

Relationship between drug use and crime



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Reviewing empirical research examining the relationship between drug use and crime. Undeniably, there is a strong association between illicit drug use and criminal activity, which appears to be consistent across much of the empirical literature with regard to the relationship between drug use and crime. (Moore, T. et. al, 2007, p. 369) However, the relationship between drug use and crime is complex and dynamic, often associated with entrenched social and health problems such as unemployment, socio economic inequality, and poor mental health. Furthermore, the complexity of the relationship further develops with the links being neither simple or linear, nor universal across offending. (Raskin White & Gorman, 2002)

Goode argues that drugs and crime are intimately related in the public mind and suggest currently, that drugs and crime are connected in a very specific way and whether their connection bears directly on a specific issue of whether or not property crime would decline under decriminalisation of certain illicit substances. (1997).

The issue that comes to the fore is that there is sometimes a tendency in the literature, and policy and public debate, to over simplify and over-draw the links between these two phenomena. This is supported in the work of Makkai (2002) whereby the argument that much of the Australian discussion on illicit drugs and crime ' is ill defined, simplistic, and lacking in evidence' where an assumption that there is a causal relationship between drug use and crime is made without sufficient supporting evidence. (p. 113) Furthermore, Raskin White and Gorman also supports the view of Makkai stating, policy makers assume that an important connection between drugs and crime exist, however the precise nature of the connection remains elusive.

There is clear evidence in literature suggesting and supporting that drug use and crime tend to be associated or co-existing in the same populations.

Within Australian literature this evidence is contained within the studies of Kevin, 1999; Loxley, 2001; Makkai, 1999 and Makkai, 2001.

Interestingly, when reviewing literature examining the drugs and crime nexus, the body of research pertaining to offending/drug use careers and initiation into drug use provide useful insight into the relationship. Pudney (2002); Best et al (2001a) argue that the onset of criminal behaviour generally precedes the onset of initial and/or regular drug use. This assertion is demonstrated empirically whereby 17 per cent of prisoners reported illicit drug use prior to offending, 29 per cent report that crime and drug use occurred at the same age, but offending before the commencement of illicit drug use was reported at 54 per cent. These results that generally the lifetime drug-using/ criminal career begins with the onset of offending, then illicit drug use, with continuing cycle of regular offending and regular drug use (Makkai & Payne, 2003a, p10). Moreover, this bolsters the relationship between drug use and crime.

The aim of this paper is to review the literature regarding the relationship between drug use and crime, particularly the theoretical models and the empirical evidence surrounding the three main theories in order to find gaps in the research and to identify future trends and research parameters regarding the relationship between drugs and crime. The three main theories to be examined is the assertion that substance use leads to crime, crime leads to substance use and that crime and drug use have common causes.

As stated during the introduction the relationship between drugs and crime is dynamic and complex. There are a variety of ways into and out of the drug offending nexus which vary between individuals and according to a range of factors. For example, Scott et al 2001 state the links between drugs and crime can vary according to factors such as age (p. 161), or sex as argued by Mazerolle (2008); Johnson (2004); Haas & Peters (2000), or the order of introduction as to whether drug use or offending came first (Farabee et al, 2001). Furthermore, according to Scott et al 2001, that serious illicit drug use contributes to continuity in serious crime, and vice versa, concluding that crime affects drug use and drug use affects crime (p. 270) This argument is supported by both Best et al, 2001a, p161 and Welte et al, 2001, p436 who suggest a two way relationship between drug use and offending.

Theories concerning the relationship between drug use and crime

Substance use leads to crime

Goldstein, considered the first to originally develop the theory between the relationship of drugs and crime, suggested three separate explanations of how the link occurs. Goldstein asserts that psychopharmacological, economic motivation and a systemic theory explain the drugs and crime nexus. (1985) The first explanation and described as the psychopharmacological theory defines, that the short or long term use of certain drugs produces physical effects which lead to offending behaviour. This theory has been applied to both property and violent crime, but it is mainly associated with violent offending and attributes acute or chronic intoxication or the effects of drug withdrawal as contributing factors towards criminal behaviour.

This psychopharmacological theory gains support in research conducted by Lo & Stephens (2002) proposing that offenders were (or claimed to be) intoxicated with illicit drugs at the time of the offence (p 125). Further research within Australia also suggest within Drug Use Monitoring Australia (DUMA) data that 34 percent of police detainees claimed to be under the influence of an illicit drug when they committed the offence, furthermore 14 percent claimed to be under the influence of alcohol. Further support is provided to Goldstein's initial theory in Indermaur's (1995, p 156) Western Australian study of robbery that found 52.8 per cent of offenders reported being under the influence of illicit drugs at the time of offending and 5.7 per cent were experiencing the effects of withdrawal.

The objective of the Drug Use Careers of Offenders (DUCO) project is to further understand the drug use and criminal histories of incarcerated offenders and to contribute to the empirical evidence on the link between drug use and crime. In the example of the DUCO study, questions regarding whether the offender was intoxicated and whether the offender committed the offence because they were intoxicated were asked. The study found that 24 per cent of prisoners reported they were intoxicated with illicit drugs, 17 per cent with both illicit substances and alcohol, and 21 per cent just with alcohol. However, these proportions more than halved when examining whether the crimes could be asserted to be causally attributed to intoxication, with 10 per cent for illicit drugs, 8 per cent for both and 9 per cent for alcohol only (Adams et al, 2008; Makkai & Payne, 2003a, p16).

Although research asserts that there is some significance of the psychopharmacological theory in explaining the link between drugs and

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crime, ambivalence surrounds the conclusion. For example, the Australasian Centre for Policing Research (ACPR, 2001, p15 - 16) conclude that it is probable that intoxication by either drugs and/or alcohol plays a role in the dynamics of the drugs and crime nexus, but that it should not be overestimated. Additionally, Raskin White & Gorman (2000 p. 185); MacCoun et. al (2001, p. 5) argue that the psychopharmacological theory explains little in terms of the relationship between drugs and crime.

