

The drug crime relationship

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There is no question that drugs and crime are related, however difficulty stands when trying to establish a causal connection between the two. According to Ronald Akers, ' compared to the abstaining teenager, the drinking, smoking and drug taking teen is much more likely to be getting into fights, stealing, hurting other people and committing other delinquencies' (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

At a surface level, drugs and crime are linked as it is a criminal offence to possess certain substances unlawfully, however when looking deeper, where drugs are said to cause, influence or be associated with offending behaviour the subject becomes quite unclear. Three major models exist that examine the drugs-crime link and will be discussed thoroughly throughout this essay. Firstly is the model that suggests drug use leads to crime and offending behaviour.

It offers the explanation that drug-users are enslaved, or behaving in ways which satisfy the craving which very often leads to participating in criminal behaviour. A second model explains that crime leads to drug use, and the third that drug use and crimes have a common aetiology. Throughout this essay these models will be examined deeply in order to try and best understand the relationship between drug use and offending behaviour. The idea that drug use leads to crime is by far the most believed and most popular idea out of the three.

The reasons for this may lie in its heavy belief from the media and the government. It is sometimes represented as a direct causal effect and sometimes as just an association. There does stand much evidence in support of this theory, however no research identifies a direct causal link

which will be noted later. One study carried out in this field gave the police power to perform drug tests on detainees in police custody and gave the courts the power to order the drug testing of offenders under the supervision of the probation service.

In total they carried out a collective of 1, 835 tests and found positive results in 63% of those tested in London, 58% of those tested in Nottingham and 47% of those tested in Strafford and Cannock. For those on probation over half tested positive (Mallender et al. 2002, cited in Bean 2008). While support stands for this view, variations exist in the way drug use is said to cause crime.

Three broad categories exist, firstly the psychopharmacological explanations, secondly the economic explanations and thirdly the drug-lifestyle explanation. Firstly the psychopharmacological explanations consider the effects of the drug chemicals have upon the human organism and what the behavioural outcomes may be. For example, the psychopharmacological model says that drugs cause violence because of their direct effects, as an effect users become impatient, irritable, energetic and irrational often leading to criminal behaviour.

Goldstein (1985) believes the psychopharmacological model to be a direct effect model and argues that ‘ some individuals, as a result of short or long term ingestion of specific substances, may become excitable, irrational, and may exhibit violent behaviour’. Brochu (2001) claims that many drugs ‘ act on specific areas of the nervous system, including the frontal lobe and the limbic system, where the centres of aggressiveness and impulsiveness are located’ (Bennett and Holloway).

While these are considered to be direct and instantaneous effects of drug use, in practice the psychopharmacological effects of drugs on crime are expected to function indirectly. Parker and Auerhahn (1998) stress from their research the overwhelming importance of the context in the relationship between substance use and violent behaviour, and as MacCoun et al (2002) claim ' it may be that no drug is sufficient to produce aggression in isolation from psychological and situational moderators. ' (Bennett and Holloway).

The second variation on how ' drugs cause crime' is the economic explanation. This is very often referred to as the economic necessity argument which simply says drug users will commit crime for economic benefit in order to fund their drug addiction. Crimes associated with this explanation are most commonly property crime including theft, shoplifting, burglary and fraud; however there are many links with violent crimes. One explanation for this is that habitual drug users face problems raising cash and therefore prefer to perform street robberies. Baumer et al. 1998) argues that this type of robbery draws cash directly and is more easily perpetrated during the hours of darkness when the streets are less crowded. Cash carries the advantage of being easily concealed and does not have to be exchanged at a discount unlike stolen property. (Bennett and Holloway). The third variation is the drug-lifestyle explanation. The theory focuses in particular, on the relationship between drug-using lifestyles and violence. It offers the explanation that drug abusers are living within a community which is more likely to be a violent one when compared to a drug free community.

The drug using community is one that is notoriously violent, especially when considering punishments for failing to pay debts, territory disputes and

selling adulterated drugs. Other ideas focusing on lifestyle but not on violence consider that drug users often do not participate in the legitimate economy and therefore the likelihood of them becoming involved in criminal activity is increased, and also they would be exposed to situations that encourage crime. (Bennett and Holloway).

When considering the idea that crime leads to drug use, the research is scarce by comparison. If crime leads to drugs use there will be no reduction in criminality even with the successful treatment of the drugs problem. If crime leads to drug use then treatment should be directed at reducing the criminality, and the drug problem will be correspondingly reduced (Hammersley et al. 1989, cited in Bean p. 39). Researchers are heavily interested in finding what came first; the drug problem or criminality?

