Written evidence from Transform Drug policy Foundation

Submission to the Drugs Policy Inquiry
Anyone's Child: Families for Safer Drug Control

“Making drugs illegal did not protect our children from harm. We support the legalisation and regulation of drugs because we don’t want any more families to suffer what we have.”

Current drug policy is justified on the grounds that prohibition protects the health and wellbeing of our communities, including our children and young people. However, the experience of the members of Anyone’s Child is that this approach has failed. Treating drug consumption as a criminal problem to be eradicated, rather than a public health issue, has done little to prevent use. Rather, it has increased the influence of organised crime, exacerbated gang violence, caused countless lives to be ruined by criminal records for possession, led to the rise in young people being exploited through county lines and trafficking networks, and prevented the avoidance of deaths from contaminated street drugs. The damage caused by the current approach can no longer be ignored. Harsh drug laws not only fail to deter young people from taking drugs, they actively put them in danger, with devastating results for them and their families.

Anyone’s Child: Families for Safer Drug Control brings together families whose loved ones have been harmed by the current approach to drugs, so we can tell our stories and explain why the legal regulation of drugs would keep everyone’s children safer. Our experiences have been painful and, in many cases, tragic; but there is nothing exceptional about us. Our children, brothers, sisters or partners who have been stigmatised, criminalised, denied medical care or even died as a consequence of drug prohibition could be Anyone’s Child.

We are submitting our stories to your inquiry to demonstrate what the harms caused by current drug policy look like in the lives of real people. All of us speak from personal experience. While the Committee must consider the full range of evidence in assessing current drug policy, we feel it is essential that they understand the human consequences as they are experienced by people like us across the UK (and globally). We have united to highlight the need for the UK’s drug policy to be evidence-led and focused on reducing harm. We are calling for clinicians, pharmacists and licensed retailers, working within the constraints of national legislation - to control the drug market, not organised criminals. We want a just and effective drug policy that puts harm reduction and child protection first.

This briefing includes just five families’ stories from our network, tragically there are thousands more. For more, including videos, visit www.anyoneschild.org.
Anne-Marie: My only child might still be alive if ecstasy was regulated

Watch Anne-Marie’s video here: www.anyoneschild.org/anne-marie

On 20th July, 2013, I received the phone call that no parent wants to get. The voice said that my 15-year-old daughter was gravely ill and they were trying to save her life. On that beautiful, sunny Saturday morning, Martha had swallowed half a gram of MDMA powder (more widely known as ecstasy) that turned out to be 91% pure. Within two hours of taking it, my daughter died of an accidental ecstasy overdose. She was my only child.

I was blissfully ignorant about the world of drugs before Martha died. Drugs are laughed about on sitcoms, joked about on panel shows. Much as I hate to admit it, they are a normal part of modern society. Young people witness their friends not dying from taking drugs all the time. So by simply spouting the “just don’t do it” line and hoping that will be enough of a deterrent, we’re closing our eyes to what’s really going on.

The subject of drugs evokes so much emotion in people, it’s hard for many to imagine what moving away from prohibition would actually look like in practice. Many think it would result in a free-for-all, but that’s what we actually have at the moment. Drugs are currently 100% controlled by criminals, who are willing to sell to you whether you’re aged 5 or 55. Everyone has easy-access to dangerous drugs, that is a fact.

After Martha died, I looked at her internet history and found that she had been researching ways to take drugs safely – I’ve said that; “Martha wanted to get high, she didn’t want to die”. All parents would prefer one of those options to the other. And while no one wants drugs being sold to children, if Martha had got hold of legally regulated drugs meant for adults, labelled with health warnings and dosage instructions, she would not have gone on to take 5-10 times the safe dose.

When I hear the news that a young person has died and yet another family has joined the bereaved parents’ club, I feel helpless as I wonder how many more need to die before someone in government will actually do something about it? As I stand by my child’s grave, what more evidence do I need that things must change? Isn't this loss of precious lives an indicator of a law that is past its sell-by date and in need of urgent reform? Every day I wake up, the stark reality of Martha’s absence hits me once again.

