



Chroming and Young People in Queensland

A Discussion Paper in plain English.

Comments? Contact YANQ and tell us:

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What is this discussion paper for?

This discussion paper is for two purposes. First, we wrote it so that young people, youth workers and other interested people can read it and find out more information on chroming.

The second reason is to get people talking to us about chroming. If you have ideas or opinions about what to do about chroming, please contact YANQ. We want to know the views of as many people as possible. **You don't have to write your views down**, or have an opinion on everything in this paper. Even if you only have one comment, please ring.

There are "Discussion Points" throughout the paper. You can tell us what you think about these particular points. Or, you can give us your opinions on other chroming issues you feel are important.

Once we have the ideas and opinions of lots of our members, we will use them to make a policy on chroming. This policy will then be used to tell the Queensland and Federal Governments what YANQ thinks it should do about chroming, and to try and push for change.

The discussion paper is in two parts. Part One describes the problem of chroming. Part Two talks about what can be done about it.

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Appendix Two

For Young People Who Use Chrome or are Thinking About It

Part One – What’s The Problem?

What is chroming?

Chroming is when people inhale the poisonous fumes from glue, paint and other household products. A lot of the time it is called *sniffing*. Inhaling the poisonous fumes gives the chromer a ‘high’ effect. It makes them feel good for a short time. It also causes lots of health problems, some of them really serious ones like brain damage or suffocation when the chromers’ lungs stop working properly.

It is called ‘chroming’ because some of the paint that is used is chrome-based.

Chroming is a new name for an old activity. In the seventies and eighties, substances like glue and petrol were more popular with sniffers. These days, paint and other spray products are more popular. It used to be that chroming or especially petrol sniffing was more common in particular places, like Aboriginal communities in remote areas. These days it looks like chroming and sniffing is becoming more common in the towns and cities as well. Chroming and sniffing seems to come and go in ‘waves’. It will be popular in one area for a few weeks or months, then the wave will pass, and young people will tend to stop.

Where did we get our information from when we wrote this paper?

We got information from research that other people have done, both in Queensland and in other states and countries. We also talked to some people on the ground like youth workers and young people and parents of chromers. We got a lot of information from research done by Brisbane Youth Service in Fortitude Valley in Brisbane, and from a large study done in Victoria by the Victorian Parliament.

If you have an opinion about chroming, we’d like to hear from you, so we can include comments from as many people as possible. The phone numbers and web address of YANQ are on the front of this paper.

Who Chromes?

Chrome (inhalant use) is an activity that is popular world-wide in many cultures. Research and anecdotal evidence tells us chrome is popular with very young teenagers and even sometimes children as young as seven or eight in North Queensland.

Older teenagers in Brisbane seem to ‘graduate’ to different drugs or a different mix of drugs, as their income rises or they learn strategies to gain access to other drugs, such as crime or sex work.

“It’s when they hit the street for the first time, they get into the chrome. Then they might learn how to do band-e’s (break and enters) and stuff, and be able to afford yandy and that.”

Youth worker, Brisbane

Some people are telling us that chrome is *particularly popular* with Indigenous children, (though of course non-Indigenous children also use the drug). Use of chrome by Non English Speaking Background (NESB) children is under-researched, but there is one study that suggests NESB youth are *more likely* to chrome and to be in the chronic users group (IIVS report p58).

These trends might be connected to the use of ‘chrome’ as an activity that gives users a ‘group identity’. Young Indigenous and NESB people who feel ‘shut out’ of mainstream Australian society might be responding by forming their own counter-culture of chrome use. For homeless young chromers, the chroming subculture could be a replacement for the family which they have left or been rejected by.

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey reported that in 1998, 4.2% of Queenslanders had ever used inhalants. This compared with a national figure of 3.9%. That is, Queenslanders were slightly more likely to have used chrome than Australians generally. This could be because of Queensland’s higher Indigenous population, if its true that chrome is particularly popular with Indigenous youth.

Children who use chrome seem likely to come from backgrounds of:

- poverty and social disadvantage
- families in crisis who are unable or unwilling to support them
- mental health problems
- child abuse
- use of many drugs (“poly drug use”)
- antisocial behaviour
- and go on to have substance abuse problems with other drugs.

Research by the Brisbane Youth Service shows that homelessness, high rates of mental illness, abusive families and existing substance abuse all are likely to contribute to chroming by young people. This is particularly true of chronic (heavy and ongoing) chrome use.

