Chapter 8

Drug use and criminal behaviour: indirect, direct or no causal relationship?

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Links between substance use, addictive behaviour and criminal activity have been the subject of psychological, sociological and criminological research over a number of decades (see Anglin and Perrochet 1998; Ferri, Gossop, Rabe-Hesketh and Laranjeira 2002; Lowenstein 2001; Nurco et al. 1985, 1995; Yeoman and Griffiths 1996). At a public health level, legislation has aimed to counter the harmful effects of taking drugs or using alcohol excessively. Research has set out to understand those mechanisms that might be important in an individual undertaking highly risky and illegal behaviour as a result of their drinking or drug taking behaviour (e.g. Albery and Guppy 1996, 1995a, 1995b; Albery, Gossop and Strang 1998; Albery, Strang, Gossop and Griffiths 2000; Guppy and Albery 1997). This chapter aims to provide a review of the contemporary evidence in relation to the drugs-crime relationship.

Types of link

As will emerge, there is a clear association between illicit drug use and some types of crime. There is much overlap between those using illicit drugs and those who are involved in crime, with a pool of people who both use drugs and offend. This link can arise in several ways (see Best et al. 2001; Coid et al. 2000; Walters 1998, for fuller discussions):

- Illicit drug use may lead to other forms of crime e.g. to provide money to buy drugs or as a result of the disinhibiting effects of some drugs.
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- Crime may lead to drug use e.g. providing the money and the contacts to buy drugs or serving as a palliative for coping with the stresses of a chaotic, criminal lifestyle.
- There could be a more complex interaction, whereby crime facilitates drug use, and drug use prompts other forms of crime.
- There may be an association arising from a shared common cause but no direct causal link between offending and drug use.

Each of the above four explanations will apply to some people at some times. In some cases, problem drug use – dependence on drugs such as heroin, crack/cocaine or amphetamines, or heavy binge use of these drugs – does trigger theft as a means of fund raising. Others would never have become drug-dependent if crime had not provided them with the means to buy large amounts of drugs. Some people will both be involved in crime and also use illicit drugs without there being any causal connection whatsoever between the two.

The fourth possibility deserves as serious consideration as the other three. Surveys of offenders’ health show that they are much more likely to smoke nicotine than the general population (e.g. Singleton et al. 1999). No one would seriously argue that smoking causes crime, however, or that crime causes smoking. Rather, smoking and crime are likely to share some causal roots without themselves being causally related. The same is likely to be true of some links between illicit drug use and crime. For example, economic deprivation, inconsistent parenting, low educational attainment and limited employment prospects are risk factors not only for chaotic or dependent drug use but also for heavy involvement in crime (De Li Periu and MacKenzie 2000; Walters 1998). In a similar vein, Jessor and colleagues (e.g. Jessor and Jessor 1977; Jessor, Donovan and Costa 1991) have argued that behaviours such as drug use and criminal activity can be regarded as two of a constellation of effects of deviancy. That is to say, they have the same common cause but may not be causally related themselves.

Through large-scale, prospective, longitudinal research over the past 25 years or so, Jessor et al. (1991) have developed their problem behaviour theory to describe the development of deviant behaviour as well as the processes that underlie such deviance and associated behaviours. Basically, this theory argues that the likelihood of an individual acting in ways that may be deemed to oppose socially generated norms is influenced by three social psychological systems; the personality system, the environment system and the behaviour system.
Within each of these systems, there are built-in controls and also built-in encouragement factors for problem behaviours. The balance between these controls and instigation of behaviour within any one individual is what Jessor et al. (1991) refer to as proneness to problem behaviour. Another way to conceptualise this may be in terms of underlying risk factors. Each system (personality, environment and behaviour) has an attached proneness continuum. As such, an individual can be seen to exist at some point along these continua. The combination of where a person is on each continuum defines their psychosocial proneness to deviancy, and also determines how conventional or unconventional a person appears. This conventionality-unconventionality dimension determines whether a person will act in general according to social norms or outside these norms. It is clear from this work that one reason why there may be an association between excessive drug use and criminal activity is not because of a causal relationship per se. Rather, the associations can best be conceptualised as a conglomeration of issues based on an individual’s conventional status which, in turn, is determined by personality factors, environmentally based factors and past behavioural patterns.

