School exclusion and adolescent drug use in Northern Ireland: a problem being addressed?

LAURA DUNCAN & PATRICK McCRYSTAL,
Institute of Child Care Research, Queen's University of Belfast

ABSTRACT *Young people excluded from mainstream schooling are a vulnerable group who are at a high risk of experiencing social disaffection and are more likely to find themselves involved in anti-social behaviour. During the 1990s, Northern Ireland experienced increasing levels of illicit drug use, particularly among young adults and adolescents. The present paper examines existing empirical evidence for an association between these behaviours and school exclusion. The evidence has been obtained from studies carried out mainly in England and Wales, as such evidence appears non-existent in Northern Ireland to date. The paper also argues that the existence of this group of young people requires more in-depth qualitative research now that the Department of Education have begun to monitor their existence more systematically. This will help identify the full extent of the problem, particularly as existing empirical evidence shows the size of this group to be increasing in recent years. This complies with the Labour Government's social inclusion initiative advocated by the Social Exclusion Unit, but one that remains, as the present paper suggests, underdeveloped in Northern Ireland.*

Introduction

While rates of exclusion from school vary from year to year (Barr *et al.*, 2000), they tend to be higher in areas of social deprivation (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). It is estimated by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998) that every year 13,000 young people are permanently excluded and over 100,000 temporarily excluded from school in the UK. The *1996/97 Northern Ireland Suspension and Expulsion Study* (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 1999) recorded 76 permanent exclusions in Northern Ireland. However, the number of exclusions is small in relation to the number of young people attending school. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) monitors school exclusion statistics in England and Wales but, until recently, no annual statistics were available in Northern Ireland (Eastwood, 2000). In Northern Ireland, the term 'expulsion' is used when discussing permanent exclusions. As the present paper utilises empirical evidence from research carried out in England and Wales, the term exclusion will be used here to include young people in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the UK. Periodically, research studies such as Kilpatrick *et al.* (1999) have recorded school exclusion rates, but it is only recently that attempts have been made to collect this information on an annual basis for Northern Ireland. The Pupil Referral Unit of the Department of Education for Northern Ireland began collecting this information in 2001/02, the only year to date for which official figures are available.

In 1996/97, Kilpatrick *et al*. (1999) reported that a total of 76 young people were excluded from school in this year, rising to 84 for 2001/02. While these figures do not suggest a major problem within Northern Ireland, there is growing evidence of unofficial and informal exclusions (Smith, 1998; Osler *et al*., 2002). Such exclusions remain largely hidden and are absent from official statistics, and will not include, for example, other disaffected young people such as young people who refuse to attend school. As a consequence, Osler and her colleagues point out that social policy does not address the problems faced by such young people with few resources allocated to them.

Social exclusion statistics reveal an increasing number of young people excluded from schools (Smith, 1998; Barr & Kilpatrick, 2000; Collins *et al*., 2002; Osler *et al*., 2002). However, it has been argued that (Smith, 1998) the number of young people who are informally excluded should be added to official rates of permanent exclusion. Without a formal system for recording school exclusions, it is difficult to assess the extent of this problem in Northern Ireland. While exclusion rates are lower in Northern Ireland, once excluded these young people are less likely to be re-integrated into mainstream schooling (Collins *et al*., 2002). For example, in 1996/97 only 6.6% of excluded pupils returned to

mainstream schooling in Northern Ireland, compared with 14.8% of the same group in England and Wales (Kilpatrick *et al*., 1999). The problems experienced by those excluded from school are therefore potentially more damaging in the longer term for a higher proportion of these young people in Northern Ireland.

Tackling exclusion was given a priority by the Labour government upon coming to power in 1997, with the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit. Tackling the rising problem of school exclusion is one that is challenging those within the field of education and social welfare generally, as school excludes constitute a particularly vulnerable group within society (Hayden, 1996).

Exclusion from school is in many ways a pivotal issue because it is one of the key targets for improvement under the Government's Social Inclusion initiative as it consults widely on further initiatives to tackle exclusions. The development of European Action Zones, the recent guidance on behaviour policies and the commitment of the Social Exclusion Unit all underline the fact that significant opportunities to make positive progress are now available across the UK. Despite these wide-ranging developments, the picture remains fragmented and unclear, and so far there has been little systematic development of strategies to tackle or prevent exclusions (Smith, 1998). The evidence presented in the present paper will suggest that while this is not a particularly acute problem within Northern Ireland, it is one that has received little attention locally due to the small number of official exclusions. It will be argued that there is a need for a closer monitoring of this age group and the problems they face due, in part, to the difficulty in identifying these young people. As the state is required to provide full-time education for all young people until the age of 16 years, it is responsible for all young people regardless of their personal or school circumstances including those excluded from school. The present paper briefly examines the reasons why young people are excluded from school and its impact on their lives before analysing the evidence for an association between school exclusion and adolescent drug use.

