



The nature of relationship between drugs and crime

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A Prolific and Other Priority Offenders (PPO) Strategy was launched by the UK Government in April 2004. This strategy made special provisions for the drug treatment and rehabilitation of prolific offenders as a key element of their management with the aim of reducing crime and disorder in the UK. To a certain extent, the Prolific and Other Priority Offenders (PPO) Strategy reflects recognition of a strong association between illicit drug use and criminal behaviour.

For practitioners who deal with drugs and crime on a daily basis, the reality of the drugs-crime link is certain. Numerous researchers are confirming what practitioners believe, and documenting the relationship between drugs and crime. Many public policies and strategies were developed on the basis of this knowledge. But, as Brownstein and Crossland (2003:1) pointed out, although researchers and practitioners alike know the relationship exists, the nature of that relationship continues to elude them. There is no lack of theories. The direct cause model of the drug-crime relationship has attracted numerous supporters because it states simply that either drug use leads to crime or crime leads to drug use. The simplicity of this statement was so tempting, that many policies and programmes have been developed on the basis of the direct cause model. Both, the American Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Programme - ADAM and the NEW-ADAM research programme in the UK have demonstrated year after year that among people apprehended and charged with a crime, a large proportion uses drugs. The NEW-ADAM programme of research also found that Heroin and Crack Cocaine users were more likely to commit acquisitive crimes, particularly shoplifting, than any other offences (Holloway and Bennet, 2004). Similar findings on the strength of the relationship between Heroin use and certain types of acquisitive crime have also been produced by Bennet (1998), Collins et al (1985), Nurco et al. (1985), McBride and McCoy (1982), Ball et al. (1981), McBride (1976), Inciardi and Chambers (1972) and Eckerman (1971).

However, as Goode (1997:119) has cautioned, even the fact that drugs and crime are frequently found together or correlated does not demonstrate their causal connection. In a recent review of literature, sociologists White and Gorman (2000) definitively dismissed the direct causal model and concluded instead that the drugs-crime link is best explained by the common cause model, in which any association of drugs and crime has a cluster of causes. Researchers who support the common cause model believe that to adequately understand the relationship between drugs and crime requires attention to many social, cultural, chemical and biological issues. A significant implication of this model for policy and practice is that any

response to drugs and crime that works in one set of circumstances may not work in another. For researchers, it means that the research agenda is endless.

This article provides a brief overview of the existing research into the links between drugs and crime in general, and acquisitive crime in particular. It also covers a General Theory of Crime that combines classical (rational choice) theory of crime with a positivist (control) theory of deviant behaviour, and offender-oriented crime prevention perspectives.

To approach the subject of this article, one should, first of all, identify the meaning of the key terms such as 'drug', 'problem drug user/misuser', 'drug-related crime' and 'acquisitive crime'.

For the purpose of this article the terminology of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD: 1982, 1988) was used to define 'problem drug user/misuser' as anyone who experiences social, psychological, physical or legal problems related to intoxication and/or excessive consumption and/or dependence as a consequence of his/her own use of drugs or other chemical substances. It is important to mention that the above definition of problem drug users includes a wider group than just dependent users. As Strang et al (1993) pointed out, dependent misuse and problem misuse are not necessarily the same thing: non-dependent use can create all sorts of problems and some dependent misusers cope with their dependency without serious problems. Therefore, this research will be concerned with dependent users whose dependency caused them problems, and those users who – even though non-dependent – get involved in the criminal justice process as a result of problems related to their drug use.

A 'drug' is defined for the purpose of this article as any substance that changes the way in which the mind and body works. This definition incorporates illegal drugs (i.e. heroin, cannabis, cocaine, LSD, amphetamines) as well as legal drugs (i.e. alcohol, tobacco, caffeine), over-the-counter and prescription medicines (i.e. Paracetamol, tranquillisers, Prozac) and solvents. Strict distinguishing between licit and illicit drugs for the purpose of crime reduction can be unhelpful because many offenders have problems with both hard drugs and alcohol.

