

Drugs and Crime: Evidence and Trends

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SUMMARY

Policymakers assume that an important connection exists between drug use and crime, yet the precise nature of the relationship remains elusive. The objective of this paper to provide an overview of the various competing explanations for the relationship between alcohol/drug use and crime in Ireland.

There are three basic explanatory models for the relationship between alcohol/drug use and crime: (1) substance use leads to crime, (2) crime leads to substance use, and (3) 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 substance-using criminals or to different incidents of alcohol/drug-related crime. Much of the literature on drugs/alcohol and crime has focused on the first explanation, which in turn is explained by three different models. These are the psychopharmacological model; the economic motivation model and the systemic model. Of equal importance, but often overlooked in the literature is drug involvement/possession as crime. Despite often considerable disagreements, much of the existing research supports the view that alcohol use is associated with violent crime, whereas other drug (especially heroin) use is associated with the commission of property crime.

In the paper, a review of the pertinent literature is presented and evidence from the Ireland given. Given the substantial limitations that exist to framing a coherent debate on this issue in Ireland, largely because of data limitations, evidence from other jurisdictions is presented which demonstrates a clear punitive trend over the past decade. In conclusion, we suggest that drug control policies are no different from other areas of social policy- That is, programs that fit some broad ideological agenda will be implemented and supported regardless of the scientific evidence. While further research in Ireland can help us make informed decisions among the choices available, but more often than not, policy decisions concerning crime and drugs will be determined by influences other than empirical evidence.

Explaining the Relationship

There are three basic explanatory models for the relationship between alcohol/drug use and crime:

- (1) substance use leads to crime,
- (2) crime leads to substance use, and
- (3) the relationship is either coincidental or explained by a set of common causes.

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Substance Abuse Leads to Crime

- The *psychopharmacological model* proposes that the effects of intoxication cause criminal (especially violent) behaviour.
- The *economic motivation model* assumes that drug users need to generate illicit income to support their drug habit. Thus, they engage in crimes such as robbery, burglary, and prostitution to get drugs or the money to buy them.
- The *systemic model*, argues that the system of drug distribution and use is inherently connected with violent crime. Systemic types of crimes surrounding drug distribution include fights over organisational and territorial issues, enforcement of rules, and transaction-related crimes. Further, drug markets can create community disorganisation, which, in turn, affects the norms and behaviours of individuals who live in the community. Such community disorganisation may be associated with increases in crime that are not directly related to drug selling

Irish Evidence?

•“*Whilst hard and fast evidence is not available we believe that no less than 80% of certain categories of crime - burglaries, muggings etc. is attributable in who are in part to substance abuse*”. (Report of the Lord Mayor’s Commission on Crime, 1994:13)

•*The influence of drugs/substance abuse on the level of crime is undoubtedly quite considerable, though difficult to assess precisely* (Department of Justice, 1997: 37)

•*In Dublin, between September 1995 and August 1996, known drug users were responsible for 66 percent of all detected crimes.* (Keogh, 1997)

•*84% of Public Order Offences were drug or alcohol related* (Millar *et al*, 1998)

•*In a study of 120 Mountjoy prisoners, the average age of first conviction was 16.8 years, while the average age of initiation into opiates (for those that used them) was 18 years* (O’Mahony, 1997)

•*Between 1971 and 1996, over 40 percent of perpetrators and victims of homicide were intoxicated* (Dooley, 1995, 2001)

Conclusion

- **Despite often considerable disagreements, much of the existing research supports the view that alcohol use is associated with violent crime, whereas other drug (especially heroin) use is associated with the commission of property crime.**
- **Of equal importance, but often overlooked is drug involvement/ possession as crime.**
- **Given the substantial limitations that exist to framing a coherent debate on this issue in Ireland, largely because of data limitations, evidence from other jurisdictions demonstrates a clear punitive trend over the past decade.**
- **Reducing the incidence of drunkenness will reduce crime, unless the control measures create a substantial illicit market.**

- **Reducing the volume of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine consumed without raising their prices will also reduce crime. Making treatment more available to offenders is one way to do so.**
- **Opiate maintenance therapy (methadone, etc) is a proven crime-control strategy.**
- **Prison sentences (particularly long sentences) for minor, non-violent drug offenders may increase crime by wasting prison cells without much influencing the price or availability of drugs.**
- **Reducing marijuana consumption is less likely to reduce crime than reducing consumption of alcohol, cocaine, or heroin.**
- **In conclusion, drug control policies are no different from other areas of social policy. That is, programs that fit some broad ideological agenda will be implemented and supported regardless of the scientific evidence.**
- **While further research in Ireland can help us make informed decisions among the choices available, but, more often than not, policy decisions concerning crime and drugs will be determined by influences other than empirical evidence.**