The Reasons for School Exclusion
Excluding a young person from school is the most serious sanction available to a school principal (Smith, 1998). The circumstances in which young people can be excluded from school are not set out in law, and guidance provided by education authorities do not have statutory force. The procedure governing school exclusions in Northern Ireland is specified in the Schools (Suspension and Expulsion of Pupils) Regulations (NI) 1995, which are based upon Sections 64 and 65 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. These regulations focus on the procedures that must be followed when a school wishes to expel a pupil rather than the substantive grounds for exclusion (Barr *et al*., 2000).

A number of groups of young people are disproportionately likely to be excluded; for example, children with special needs are six times more likely than others to be excluded; children in care are 10 times more likely to be excluded, and make up 33% of all secondary school exclusions and 66% of all primary school exclusions. Young males are also more likely to be excluded than females (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). These destructive patterns benefit no one. They mean that children are relegated to the margins of society while teachers find it difficult to cope, and the public picks up the costs incurred for children who drift onto the streets without qualifications and skills where they can easily gravitate towards crime and prison (Audit Commission, 1996).

While the reasons for exclusion vary from relatively minor incidents to serious criminal offences, almost all school exclusions are due to some form of indiscipline or unacceptable behaviour in school. In many cases, school exclusion is the result of repeated displays of such behaviour, which at times is of a trivial nature (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998; Kilpatrick *et al*., 1999; Eastwood, 2000). Smith (1998) argues that accurate and specific information is needed to discover the precise causes of school exclusions that are essential for the development of effective strategies. Smith claims that it is open to question the extent to which recording reasons for exclusion under sweeping categories such as 'disruption' without further explanation contributes to our understanding about the reasons such decisions are made. For example, the description 'indiscipline' and 'unacceptable behaviour' could encompass both serious and minor incidents. Therefore, accurate and specific information is required in order to discover the precise causes of school exclusion in order to adequately address the problems inherent in the lives of these disaffected young people.

Such an approach will provide valuable information to discover the origins of these behaviours, that very often go much deeper than their experiences at school and may include levels of family stress arising from, for example, unemployment, low income and family disruption (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). OFSTED research highlights poor acquisition of basic skills, particularly literacy; limited aspirations and opportunities; poverty; and poor relationships with pupils, parents or teachers as further risk factors for school exclusion. In addition, there is also the social and financial costs incurred by both the individual and society in paying for the impact of school exclusion.

The Impact of School Exclusion

The education system is central to the lives of most young people, who may get only one chance at school as many do not return to full-time schooling after being excluded (Audit Commission, 1996). Once a decision is taken to exclude a young person from school many lose the potential benefits of this experience, with very significant consequences for the young people concerned. The most immediate consequence of school exclusion is that the young person falls behind his/her peers in academic work and he/she also loses formal contact with one of the three primary socialisation factors (Oetting & Donnemeyer, 1998). The Social Exclusion Unit (2001) noted that, prior to 1997, young people excluded from school received just 2–3 hours education each week, but that the quality of education is improving for these young people. The longer the young person remains excluded, the greater the difficulty in catching up, which in turn increases the difficulty of successfully re-integrating them into mainstream schooling. Smith (1998) suggests there is also a risk of reinforcement of problem behaviour through the current practice of bringing these young people together to receive alternative education.

Young people excluded from school remain entitled to free education up to the age of 16 years but often get very limited educational support that does not cover the full curriculum (Smith, 1998). Helping them can be difficult as, for example, Brodie and Berridge (1996) argue they are almost always anxious to return to school, regardless of age or the reason for exclusion, but schools are reluctant to allow them back to school. The Audit Commission (1996) argues that joint initiatives between education and social services can benefit young people excluded from school. Such initiatives presently exist within the Juvenile Justice Board operated by the Whitefield House Project supported by the Northern Ireland Office and other similar initiatives funded by the Department of Education and Education and Library Boards who receive the type of support recommended by the Audit Commission. While many of these young people are excluded from school, this may not be the reason for their referral to the Juvenile Justice Board. When young people return to school, few have programmes to deal with them. As a result, they may fall further behind, becoming disillusioned and disruptive in class.