Four types of study are relevant for the following discussion:

- Those examining illicit drug use and offending in the overall population.
- Those examining drug use in the offending population.
- Those examining offending amongst the ‘problem drug using’ population.
- Those examining patterns of drug use and crime amongst criminally involved problem drug users.

In the following pages, we gather together the research evidence under these four headings. At the end of the chapter we draw together the threads and discuss possible implications of the available evidence.

Simply in the interests of clarity and manageability, this chapter focuses primarily on an examination of the links between illicit drug use and property crime. It is not concerned with the links excessive drug consumption may have with violent crime. This is not to suggest that there are no such links. There is evidence that specific drugs can facilitate violent behaviour and that others can inhibit it (Anglin and Speckart 1988; Dobinson and Ward 1986; Harrison and Backenheimer 1998; Jarvis
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and Parker 1989). Nor is it concerned with the links between alcohol misuse and crime, significant though these may be.

**Drug use and offending in the general population**

The increasing numbers of individuals who report using illicit substances has heightened interest in drug use and criminal activity in the general population. Evidence from the British Crime Survey suggests that about 34 per cent of the adult population have used illicit substances during their life span and 11 per cent have used during the previous 12 months (Ramsay *et al.* 2001). These figures suggest a current drug using population of about four million in Great Britain. It also seems that this behaviour is largely restricted to younger individuals. Ramsay *et al.* (2001) report that over 50 per cent of young people aged 16-29 years old reported using an illicit substance in the previous 12 months. While the use of cannabis accounts for a significant proportion of these statistics, other drugs such as ecstasy, heroin and cocaine are also reported although in rather low numbers. Miller and Plant (1996) report similar figures for a cohort of 13–15 year olds.

The Youth Lifestyle Survey (YLS) makes broadly similar but slightly higher estimates (Flood-Page *et al.* 2000). The YLS found that about a fifth of young people admitted to some form of offending and that self-reported drug use was the strongest predictor of serious or persistent offending. However, for the majority of young people, there is no persuasive evidence that there is any direct causal linkage between offending and drug use. The association between drug use and offending in the YLS is best understood in terms of a common cause, which leads to two – not totally dissimilar – forms of hedonistic risk-taking. This interpretation concurs with Jessor’s (1991) problem behaviour theory discussed previously.

Other evidence comes from Parker and colleagues’ longitudinal studies that describe evolving patterns of drug use amongst young people in the North West of England (Measham *et al.* 2001; Parker *et al.* 1998). Experience of illicit drugs was widespread in their samples although most participants funded drug use through legitimate means. Respondents made a sharp distinction between acceptable and unacceptable drugs – with heroin and crack in the latter group and for which use of these drugs was low. Only a very small minority were heavily involved in crime, dependent drug use and other forms of delinquency.
Drug use in the known offending population

At any one time, there are very roughly 550,000 people in Britain who are persistently involved in crime, of whom slightly more than 100,000 are high-rate, persistent offenders (Home Office 2001). The majority of these offenders are known to the police. They are much more heavily involved in drug use, and in problematic drug use, than the general population. The largest relevant research study is the NEW-ADAM survey (Bennett 1998, 2000, 2001) in which drug testing and interviewing samples of arrestees was undertaken. The latest sweep of the survey found that 65 per cent of all arrestees tested (N=1,435) were positive for some form of illicit drug, with 24 per cent testing positive for opiates and 15 per cent for cocaine. The average weekly expenditure on drugs, for heroin and crack/cocaine users, was £290. The main sources of illegal income during the last 12 months were property crime (theft, burglary, robbery, handling stolen goods and fraud/deception) followed by drug dealing and undeclared earnings while claiming social security benefits. Heroin and crack/cocaine users had an average annual illegal income of around £15,000 – compared to an average annual illegal income of £9,000 for all interviewed arrestees. Bennett concludes that these findings suggest drug use and, in particular, the use of heroin and crack/cocaine is associated with higher levels of both prevalence and incidence of offending.

