



# What works? research into illicit drug use by mental health consumers aged 18-30

Raising awareness and changing behaviour  
through targeted health promotion campaigns

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in partnership with Mental Health Association  
NSW; NSW consumer Advisory Group;  
Association of Relatives and Friends of the  
Mentally Ill – ARAFMI NSW





## Who are we? The community partners

**Mental Health Association NSW** - mental health promotion and mental health information - needs information to develop health promotion campaigns in mental health

**ARAFMI** - parents, relatives of people living with mental illness who are concerned at high rates of cannabis use particularly by young people in early stages of mental illness

**NSW Consumer Advisory Group** - network of consumers of mental health services who want good evidence about treatment practices for people living with mental health who have a substance use problem



## Lived experience - partner organisations

- NSW Consumer Advisory Group - many consumers of mental health services have used cannabis - some have stopped, others occasionally use and some are dependent
- Community stigma related to the idea that drug use 'causes' mental illness
- Problems of access for co-morbidity



## **Anecdotal information from the community**

- Relatives - some knew that their family member has used cannabis and had successfully stopped; others were concerned at ongoing use and concomitant deterioration in mental health
- Relatives mentioned some factors they thought were important: peer influence; cannabis relieving side effects of antipsychotic medication



## The research question

- To identify what people living with mental illness say about why they use cannabis; what might prompt them reduce or stop using the drug; what maintains the behaviour for those who continue to use cannabis.



## Reported drug use

- Strong relationship between self-reported mental health problems and drug use.
- Users of every illicit drug were significantly more likely to report having experienced a mental health problem

(Cook, Miller, Parr, & Blue Moon Research, 2007)



## Reported cannabis use

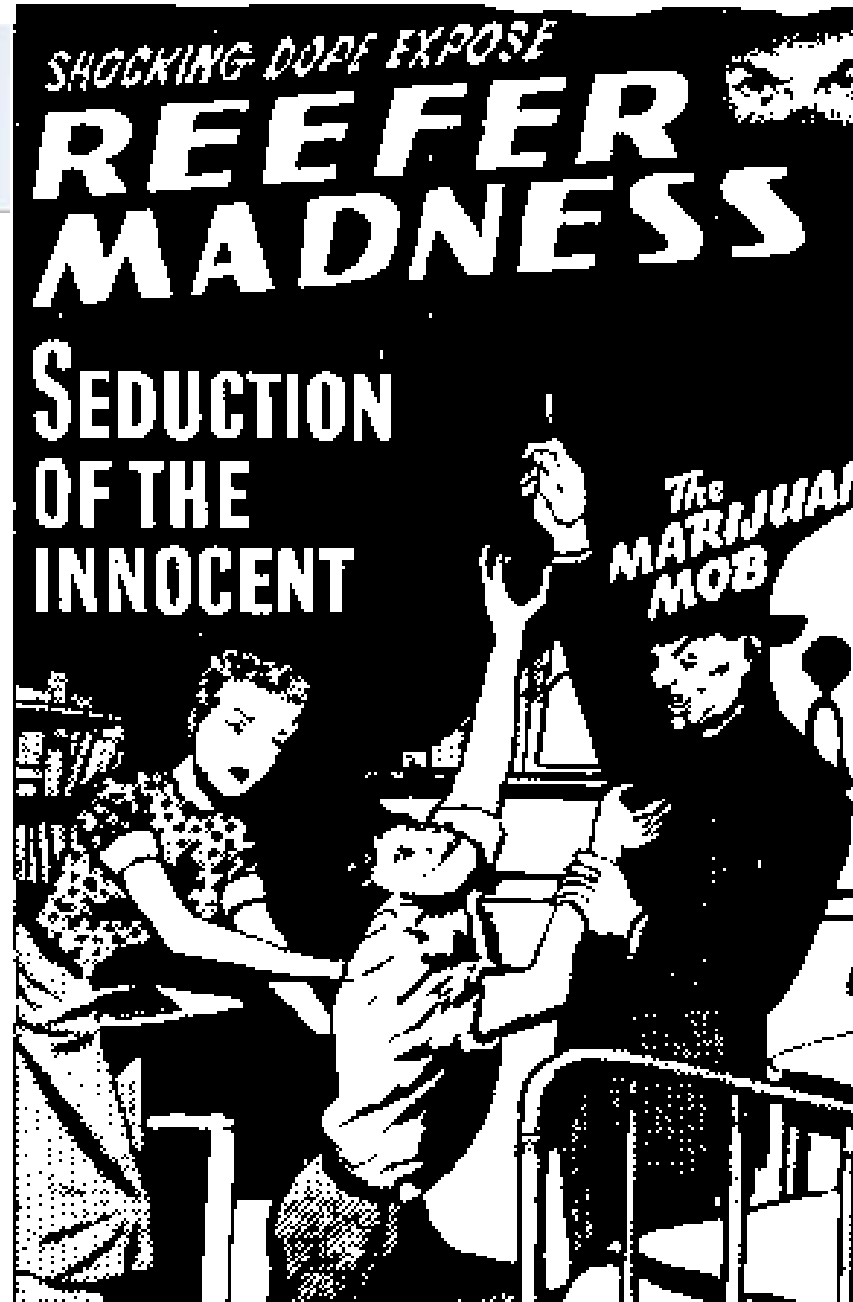
- Those experiencing mental health disorders use cannabis at higher rates than those who are not experiencing mental health disorders
- Cannabis users are more likely to experience mental health problems than their non-cannabis-using peer

(Hall & Pacula, 2003; McLaren, Lemon, Robins, & Mattick, 2008; Hall & Degenhardt, 2000)



# **Cannabis use among those with mental illness – why the connection?**

1. Cannabis causes psychosocial problems
2. Psychosocial problems prompt the use of cannabis – including ‘self-medication’



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# Psychosocial factors

- 'Self-medication' hypothesis
- Peer drug use
- Socio-economic disadvantage
- Alcohol use
- Prior victimization
- Parental marital status
- School grades



## Qualitative research aims

- Not structured on categories of medical diagnosis or survey
- We want to inform an understanding of the *experience* of mental illness and cannabis use
- Beliefs, behaviours, contexts, and culture – the daily experience



## Project aims

- Inform an evidence base on the educational, treatment and practical needs of young people living with mental illness and who use cannabis
- Identify the salience of cannabis; analyse basic cultural ideas about cannabis; and assess what messages might resonate with young people who want to reduce or stop using cannabis



# Methodology

- Focus groups with young people:
  1. without a history of continued cannabis use
  2. who no longer use cannabis
  3. who use cannabis at present and have done so over an extended period



## Recruitment

- Participants to be recruited through consortium partners membership databases via mailouts to members, posters at community health centres, youth centres, Drug and Alcohol support centres, universities ...



**Would you like to be involved?**

**Do you work with young people living  
with mental illness?**

We will be conducting focus groups in July so  
please call or email

Email: [AOLsen@mentalhealth.asn.au](mailto:AOLsen@mentalhealth.asn.au)

Phone: (02) 9339 6017