The second theory to explain the drugs and crime nexus is termed the 'economic compulsive' and suggests that crime is commissioned in order to finance a drug habit. Makkai, 2002b argues that this theory primarily relates to property crimes, however may also relate to violent crime such as robbery where violence may be used during the commission of a property crime (p111 - 113). Support for this theory is derived by the research within Australia of Maher et al whereby high proportions of drug users report commit crime and in particular property offences to aid in paying for a drug habit (2002). These findings also concurs with Best et al, 2001a whose finding suggested that the most typical property crime was that of shoplifting (48 per cent of respondents), followed by burglary (28 per cent) then unarmed street robbery such as bag snatches and muggings (13 per cent). Furthermore, empirical studies examining the drugs and crime nexus such as Collins, 1999 and Nelson et al, 2002 asserts the tendency that burglary is the offence associated most with financing drug use, however not as high as the income derived from offenders involved in drug selling. (Weatherburn et al, 2003, p193). Pritchard & Payne cite that the main reasons for burglary are to support a drug habit (44 per cent of

respondents), to obtain money or goods (42 per cent) and money was needed as a result of unemployment (41 per cent) 2005, p 46.

In conclusion and although strong evidence has been provided in support of the theory, economic motivation cannot provide a complete explanation of the link between drugs and crime, however does contribute and explain why crime accelerates as addiction increases (ACPR, 2001, p. 16). Furthermore, Bennett & Holloway (2005); Raskin White & Gorman (2001) identifies gaps in the research where there is a need to distinguish between different categories of drug users when examining the relationship between drugs and crime.

Systemic theory as examined by Goldstein suggest the engagement within drug market activities results in offending, that is, drug related crime results from negative interactions in the illegal drug market, where it is argued that distribution and use of illicit drugs are inherently connected to the commission of crime, with particular reference to crimes of violence (Raskin White & Gorman, 2000, p191)

Reiss & Roth argues that systemic crime is associated with drug distribution through organisational crime, transaction related crime and third party related crime. Although there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting a strong connection between drugs and crime, however as Bean (2002) asserts, research on organised crime outside the United States is limited and states that it does not directly discuss the relationship between organised crime and drugs and, furthermore the literature available could be classed as journalistic in nature rather than empirical research. On the other hand,

Findlay states without drug trafficking, dealing and use being illegal, profit would not be assured (1999, p. 26), which in turn suggest that drug related crime is an artefact of law and policy (McBride et al, 2001, p5).

Crime leads to substance use

The second proposed theory is that offenders are more likely to become illegal drug users. Thus, individuals who are deviant are more likely to be involved or choose social situations where drug use condoned or encouraged. Raskin White & Gorman state that this theory may arise when deviant individuals use drugs to self medicate or to provide an excuse to commit deviant or criminal acts (2000, p174.) or that income from criminal acts providing additional income enables the offender to purchase drugs, contrasting the previous theory of drugs compelling the offender to commit a crime. In short, both overarching theories receive support and even reinforce each other in the sense that crime may lead to drug use and drug use may lead to more crime.

Crime and drug use have common causes

The third theory suggests that crime and drug use are not directly causally related to each other, however are related due to sharing other common causes in terms of individual level, interpersonal level, environmental and situational factors. Pudney states that social, economic and family circumstances appear to be influences on young people's risk of becoming involved in both crime and drug use (2002, p28)

A range of risk factors (which may increase the likelihood of an offence occurring) and protective factors (which reduce the impact of an unavoidable negative event) are described within this theory where Weatherburn et al
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simply state that where risk factors outweigh protective factors, the greater the likelihood of becoming involved in drugs and/or crime (2000 p 49 -53) and there is considerable overlap and relationship between illicit drug use and criminality (ACPR, 2001, p28).

After describing the drugs and crime association within this literature review it is possible to conclude and identify recommendations for further research. No one individual theory can adequately explain the drugs and crime nexus in every instance, furthermore the relationship between drugs and crime is very complex, whereby the conclusions researched on this topic vary and depend on which area the researcher examines and interprets the data. Furthermore, consideration to all theories is prudent in order to develop a true assessment of this relationship.

Illicit drug use and crime are mutually reinforcing where both can precede the other, and be interrelated with a broad range of other variables, however there is no required criteria or necessary causal links between the relationship. That is, most drug users do not engage in criminality and there is an absence of evidence suggesting that drug use in and of itself causes criminality, and that criminality in and of itself forces people into drug use. With this said, drugs are important within the context of violence and property crime (MacCoun et al, 2001, p2), where the drug using offending population commit a disproportionate amount of crime.

Although it can be said that the drugs and crime nexus is intimate, further research is necessary to assist in further defining and understanding the links, where the methods of disaggregation or examining specific areas may

prove beneficial and give greater clarity such as, the relationship between crime and particular kinds of drugs, connecting empirical findings to drugs and crime theories, and researching the casual connection between drugs and crime. Finally, an area of interest to the writer to identify gaps in the research pertaining to the drugs and crime nexus is drug use in prison.

This paper reviewed a number of studies in reference to the relationship between drugs and crime in an effort to illustrate the complexity of the connection. After examining the link the paper discussed three theoretical models which endeavour to explain the relationship; the psychopharmacological link; the economic-compulsive link; and the systemic link. Drug user's dependency on expensive drugs where affordability is lacking demonstrates the closest link between drugs and crime; however even with this example the relationship is not automatic due to crime not being an inevitable consequence of drug use. Finally, involvement in crime is also dependent on economic, social and cultural contexts, not simply drug use.