However, this study has some methodological limitations. The samples are small, and given that they are drawn from eight cities per sweep, they are unlikely to be representative of the country as a whole. Participation is voluntary and urine test data are not adjusted to take account of the differences in the half-life of drugs. For instance, amphetamines remain testable in urine for two days; opiates, cocaine and benzodiazepines for three days; and cannabis up to a month with chronic users. The results thus need cautious interpretation (see Stimson et al. 1998). Nevertheless, they give a good idea of the ‘order of magnitude’ of the relationships between illicit drug use, dependence and offending in this population.

Other studies have shown that levels of drug use among prisoners tend to be greater than in the general population (Farrell et al. 1998). Surveys of prison inmates indicate that a significant minority of the adult convicted population are dependent drug users prior to imprisonment (Maden et al. 1991; Singleton et al. 1999). Mason et al. (1997) report that 70 per cent of newly remanded individuals reported a history of illicit drug use, while 57 per cent had used illicit substances
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during the 12 months prior to incarceration. In addition Lader and colleagues in their study of psychiatric morbidity among young offenders aged between 16 and 20 years in England and Wales, found that six out of ten had used some drug before entering prison (Lader et al. 2000). Over half were being held for acquisitive crimes, although among women, drug offences were themselves more common (one in five being held for such offences). A large proportion reported a measure of dependency – 52 per cent of sentenced male offenders, 58 per cent of female offenders and 57 per cent of remanded male prisoners. In particular, opiate dependence in the year before coming into prison was reported by 23 per cent of women, 21 per cent of the male remanded and 15 per cent of the male sentenced group.

Recent evidence has emerged to suggest that not only are there a significant number of individuals who were problematic drug users before incarceration but that a proportion began using drugs in prison. For example, Boys et al. (2002) report findings from a large-scale investigation of psychiatric morbidity among 3,142 prisoners. Depending on choice of drug, between 38 (heroin use) and 77 (cannabis use) per cent reported lifetime use. In excess of 60 per cent of those who had ever used heroin or cannabis reported use in prison (64 per cent for cannabis, 62 per cent for heroin). In addition, more than a quarter of these users reported initiation into drug use while in prison.

Whilst many studies have found extensive drug use amongst persistent offenders, by no means everyone has concluded that there is a simple causal relationship, whereby dependent drug use fuels crime. This perspective has been labelled the ‘addiction model’ of the links between drugs and crime. The argument is that frequency of criminal activity is directly proportional to the frequency of drug use and also severity of dependence (Ball and Ross 1991). Further, that criminal activity is just one manifestation of the addictive disease (Hall, Bell and Carless 1993). In other words the greater the levels of use of a drug and its concomitant reflection in dependence levels, the more likely an individual is to take part in criminal activity. Support for this position comes from findings from investigations of opiate addicts that have shown that the frequency of criminal behaviour increases significantly during periods of dependence when compared to periods of abstinence (Ball et al. 1983). Other supportive evidence comes in the form a strong association between criminal activity and length of dependence episode (Ball et al. 1981). These studies also point to the overrepresentation of the proportion of acquisitive crime undertaken by heroin users.

However, Hammersley et al. (1989) examined opioid use amongst a
group of offenders (in this case, people who had been sent to prison), contrasting them to a group of non-prisoners. They found that involvement in property crime predicted opioid use better than opioid use predicted property crime, and suggested that heavy heroin use could be understood as a function partly of the spending power of persistent offenders and partly of the criminal sub-cultures within which heroin use took place. Several researchers have also drawn attention to the ability of many people to use ‘drugs of dependence’ over long periods in controlled ways that do not amount to addiction. Ditton and Hammersley (1994) have argued this in relation to cocaine and Pearson (1987) in relation to heroin (also see Zinberg and Jacobson 1976; Harding et al. 1980).