To represent my beloved Martha, it is my quest to align myself with those who can help progress this conversation. That is why I’m involved with the Anyone’s Child project. This unique chorus of voices cannot be ignored, there is nowhere to hide from our harrowing stories – but with every step this project takes in pursuit of political change, one more set of footprints on this earth will hopefully be saved from being extinguished.

---

Rose and Jeremy: We lost two sons to heroin because of the drug war

Watch Rose’s video here: http://anyoneschild.org/rose-and-jeremy

My name is Rose Humphries. I am a mother of two much-loved sons who both died from heroin. I want to tell you why I’m calling for legal regulation of
drugs, through my sons’ stories. For half a century our laws have not succeeded in stopping people using drugs. If people will use them anyway, let’s at least make them safer. One of those people might be your son or daughter, whether you know it or not.

As teenagers, my two youngest boys, Jake and Roland, were trying drugs. We couldn’t imagine they were doing such a thing. It had no place in our respectable world. But we did have conversations with them about drugs, telling them to just say No. They’d reply that people who took drugs were stupid. We thought, while struggling with their behaviour, that we’d got two very rebellious teenagers who’d grow out of it.

For Jake and Roland in the early 1990s, cannabis, amphetamines and magic mushrooms were readily available – despite their supply being illegal. Their friends were doing these drugs too, even though possessing them was illegal. Most of their friends did not go on to become heroin addicts. But my boys did. They’d never intended this outcome, but it could happen to anyone’s child regardless of upbringing.

Jake was arrested for possession of cannabis. Our local paper reported it, naming our quiet little street and making me feel humiliated. He later said that newspaper report seemed to label him and push him along the path of being a druggie. Having a fine to pay was not helpful, and the criminal record did nothing to help him in applying for jobs.

When someone decides to get off drugs, that’s when they need help, not several weeks later. Roland, our youngest, shy, gentle son, died twelve years ago aged 23. We’d had the joy of seeing him give up heroin for a while previously. But then he and his girlfriend split up and he returned to it to deal with his heartbreak. He wanted to be drug-free again, make up for wasted years, and go to college. So Roland was put on a waiting list for a methadone programme. After several weeks and still waiting, while he was trying to reduce his use, a friend phoned him. That call tempted him round to the friend’s house. We didn’t know we’d never see him alive again. He died there, from a combination of heroin and alcohol.

The people Roland was with delayed calling 999 when they saw him slumped in the bathroom. We suspect that fear of the law caused this delay.

Jake had eventually got to university and was away when Roland died. He was devastated. He dropped out of his course and coped with his distress by using drugs more than ever.

Eventually, after rehab, Jake had almost seven years drug-free. We were proud of him studying again and being such an amazing personality. He was well on his way to qualify as an art psychotherapist, and in a loving relationship with his partner and adored baby son. But in 2013 he relapsed then recovered. The year after, about to complete a Masters degree among doing too many other things, he relapsed again. I think it was because he put himself under too much pressure. We found out and he was ashamed and promised to stop. Stopping is not so easy. We were to lose a second son. Aged 37 with a bright future, he died alone from heroin overdose. I wish he could have gone to an easily accessible clinic for safe prescribed heroin, with counselling and help to gradually recover. Instead he felt his only option was street heroin of unknown purity and strength.

When my grandchildren are older, I’d prefer them not to use drugs. But, if they do, I want it to be without going to unsafe environments, without risking a criminal record or worse, without
their families feeling fear and shame, and with truthful drugs education and by choosing safely produced and labelled products from regulated outlets.

