

The vulnerability of young asylum seekers and refugees to problematic drug use

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Asylum seekers in the UK

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61,050

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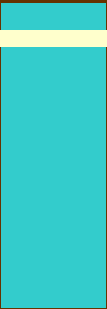

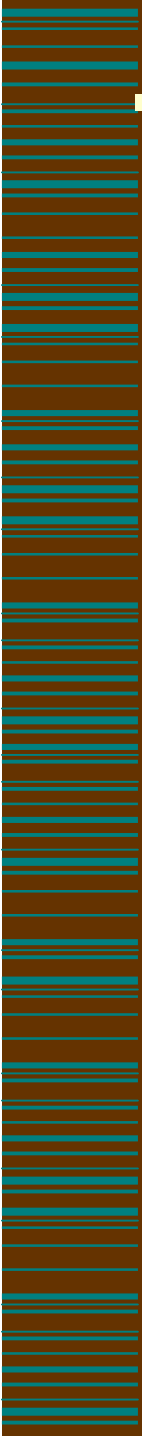
2002

6,200 unaccompanied minors





Young refugees and asylum seekers in Greater London: vulnerability to problematic drug use





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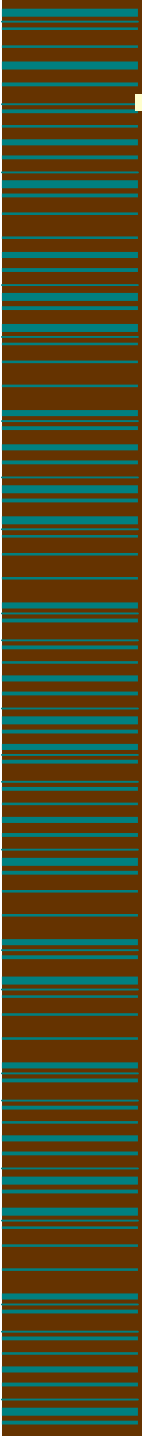
4 interconnected elements:

stakeholder group


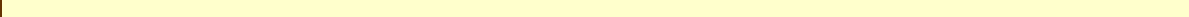
literature review

policy mapping exercise, supplemented by
interviews with individuals who have
experience of implementing these policies

research by community organisations



Young refugees and asylum seekers in Greater London: vulnerability to problematic drug use



Research by community organisations

Community engagement approach:

we trained and supported young people from
asylum-seeking communities to conduct
interviews with members of those communities.



Problematic drug use

Illegal or illicit drug use that leads a person to experience social, psychological, physical or legal problems related to intoxication or regular excessive consumption and/or dependence. Problematic drug use therefore causes harm to the individual, their family, partners, friends and children, or to the wider community.



Risk factors for problematic drug use



Problems with:

- education
- health
- crime
- employment
- housing
- previous and current drug use
- family
- social networks
- the environment (social deprivation, and community and neighbourhood disorganisation)

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Areas of risk apply to all young people,

but minority ethnic communities disproportionately disadvantaged

and young asylum seekers even more disadvantaged



The process of migration

- Left country of origin because of persecution and/or war, or poverty.



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- Close relatives killed or imprisoned. Some had experienced imprisonment and torture themselves.

Experiences in the home country

The war has bring hunger into the country. Many people starve to death and some died from HIV diseases...I lost many close relatives and friends from the Somali starvation. (Somali)

They took my dad with them, also assaulted my mother, and I tried to fight them back because I just could not bear it when they attacked my mother. I was assaulted in the chaos that was going on...They also placed hot iron bars on my back ... When I was still in hospital, we got the terrible news that my father's body was discovered in the bushes. (Zimbabwean)



The process of migration

- Left country of origin because of persecution and/or war, or poverty.
- Close relatives killed or imprisoned. Some had experienced imprisonment and torture themselves.
- Long and often hazardous journeys to the UK

Journey to the UK

It was very bad. We were all in the back of a lorry, and you could imagine ninety-seven people in the back of a lorry, very cramped space. (Iraqi)

I went to Holland first, I was there for one year. Then I went to Belgium, stayed there for two or three days. Then I went to France, stayed there for a week or less. Then I came to the UK. (Afghan)



The process of migration

- Left country of origin because of persecution and/or war, or poverty.
- Close relatives killed or imprisoned. Some had experienced imprisonment and torture themselves.
- Long and often hazardous journeys to the UK
- Some young people made the journey alone. Some did not know where their families were – or if they were alive.