There are three principal ways in which the relationship between drug use and other forms of offending is believed to work: there are crimes that are related to the drug trade (for example, the use of violence to gain and maintain control of drug markets); there are offences that are drug induced (the effects of some drugs make it more likely that people will commit certain kinds of offences; for example, there is a link between crack cocaine and violent offending); and there are offences that are believed to be drug-related (for example, acquisitive crime), in the sense that the proceeds are spent on drugs (Roberts, 2003:4). The last (third) kind of relationship between drugs and acquisitive crime will be examined for the purpose of this research.

An 'acquisitive crime' describes offences where the perpetrator derives material gain from the crime. This encompasses crime types such as burglary, robbery, theft (including shoplifting), vehicle crime, fraud and counterfeiting. It is important to mention that terms 'property crime' and 'acquisitive crime' used as completely interchangeable by some academics (Nicholas et al., 2005; Dodd et al., 2004; Simmons and Dodd, 2003; Simmons et al., 2002). However, not

all crimes committed against property are acquisitive crimes. For example, such property crimes as unauthorised taking of vehicles (without intent to permanently deprive the owner – this will typically include ‘joyriding’ where the car is later discovered), criminal damage and arson (with the exception of cases of insurance fraud) could not be classified as acquisitive crimes. Therefore, for the purpose of this research the terms ‘property crime’ and ‘acquisitive crime’ were used to encompass crime types such as burglary, robbery, theft of, and from, vehicle, other theft (including shoplifting) and fraud.

The strong association between illicit drug use and criminal behaviour has been widely acknowledged by academics and practitioners for many years. According to White (1990) and White and Gorman (2000:170), three basic explanatory models were developed for the relationship between drug use and crime: substance use leads to crime; crime leads to substance use; and the relationship is either coincidental or explained by a set of common causes. Each model may apply to different sub-groups of the population of drug-using criminals or to different incidents of drug-related crime.

In its regular monitoring programme of drug use (Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Programme – ADAM), the United States has clearly demonstrated that some 50 per cent of male arrestees across a wide geographic area regularly test positive for at least one drug (Lind et al., 2002). These findings were thoroughly examined and supported by the recently introduced Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) and the NEW-ADAM research programme set up by the UK Government in 1998. Evidence of strong links was discovered there, particularly between property offending and opiate use (McRostie and Marshall, 2001; Bennett et al, 2001). Similar findings on the strength of the relationship between Class A drug use and certain types of acquisitive crime have also been produced by Allen (2005), Liriano and Ramsay (2003), Bullock (2003a), Hammersley et al. (2003), Goulden and Sondhi (2001), McGallagly and Dunn (2001), Hough et al. (2000), Spiess and Fallow (2000), Bennet (1998), NAPO (1994), Hammersley et al. (1989), Jarvis and Parker (1989), Parker et al. (1988), Nurco et al. (1985), Collins et al. (1985), McBride and McCoy (1982), Ball et al. (1981), McBride (1976), Inciardi and Chambers (1972) and Eckerman (1971).

The findings of the NEW-ADAM research programme also demonstrated a ‘statistical link’ between levels of substance misuse and the commission of acquisitive crime by discovering that heavy drug users were found particularly likely to be acquisitive offenders (Holloway et al., 2004). Other UK (for example, Godfrey et al., 2002; Liriano and Ramsay, 2003) and international research (Goldstein, 1981; Chaiken and Chaiken, 1990) also indicated a strong positive correlation between the frequency of offending and the level of offenders’ illicit drug use. This supports the conclusion that offenders with an expensive drug habit tend to commit income-generating offences more often (Weatherburn et al., 2000).

The limitation of the above research is in its focus on the known offenders (arrestees). The main distinction between known offenders and other offenders lies in the fact that they have been caught. Therefore, it is important to remember that known offenders do not represent the offending population as a whole, and it is possible that heavy drug users may be over-represented in this group either as a result of their drug misuse or as a result of their high rate of offending (Hough, 1996:16).