School exclusion is extremely costly to the young person, their family and society at large. These young people do not just disappear from society, and should be quickly re-integrated back into mainstream schooling, if possible. However, this happens in only about one-third of cases, with the others losing their entitlement to full-time education (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). The Audit Commission (1996) reported that one-third of education authorities do not know where young people excluded from school are 6 months after excluding them. As the education system is central to the lives of millions of young people, forced exclusion can have a very damaging effect on them (Harris, 2000). For example, despite the statutory requirement for the education authorities to provide suitable provision for excluded pupils, such provision does not have to be full time.

The Commission for Racial Equality (1996) reported that, in 1994/95, school exclusions cost a total of £24 million, with the education system paying £14 million, police and courts £7 million, and social services £3 million. The cost of mainstream schooling was approximately £2500 for secondary school pupils and £1750 for primary school pupils, compared with £4300 for a young person excluded from school. However, according to the Commission for Racial Equality, this provides only 10% of full-time education.

School exclusion is associated with educational underachievement, social alienation and criminality, which results in serious costs for young people themselves and society as a whole (Audit Commission, 1996). Exclusion from school is most common among socially disadvantaged groups and reinforces social exclusion as a whole (Harris *et al.*, 2000). In turn, these factors have been identified as increasing the risk of abusing drugs (Newcombe *et al.*, 1986; Newcombe & Felix-Ortiz, 1992). Young people excluded from school often suffer low self-esteem, show little ambition, possess little ambition and are therefore more likely to become long-term unemployed when adults (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2000). At the age of 18 years many will find themselves at 'Status Zero', without any educational or vocational qualifications with which to enter the employment market, further reinforcing the damaging impact of social exclusion (McVicar, 2000).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Lloyd Smith (1993) referred to the post-exclusion period as a 'policy vacuum', as there were no automatic systems or structures available to parents or their children to offer support and alternatives to school. This Parsons felt contributed to the development of an unemployable, alienated underclass (Commission for Racial Equality, 1996), and Farrington (1991) identified a clear link between school exclusion, emotional and behavioural problems, and juvenile delinquency. Devlin (1995) has reported strong negative attitudes to school from convicted offenders. In Scotland, two-thirds of excluded young people were known to police and one-third ended up in court (Scottish Council for Research, 1992).

Adolescent Drug Use in Northern Ireland

Despite being one of the most heavily researched areas in the world, relative to its size, little is known about non-political social problems in Northern Ireland (Whyte, 1990). The implementation of paramilitary cease-.res in 1994 has seen an increasing profile of such problems, including drug use among young people in Northern Ireland. Despite increasing concern surrounding drug use in Northern Ireland, it has been claimed that 'we have a far from adequate picture of the extent and patterning of illicit drug use throughout Northern Ireland' (Higgins & McElrath, 2000, p. 6). The knowledge base in Northern Ireland relating to illicit drug use is limited compared with the UK and the USA.

In the 1990s, a drug problem in Northern Ireland began to surface in the official discourse. During the period to the early 1990s, the literature recorded lower levels of drug use among young people than the rest of the UK (Harbison & Haire, 1982; Office of Population Census and Surveys, 1989; Craig, 1989; Policy and Planning Research Unit, 1989; Loretto, 1994). McQuoid and Lockhart (1994), in a self-report delinquency survey, estimated that around 25% of young people in Belfast in 1994 had used illegal drugs, at least on a casual basis. In 1996, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in its session on illicit drug use noted a 'significant growth in the use of "recreational" drugs' (p. xvii) and that 'Northern Ireland no longer has a relatively low illicit drug use it once seemed to have; illicit drugs particularly "party drugs"—are regularly available to potential users including school children, all over Northern Ireland' (pp. xiii, xxvii). Higgins and McElrath more recently noted that 'concern surrounding drug use is gaining momentum in Northern Ireland' (2000, p. 36).

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (1995) reported the lowest level of teenage illicit drug use in the UK was in Northern Ireland at 18%. This compared with other UK regions that reported much higher levels of drug use among teenagers. Teenagers in Scotland reported the highest levels of illicit drug use, with nearly two-thirds (60%) reporting this, followed by 40% in England and 35% in Wales. In a survey of the knowledge and awareness of drugs, among nearly 4000 young people the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (1998) noted that, in relation to the timing of their survey (November 1996–January 1997), 'the 17 years olds in the survey have spent their teenage years in a society where illicit drug use has suddenly become more widespread and, for some, a part of growing up' (p. 78). Miller and Plant (2001) reported that the number of young people reporting the use of illicit drugs had risen sharply to 40%, with cannabis being the most popular choice. In general, their findings suggested that illicit drug use among teenagers in Northern Ireland was similar to that reported across the UK, which usually was among the highest in Europe. Miller and Plant (2001) made no reference, however, to the potential impact of more relaxed legislation in place in other European countries, such as the Netherlands.