Early British studies found that about 50% of heroin addicts were antecedently delinquent but, of course, 50% were not (Bean 1971). However, some researchers are sure they know the truth. Korf et al. (1998) believe that there is empirical support for thinking prior criminal involvement increases one's chance of getting into drugs, claiming ' many current addicts have set out on a criminal path at an early age and before their first dose of heroin. These pre-drug criminals turn out to be the group most likely to generate their income from property crime. ' (Bean p. 9) As noted, there doesn't stand as much research into this field as the previous (drug use leads to crime) however, the theories which do stand can be divided again roughly into the three same categories, psychopharmacological explanations, economic explanations and criminal lifestyle explanations. Explaining this idea through psychopharmacological means, researches such as Menard et al (2001)

claim that criminals use drugs as a form of chemical recreation to celebrate successful crimes, pretty much in the same way people use alcohol to celebrate a special occasion, (Bennett and Holloway, p. 6). In another way according to the psychopharmacological model, people who have planned crime might turn to drugs to enable themselves to carry out the planned actions. It is possible therefore to say that crime causes drug use because without the drug it is possible the crime wouldn't have occurred. The economic perspective explanation simply says crime causes drug use through crimes resulting in surplus cash which enable the offenders to buy drugs, funds which would not be available were it not for criminal activity (Tim Newburn). The criminal lifestyle explanations suggest that a criminal lifestyle tends to involve drug use either via sub-cultural values, through available opportunities or as a result of self-medication. Criminal activity in subcultures provides 'the content, the reference group and the definitions of a situation that are conclusive to the subsequent involvement in drugs' (White 1990: 223, Bean p. 39).

Evidence for this comes from a small number of studies, quoted by White, where she says the individual is placed in an environment which is supportive of drug use, and it is the desire for sub-cultural status rather than a need for a drug which leads to the individual committing crimes. The available opportunities idea goes hand in hand with the situational crime theory, which states the individual makes a rational choice, essentially weighing up the pros and cons of their actions. If the pros outweigh the cons then the person will display offending behaviour.

Supporters of situational crime prevention would say that crime leads to drug taking, and therefore by modifying crime hotspots and the environment, and by dealing with characteristics and location of suitable targets, drug taking can be reduced. The Third, that drug use and crimes have a common aetiology. This theory rejects strongly the simple causal explanation that drugs use leads to crime or the other, crime leads to drug use claiming the relationship to be far more complex than this.

Rather, this suggests a common cause between the two, enforcing arguments that there are other factors involved which help explain both forms of behaviour. ' Such factors may take various forms including aspects of personality or temperament, aspects of a person's interpersonal social world (family, friends, peers) or some feature of the social environment in which they live' (Newburn). These common factors can be grouped into three categories – psychological, social and environmental.

Psychological factors can be related to a person's genetics or temperament character. Many explanations focus on the role of psychological factors as distal causes, which are those factors operating in the past that predispose people to act in certain ways. The social factors focus on social relationships and the way in which these may have an effect on crime and drug use. Peer pressure is said to be a major sway on a person's behaviour with regard to crime and illicit drug use. As White (1990) concludes in Bennet and Holloway (2005) ' Peer group influences are the best predictors of delinquency and drug use. ' With regards to the environmental explanation, factors within the environment are said to play a role in the drug-crime link. The social disorganization theory developed by Shaw and McKay in 1942 was applied to

help try and best explain the drug – crime link in 2000 by White and Gorman, who argue that rates of violence and exposure to drugs was greatest in less affluent areas, densely populated areas, racially segregated areas and those that are composed of a transient population.

A rather sociological version of the common cause idea is a variation of the sub-cultural theory which sees drug use as a learned behaviour. Behavioural norms are learned from generation to generation and become internalised, which lead individuals within particular families or social groups to behave in the same manner with the same patterns of offending. To conclude, this essay has highlighted much evidence to suggest that drug use leads to crime, and the opposite, that crime leads to drug use.

People who try illicit drugs are more likely to display offending behaviour than others; however there is no persuasive research evidence of a causal link between drug use and offending within the majority of drug users. Much of the research provides conflicting explanations of the topic, however there does stand some common ground. There are no inconsistencies in the idea that drug use might sometimes cause crime and crime may sometimes cause drug use.

However, as a general rule, research provides evidence sufficient to establish an association as appose to a direct causal link. This essay has also looked at the idea of a common cause or common aetiology between the relationship between drug use and offending behaviour, which is the idea that other factors such as personality, temperament, family or friends influences play a part in an individual's lifestyle and choices.