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Government policies that should act as protective factors are largely failing



Risk factors for problematic drug use




The presence of a single or even multiple risk factors in a young person's life does not automatically predict problematic drug use.


Nevertheless, the greater the number of risk factors present, the greater the likelihood of drug use and subsequent problematic use.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education



Risk factors

- exclusion from school
- truanting
- low school grades
- attendance at 'special' schools or lessons.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education

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- attendance at 'special' schools or lessons.

Protective factors

- attachment to teachers
- a commitment to education
- and educational attainment.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education



Experiences of education prior to arrival in the UK varied greatly between the different groups.

Majority had been in education in their country of origin.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education



Many expressed a great desire to enter education.

Many reported positive experiences.

But others faced barriers:



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education

Many expressed a great desire to enter education.

Many reported positive experiences.

But others faced barriers:

language

I had problems with my class teachers in secondary school. When they explained, I couldn't understand them. They weren't helping and I couldn't ask questions that I wanted to ask.

Risk factors for problematic drug use: education

Many expressed a great desire to enter education.

Many reported positive experiences.

But others faced barriers:

language

racial harassment and bullying

Some of the teachers, I felt that they didn't like refugees and asylum seekers.

At first, when I started university, I experienced a lot of racism from fellow students in my class because I was the only African in my class. They just used to be funny towards me or just pass some unkind remarks.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: education



Many expressed a great desire to enter education.

Many reported positive experiences.

But others faced barriers:

language

racial harassment and bullying

Result: stop attending school:

*I don't understand well because I can't speak English.
I was having trouble at school and decided not to go
to school.*



Risk factors for problematic drug use: health



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Risk factors

- Being a victim of child abuse (physical and/or sexual)
- Childhood conduct disorders
- Mental disorders - particularly depression and suicidal behaviour



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Asylum seekers unaware of services.



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Asylum seekers unaware of services.

Unaccompanied minors particularly at risk.



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Overall findings: some of the young people demonstrated an ability to adjust and function in their everyday life in the UK, but others displayed characteristics of mental distress.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: health

I was lonely and had nobody whom I could speak to. I felt isolated and depressed in the first year of arrival. I used to think that there is a wall between me and other people. There is sadness in your heart and you don't feel free and independent.

I felt lonely, didn't know the language and so couldn't get out of the house. I had to stay at home all the time. It was difficult, very difficult. I wasn't in contact with anyone else and this made me upset and depressed.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: crime



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Risk factor

Offending at a young age.




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No evidence for a higher rate of criminality amongst refugees and asylum seekers.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: crime



