



# Boomerang ads

Not ads for boomerangs, but which risk a boomerang effect – specifically, the ads in the US government’s biggest ever attempt to use the media to turn US youth away from drugs. Could they actually have done the reverse?

**a FINDINGS analysis** “IN 1998, WITH BIPARTISAN SUPPORT, Congress created the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign with the goal of preventing and reducing youth drug use. Unprecedented in size and scope, the Campaign is the most visible symbol of the federal government’s commitment to youth drug prevention”<sup>1</sup> – how the US Office of National Drug Control Policy introduces its flagship multi-media campaign. “Visible” it was and is, “symbol” certainly, but “prevention”? Not according to the US government’s own appointed evaluators.

Thanks to Dr Christopher Wibberley of Manchester Metropolitan University for his comments.

The campaign’s big idea was to get broadcasters to donate as much air time again as the government bought for its anti-drug ads. Soon it became mired in accusations of illegal use of federal funds, interference with state-level lawmaking, exploitation of a dubious link with terrorism, covert propaganda, misleading ads, and profiteering,<sup>2,3,4</sup> but for the US citizen in the street, all might have been forgiven had the campaign, in its own terms, saved at least a few youngsters from drugs. If it has, they eluded the researchers. Zero impact seems a fair assessment, with hints that some children actually became *more* inclined to drug use as a result of the ads.

How could over a billion dollars and so much exposure time<sup>2</sup> (by its latest phase, 9 in 10 teenagers were reached at least four times every week) have been expended to such little effect, possibly even promoting the attitudes it sought to counter?

## EVALUATORS REPORT ZERO OR NEGATIVE IMPACTS

The bad news started in earnest in 2002 when the evaluators appointed by the US National Institute on Drug Abuse reported on their national surveys of young people and parents. In May<sup>5</sup> and again in November,<sup>6</sup> parents may (it was not conclusive) have responded as intended to the campaign, talking more to their children about drugs and monitoring them more closely. However, if they did, their children were unmoved. There were no statistically significant declines in cannabis use and none of the desired changes in beliefs and attitudes about the drug. Most tellingly, there was also no tendency for children who recalled seeing more of the ads to hold more desirable, anti-cannabis beliefs.

There was worse. A year to 18 months later, children who had recalled seeing more of the ads consistently recorded attitudes and beliefs associated with *increased* cannabis use. Though other influences could not altogether be eliminated, this ‘delayed effect’ analysis was the one which got closest to establishing a causal link between the campaign

and how children thought and behaved. It was limited to children who at the first survey had not yet used cannabis, so reflected the potential for the campaign to prevent use. It also sorted out the time sequence, so that the ‘cause’ (campaign exposure) preceded its supposed effects (drug-related attitudes and behaviours). Finally, it tied these effects to the degree to which children had actually been exposed to the campaign.

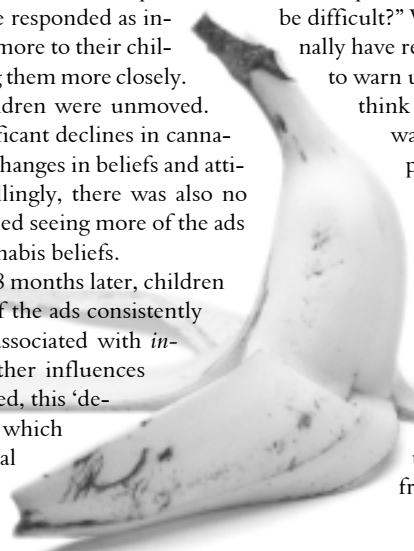
What it found was that the more a child recalled being exposed, the *less* likely they later were to absolutely rule out using the drug or to be confident they would resist if it were offered to them. Also, the more they had been exposed to anti-drug ads in general (including those from the campaign), the less favourable were their ‘normative’ assumptions about how many of their friends and age-mates used cannabis and the degree of social disapproval they expected to face if they did the same. The saving grace was that there were no signs that the campaign had actually increased cannabis use – or not detectably so and not yet; the researchers cautioned that these attitudes and beliefs were potent harbingers of increased use.

The normative measures offered a clue to how all this could have happened. Such beliefs about extent of use among one’s peers and anticipated disapproval have emerged as an important focus for prevention.<sup>7</sup> But not only were they associated in the wrong direction with prior campaign exposure, they had also moved in the wrong direction across the years of the campaign – “some of the strongest results” found by the researchers.

“Is it possible”, they asked, “that the Campaign, while its explicit message is anti-drug, provides a second implicit message – that drugs are a big problem and their use is widespread ... and that resistance [to using them] may be difficult?” Why else, the youngsters might subliminally have reasoned, would the government be so keen to warn us of the consequences of their use and to think we need help to resist them? Beyond this was the possibility that while most young people were unaffected by the ads, some resented being ‘told what to do’ and reacted by moving in the opposite direction.

## NEW FOCUS ON CANNABIS HARMS

Partly in response to these findings, in 2002 the youth component of the campaign shifted to what was called the Marijuana Initiative. The focus sharpened to the negative consequences of cannabis use and the primary targets moved up the age range from 11–14-year-olds to 14–16-year-olds.





It's cool not to smoke pot ... there's so much else to do. Shacoya's (inset above) rap features in one of the ads – punch line, "I refuse to be another drug abuser teen statistic." At [www.freevibe.com](http://www.freevibe.com) she tells a young fan, "We need to stand up for ourselves and become independent thinkers." A plausible reason why the ad campaign did not work is because some youngsters resented being told what to do.



In 2002 the decision was made to focus on the negative consequences of cannabis use. The problem was finding clear cut examples. Driving while intoxicated is one but the implied link with cancer ("One marijuana joint contains as much cancer causing tar as four cigarettes") is at best misleading, at worst, deliberate scaremongering.