Research by Brady, suggests however, that the picture might be more complex. Patterns of petrol sniffing and chroming both in Australia and in American Indian communities, show that poverty, isolation and family dysfunction are typical of *almost all* Indigenous groups.

That is, there isn’t much difference between the families of youth who chrome, and the families of those who don’t. Despite having common experiences and problems, some Indian and Aboriginal communities have chroming problems, while others do not.

Brady suggests that perhaps lack of **community leadership**, and **parental alcohol abuse**, might be some of the triggers for youth chroming. She also says that having “meaningful economic activity” – that is, **good jobs**, is part of solving the problem. In areas where Aboriginal people historically worked in the cattle industry, doing ‘real’ work rather than menial work, sniffing is minimal or absent. (1992:ch 2).

DISCUSSION POINT: Do you agree that it is mainly young teenagers who are chroming? Do you agree that chroming is especially popular with Indigenous youth? Do you have any opinions about NESB youth and chroming? Is parents alcohol use important?

Why do they do it?

Like all other drug use, chrome is popular for a range of reasons. Some young people will experiment with chrome once or twice and never use it again. Others will become regular 'social' users, mostly on the weekends. Another smaller group of young people will go on to use chrome on a 'chronic' basis, chroming heavily most days of the week.

Experimental and social users can come from any background. There is probably curiosity and adventure involved in this sort of use. Chronic chromers however, are likely to have personal histories of abuse, neglect and trauma. They are more likely to be using the drug to mask pain. Children who are under Government Orders in Victoria (eg wards of the state) are much more likely to be chronic chromers than other children (IIVS Report).

For a young person who is homeless, has a background of abuse, and is experiencing rejection by their family and/or school and/or social group, the option of "getting out of it" can be overwhelmingly attractive.

"It takes you away from reality and its cheap. I don't want reality, because reality bites and it bites hard."

"It pushes everything aside; you don't have to worry about anything when you sniff."

"..you're out of it you don't remember much and you're out to it – well, if someone rapes you then, its not really rape."

"It takes away the pain."

Boredom is another key reason identified by chromers.

"I'm happy not to sniff if that means I get to do stuff."

Boredom, in the case of homeless or marginalised young people, can be a 'catch-all' phrase for feeling bad. Boredom is also well-recognised as a symptom of depression.

Just as adults use tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs to create excitement in their lives, or through being addicted, or to mask feelings of depression or hopelessness, so do young people use the drugs available to them.

One youth worker expressed that chroming was a young person's way of:

"Shocking people. You know, people go Oh, Wow, its chrome, its such a big deal...they get shocked by it, when really its just another drug. But the kids who do it are so marginalised, they *want* to shock. They want to

be totally outside because they already feel like they are pushed outside everywhere else. It's like a rage thing, I think."

Youth worker, Brisbane

Research by Brady suggests that for some Aboriginal petrol sniffers in remote areas, sniffing is an expression of control over their lives. Having little or no control over their lives, some young people decide to "get out of it" as a *deliberate strategy of defiance*. It is a demonstration that they are beyond the control of adults – that they themselves are the bosses of their lives. Chromers in coastal and city areas may be exhibiting similar behaviours.

Links have also been drawn to suicidal behaviour and suicidal thoughts of young chromers:

"...young people turn to chrome partly under peer pressure and when chronic users, to mask pain" (IIVS report)

"I don't care if it kills me, my life isn't worth living anyway." (IIVS Report)

DISCUSSION POINT: Do you have any observations about why young people are using chrome in your area?

Why is it a problem?

The inhalant ingredient in paint or glue is a drug and when abused, it causes a range of similar problems for users as other drugs do.

As many researchers have written, it is important to make a distinction between the individual costs of drug use, and the social costs. It is also important to make distinctions between **actual costs** and an often illogical '**panic reaction**' that occurs simply because any kind of drug use is occurring, and because this drug use is threatening to general perceptions of what is right and proper.

Individual costs of chroming can include:

- minor health problems for the user, like nausea, headaches, dizziness
- very severe health problems like suffocation, blackouts,
- death (statistically males are more likely to die from chroming)
- potentially permanent health problems like brain damage
- chronic chromers have trouble attending school, TAFE, Uni etc and so their education is affected
- chronic chromers – who are already likely to be unemployed – are even less able to hold down jobs
- chroming exposes homeless youth to the dangers of the street even more than usual. These dangers include rape, murder, bashings, imprisonment, theft of their belongings, and traffic accidents, to name a few.
- Income spent on chrome is income lost to food, housing, transport and education
- The danger of accidents when driving is increased dramatically

“If I had fifty dollars I’d be taking smack (heroin) but I don’t, so I sniff.”

