Drug spend and acquisitive offending by substance misusers

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The need to generate income to fund drug misuse is assumed to be a driver of involvement in acquisitive crime. We examined the influence of drug misuse expenditure, and other factors, on acquisitive offending.

Methods: Clients ($N = 1380$) seeking drug treatment within 94 of 149 Drug Action Teams (DATs) across England completed a comprehensive survey, incorporating validated scales and self-report measures, such as levels of drug and alcohol use and offending.

Results: Forty per cent ($N = 554$) had committed acquisitive crime in the previous month. Regression analysis showed that acquisitive offending was associated with the presence of problematic use of crack cocaine, poly-drug use, sharing injecting equipment, unsafe sex, overdose risk, higher drug spend, unemployment, reduced mental wellbeing, and younger age.

Conclusions: Rates of acquisitive crime among drug users are high. Drug using offenders can be distinguished from drug using non-offenders by problematic crack cocaine use, younger age, income-related factors, and indicators of a chaotic life style and complex needs. Behavioural and demographic factors were associated more strongly with acquisitive crime than drug use expenditure, suggesting that the need to finance drug use is not necessarily the main factor driving acquisitive offending by drug users.

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1. Introduction

Estimates of the societal costs of problem drug use are high (£15 billion economic and social costs of Class A drug use, England and Wales, 2003/04; Gordon et al., 2006). It is reported that over one half of all those arrested for acquisitive crime test positive for drug use in the UK (Boreham et al., 2007). Such evidence has been used to infer a causal link between drug use and acquisitive crime. This is the primary focus, in the UK setting, as reflected in policy statements over the past two decades (HM Government, 2008; United Kingdom Anti Drugs Coordination Unit, 1998), in contrast to the US, where the focus is broader, and incorporates pharmacological effects or the effects of drug markets (Boyum and Kleiman, 2002; White and Gorman, 2000).

However, set against this, the evidence for a causal link is, perhaps, weak. The literature suggests a more complex association between drug misuse and acquisitive offending than a simple causal relationship (Best et al., 2001; Buchanan, 2010; Hammersley, 2008; Seddon, 2000). Rather than drug use fuelling criminality, not all drug users commit acquisitive offences, and acquisitive crime often pre-dates problem drug use (Pudney, 2002; Stewart et al., 2000). Drug use and criminality may develop in parallel (Edmunds et al., 1998), perhaps via a third factor such as socio-economic deprivation (Seddon, 2000).

A number of previous studies suggest that drug treatment impacts favourably on levels of offending (Godfrey et al., 2002; Reuter and Stevens, 2008). Evidence from the US Drug Abuse Treatment Outcome Study (DATOS; Flynn et al., 1997) highlights decreased crime costs following drug treatment in both residential and outpatient settings (Flynn et al., 1999). Drug treatment in the Research Outcome Study in Ireland (ROSIE; Comiskey et al., 2009) was associated with a significant decrease in acquisitive offending (Cox and Comiskey, 2011) and one-year follow-up in the UK National Treatment Outcome Research Study (NTORS) observed a two-thirds reduction in the level of acquisitive offences compared to baseline (Gossop et al., 2000). Findings are consistent with the assumption that drug use fuels offending, but do not support a causal link.

If acquisitive offending is undertaken to fund drug use, it follows that drug use expenditure should be strongly associated (Bradford-Hill, 1965) with such offending. Previous work has suggested that high levels of drug use are predictive of high rates of offending, but has employed indirect indicators of the cost of drug use, such as frequency of use, or quantity used (for example Gossop et al., 2000,

2002; Stewart et al., 2000). However, drugs may be obtained in a variety of ways that do not incur direct costs to the individual, such as low-level supply to other users, or via a partner. Direct examination, in an observational setting, of the contribution that drug use expenditure makes to the likelihood of committing acquisitive crime would provide further evidence of an association between these factors, albeit falling short of a causal examination.

In addition to the contribution of expenditure on drugs, other factors are also likely to distinguish between drug using acquisitive offenders and non-offenders. Evidently, the type of drugs used is likely to be an important factor; less costly patterns of use, e.g., cannabis and solvents, may be less likely to be drivers of acquisitive offending (Boyum and Kleiman, 2002). Use of cocaine, in particular crack cocaine, has been linked to acquisitive crime. In ROSIE, among opiate dependent clients, those using cocaine/crack were more likely to report criminal activity than those not taking cocaine or crack (Cox and Comiskey, 2011). In NTORS, predictors of acquisitive offending included regular use of cocaine (powder and/or crack); with regular heroin use the main predictor (Stewart et al., 2000). Age may be predictive: two-thirds of a 2009 Class A drug using offender cohort were aged less than 35 years (Home Office, 2010). In Boreham and colleagues' arrestee survey, the likelihood of acquisitive crime declined with age (Boreham et al., 2007). Poly-substance use may also be important; poly-drug using offenders commit twice as many offences as those not reporting multiple drug use (Bennett and Holloway, 2005) and high levels of poly-drug use are recorded amongst drug using arrestees (Boreham et al., 2007).