These studies argue against the adoption of a simple ‘addiction model’ of the links between drugs and crime, whereby dependence inevitably follows the regular use of drugs, and where crime inevitably follows the onset of dependence. However, there is also the need for some realism in taking at face value the way in which a significant proportion of offenders say that they are drug-dependent, say that they commit crime to feed their habit, and are prepared to seek treatment to address their drug problems.

A strong association between drug use and known offending has also emerged from US research. Because the American criminal justice system has been actively targeting drug users for many years as part of the ‘war on drugs’, it is not surprising that such studies find large numbers of drug users amongst those arrested, dealt with by the courts or imprisoned (MacCoun and Reuter 1998).

**Offending amongst the ‘problem drug using’ population**

Extrapolating from the Home Office Addicts Index in 1996, Edmunds et al. (1998, 1999) estimated that problematic drug users in England and Wales number somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 – less than 5 per cent of the four million or so of those who use illicit drugs each year. More recent estimates suggest that Class A problem users may number between 280,000 and half a million (Godfrey et al. 2002). The Scottish population would add around ten per cent to these estimates. In any one year, there may be around 50,000 in contact with treatment services, and several studies have considered the criminal involvement of those in treatment.

Kokkevi et al. (1993) showed that 79 per cent of their sample of heroin
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Dependent individuals had been arrested in the past and 60 per cent had been convicted of a crime. Similarly, Stewart et al. (2000) showed that among a cohort of over 1,000 primarily opiate dependent users, acquisitive crime (in the form of shoplifting) was very common. Over 25,000 offences were reported by these participants in the three months prior to entry into the study. However, the majority of these crimes were accounted for by about ten per cent of respondents. Gossop et al. (1998) also found high levels of criminal behaviour among a large cohort of primarily opiate dependent individuals (Gossop et al. 1998). Sixty-one per cent of the sample reported committing crimes other than drug possession in the three months before they started treatment; when aggregated, they admitted to 71,000 crimes in this period. The most commonly reported offence was shoplifting. A smaller study of 221 methadone reduction and maintenance clients found over four-fifths had been arrested for some criminal offence in the past (Coid et al. 2000).

However, offending prior to treatment had not always been undertaken solely to fund drug taking. Despite this, two-thirds believed there was a strong link between their current offending and their drug habit and half claimed that their current offending served solely to fund their drug habit. Best et al. (2001) examined 100 people entering drug treatment in London. Consistent with Gossop et al. (1998) and Coid et al. (2000), they found slightly more than half of the sample reported funding drug use through acquisitive crime.

Similar findings have emerged from American studies. Research on dependent opiate users have shown that the frequency of criminal behaviour increases significantly during periods of dependence when compared to periods of abstinence (Ball et al. 1983). Other supportive evidence comes in the form a strong association between criminal activity and length of dependence episode (Ball et al. 1981).

In addition, Kaye, Darke and Finlay-Jones (1998) have argued that excessive drug users are not a homogeneous group, and that different sub-groups may exhibit different sorts of links between drug use and criminal behaviour. They studied 400 methadone maintenance patients, some in community-based programmes and others in prison. They were able to distinguish between those for whom drug use preceded criminal behaviour, labelled ‘secondary antisocials’, and those whose criminal behaviour preceded excessive drug use, labelled ‘primary antisocials’. These two groups differed on a number of dimensions. Primary antisocials were found to be younger, and were more likely to be male. They had committed more violent crime and were twice as likely to qualify for a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder.
Patterns of drug use and offending amongst criminally involved problem drug users

