

# Criminology essays - drug crime assessment



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## **A Critical Assessment of the Supposed Relationship Between Drug Use and Crime.**

### **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom and many other countries statistics show that there is a significant relationship between recreational drug use and crime (Bean, 2004). What is unclear, however, is the nature of the relationship between drug use and crime and this has resulted in much discussion. In particular the relationship between crime and the use of illegal drugs, such as heroin and cocaine has been a major area of research and debate. Therefore, this report will concentrate on the link between illicit drug use and crime. The definition of drug-related crime excludes violations of drug laws and includes acts of crimes that are committed by people who are using drugs or in the course of buying drugs or selling (Stevens, 2005). Several theories have been developed which attempt to establish what the relationship is between drug use and crime and these will be discussed.

### **Drug use leads to crime**

This idea is based on the notion that drug use leads to and crime. Goldstien (1985) proposed the relationship between violent crime and drug use can be classified into three categories. Firstly, psycho-pharmacological i. e., the physical properties of the drug affect the user's mind in a way that leads to violent behaviour. Secondly, systemic i. e., violent behaviour is the normal and expected behaviour of the drug scene culture. Finally, economic-compulsive i. e., the addictive nature of the drug leads the user to engage in violent behaviour to steal items in order to resell them to fund their drug

habit. This is probably the most widely accepted link between drug use and crime (Stevens, 2005).

Research used to support that drug use leads to crime relies on the assumption that a lot of crime is committed by people who are drug users. The research invariably falls into two types. Firstly, offenders who have been caught are tested for drug use. This scheme, called The Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) programme, has been implemented in England and Wales and in at least eight other countries (Stevens et al, 2005). The findings of ADAM show that a high proportion of people arrested tested positive for illegal drugs. For example, in 1998/9, 740 people arrested in England and Wales were tested for drug use and 69% of them tested positive, (Taylor, 2002). In addition, Ahmad and Mwenda (2004) state that 113, 500 people in 2002 were dealt with by means of a caution or conviction for drug use.

The second line of evidence to support the notion that drug use leads to crime is obtained from 'treatment' studies. These studies assess the criminal activity of drug users who are undergoing treatment for their drug-use problem. For example, Best et al (2001) interviewed 100 dependent drug users who were receiving treatment and found 56% of the drug users engaged in acquisition crime.

Both the above methods of research have been heavily criticised. Bean (2004), for example, points out that not all offenders use illicit drugs or are dependent on drugs. Also, not all dependent offenders commit crime. In addition, measures used to assess drug use can produce misleading results. One example is that urinalysis compares different drugs that are detectable

in the urine for different lengths of time and this could bias the results obtained from such studies.

Treatment studies have been criticised because they rely on self-assessment of offenders. This runs the risk of offenders exaggerating or minimising their use of drugs. In addition, treatment studies such as Best et al (2001) have failed to establish the sequence of the two events of drug use and crime. Knowing whether individuals committed crime before or after they started being involved in drug use is crucial in helping to establish whether drug use leads to crime. Allen (2005) addressed this issue by using sequence studies. Sequencing studies set out to establish the pattern of drug use and crime behaviour in the individuals receiving treatment for drug use. Allen (2005) found that out of a sample of 26 individuals that 23 had been arrested for criminal offending before using drugs and therefore there was no evidence that drug use leads to crime. Also, in another study Nurco (1987) found that criminals sometimes continue to commit crime after they have stopped using drugs.

Allen (2005) also investigated why people became drug dependent. It was found that the development of dependency was partly because of both the normality of the crime and the use of drugs and partly because of important traumatic events that occurred in their lives, such as sexual abuse or bereavement. It was also found that many drug addicts attempted to successfully manage their drug habit without resorting to crime, such as gaining money by begging. Moreover, when they resorted to crime it was likely to be non-personal crimes such as shoplifting. In Allen's view people

exist within subcultures in which crime is acceptable and then at critical moments in their lives they become dependent on drugs.

If drug use leads to crime then it has important implications because reducing drug use would in turn reduce the level of crime. It is also an extremely popular idea and in 2002 the UK government underlined their view that drug use does indeed lead to crime. The government implemented the Street Crime Initiative, which included making drug treatment available within 24 hours for drug users who were arrested for street crime offences. The assumption was that treating offenders for their drug problem would break the link between drug use and street crime and therefore stop the cycle of re-offending. However, in light of the discussed criticisms the effectiveness of such crime prevention is highly questionable.

### **Crime leads to drug use**

Just as there are views that drug use leads to crime there is also a view that crime leads to drug use. If such a relationship exists then this would also have important implications in the development of any policies: if crime leads to drug use then reducing drug use would not reduce crime, whereas reducing crime would reduce drug use.

Three models exist to support that crime leads to drug use (Bean, 2004). Firstly, there is the subcultural theory, which suggests that individuals who are involved in criminal subcultures are more likely to participate in criminal and antisocial behaviour including drug use. Secondly, situational control theory suggests that crime allows the promotion of unrestricted conduct. Thirdly, self-medication suggests that individuals can have an underlying

problem that is responsible for their criminal actions so therefore they take drugs to deal with the problem.

The theory that crime leads to drug use, as with the view that drug use leads to crime, appears too simplistic. The evidence reviewed so far does not support the unidirectional causal relationship between drug use and crime. This has led to the development of an alternative theory that views the link between drug use and crime as a complex interaction between many causal events.

### **The causal web theory**

The causal web view rejects the idea that crime leads to drug use and vice versa. Instead, the theory views the relationship between drug use and crime to be interconnected or both elements are affected by alternative variables.

Bean (2004) suggests there are four types of theory related to the causal web model. Firstly, common origin theory suggests that drug use and crime develop from the same source, such as anti-social syndrome (Farrington 1997). Secondly, the reciprocal model where the relationship between drug use and crime are viewed as bi-directional i. e., both are dependent on each other and therefore mutually reinforced. Thirdly, the spurious or co-morbidity model that posits that drug use and crime occur in unison but this is by chance. Lastly, the policy model suggests that the link between drug use and crime is a result of the impact of the criminal justice policy.

Many studies have failed to show any general link between drugs and crime (see da Agra, 2002, Byquist & Olsen 1998). This supports the notion that there is a complex system of interactions between drugs and crime. The <https://assignbuster.com/criminology-essays-drug-crime-assessment/>

causal web theory, therefore, seems the best way to view the relationship between drugs and crime. The causal web theory recognises that many people who commit crime do use drugs but views the relationship between the two as extremely complex.

#### **Conclusion**

Recent findings suggest that theories supporting a unidirectional causal relationship between drug use and crime are over-simplistic. In contrast, the evidence strongly suggests that the relationship between drug use and crime is a complex one involving many interactions. This complexity must be considered if policies aimed at reducing drug-related crime are to be implemented effectively. Policies that only focus on one part of the drug-crime link are unlikely to succeed if another part is ignored. Future research is essential in teasing out the specific interactions between the relationship of drug use and crime and this will help in the development of effective strategies to deal with the issue.

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