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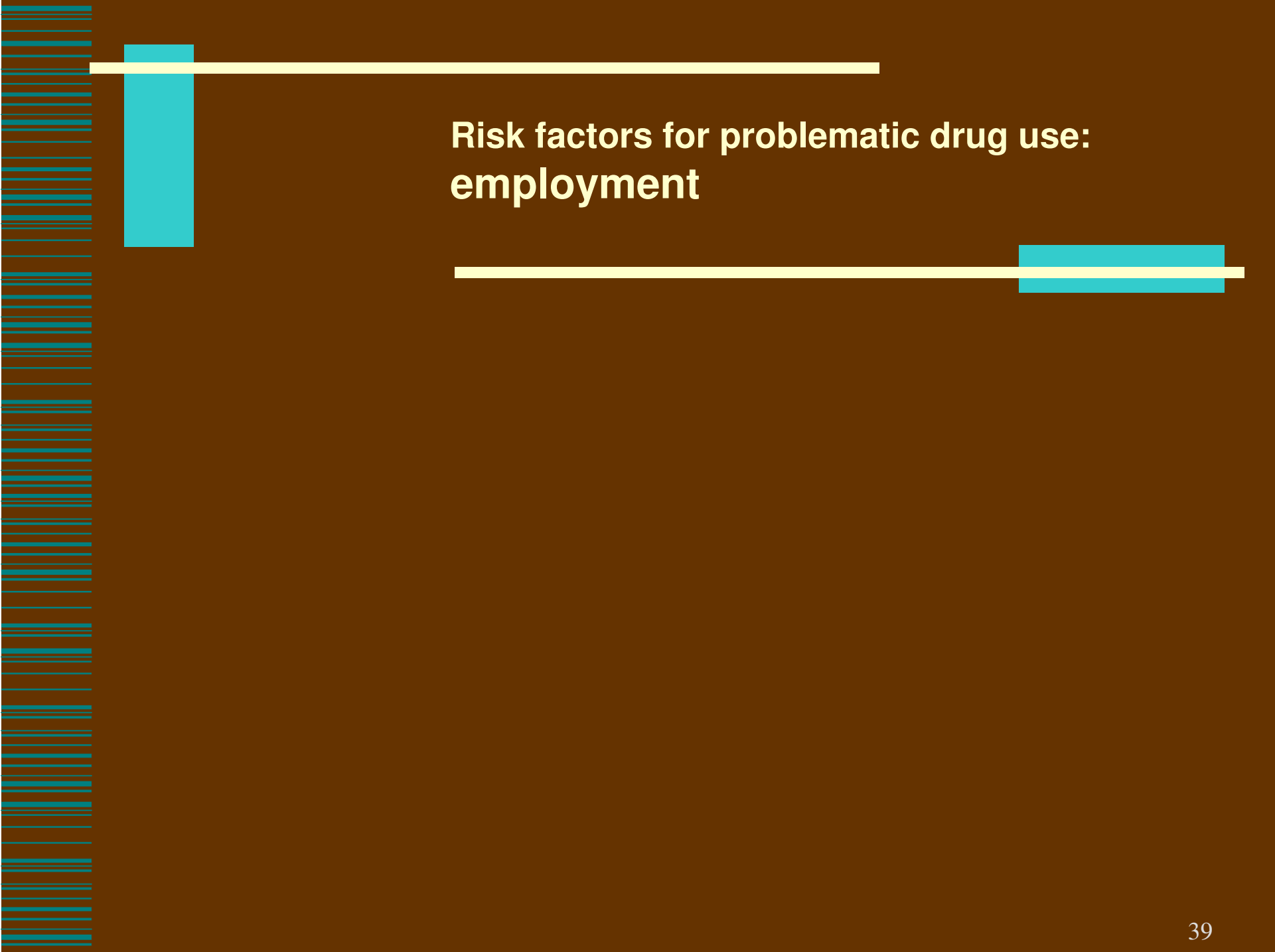
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But risk thought to be high:


need to belong could lead to involvement in gang culture

economic necessity

naivety.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: employment



Risk factors for problematic drug use: employment

Risk factors
unemployment
sex work.



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Asylum seekers not allowed to work.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: employment

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Asylum seekers not allowed to work.

Many work illegally, in low-paid, unskilled jobs, for long hours, and ill-matched to their qualifications and experience.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: employment

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Asylum seekers not allowed to work.

Many work illegally, in low-paid, unskilled jobs, for long hours, and ill-matched to their qualifications and experience.

Skills and confidence lost, difficult to access the labour market.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: employment



When allowed to work, remain in low-paid, unskilled jobs, for long hours, and ill-matched to their qualifications and experience.

Employers do not recognise qualifications and experience gained in another country.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: employment



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Young asylum seekers want to work / develop a career, but members of minority ethnic communities more likely to be unemployed than white people.

Risk factors for problematic drug use

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Risk factors for problematic drug use: housing

Risk factors

homelessness

running away from home

looked after by a local authority or foster parents ('in care')



Risk factors for problematic drug use: housing

Risk factors

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running away from home

looked after by a local authority or foster parents.

Some had fairly positive experiences but most had not:

Risk factors for problematic drug use: housing

Risk factors

homelessness
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Some had fairly positive experiences but most had not:

not always welcomed by friends or family

The relatives I am staying with always tell me I am a burden, that I eat too much, I waste their things. If they are not there, I will be at home alone taking care of their child. They always accuse me of things I did not do.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: housing

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hostels, temporary accommodation

Risk factors for problematic drug use: housing

Hostels, temporary accommodation

The standard of hygiene was extremely low, there were cockroaches walking around the place. It was filthy.