Despite the wealth of research confirming the existence of links between drugs and crime, the question of the exact dynamics of the drug-crime relationship continues to be argumentative. The co-occurrence of illicit drug use and property crime does not, in itself, justify the conclusion that drug use causes crime. Some early studies support this view, showing that involvement in crime actually preceded drug use (Dobinson and Ward, 1987; Dobinson and Poletti, 1998).

The studies published in the last 10-15 years point to a more complex inter-relationship between drugs and crime. Hough (1996) differentiates between drug-related crime and drug-driven crime, suggesting that the causal relationship may take any of the following forms: dependent drug use may predate other forms of crime and precipitate these; involvement in property crime can predate drug use; dependent drug use may often amplify property offending; drug use and property crime may both increase in an upward spiral. White and Gorman (2000:174) suggested that it is also possible that the relationship between substance use and crime is reciprocal. As Collins (1986) and Fagan and Chin (1999) explained, the substance use and crime may be causally linked and mutually reinforcing and, therefore, drinking and drug use may lead to more criminal behaviour and criminal behaviour may lead to more drinking and drug use. Research also suggests that a distinction needs to be drawn between experimental and problematic drug use. Edmunds et al. (1999) found that experimental drug use generally predates contact with the criminal justice system, but use becomes problematic after a criminal career has been established. This suggests that criminal and drug using careers may develop in parallel and are mutually sustaining, with acquisitive crime providing people with enough spare cash to develop a drug habit.

The common cause explanatory model, which suggests that substance use and crime do not have a direct causal link, presents another perspective on the drugs-crime relationship. White (1990) and White, Brick and Hansell (1993) argued that drug use and crime are related because they share common causes, such as genetic or temperamental traits, antisocial personality disorders, family alcoholism and poor relationships with parents. Fagan (1990) and Gorman and White (1995) pointed out that sub-cultural norms may also reinforce both criminal behaviour and substance use. That is, certain subcultures (for example, youth gangs) may promote both crime and drug use as proof of masculinity, which would spuriously influence the relationship between these two behaviours. Bursik (1988), Sampson et al. (1997), Ensminger, Anthony and McCord (1997) and Skogan (1990) suggested that in addition to individual-level and inter-personal level influences, drug use and crime may have common environmental, situational and social causes.

As Walters (2000:4) pointed out, while existing research indicates that drug users are more likely, than non-users to commit acquisitive crime, most crimes result from a variety of factors (personal, situational, cultural, economic). Even when drugs are a cause, they are likely to be only one factor among many. Assessing the nature and extent of the influence of drugs on crime requires that reliable information about the offence and the offender be available and that definitions be consistent.

The researchers found it extremely difficult to produce reliable estimates of the proportion of crime which is drug-driven (where the offence is committed solely to pay for drugs) or drug-related (where the proceeds of the offence happen to be spent on drugs). According to

Mayhew et al (1989, 1993), statistics of the number of recorded crimes – whether or not they are drug-related – are not straightforward; statistics of the losses incurred through crime are very imprecise; the number of offenders involved in either acquisitive crime or drug misuse is extremely hard to assess, as is their rate of offending.

Nicholas et al. (2005:15 and 49) pointed out that while falling considerably since 1995, property crime accounted for the majority of both the British Crime Survey (BCS) and recorded crime (78 per cent and 75 per cent respectively) in 2004/2005. However, these figures should be treated with caution, because the BCS and police recorded crime categories are not the same. For example, the BCS does not cover offences against non-domestic targets (ie businesses), and, therefore, does not include such crimes as theft of business property, shoplifting and fraud.

