.



Treating young people to reduce alcohol and drug abuse is an investment in the future. Each \$1 spent on treatment returns \$4-7 in economic benefits to society.

YOUTH FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

Many young people with serious alcohol and drug-related problems come from dysfunctional family backgrounds. Alcohol and drugs are often used as a way to 'self-medicate' against depression and anxiety, or just to fit in with their peer group. Their treatment and intervention needs are complex.

- Interventions work when they are engaging and underscore the young person's values.
- Interventions need to involve the young person's family and peers.
- Services work best when they help young people reintegrate into society.
- Residential facilities must be available for those without a supportive family environment.
- Programmes must be culturally appropriate to engage Maori and Pacific youth.
- Alcohol and drug programmes work when the young person is engaged with a range of services.

One size does not fit all, and a range of treatment options is necessary. Careful assessment needs to be carried out by skilled health professionals with experience in all aspects of youth development. This ensures young people have access to the treatment most suitable to them.

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS – YOUTH AND CRIME

Alcohol and other drug misuse features in the personal stories of most of our young offenders. In fact 80% of those appearing in the Youth Court are estimated to have alcohol or drug-related issues connected to their offending.

Addressing alcohol and other drug problems with young offenders reduces offending.

"Punishing addicts is not going to help – putting them with criminals where they can enhance their contacts and skills is not beneficial. They do need to be removed from society and they do need time out to be drug free. They need family love and support... and contact"

Joanne, parent

CHANGES TO THE LAW

The proposed Children, Young Persons and Their Families Amendment Bill's intention to acknowledge the diverse needs of young offenders and their families are laudable. To really address substance misuse as a driver of crime among young people the new Act must:

- be based on local community initiatives that include family and whānau
- allow for difficult offenders to spend time in a safe and stable environment so as to encourage sustainable lifestyle changes

- invest in local treatment resources and services to create opportunities for the young person to re-connect with their family, whānau and community
- provide an integrated funding framework between the DHBs, Ministry of Social Development and the Department of Corrections to effectively allocate scarce resources.



IS COMPULSORY TREATMENT THE ANSWER?

Healthy development has little to do with strict discipline and regimented activity, and a lot to do with connectedness to self and community.

Sentencing young offenders to compulsory treatment may be a first step in a limited number of difficult cases but the journey from a dysfunctional adolescence to functional adulthood is best travelled willingly with support from schools, employers family, whānau, friends and the local community.

INVESTMENT IN TREATMENT IS ESSENTIAL

NCAT supports evidence-based policy initiatives that have proven effective in reducing alcohol-related harm among young people. These policies must exist side-by-side with a cohesive and well-resourced network of effective local treatment initiatives.

Although New Zealand has a hard-working and committed alcohol and other drug treatment sector, we are a long way from this model.

Increasing numbers of offenders are being sent to treatment services as a result of a greater focus on alcohol and drug problems among young people.

Investing in treatment services for young people is therefore an unavoidable necessity however it is still much cheaper than the social and health costs arising from problem drinking and other drug misuse by young people.

For an annotated version of this position statement see www.ncat.org.nz/statement.html



National Committee
for Addiction Treatment

For more information contact info@ncat.org.nz or www.ncat.org.nz. For media enquiries contact NCAT's co-chairs: Chris Kalin on 027 277 0323 or Robert Steenhuisen on 021 954 213.