



## Research paper

## Are risk factors for drug use and offending similar during the teenage years?



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 24 February 2014

Received in revised form 31 October 2014

Accepted 5 November 2014

## Keywords:

Drug use  
Offending  
Teenage  
Adolescence  
Risk factors

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This paper explores whether at different stages of the developmental cycle of adolescence, drug use and offending are associated with a similar set of risk factors relating to: socio-structural position, informal social control, deviant peer group contexts, and deviant lifestyle behaviours.

**Methods:** Multivariate regression was used to analyse data from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC) self-report questionnaire.

**Results:** Early in the teenage years drug use was associated with a similar set of factors to offending. These include weak bonds to parents and teachers, and deviant lifestyle behaviours. However, later in the teenage years there were differences, e.g. drug use was associated with higher socio-economic status and importance of school, and a number of factors which were associated with offending were not associated with drug use, e.g. parent–child conflict, gang membership and hanging around.

**Conclusion:** Results show that the factors included here are more appropriate to understanding offending than drug use. Different risk factors are associated with drug use and offending in the older, but not younger teens. It is argued that later in the teenage years drug use should be understood and addressed differently to offending. This is particularly important given the tendency for the ‘drugs problem’ to increasingly be dealt with as a ‘crime problem’ (Duke, 2006).

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## Background

## Introduction

Drug use and offending by young people are often assumed to be closely related. Given the tendency for the ‘drugs problem’ to increasingly be seen and dealt with as a ‘crime problem’ (Duke, 2006), analysing whether drug use should be understood and responded to in a similar way to offending is particularly important. However, much research on the topic focuses on the co-occurrence of these behaviours in criminal justice (e.g. Bennett & Holloway, 2004; DeLi, Oriu, & MacKenzie, 2000) or drug treatment samples (e.g. Kinlock, Battjes, & Gordon, 2004); or on interventions with drug using offenders (e.g. Best, Walker, Pegram, & O'Donnell, 2010; McSweeney, Turnbull, & Hough, 2008). Moreover, Bennett, Holloway, and Farrington's (2008) meta-analysis suggested that the association between drug use and offending was stronger for adults than juveniles. As Stevens points out, it has often been assumed that ‘the overlap that is perceived between known offenders and

drug users persists for the much larger populations of unarrested offenders and anonymous drug users’ (Stevens, 2007: 92).

Nationally representative cross-sectional self-report surveys have been used to estimate the prevalence of drug use and offending amongst young people (e.g. Pudney, 2003). Although there have been some geographically specific UK based longitudinal self-report studies (North West Longitudinal Study, Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study, and the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime) the vast majority of studies which have looked at the relationship between drug use and offending over the teenage years are US based (e.g. National Youth Survey, Monitoring the Future) and these tend to focus on establishing the direction of causal effect, rather than offering substantive explanations for the relationship. In search of ‘true causal relations’ there is a tendency for research to view potential explanatory factors as ‘confounding factors’ to be controlled for (for example, see Macleod et al.'s 2004 systematic review).

It is proposed in this paper that the central focus should be on understanding both drug use and offending, which may help us to explain the relationship between the two. Consideration may then be given as to whether the behaviours should be responded to in a similar way. Studies do not tend to focus on age differentiation in associations between drug use and offending and various

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other factors during adolescence. This research fills a gap in exploring associations between drug use and offending and risk factors relating to socio-demography, informal social control, deviant peer group contexts and deviant lifestyle behaviours, in order to explore whether drug use may be understood in a similar manner to offending at different stages of the developmental cycle of adolescence. Using data from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC), this paper will show that in the early teenage years, drug use, like offending is associated with factors relating to weaker social bonds and engagement in deviant lifestyle behaviours; but associations between drug use and these factors change over the teenage years. Different risk factors are associated with drug use and offending at older, but not younger ages. It is argued that later in the teenage years drug use may be understood differently to offending, therefore the policy response should not be the same.