“How did I get off? Through pot. Using pot, once I had the money.”

“The volume of use may be related to situational factors. For example, a lack of money to buy alcohol or marijuana may lead to greater inhalation of spray paint.” (IIVS report)

Anecdotally, there is a clear connection between the price of chrome – which is low – and its use by young people. A spraycan of paint can be purchased for less than five dollars. Volatile substances can be shoplifted fairly easily, or found in most households.

“For reasons of availability, cheapness and lack of access to other drugs, the inhalation of volatile substances is particularly appealing to young Aborigines, as it is to non-Aboriginal youth...”
(Brady, 1992:12)

Young people with little or no money seem more likely to use chrome than older teenagers with slightly more income. Older teenagers and those in their early twenties seem to switch from chrome to using more alcohol, amphetamines and marijuana, if these are available. YANQ believes that the *affordability* of chrome is a prime reason why young teenagers choose it, rather than other, arguably less harmful, drugs.

“..those younger kids were kids who were not able to access marijuana, and as a result of that we now have a group of kids who are certainly affected by this (chroming).” (IIVS Report)

There is also an anecdotal connection between the heroin drought in Australia and the increased use of chrome by young people in 2002-3.

DISCUSSION POINT: What do you think about the ways chrome is being used and the reasons for it? Do you think the cheapness of chrome compared to other drugs is a factor?

Legal issues

At present, chroming is not an illegal activity in Queensland. Young people are therefore not at increased risk of being locked up, simply because they use chrome.

Chroming can, however, lead young people into trouble with police and into detention, if they behave in anti-social or alarming ways while high. Young people who chrome in public, it should be remembered, are likely to already be homeless and likely to be overpoliced. They are also likely to be users of other drugs such as alcohol that can also lead to anti-social behaviour.

YANQ supports the status quo where chroming **is not** an illegal activity. Some people support making chroming a crime. But making chroming a crime would, in our opinion:

- increase the risk of “sudden sniffer death” resulting from chromers running away from police or security guards
- put young people at unnecessary risk of detention
- probably not affect chroming levels, especially not by chronic users
- worsen community relations with police
- put young people at further risk of self-harm and suicide while in detention
- lead to young people chroming in out-of-the-way areas where they are less safe and where it is more difficult for the ambulance workers to find them in an emergency
- cause further distress to homeless young people, especially those with mental illness
- further stigmatise young people as criminal for behaviour which is similar to that of many Australian adults (ie use of drugs, which is common in the adult community)

A report by the Children’s Commission of Queensland recently said about making chroming illegal:

Strategies seeking to further marginalise young people who have already suffered significant disadvantage are strongly opposed by the Commission, as are “quick fix” reactive measures which solely seek to move young people on to places where they are less visible...”

YANQ believes that making chroming illegal would cause more problems for young users, without any real gains being achieved.

Part Two: WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

What should the Federal Government do?

YANQ believes that chroming is not an issue of individual choice. Children do not wake up one morning and decide to become drug users or addicts. Their desire to use chrome is a logical response to their feelings of despair, isolation and misery. When these feelings are overwhelming, young people turn to the nearest available substance to make the feelings go away. For young people with very little income, that nearest available substance is chrome.

Chroming is therefore a reflection of some children's lives in Queensland. British research shows that children in poverty are twice as likely to use inhalants as children from wealthy families. Research by Brady suggests that parental alcoholism could be a factor in children chroming.

Australia is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Under this Convention, young people have the right to safe accommodation, to an education, and to live meaningful lives free from violence and poverty. Often these rights are not met, and as a result young people may in desperation turn to chroming, to cope with feelings of powerlessness and despair.

The Federal Government should:

- increase the **income levels** of young people on Centrelink benefits so that they can afford safe, appropriate housing, and have a decent standard of living
- Fund programs to help young people “**detox**” from chroming
- increase the amount of funding available to provide **safe, appropriate public housing** to young homeless people and their communities of origin
- ensure that community services such as youth services and health services have **enough funds** to really meet the needs of young homeless people
- Fund more programs to address **mental illness** in young people on the street

What Should the State Government Do?