Cannabis, the most popular drug with prevalence rates varying from 7.5% for a cohort of 11–16 year olds (Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, 1998) to 34.9% for males aged 15–16 and 15.9% for females aged 15–16 (Miller & Plant, 1999). Ellison (2001) reported the use of 'recreational' drugs by young people in Northern Ireland was similar to that of young people in the UK. Cannabis remained the most popular illicit substance, with a higher proportion of boys using it. In addition, Ellison claims that his findings show that the use of psychoactive drugs is prevalent throughout all social classes and socio-economic categories. However, Ellison found that young people from areas of socio-economic disadvantage are more likely than young people from affluent areas to have tried inhalants and tranquillisers. He also noted they were more likely to use them regularly, which he also notes as a 'worrying trend'. Other types of drugs used according to their popularity were Magic Mushrooms, Ecstasy and amphetamines. Use of 'harder' drugs such as cocaine and heroin was much less frequent, with prevalence rates rarely rising above 1% for young people during the 1990s (reported in Higgins & McElrath, 2000).

School Exclusions and Adolescent Drug Taking

There is some evidence to suggest that young people offend more following exclusion from school (Rutter *et al.*, 1979; Gray *et al.*, 1996). For these young people the chances of committing offences would appear to rise considerably once excluded, a particular concern given the increasing numbers of young people being excluded from school (Smith, 1998; Barr & Kilpatrick, 2000; Collins *et al.*, 2002; Osler *et al.*, 2002). The Home Office Youth Lifestyle Survey concluded that those who were disaffected at school or who were persistent truants had a higher risk of committing serious criminal offences and persistent offending (Campbell & Harrington, 1999). Graham and Bowling (1995) noted from their analysis of the 1992/93 Youth Lifestyle Survey that exclusion from school was closely associated with offending. Previous work by Graham (1988) had also indicated the presence of a close relationship, with 42% of school-age offenders being found to have been excluded by the time they appeared in court. In a recent Children's Society study of persistent offenders (Crowley, 1998), only one of the sample of 19 was in full-time schooling. Most of the others had been excluded and as a result their schooling had broken down. The Audit Commission (1996) report *Misspent Youth* reports that three-quarters of excluded young people offend compared with one third of non-excluded young people. It argues

that successfully re-integrating all excluded young people would reduce the percentage of offending among those of school age. Devlin (1995) reported that 37% of prison inmates in the UK had been suspended from school. This statistic perhaps more than most provides stark evidence for the potential long-term damage of school exclusion.

The Social Exclusion Unit (1998) suggests that these young people are at a greater risk of becoming involved in crime and other illicit behaviours including drug use. The Social Exclusion Unit included school exclusion among 'the most severe forms of exclusion' (2001, p. 15). Mohibur *et al.* (2001) identified 50 indicators of social exclusion that included school exclusion among those specific to children. Along with youth alienation and offending behaviour, drug abuse has also been identified as one of the secondary symptoms of social exclusion (Parkinson, 1998). In particular, problem drug use has been cited as an outcome for young people experiencing social exclusion (Buchanan & Young, 2000a, b; O'Gorman, 2000). Sneddon (2000) argues that an emphasis on tackling social exclusion may be more fruitful in reducing drug-related crime than, for example, improving access to treatment, as he believes there is a strong link between social exclusion and drug problems. This is supported by Young (2002), who claims that in the war on drugs the 'key issue is not the availability of drugs but rather the problematic drug use caused by social exclusion'. In a survey of young people on supervision orders, 10% admitted they offend to get drugs (Audit Commission, 1996). These views are particularly important given the increased risk of social exclusion for young people excluded from school. Little research has been undertaken in the UK that examines patterns or trends of drug use among young people excluded from school (Goulden *et al.*, forthcoming).