### *Theoretical context*

There are a myriad of possible explanations for drug use and offending. The importance of the role of criminological theory in understanding young people's drug use has been highlighted in a review by Measham and Shiner (2009), published in this journal. This research explores associations between drug use and risk factors, related largely to Sampson and Laub's (1993) age graded theory of informal social control, which has its basis in Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory. He posited that weak social bonds free people to engage in delinquency and outlined four elements of the social bond: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Although support is lacking for 'involvement' much research has found the other elements of the social bond to be important (Lilly, Cullen, & Ball, 2011). For example, Smith (2004) and Huizinga, Loeber, and Thornberry (1994) found that parent–child conflict was associated with higher delinquency, though the latter found that parental conflict was not related to drug use. However, Huizinga, Loeber, and Thornberry (1994) showed that poor family attachment was related to offending and drug use and Nagasawa, Quian, and Wong (2000) found that commitment to school insulated youths from drug use. Much research has found parental supervision to be important in predicting offending (e.g. Smith, 2004), drug use (e.g. Svensson, 2003), and both drug use and offending (e.g. Huizinga et al., 1994).

As Sampson and Laub (1993) recognised, individuals, families and social control processes are embedded in social structural contexts. It is argued here that the socio-demographic factors (e.g. gender, socio-economic status, not living with two birth parents) should also be explored. Being male and from low socio-economic status background has been said to increase the likelihood of deeper involvement in offending (Elliot, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989). Daniel et al. (2009) concluded that cannabis use is connected to childhood disadvantage, and family structure (not living with two birth parents) has been found to be associated with substance use (Barrett & Turner, 2006). However, some research has suggested that gender (Silbereisen, Robbins & Rutter, 1995) and socio-economic status (Elliot, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989) may be differently related to drug use. The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England showed that by the age of 16 young people from the top SEP (socio-economic position) quintile were more likely to report having tried cannabis than those in the bottom quintile (Chowdry, Crawford, & Goodman, 2009); the North West Longitudinal Study (NWLS) which found that those with 'professional/managerial' parents often had the highest rates of drug trying (Aldridge, Measham, & Williams, 2011); and National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health data has shown that higher parental education and household income in adolescence was associated with higher rates of substance use in early adulthood (Humensky, 2010).

It is argued here that it is also important to look at informal social control beyond the family and school, i.e. in relation to attachments to delinquent peers (Sampson & Laub, 1993) or settings which may reinforce delinquency (Thornberry, 1987). This could involve factors relating to involvement in deviant peer group contexts (deviant friends, gang membership, hanging around) and engaging in deviant lifestyle behaviours (smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, drug use or offending). Association with drug using or delinquent peers is perhaps the most frequently cited risk factor for involvement in both offending and drug use (e.g. Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002; Garnier & Stein, 2002; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997; White, Pandina, & La Grange, 1987). Gang membership has also been found to be related to rates of delinquency and substance use (Huizinga, Loeber, & Thornberry, 1994; Smith & Bradshaw, 2005). It is suggested that involvement in one deviant behaviour (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol, offending) may open up opportunities to engage in another deviant activity (e.g. drug use).

Research has shown that there may be some differences in terms of which risk factors are associated with early-onset and late-onset delinquency (e.g. Welte, Zhang, & Wieczorek, 2001). Thornberry (1987) argues that in middle adolescence the family declines in relative importance, while the adolescent's own world of school and peers takes on increasing significance. Therefore, the relationship between different risk factors and drug use and offending may change over the developmental cycle of adolescence, so it is important to explore these associations at different points during the teenage years.

This paper explores cross-sectional associations (rather than causal relationships) between factors relating to socio-demography, informal social control, deviant peer group context and deviant lifestyles and drug use and offending amongst the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC) cohort, at different points during the teenage years. Based on the theoretical context and literature on explanations for drug use and offending presented above, two research questions were posed.

- Are drug use and offending both associated with a set of factors relating to: socio-demography, informal social control, deviant peer group contexts and deviant lifestyle behaviours?
- Are these associations the same earlier and later in the teenage years?

The next section outlines the methods used to do this.

### **Methods**

This paper presents analyses of self-report questionnaire data from the ESYTC (Smith & McVie, 2003). This prospective longitudinal study was carried out in the city of Edinburgh using a single age cohort who started secondary school in the city of Edinburgh in 1998, when they were twelve years old on average. Using a census approach, the study includes young people from a broad range of social backgrounds and neighbourhoods, rather than only focusing on areas of deprivation. All 23 state secondary schools, eight out of 14 independent sector and nine out of 12 special schools agreed to take part, which meant that 92% of children of the appropriate age range were included in the cohort.

Children and parents were given assurances of confidentiality and the purposes of the study were explained. An opt-out letter was sent to parents at the outset and at each occasion children could decline to participate. Questionnaires were completed in classrooms with researchers present and children were given assistance where necessary. An effort was made to include all those who were not present at school on the day of fieldwork by making arrangements to revisit the school at a later date or, if necessary,

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