YANQ believes that the Queensland government can and should set up services for young people who chrome, in order to meet their rights and needs. Homelessness, poverty, stress and violence, and isolation are all factors that seem to lead to chroming. Chroming is both a symptom, and potentially a cause of, homelessness, poverty, stress and violence.

If young people in Queensland had:

- safe housing,
- higher incomes,
- trusted people to help them deal with stress and violence,
- less racism and exclusion in their lives

- were able to stay in school or training longer,
- and if they felt like they belonged to a safe community that valued them,

then chroming would probably decrease.

The Queensland Government should:

1. **Continue to deal with chroming as a health issue, and not as a legal issue.** Chroming should NOT be made illegal. Making chrome illegal is likely to bring more young people into contact with the criminal justice system without having any positive impact on the amount of chroming that happens.
2. **Fund ‘safe houses’** for homeless young people who are affected by substance abuse. These places would be a haven for chromers where they would be safe from rape, bashing and other forms of abuse or accident while they are affected by chrome.
3. **Fund detoxification centres** for young people to get help to come off chrome.
4. **Increase safe short - term, medium-term and long-term housing** options for young people in Queensland.
5. **Provide funding for community-based projects** that engage, excite and involve chromers in safe activities on a medium term basis.
6. **Fund community-based services on a recurrent basis**, rather than on a one-or three yearly basis. This would enable some certainty in the provision of services to young people, especially marginalised young people. Organisations would be able to develop strategic plans with meaning, for assisting young people to change their lives.
7. **Increase funding to community-based alternative schools** which are better able to meet the needs of marginalised young people, and help them stay in the education ‘loop’.
8. **Fund additional job creation** likely to be of assistance to young homeless people, to counter boredom, poverty, unemployment and low self-esteem.
9. **Fund additional positions for health and youth workers** who are able to help young people deal creatively with the stress and violence of being homeless and/or physically, sexually or emotionally abused.

DISCUSSION POINT: Do you agree that chroming has a structural basis in poverty, homelessness and so on (that is, that it is not simply that some young people “choose” to use and others “choose” not to)?
What do you think the Federal and Queensland governments could do?

APPENDIX ONE

What Can Youth Workers Do? Tips for Harm- Reduced Inhalant Use

1. Inhalants are one of *many* drugs young people will experiment with, or else use on an ongoing basis. Panic – while understandable – is not helpful. Try to stay calm and not make a bigger deal out of inhalants than they already are. At the end of the day, inhalants are just one more drug we have to deal with.
2. As with any other challenging behaviour, the best way to proceed is by being *low-key, supportive but not intrusive*, and listening to what the young person has to say. Try talking less than the young person does. After all, would you listen if a stranger suddenly started telling **you** what to do?
3. One of the main dangers of sniffing inhalants is Sudden Sniffing Death. If a young person *runs or does other strenuous exercise* after sniffing, their heart can fail. Encourage sniffers NOT to sniff and run.
4. Remember that the vast majority of sniffers *will not* have major long-term health impacts. Removal of lead from petrol has made it a bit safer than it used to be. Other than Sudden Sniffing Death, here is no clear evidence one way or the other about the long-term effects of paint or glue.
5. Use of plastic bags to hold the inhaled gas is dangerous. Encourage sniffers to use a *small* plastic container like a bottle instead. It can't smother them like a plastic bag might.
6. Encourage sniffers not to sniff alone. Remind them that the ambulance doesn't have to call the police – so if someone collapses, call the ambulance straight away. Put the person on their side so they don't choke on vomit.
7. Encourage sniffers to do it in a relatively safe place. Encourage them to stay away from clifftops, busy roads, and places where they are at increased risk of attack or rape.
8. In any enjoyable activities that you hold, try not to deliberately exclude sniffers. But, don't "reward" their sniffing behaviour by having activities that are only for sniffers. Enjoyable activities should be available to young people whether or not they are sniffing. This helps break down the isolation of the sniffers.
9. Getting sniffers to the health clinic for a health check is a low-key way of telling them that you care about them, without making accusations that can upset young people.
10. Research suggests that sniffers use inhalants for the following reasons:
 - to mask pain
 - to get excitement and kill boredom

- to belong to a group that accepts them

If you can offer young people any activities that fulfil these needs, you might go some way to stopping or slowing their sniffing.

What can parents do?

“One off” chromers can be anyone. Young people in any culture will experiment and take risks.