There is now quite a significant body of research examining patterns of crime and drug use amongst problem users who are identified as such as they pass through the criminal process. Much of this work has involved evaluations of treatment or referral programmes targeting this group. The studies show that these problem drug users commit large amounts of acquisitive crime. For example, drug using offenders on probation in London were found to be spending an average of £362 per week on drugs prior to arrest, primarily raised by committing acquisitive crime, notably shoplifting. In the month before arrest, over half (51 per cent) of these probationers were using both heroin and crack (Hearnden and Harocopos 2000). The evaluation of a range of ‘arrest referral schemes’ designed to refer offenders to treatment also found similar levels of expenditure on drugs funded through property crimes such as burglary. Again most reported polydrug use with 97 per cent using either opiates or stimulants or both (Edmunds et al. 1999). Turnbull and colleagues described the drug use and offending behaviour of those offenders given Drug Treatment and Testing Orders. Three-fifths of those given the 210 pilot orders had never received any form of help or treatment for their drug use (Turnbull et al. 2000). Of 132 drug-using offenders interviewed, most (120 or 91 per cent) had been using opiates on a daily basis before arrest. They reported committing several types of property crime on a daily basis in order to fund an average expenditure of £400 per week on drugs. Almost half received their treatment and testing order following a conviction for shoplifting.

An important finding to emerge is that the criminal careers of this group usually pre-dated the onset of problematic or dependent drug use. Edmunds et al. (1999), for example, examining a sample drawn from arrest referral clients and probationers found that the average age at which illicit drugs were first used was 15 years. The average at first conviction (for any offence) was 17 years. The average age at which respondents recognised their drug use as problematic was 23 years, a full six years later.

A review of US research by Deitch et al. (2000) concluded that roughly two-thirds of drug using offenders report involvement in crime before the onset of drug use. This simple finding has led some to argue that drug use cannot be regarded as a cause. Obviously it cannot be the sole cause but may act as an amplifier for any deviant tendencies the individual may already possess (Harrison and Backenheimer 1998). Whilst dependent drug use may not have triggered the criminal careers
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of this group, it provides a mechanism by which they are locked into offending, and thus fail to mature out of crime in the way that characterises the majority of young offenders.

There are many studies that suggest that treating the drug problems of this criminally involved population has benefit. Both British and US research suggests that drug treatment can work to reduce offending as well as drug use (Coid et al. 2000; Edmunds et al. 1998 1999; Gossop et al. 1998; Hearnden and Harocopos 1999; Turnbull et al. 2000; also see Belenko 1998 and Lurigio 2000, for American reviews). Much of the research can be criticised on methodological grounds. Most have relied on urine test data for the period covering the treatment programme, few collected reliable outcome measures relating to re-offending, and fewer still have run for periods of time stretching beyond engagement with the programme, comparing treatment groups with comparison samples. Nevertheless, it cumulatively offers quite good evidence that appropriate drug services can help reduce drug use and related crime. The studies also have obvious implications about the links between dependent drug use and persistent offending. If reduced dependence results in reduced offending, this provides strong grounds for the existence of a causal link.

The nature of the drugs–crime relationship

So far, this review points to several conclusions about the links between drugs and crime in Britain:

- Around four million people use illicit drugs each year.
- Most illicit drug use is relatively controlled ‘recreational’ use of cannabis and ecstasy.
- People who try illicit drugs are more likely than others to commit other forms of law breaking.
- There is no persuasive evidence of any causal linkage between drug use and property crime for the vast majority of this group.
- A very small proportion of users – less than five per cent of the total – have chaotic lifestyles involving dependent use of heroin, crack/cocaine and other drugs.
- A proportion of this group – perhaps around 100,000 people – finance their use through crime.
The majority of those who steal to buy drugs were involved in crime before their drug use became a problem for them. This group of criminally involved problem users commit very large amounts of shoplifting, burglary and other crime to finance drug purchases. If appropriate drug treatment is given to this group, they reduce their offending levels.

There are different explanations for the association between illicit drug use and crime for different groups of drug users. In considering the links, it is essential to be specific about these different groups. The literature suggests that ‘lifestyle’ and ‘sub-cultural’ factors are important in explaining why those who try illicit drugs are also more likely than others to get involved in other forms of law-breaking. The search for novelty and excitement, and enjoyment of the rewards of risk-taking, are defining aspects of youth culture. It is hardly a surprise that large minorities of the population engage in the – relatively controlled – risks of both recreational drug use and minor crime at some stage of their adolescence and young adulthood.