It is also important to note that the reporting of acquisitive crime varies considerably by type of offence (Thorpe and Ruparel, 2005). In BCS 2004/2005, reporting rates for thefts of vehicles were the highest at 95 per cent, followed by burglaries in which something was stolen (77 per cent). Reporting rates for theft from the person were much lower at 32 per cent (ditto, 2005:35). While 58 per cent of small businesses have been a victim of crime (many of which were drug-related) in the last 12 months, only a minority of incidents is reported to the police. For example, one of the favourite crimes of drug-using offenders - shoplifting - affects 12 per cent of all businesses, but only 4 per cent of these crimes are reported. Cheque and credit card fraud (another offence common among drug users) affects 8-9 per cent of businesses, but only 2-3 per cent of incidents are reported (Federation of Small Businesses, 2005: 13-14). Jansson et al (2005:61) argued that the police recorded statistics of fraud are a poor indication of the real level and trends. Many cases of cheque and credit card fraud (legally defined as deception) go unreported to the police. It happens, either because the victims are unaware that they are being deceived, or because the cardholders, once they realise, are more likely to inform the bank or card company than the police. For similar reasons, fraud and forgery offences cannot be identified by the BCS.

Based on the cited evidence, it could be argued that acquisitive crime which is the most often linked to drug use, particularly business-related, is seriously under-reported and that police statistics do not reflect the full extent of the problem. As Michael Hough (1996) pointed out in his review of the literature on drugs misuse and the criminal justice system, those attempts that have been made to link acquisitive crime with drug misuse have been built on many tentative assumptions. According to Hough, two approaches have been adopted by researchers to date: estimating the number of crimes which can be attributed to drug misuse and estimating the cost of crime which can be attributed to drug misuse.

The first approach was adopted by Mott (reported in ACMD, 1991), who estimated the proportion of various types of acquisitive crime which could be attributed to dependent heroin users in England and Wales in 1987. His work suggested that between 6 per cent and 24 per cent of burglaries involving loss were committed by dependent heroine users, between 6 per cent and 22 per cent of thefts from the person and between 0.6 per cent and 8 per cent of shoplifting. Estimates of the proportion of the costs of crime accounted for by dependent heroine use have been made by Blair (1994) and by the government green paper, 'Tackling Drugs Together' (Lord President, 1994). Blair's estimate was that half of the £4 billion cost of

all thefts recorded by the police was attributed to drugs. The approach adopted by the Green Paper (Lord President, 1994) built on Blair's work in combination with some of the assumptions made earlier by Mott (in ACMD:1991). The Green Paper gives estimates of the proportion of dependent heroin use financed by crime based on recent Scottish, European and American research. It stated that the overall cost of all types of acquisitive crime committed by dependent heroin users to finance their drug use in 1992 fell somewhere between £58 million and £864 million. This represents between 1 per cent and 20 per cent of the costs of thefts recorded by the police. However, as Hough (1996) pointed out, the various calculations and assumptions behind those two approaches were tentative and they would only have to change slightly to produce very different estimates.

Hough (1996:15) noted that deciding what to count as a drug-related crime is very complex. The practical problems in actually quantifying it are immense. However, UK researchers have made some progress in finding out how problem users finance their habit. Bean and Pearson (1992), Dean et al. (1992), Southwark DPT (1994) and Maddalena (1994) found evidence of a growing overlap between crack and heroin use. They also have identified that a small minority of heavy users could spend anything between 300 GBP and 800 GBP a day on drugs. Expenditure on other illegal drugs is generally lower.

Findings of the research undertaken by Jarvis and Parker (1989), Stimson et al. (1993), Power et al. (1993) and Klee and Morris (1994) show that the majority of problem drug users in all the studies were unemployed and in receipt of benefit. A significant proportion of those individuals reported that acquisitive crime was one of the ways by which they financed their drug purchases. According to Hough (1996), there is no research in England identifying the proportion of problem drug users' income derived from crime. Studies of links between drugs and crime in Scotland, North America and Europe vary in their findings. Depending on the nature of the samples, this was identified as between 20 per cent and 50 per cent (Hammersley and Morrison, 1997; Lord President, 1994).

As the above review of literature shows, our current knowledge about the volume and cost of drug-related crime is very limited. However, it can be argued that the drugs-crime link is best explained by the common cause model (White, 1990; White et al., 1993), in which any association of drugs and crime has a number of causes ('cluster of common causes' concept in the results of the research). The only certain conclusion from modern research into this problem could be that problem drug misuse is responsible for a significant minority of acquisitive crime in the UK.

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