Most chronic chromers are young people with a complex set of problems. Chronic chromers tend to be people without strong social networks or many non-chroming friends. They tend to be homeless, and will often though not always come from backgrounds of abuse, poverty, neglect and despair. Parental alcohol abuse may be a factor.

Parents of chronic chromers are often in need of support themselves. They can seek help from counsellors at health centres, their GP, and various community organisations. Try the front of the phone book for some numbers to call. Parentline on **1300 30 1300** is a community-based helpline for any parent with problems that they want to discuss.

Parents can help chroming young people by:

- not panicking! Most young people will experiment with risky behaviour, then stop.
- Avoid lecturing your child – if it was going to work, it would have by now!
- By really listening when your child tries to talk, rather than expecting **them** to do all the listening, or to instantly do what you say
- Trying to hear what your child says about *why* they might be angry or unhappy
- By getting as much information on chrome as you can and
- By staying involved in your child’s life, through any way possible (eg sport, art activities, even just watching TV together without lectures or blame).

What can shops do?

Inhalants are very commonly available products like petrol, paint and glue. (This report will not list inhalants in detail, as we don’t want to publicise them).

YANQ believes that shops can help stop chroming by putting inhalant products like paint and glue out of reach, and in difficult places to steal.

Retailers are members of a wider community, and have moral obligations to that community. *Knowingly* selling paint or other harmful substances to young people who are about to chrome is morally reprehensible, and should be condemned. Retailers must be encouraged to regard their young customers as people first, and consumers second, and treat them on that basis with the same care as they do their own children.

APPENDIX TWO

YANQ supports a ‘harm minimisation’ approach to chroming. That is, we believe that young people do not usually listen to messages on drugs like “Just Say No”.

A harm minimisation approach is based on the fact that, even with help and support, some young people will continue to use chrome. Therefore it is sensible to give them information to do so in *the safest ways possible*.

For young people who use chrome or are thinking about it:

You can find out more information about chroming by asking people. Ask at a health service, doctors, nurses, teachers, youth workers, other young people, or anyone you trust.

You could think about what times of the day or week you feel like doing chroming and try and plan to do other stuff at those times. Think about the headaches and sickness you get after the high wears off.

You can remind yourself that chroming is really dangerous. The fumes make you high by damaging your brain and your lungs. Chroming can make you really sick or kill you.

You can try and find someone to talk to about the problems you have, instead of chroming. Relatives that you trust, Youth Services, health services or the school nurse might be able to help. **Kids Helpline** is free and offers help and advice to any child or young person: **1800 55 1800** or try www.reachout.asn.au

If you decide to chrome anyway, try and:

- **DON'T CHROME AND RUN!** Running or other exercise that makes you puffed when you are chroming can be really dangerous. Some people have dropped dead on the spot from running when they are high on chrome.
- **DO** do it where there are people around that can help you if you have a fit or get really sick.
- **Do** take regular breaks – don't keep chroming continuously for hours. Give your body a bit of a chance to recover.
- **DO** remember that the ambulance don't have to call the police, so ring them early if someone is sick from chroming.
- **DO** use a small container rather than a plastic bag. Plastic bags can go over your face while you're high and suffocate you.
- Some people say drinking milk before you chrome helps protect your stomach from fumes.
- **DO** drink lot of liquids like water, milk or soft drink while you're chroming, to keep yourself hydrated.

References:

These are the books and reports that are quoted in this Discussion Paper. We got some of our information from them.

Volatile Substance Misuse in Queensland, Commission for Children and Young People, September 2002

Report of the Victorian Parliament, Inquiry into Inhalation of Volatile Substances, Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, 2003? (Referred to throughout this paper as IIVS Report)

Going Somewhere? Income Support for homeless young people, Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Melbourne 1993

Heavy Metal: the social meaning of petrol sniffing in Australia, Brady, M., Aboriginal Studies Press 1992

“*No Reason to Breathe Easy*”, Terry Sweetman, The Sunday Mail, October 6, 2002

Sniffing Around the Valley: Young People, Homelessness and Chroming in Brisbane's Inner City, Brisbane Youth Service, February 2003

Recommendations: Drug Stream, Youth Justice Conference, Brisbane 2003

And by talking to workers and young people in various settings including Brisbane Youth Service, Salvation Army in Fortitude Valley, Southside Education, Boystown Kingston and the Aboriginal and Islander Community School. We spoke to some of the workers at these places, but the opinions and ideas in this report are the responsibility of YANQ.