For those individuals whose offending (and drug use) is more persistent and less controlled, other explanatory factors also need to be called into play. In the first place, chaotic drug users and persistent offenders – in contrast to controlled drug users and occasional petty offenders – have limited social and economic resources, and limited exposure to legitimate ‘life opportunities’ (see e.g. Harrison 1992; MacGregor 2000). The majority are from deprived backgrounds, with inconsistent parenting, poor access to housing and health care, low educational attainment and limited employment prospects. Given the scale of participation in controlled drug use, there is no reason to expect an obvious association with social exclusion. Chaotic or dependent use, by contrast, shares that constellation of risk factors that also predict heavy involvement in crime and exposure to many forms of social exclusion.

It has been argued that these risk factors predispose people both to uncontrolled drug use and to involvement in persistent offending. For instance, Walters (1998) and De Li Periu and MacKenzie (2000) have discussed how reciprocal causal relationships can begin to emerge, such that criminal involvement both facilitates and maintains drug use, and drug use maintains involvement in crime. Whilst some researchers (e.g. McBride and McCoy 1982) have argued for sub-cultural explanations of the drugs-crime link, the accounts of the offenders themselves are more
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consistent with a pathological perspective, where dependence provides
the motive for acquisitive offending.

A number of authors have argued that undertaking criminal activities
over time leads to drug use because of the their associations with deviant
sub-cultures (Bean and Wilkinson 1988; McBride and McCoy 1982). In
other words, one’s involvement with criminal activities or excessive
substance use will increase the likelihood of being drawn into a deviant
sub-culture. This sub-culture acts to reinforce any form of deviant
behaviour of which criminal behaviour and excessive drug use are two
examples. As such, the sub-culture acts as a latent moderator of the
relationship between crime and drug use (Bean and Wilkinson 1988).
However, while there is empirical evidence to support this proposition
(e.g. Bean and Wilkinson 1988), these same studies also indicate a more
or less equal proportion of participants for whom drug use preceded
criminal behaviour.

Studies of the impact of drug treatment also support this view. For
instance, when users enter methadone maintenance, their criminal
activity is in general decreased (Bell, Hall and Byth 1992; Ward, Mattick
and Hall 1994). Those with continued criminal involvement tend to be
also continuing their illicit drug use (Patterson, Lennings and Davey
2000) or else, show high scores on an antisocial personality inventory
(Bovasso, Alterman, Cacciola and Rutherford 2002).

Over the past decade or so, successive political authorities have
claimed a ‘war on drugs’ and as such that drug-related crime is one of
the worst consequences of drug use. This chapter has presented
theoretical and research evidence that calls into question this simple
‘addiction model’ of the relationship between drugs and crime whereby
illicit drug use leads inexorably to dependence and thence to crime. The
relationships are actually more complex. The vast majority of illicit drug
users are, and remain, in control of their use. There is a small minority of
illicit drug users who are dependent in their use and also chaotic in their
lifestyles (Kaye et al. 1998). There is a strong probability that these will
finance their drug use through property crime. The inter-relationships
between illicit drug use, problematic drug use and persistent offending
are set out schematically in Figure 8.1. This is intended to be illustrative
rather than precise.

It makes sense to think of chaotic or dependent drug use and
persistent offending sharing causal roots, but it is also important to
understand how, once established, the two behaviours can be mutually
sustaining. Drug dependence tends to amplify the offending rates of
people whose circumstances may predispose them to becoming
persistent offenders. There are important policy implications here. It
makes excellent sense to provide treatment services for drug-dependent offenders. If successful, it should substantially reduce levels of crime. Indeed we have already seen some success from methadone programmes in this way (e.g. Strang et al. 2000). However, to maintain the lifestyle changes, which treatment may enable, it will also be necessary to address the factors that drew this group into persistent offending in the first place.

References

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