



# The statistical association between drug misuse and crime: A meta-analysis

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 October 2005

Received in revised form 18 February 2008

Accepted 20 February 2008

Available online 4 March 2008

### Keywords:

Drugs  
Crime  
Robbery  
Heroin  
Crack  
Cocaine

## ABSTRACT

In the last 25 years, there have been a large number of studies conducted on the connection between drug misuse and crime. However, there have been few attempts to date to conduct a meta-analysis of this research. There have also been few attempts to breakdown the relationship by type of drugs and type of crime. This paper investigates the relationship between drug use and criminal behavior by conducting a systematic review of the literature and a meta-analysis of the strength of the relationship. Results of a review of 30 studies showed that the odds of offending were three to four times greater for drug users than non-drug users. The odds of offending were highest among crack users and lowest among recreational drug users. This relationship held true across a range of offence types, including robbery, burglary, prostitution and shoplifting. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the study for research on the drugs crime connection and for government policy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The findings reported in this paper derive from a research project funded by the UK Home Office. The opinions expressed in the paper are not the official view of the Home Office and should not be considered an indication of Home Office policy.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last 25 years, there have been a large number of studies conducted on the connection between drug misuse and crime. However, there have been few attempts to date to conduct a meta-analysis of research on the connection. The only meta-analysis that we have found concerned the relationship between marijuana use and juvenile delinquency and this study showed a modest positive association (Derzon & Lipsey, 1999). As far as we know, there have been no meta-analyses of the relationship between the types of drugs and types of crime most commonly associated with the drugs crime connection.

The relative absence of research in this area is perhaps surprising considering the importance of the topic in terms of government policy and research knowledge. It is also surprising because there are a number of clear advantages in using meta-analysis over conventional 'vote counting' methods, which count the number of statistically significant and non-significant findings (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). A meta-analysis can provide a single summary statistic of the strength of a relationship across a large number of studies and can assess correlates of effect size. In relation to research on the drugs crime connection, it is possible to provide a quantitative measure of the overall strength of the relationship between drug use and crime and a measure of variations in the strength of the relationship by moderating factors, such as drug type and crime type.

The limited use of meta-analyses in the study of the drugs crime connection might be explained in part by the convention in drugs and crime research to use this method primarily to investigate program effectiveness. However, meta-analysis can be used to summarize both experimental and correlational findings (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). And it has been used widely in other areas to investigate the associations between variables. Baier and Wright (2001), for example, used meta-analysis to investigate the association between religion and crime. This paper presents the results of our own meta-analysis of recent studies that have reported on the association between drug use and crime. The main aim of the research is to investigate the strength of the relationship and to assess variations in the relationship by type of drug and type of crime.

### 1.1. Previous reviews of the research literature

There have been a number of reviews of the literature on the connection between drug misuse and criminal behavior. One of the earliest was by Gandossy, Williams, Cohen, and Harwood (1980), who conducted a comprehensive survey of the English language research literature, covering studies from America, Australia, Canada and Europe. The review focused mainly on the association between heroin use and crime, although the relationship between other drugs and crime was also considered. The authors found a strong correlation between drug addiction and reported criminal behavior and concluded, '...it was difficult to avoid concluding that addicts engage in substantial amounts of income-generating crimes. This is true when analyzing the charges against drug-using arrestees, convictions of addicts in prisons, arrest records of treatment populations, or the observations of street addicts.' (Gandossy et al., 1980, p.52). In relation to amphetamine use and crime, they concluded that the research produced contradictory findings. One reason for this was the variation among the samples assessed. Studies based on amphetamine users who had a substantial prior record of criminal involvement were more likely to show a drugs crime connection than studies based on amphetamine users without such a record (e.g., research based on college students). Studies on the relationship between barbiturates and crime also provide mixed findings. Some showed that barbiturate use inhibited violent behavior, while others showed that it encouraged violence. In relation to marijuana and LSD, the authors concluded that there was little evidence that either was linked to criminal behavior.

Chaiken and Chaiken (1990) reviewed the literature on the relationship between drug use and predatory crime (i.e., instrumental offenses committed for material gain). Their review found no evidence of a general association between drug use and participation in crime and no association between drug use and onset or persistence in criminality. They concluded that, when behaviors of large groups of people were studied in aggregate, there was no coherent association between drug misuse and predatory crime. They also concluded that, for the majority of drug types other than heroin and cocaine, drug use was unrelated to the commission of crimes. They also noted that, even in relation to heroin and cocaine, there was no clear evidence of a relationship between consumption and offending. The only consistent evidence of an association between drug use and predatory crime was that offenders who were daily users of heroin or cocaine and those who used multiple types of drugs committed crimes at significantly higher rates than did the less drug-involved offenders. They go on to ask, 'Where, then, lies the strong relationship between drug misuse and criminality?' (Chaiken & Chaiken, 1990, p.212).

Hough (1996) conducted a review of British research investigating the drugs crime connection. This covered studies based on drug-user populations and offender populations, and studies that estimated the proportion of crimes committed to

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