We didn't have a kitchen, so we couldn't really cook food. The hotel supplied all our meals. I remember for about four months that we couldn't eat any meat because it wasn't halal, so all we ate was vegetables.

I absolutely hated the place [bed and breakfast accommodation]. I did not feel safe - there was a lot of violence in the place. They were all men apart from me - I was the only girl. My neighbours got drunk, got into fights, and it all scared me...I did not open the door after 6pm.



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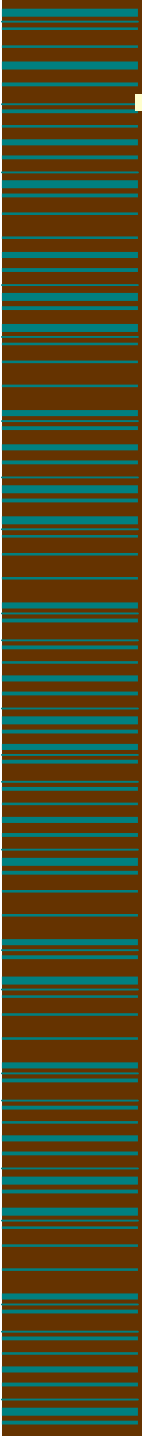
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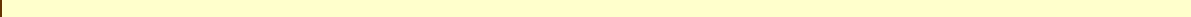
reliance on strangers.

Risk factors for problematic drug use: housing

There was a pavement... I sat and start crying... I didn't know anyone, any place and even didn't know my way around in London... a Somalian man went past me. He turned back and asked me why I was crying... I told him that I am from Afghanistan...but got nowhere to go and don't know anyone too...He said that he would take me to a restaurant where immigrants from Heathrow stay there - Afghans too... I start travelling with him... I had to trust a stranger - in that situation you trust anyone... I stayed with an Afghan family for two nights. In those nights I was awake all night, I couldn't sleep at all.


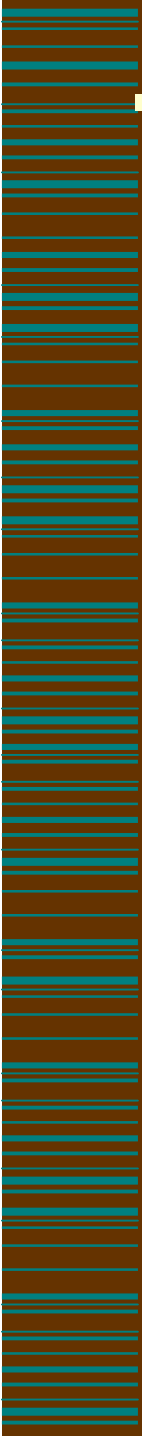


**Risk factors for problematic drug use:
previous and current drug use**

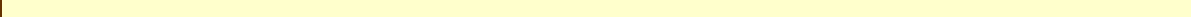


Risk factor

Early onset of drug use



Risk factors for problematic drug use: previous and current drug use



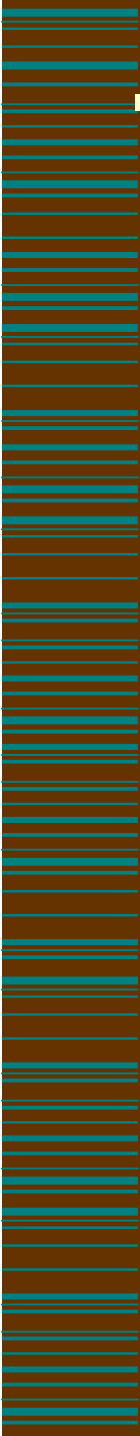


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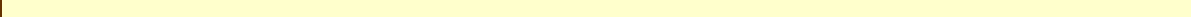
Early onset of drug use