**Mick and Hope: Our son's life has been blighted by the drug laws**
**Watch Mick and Hope's story here: http://anyoneschild.org/hope-and-mick/**

Our son James was in his second year at Manchester University when it happened. We’d just come back from the local supermarket, when the phone rang, and our lives were changed forever. James was at a police station on a drugs charge. Neither of us knew much about illegal drugs, and I shudder now to think how ignorant we were. Like most parents we just hoped our kids would be okay, and any foolish things they might do were part of the growing up process. You have to let them go and University is where you are meant to learn, experiment and make mistakes. But if your son or daughter is unlucky enough to get caught on a drugs charge, they will be allowed no second chances. They will be criminalised, and can end up in prison even for a first offence.

James had taken his turn to get cannabis and ecstasy for his household of adult university friends. He made no profit but the drugs were cheaper if you got enough to last the term. They were in a bowl in the communal sitting room from which they all helped themselves. But James had told the truth about being the one to get them that time. Ecstasy is a class A drug and the law does not differentiate between a feckless student and a drug dealer. Prison is the only outcome for the intent to supply a Class A drug. We just could not believe that our son was going to go to prison. How were we all going to cope? Luckily the university showed better judgement than our courts, which are hog-tied by indiscriminate politically pre-determined minimum sentence and rigid guidelines. After he came out of prison having served 15 months of his two-and-half year sentence, he went back to study and achieved a postgraduate Masters in biology and geology.

Prison can be very brutalising, and is the wrong place for most people. We learned a lot about the prison system and how it doesn't work. After James was sent down we were left reeling but we had little knowledge of what he would have to face. Even while we sat in the court wondering if we could find the strength to walk, James was being attacked in the holding cells by two men who decided they wanted his watch. When he got to Strangeways his cellmate was a Moss Side gangster who had chopped off the fingers of one of his victims, and stabbed a man in the heart. Luckily, we didn't hear about most of the horrifying experiences until they were over, as I don't know how we could have borne it. It is a long time ago now but nothing has changed. The profound after-effects are there and none of our family will ever fully recover. James’s life has been blighted. No one could avoid being scarred by what he has experienced. And he still has a criminal record that has affected his career prospects. Despite his Masters Degree, he now sells carvings by the roadside.

When something so unjust happens, if it doesn't destroy you, you want to do something about it. So our family began to fight for an end to these cruel and draconian laws so others won't be afflicted in the same way. The voice of common sense is ready to be heard and **Anyone’s Child** is bringing families together to make sure that it is. But for now, what happened to us could happen to you.

**Ray: I lost my two sons to overdoses that may have been preventable.**
**Watch Ray’s story here: http://anyoneschild.org/ray/**
I lost both of my sons to accidental ecstasy overdoses – on the same night. Their bodies were found beside one another after taking about six times the lethal dose of the drug, bought on the dark web.

Preferably I’d rather people didn't take drugs at all. I wish I could wipe them off the face of the Earth. But I can’t make that happen. The only way to prevent similar deaths is by regulating drugs.

I feel so angry at their wasted lives. They were both so talented, so creative and had so much to live for. They were intelligent kids. But it was so stupid of them to die like this.

Had my boys known exactly what they were taking they certainly wouldn't have taken the quantity they did. I’m certain - and the coroner was certain - they didn't intend to kill themselves. It wasn't suicide. It came down to the fact they didn't know what it was they were taking.

At the moment drugs are in the hands of criminals. We need to get a grip on the situation. It would be lovely if we could say that the current legislation is working, and that education is working, and the law is preventing dealers. But unfortunately it’s not the case.

**Andy’s Story:** We are convinced that if drugs were regulated our son would still be with us and our lives would not have been torn apart.

I was at work in Mayfair, London in July 2016. My Personal Assistant, who is based in Bracknell in Berkshire, had called me to say that Livingston CID in Scotland were trying to contact me and could I call them. She gave me the number of an officer at Livingston police and I called her. The hours following are a blur of shock and devastation.