[www.mediacampaign.org](http://www.mediacampaign.org) is the Office of National Drug Control Policy's central site for the media campaign.  
[www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com) is for parents and [www.freevibe.com](http://www.freevibe.com) for their children.



The following December, the same research team reported on the consequences.<sup>8</sup> Again, parents might have reacted largely as intended, in particular by talking to their children. The exception this time was that there was no evidence of improved monitoring of their children – worrying, because this was the focus of the parental campaign and seemed strongly protective against cannabis use. Regardless of the possible impacts on parents, there was no evidence that as a result their children's beliefs or behaviours had changed.

Most dispiriting was the finding that (as before and despite the revamped ads) among teens yet to try cannabis, those most exposed to the campaign were no more likely than the rest to express beliefs or intentions indicative of continued abstinence. This time at least there were no clear negative findings. However, little comfort could be taken from this. The timing of the latest survey had meant that the delayed effect analysis which had previously identified these could not be replicated. The possibility remained that had it been, the same type of findings would have emerged.

Though this could not be directly linked to the ads, the worrying trend in normative beliefs had continued. Over the years of the campaign, children came to perceive more cannabis use among their peers and to expect less social disapproval should they also use the drug.

Conclusion? "The Marijuana Initiative's focused analyses provide results largely consistent with no Campaign effects on youth."<sup>8</sup> The Office of National Drug Control Policy countered this verdict with what it saw as more promising findings elsewhere,<sup>9,10</sup> but since it came from the government's officially appointed evaluators, the attempt failed to reassure US Congressional scrutineers<sup>1</sup> or to silence the critics.

#### WATCH OUT FOR THE BOOMERANG

One of the other changes introduced by the Marijuana Initiative was to more rigorously test ads on a sample of the audience before releasing them. Researchers showed how important this was when they tested 30 ads produced by the Partnership for a Drug Free America, the private, non-profit organisation which produced most of the US government's campaign ads – several of the researched ads featured in the early stages of the campaign.<sup>11</sup> The results give an insight into how the campaign might have had counter-productive effects.

The study recruited 3608 US middle and high school pupils to view the 30 ads and assess how effectively each would turn their peers away from using drugs.<sup>12</sup> A programme about video and news production techniques was used as a control condition against which to compare the ads. Amazingly, six were seen as *less* effective than this

comparator – or, put another way, compared to neutrally watching TV, they were seen as actually *promoting* drug use. Another eight were seen as equally (in)effective, leaving only just over half performing better than a programme not intended to be anti-drug at all and which included only a few incidental shots vaguely related to the topic.

Given the campaign's later focus on cannabis, it was not a good portent that two-thirds of the poor-performing ads focused on this drug. In contrast, just two of the ads which outperformed the control programme focused on cannabis, and one was the least effective of the bunch, only marginally better than the control programme.

#### GATEWAY TACTIC COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE

One of the two cannabis ads which did somewhat impress the young viewers was a dramatic depiction of the 'gateway' theory – a teenage girl recounting how the first drug she used was cannabis, thinking "I'd never have a real problem with it", only to develop

**NOTHING MORE THAN SMOKE AND MIRRORS, DISGUISED AS AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH PROJECT** an appetite which soon escalated to "crack ... angel dust, everything".

An offshoot of the study reported above evaluated this tactic.<sup>13</sup> From schools in Philadelphia, 418 pupils were randomly allocated to view one of four versions of a TV programme. One included a sequence of ads which rammed home the gateway message: four graphic depictions of the consequences of 'hard' drug use ending with the teenage girl's account of how it can all start with cannabis. The control condition was the TV programme without the ads.

Amazingly, on all the many measures of how the children reacted, the hard-hitting gateway sequence left them feeling *more* positive about cannabis and more likely to say they would use the drug. On their own, none of the differences was statistically significant, but this aggregation of wrong-way-round outcomes (which included a near significant weakening of belief in the gateway theory itself) was a strong indication of a boomerang effect.

#### REFERENCES

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- 3 French A. *Up in smoke: Office of National Drug Control Policy's wasted efforts in the war on drugs*. Citizens Against Government Waste, 2005.
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It happened at least partly because the bulk of children unlikely to use cannabis anyhow were unmoved by the ads, while those most likely to use (many if not most may already have done so – this could not be directly ascertained) tended to "move towards disbelieving that regular marijuana use has negative consequences". The researchers conjectured that these children rejected the gateway depiction because it was contradicted by their own experiences, a speculation strengthened by the fact that these youngsters were indeed the ones most sceptical about cannabis leading to harder drugs. The upshot was that children who had little room to become more anti-cannabis were unaffected, while those with a more pro-cannabis profile ricocheted in the wrong direction.

#### A WASTE OF MONEY?

The non-partisan Citizens Against Government Waste agency carries on the work started by President Reagan when he established a commission to "work like tireless bloodhounds to root out government inefficiency and waste of tax dollars." In May 2005 they reported on the Office of National Drug Control Policy's anti-drug projects.<sup>3</sup>

One of the two they identified as the biggest dollar drainers was the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign: "Congress rolled taxpayers into a ditch of weeds by funding the ... Campaign. ONDCP's program is nothing more than smoke and mirrors, disguised as an educational outreach project but created to influence state marijuana initiatives ... the campaign violated federal propaganda laws, did not reduce drug use amongst America's youth, and has produced no significant results."

For would-be media campaigners, the campaign is also an object lesson in the difficulty of moving those who already hold anti-drug attitudes even further towards the anti-end, and the risk that in the process, those less convinced by these arguments will be activated to reject them, producing an effect opposite to that intended.

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