Concern that drug use will escalate once in the UK

Inexperience leads to harmful drug-using behaviour



Risk factors for problematic drug use: previous and current drug use



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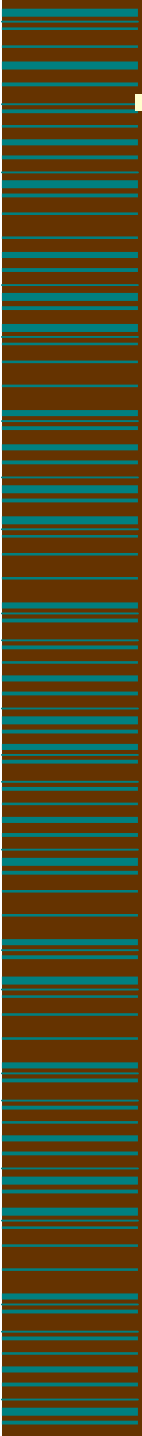
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Little information on drug use:


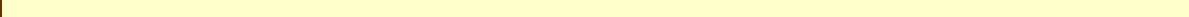
lack of research

little drug treatment data



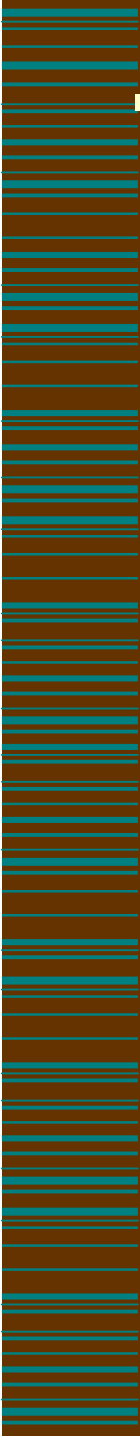
fear of disclosure




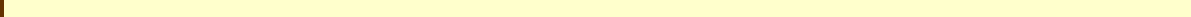
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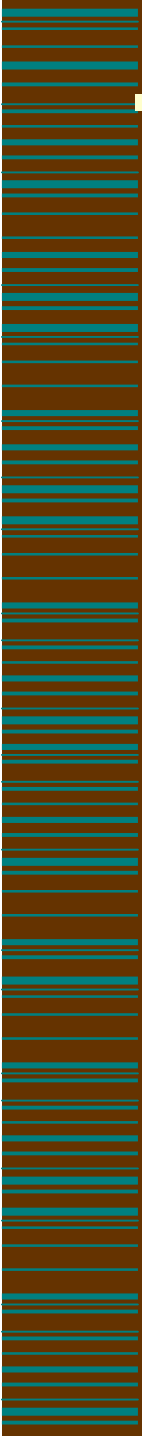
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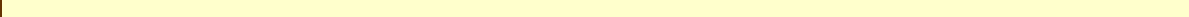
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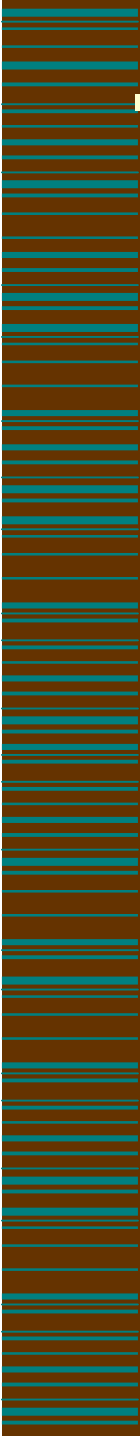
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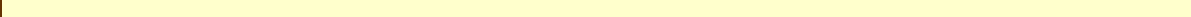
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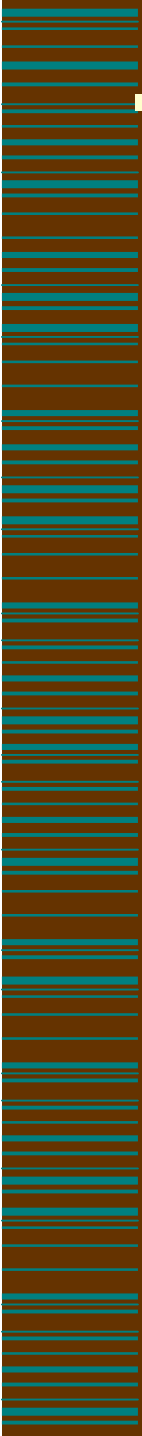
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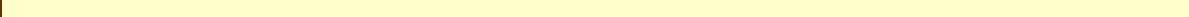
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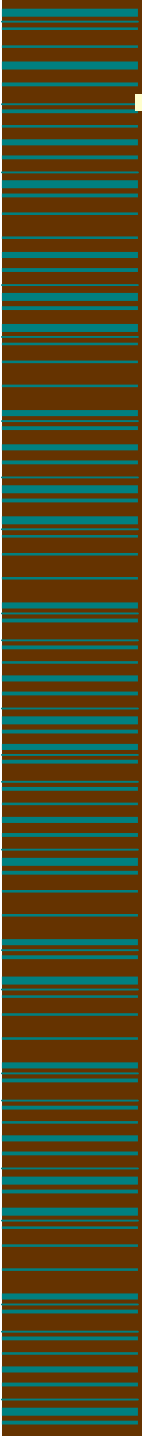
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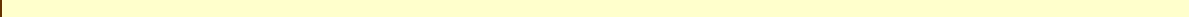
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Risk factors for problematic drug use: previous and current drug use