The UK Drug Treatment Outcomes Research Study (DTORS; Donmall et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2007, 2009) provides an opportunity to further examine factors associated with acquisitive crime in a cohort of treated drug users and to examine whether these factors can reliably distinguish drug using acquisitive offenders from drug using non-acquisitive offenders. In particular, the study gathered data on actual expenditure on drug use, providing an opportunity to better, and more directly, explore the relationship between offending and the need to generate income to support drug use. Our aim was not to propose a causal link but to investigate whether the assumed association between drug spend and acquisitive offending is observable or, indeed, weak, or even absent.

2. Methods

2.1. DTORS

The study was conducted as part of UK DTORS (Drug Treatment Outcomes Research Study; Donmall et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2007, 2009). DTORS was a longitudinal, observational, multi-site, cohort study, funded by the UK Home Office, examining drug treatment outcomes in adult drug users seeking treatment. Independent interviewers assessed participants at baseline and two follow-up time-points, scheduled for 3–5 months and one year. Baseline interviews were carried out between February 2006 and March 2007. Multi-site NHS Research Ethics approval was obtained.

2.2. Participants

Participants (N = 1380) were recruited from 342 agencies within 94 of 149 Drug Action Teams (DATs) across England. Eligibility criteria were: aged 18–65 years; seeking drug treatment; not engaged in treatment prior to the baseline interview. Every effort was made to conduct client interviews as soon as possible following initial assessment for treatment but, as interviewers were not always situated in treatment agencies, time to achieve baseline assessment varied, meaning that a number of clients had received treatment prior to their baseline interview; these cases have been excluded

from this analysis. This sample was comparable, in terms of gender and ethnicity, but younger (32 years vs. 34 years) than the total study sample. Based on baseline interviews, participants were categorised as involved/not involved in acquisitive crime in the previous 4 weeks. Acquisitive crimes included shoplifting, selling stolen goods, stealing a vehicle, stealing from a vehicle, house burglary, business burglary, violent theft, bag snatching, prostitution, drug dealing, other stealing, cheque/card fraud and benefit fraud.

2.3. Measures

Baseline interviews gathered details of drug and alcohol use, including actual drug misuse expenditure, offending behaviour, physical and mental health, and variables such as employment and accommodation. These were assessed via a comprehensive survey tool, incorporating bespoke measures and the following validated scales: CMR (Circumstances, Motivation and Readiness Scale; De Leon et al., 1994); SDS (Severity of Dependence Scale; Gossop et al., 1995); SF12 (Ware et al., 1996); elements of MAP (Maudsley Addiction Profile; Marsden et al., 1998); and IRQ (Injecting Risk Questionnaire; Stimson et al., 1998). Measures relate to the previous four week period, or current circumstances. Key assessments relate to stability of accommodation (stable being defined as owned or rented by the client, their family, or friends, or residential drug treatment), whether participants self-defined as having a problem with use of a particular substance, self-reported legitimate income and self-reported spend on drugs. Full details are reported elsewhere (Donmall et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2007, 2009).

2.4. Data analysis

The baseline DTORS sample had 89% power to detect a predetermined between-group difference of £25 in weekly drug spend between CJS (Criminal Justice System) and non-CJS clients (Moody et al., 2009). Instances where criminal justice personnel had direct input into the referral process were defined as CJS referrals (Jones et al., 2007). Clients were not recruited from prison settings.

Data from a number of cases (n = 15) were removed from the analysis, as statistical outliers, on the basis of implausibly high income or level of offending. Data were analysed using SPSS for Windows (version 19). Demographic data and measured variables were compared between groups (acquisitive offenders vs. not) using Chi Squared, Mann–Whitney and t tests to identify possible predictors of acquisitive offending (see Tables 1 and 2).

In order to identify potential factors associated with acquisitive offending, whilst accounting for confounding, a multivariable model was constructed from 20 variables using a binary logistic regression model with acquisitive offending (in the previous 4 weeks) as the outcome. Variables entered into the regression were representative of demography, recent (previous 4 weeks) drug use, health and risk-taking, drug treatment and drug use history. From this we identified variables as a priori statistical predictors and a parsimonious model was sought by eliminating the remaining variables using a backwards stepwise procedure. The stepwise procedure involved all a priori and potential predictor variables being included in a multivariable logistic regression model; the potential predictor variable associated with the largest p-value was removed, whilst all a priori predictor variables remained, and the model was refit. All non a priori variables were removed until all potential confounding variables in the model had a p-value of less than 0.1. A backward elimination method was chosen as its use is associated with a lower risk of making a type II error, failing to identify an outcome predictor (Field, 2005).

Demographic variables included were: age; finishing education before the age of 16 years (i.e., did not complete mandatory secondary school education); gender; ethnicity; employment;