My wife, Margaret, and I met as kids and have been married for nearly 40 years. Daniel, who was 29, was the middle of our three sons. He had been celebrating a new job and a new apartment after an upsetting few months in which his marriage had broken down. But as always with Daniel, he was getting back on his feet and resetting his compass for a new life. If I try to find the most fitting words to describe him, they surely include; fun-loving, mischievous, warm, tactile, talented, loving, sociable, life-and-soul-of-the-party, practical joker, wonderful son and brother. So many people looked to him, his joie de vivre, his enthusiasm, his positivity, for encouragement and solace, and he was generous with his time and company. I think by now you start to get him.

We had been aware that, from his teenage years, Daniel had probably been a very occasional user of recreational drugs. Just the occasional substitute or enhancement for alcohol I suppose. He liked to try new things but was a responsible guy with a good job, a good career in financial services ahead of him, and always clear thinking. He loved movies, could talk about them for hours, he loved his friends and he loved spending time with his family.

One of his friends in Linlithgow was a lad who had followed a darker path. He was a known drug user, and reputed distributor. But he had been Daniel's friend since school days and...
Daniel wasn’t the type to dump his friends. It is with this friend that Daniel chose to celebrate on Sunday 24th July 2016. The witness testimony tells us that Daniel’s friend acquired drugs from the Dark Web at some point that day and they formed part of the fatal cocktail Daniel took. By all accounts, he went to bed at around midnight, no doubt feeling relaxed and happy, looking forward to the next phase of his life.

The next morning, his friend got up at around 1pm and found Daniel unresponsive on the couch. A member of the Fire Department close by tried to resuscitate him but to no avail. He had taken a mix of heroin and MDMA (“ecstasy”) and it had killed him. Although at that time autopsies were rarely testing for fentanyl, the police say there is a possibility that this is the synthetic heroin he took.

In my last conversation with Daniel that very Sunday, in the afternoon, he seemed happy and excited about his new apartment in Edinburgh. We talked about the new job which he was starting in only a week’s time. As he often did, he told me how proud he was of what I had achieved and hoped to emulate my success.

It’s hard to imagine a world where Daniel could have simply popped into town and bought drugs for his celebration evening from, perhaps, a local chemist, knowing that he would be safe and the drugs would be fit for consumption. No sleazy dark web, no ruthless criminals, no danger that the drugs were created and distributed with only profit in mind, rather than consumer safety.

The majority of drug takers do not deserve to be criminalised or subject to abandonment by authorities. Manufacture and supply need to be controlled by responsible agents and governed by proper, caring regulation within the context of a tolerant and pragmatic society.

I am convinced that, had this been the case, our son would still be with us. And our lives would not have been torn apart.

Life goes on, but we will never be the same. Daniel was such a bright, shining light in our lives. The unimaginable disappearance of that star will leave a gaping void of darkness for as long as we live. But we are lucky that we have our two remaining boys, handsome and strong, of whom we are so proud. We live for them, and for each other. And if we can, we would like to try to ensure this tragedy stops happening to others.

What next?

The Anyone’s Child families want the policy debate to move beyond fear, and for the law to move away from an approach that relies on punishment, and too often leads to discrimination and stigma. We need policymakers to speak honestly about the failures of current policy, and to stop allowing the fear of media backlash (itself often hypocritical) to prevent them speaking out. The consequences are too serious for debate to be shut down any longer. We have to move towards drug laws that are centred around honesty, compassion and health.

We are calling for the legal regulation of the drugs market. This means the state taking control of the drugs market rather than organised criminals. We see this as the only approach that would have kept all of our children safe.
It because we know so profoundly the harms that drug policy can cause that we are calling on the government to regulate the market. The goal of policy must be to reduce drug-related harms so that our young people, and the vulnerable in society are better protected.

We urge this enquiry to read our stories and remember that prohibition could fail anyone’s child. We urge the inquiry to be bold in their recommendation and stress the urgent need to update our failed drug policy to stop other families suffering as we have.

Find out more: www.anyoneschild.org

March 2019