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- Strong reasons for not using: health and religion
- 1/3 currently using drugs – mostly cannabis
- Reasons for use: boredom; peer pressure; emotional suffering and problems; depression; and availability and use of drugs in local environment.
- Assimilation = ‘normalisation’ of drug use?
- Little awareness of drug services



Risk factors for problematic drug use: family



Many risk factors, including family disruption, conflict,
and breakdown



Risk factors for problematic drug use: family

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and breakdown

Many separated from their families:



Risk factors for problematic drug use: family



Many risk factors, including family disruption, conflict,
and breakdown

Many separated from their families:

lost contact

worried about those still in home country

families dead



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks



The strongest predictor of young peoples' drug use is peer relationships.

Social support and contact with 'similar others' is important for maintaining mental health and well-being.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks



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Social support and contact with 'similar others' is important for maintaining mental health and well-being.

Some had a range of social networks



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks



I have met new friends who are from other countries and who are experiencing a new life like me, and have their own stories to tell about back home, and we sometimes meet to socialise.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks



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Some centred on members and organisations of their own community



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Some centred on members and organisations of their own community

Some had no social networks



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks



I feel deprivation, when I see youngsters like myself going to school and having fun, and I am sitting at home. I feel happy because I am free and living in peace, unlike my family. But at the same time I feel deprived because I have no friends.

I'm very, very lonely. I'm still scared, not knowing how to talk to others. I just don't know how to get through it...I haven't made any friends here.



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks



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Some had a range of social networks

Some centred on members and organisations of their own community

Some had no social networks:
cultural barriers



Risk factors for problematic drug use: social networks

I want to study and learn the language so I can get involved in society and find friends...I don't know anyone here.

In Iraq on a Friday, they'll tell you 'Let's pray.' In London on a Friday, they'll tell you 'Let's go clubbing.'



Risk factors for problematic drug use: environment




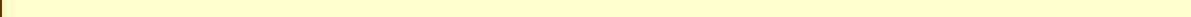
Risk factors

social deprivation

community and neighbourhood disorganisation



Risk factors for problematic drug use: environment



Risk factors

social deprivation

community and neighbourhood disorganisation

Young heroin users characterised by social and economic exclusion



Risk factors for problematic drug use: environment



Risk factors

social deprivation

community and neighbourhood disorganisation

Young heroin users characterised by social and economic exclusion

Vast majority of asylum seekers / significant proportion of refugees experience a level of poverty that places them at the margins of society - they are socially and economically excluded



Conclusion



Arrival in the UK is a relief to asylum seekers, but it brings new stressors, including hostility from some of the media and population and media, and problems in the areas that have been identified as risk factors for problematic drug use.



Responses

Some examples of good practice,



Responses

Some examples of good practice,
but this work is under-funded



Responses

Some examples of good practice,
but this work is under-funded
and 'one-size-fits-all' interventions too often
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Issue of drug use amongst asylum seekers
higher on the agenda.