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Research Report

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Organization (at the start of the grant period):

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Title of Research:

Illegal drug abuse control in Japan: An exploration of recovering drug users' perspectives

Purpose of Research: (200 words)

Responses to illegal drugs in Japan have traditionally been based on a commitment to a tough and stigma-producing criminal justice-led approach which seeks to prevent, deter, and punish drug use. However, in recent years there has been growing concerns about an increasingly high re-offending rate, which in turn has generated greater interest in developing more effective treatment and re-integrative measures for repeat drug offenders. Previous research has tended to neglect social factors, including, *inter alia*, the family, school, friendship networks, work, wider societal culture, and how these shift over the life course. The aim of this research project was to critically examine illegal drug use control in Japan through an exploration of the perspectives of recovering drug users. It sought to identify factors which shape individuals' choices to use and desist from illegal drug use over the life course, as well as generating an understanding about the nature of contemporary drug abuse control culture in Japan from those who have directly experienced it. In doing so, it aimed to (1) generating a deeper understanding of the intersection between policy responses and the socio-cultural conditions which are faced by recovering drug users; and (2) "promote international understanding" of the issues in Japan.

Content/Methodology of Research: (400 words)

The project had three core research questions: (1) What factors shape the onset of, and desistance from, illegal drug abuse over the life course? (2) What are the experiences of drug control measures? (3) How have they impacted upon the lives of recovering drug users? The research adopted a case study design, focusing on the Kansai region of Japan. The research recruited a total of 13 participants from different Drug Addiction Rehabilitation Centers in the region. In-depth life history interviews were used as the primary method of data generation, complemented with a review of existing secondary data such as research literature and statistics. Each participant was interviewed at least 2 times and interviews generally lasted between 1-2 hours. In the first interview, participants were instructed to openly and freely discuss their life histories, with a particular emphasis around the onset and desistance of drug use, as well as their experiences of formal responses. This allowed participants to identify and talk about what they saw as important, rather than imposing ideas from the researcher. Following this, the second (and any subsequent) interview(s) were based on the content discussed in the first interview. The researcher created a timeline of events, as well as a set of more specific questions to gain greater clarity and detail on particular aspects that were discussed. Following data collection, interviews were transcribed and inputted into NVivo code-and-retrieve software. This facilitated a thematic analysis to be conducted. Whilst allowing for flexibility, themes were based around the core research questions, such as "onset"; "desistance"; "family"; "peers"; "employment"; "education"; "community"; "criminal justice contact"; "turning points"; "trigger events" etc. as well as being created 'in-vivo' (directly from the words of participants). From this coding, key themes and patterns that emerged in the interviews were identified.

Conclusion/Observation (200 words)

The research found that those recovering from drug use often have complicated histories, with lots of variance apparent between participants. At the same time, however, there were several notable patterns that emerged from the data. In respect of onset, there was often the experience of trauma events as a child within the family environment such as

abuse by a family member. Second, there was often a sense of failure to meet the expectations of parents and/or grandparents. Third, and following on from these two prior experiences, the joining of deviant and criminal peer networks such as organized criminal groups. As individuals became more embedded in drug using lifestyles, it often became extremely difficult to stop using and return to society. Important factors contributing towards this were found to be social stigma by the family and in the broader community, as well as the problems created through criminalization and imprisonment which further severed ties between the user and their non-using networks. A common observed pattern was that desistance often followed a key turning point, such as the death of a family member, or an episode of high levels of drug use. In sum, the lived realities of those recovering from illegal drug use contain important lessons for formal responses. Mainly, that a punishment-oriented approach fails to recognize the multi-faceted reasons for drug use and may only serve to further disconnect the individual from those pro-social networks which are crucial for living healthy and happy lives.