In the USA, Mensch and Kandel (1988) found that high school dropouts were more likely to abuse drugs and that early onset of drug use was also associated with high school drop out. Wisely *et al.* (1997) found that, in a sample of heroin users, 80% had experienced some form of exclusion from school prior to their heroin use. In Sweden, Holmberg (1985) found that those who were registered for drug abuse were more likely to have dropped out of school at an earlier stage. Hawkins *et al.* (1992) reported an association between 'school failure' and among risk factors for drug abuse in young people. However, it has been recognised in the UK that exclusion from school is a very strong predictor of problem drug use (Lloyd, 1998; Miller & Plant, 1999). The Health Advisory Service (1996) referred to these young people as a vulnerable group. Furthermore, the Government's anti-drug strategy suggests that 'for early to mid-teenagers, there are strong links between drug problems and exclusion from school' (United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-Ordination Unit, 1998, p. 14) Across the UK, education authorities are required to offer some education provision for those excluded, but this is often very limited teaching hours. Consequently, these young people spend most of their time with nothing in particular to do, and few have positive goals to work towards.

Flood-Page *et al.* (2000) in their analysis of the 1998/99 Youth Lifestyles Survey noted that young people excluded from school tended to have significantly higher levels of illicit drug use than those attending school. For example, they found they had taken at least one drug in their lives, which was four times higher than those attending school. In particular, Flood-Page and colleagues also noted high levels of polydrug use among school excludees, with cannabis, solvents and amphetamines featuring strongly. Among female excludees, a higher level of drug use was recorded compared with their male counterparts for most drugs, with nearly twice as many female excludes reporting drug use. The level of use of Class A drugs was also significantly higher among school excludees than regular school attenders in the Youth Lifestyles Survey. One of the Government's key objectives is to 'stifle the availability of illegal drugs on our streets' and, specifically, 'to reduce access to all drugs among young people' (United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-Ordination Unit, 2000). One major factor in the level of drug use among vulnerable groups of young people is their exposure to existing drug-using groups (Lloyd, 1998). Young female excludees taking part in the Youth Lifestyles Survey were generally more likely to report finding it easier to obtain drugs than young males. This is particularly significant as girls comprise nearly one-fifth (17%) of permanent exclusions from school (Osler *et al.*, 2002).

Goulden *et al.* argue that, while in the UK the number of school excludes represents a relatively modest number of young people, at a more regional or UK-wide level 'this would suggest that current school-based surveys might produce modest underestimates of school-age drug use' (forthcoming, p. 15). They suggest that there is now a strong case for more in-depth research with this group of vulnerable young people in order to determine more accurately the precise nature of drug use among them as well as their initiation into drug use. In particular, this type and level of research will enable us to effectively pursue the potential causal relationship between school exclusion and adolescent drug use. To date, the existing empirical evidence has demonstrated a strong association but has not yet fully explored the causal mechanisms unique to school excludees and adolescent drug use. Such research would also have the benefit of providing greater insights into the relative risks for different school aged vulnerable groups in relation to earlier initiation into drug use as well as the roles of socialisation factors such as peer networks on this group. Many school excludees lose contact with their school peer group due to leading a lifestyle that does not revolve around mainstream schooling

and are more likely to socialise with peers who are also excluded from school. As a result the role of two of the three primary socialisation factors (school and peer groups) can be diminished compared with those who remain in mainstream schooling. To fully investigate these issues it would be important to track drug use behaviours of this vulnerable group as they move through adolescence and into adulthood, which to date has not been successfully accomplished.

Conclusion: Future Directions
The present paper has examined current research in the area of school exclusions and adolescent drug use. The work of the Social Exclusion Unit and monitoring procedures adopted by the DfES has made a valuable contribution to this issue across the UK. However, few resources have been devoted to this issue within Northern Ireland, perhaps due to the very low level of formal school exclusion.

The literature points to high levels of drug use, and considerable potential for developing more problematic drug use among these young people. Researchers at the Institute of Child Care Research have begun to examine the link between illicit drug taking and young people excluded from school, with existing evidence suggesting that an in-depth qualitative approach would produce valuable insights into the experiences of these vulnerable young people. In addition, this approach would enable us to gain a more insights into the complex perspectives on the nature of drug use and its place within the lifestyles of these young people. In doing so, it will also shed light on what can be done to reduce the risk of these vulnerable young people going on to develop long-term careers of damaging drug use.

This is particularly important as many of these young people may meet the Children (NI) Order definition of 'in need' as outlined in Article 17 of the legislation. For example, their statutory rights in relation to their education are not always fully met by the statutory authorities in the education sector. This would also assist drugs prevention agencies to determine which interventions are appropriate for these young people who are at a high risk of abusing drugs. Such an approach would also help these agencies to address the growing emphasis on identifying 'at risk' or vulnerable young people, particularly school excludees, through more effective targeting of prevention activities, as suggested by the Government's 10-Year Strategy for Tackling Drug Misuse (Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain, 1998).

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