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White House Office of National Drug Control Policy

Drug Policy Information Clearinghouse

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Fact Sheet: Drug-Related Crime

Drugs are related to crime in multiple ways. Most directly, it is a crime to use, possess, manufacture, or distribute drugs classified as having a potential for abuse. Cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and amphetamines are examples of drugs classified to have abuse potential. Drugs are also related to crime through the effects they have on the user's behavior and by generating violence and other illegal activity in connection with drug trafficking. The following scheme summarizes the various ways that drugs and crime are related.

Summary of drugs/crime relationship

| Drugs and crime relationship | Definition | Examples |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Drug-defined offenses | Violations of laws prohibiting or regulating the possession, use, distribution, or manufacture of illegal drugs. | Drug possession or use. Marijuana cultivation. Methamphetamine production. Cocaine, heroin, or marijuana sales. |
| Drug-related offenses | Offenses in which a drug's pharmacologic effects contribute; offenses motivated by the user's need for money to support continued use; and offenses connected to drug distribution itself. | Violent behavior resulting from drug effects. Stealing to get money to buy drugs. Violence against rival drug dealers. |
| Drug-using lifestyle | Drug use and crime are common aspects of a deviant lifestyle. The likelihood and frequency of involvement in illegal activity is increased because drug users may not participate in the legitimate economy and are exposed to situations that encourage crime. | A life orientation with an emphasis on short-term goals supported by illegal activities. Opportunities to offend resulting from contacts with offenders and illegal markets. Criminal skills learned from other offenders. |

Drug users in the general population are more likely than nonusers to commit crimes

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) National Household Survey on Drug Abuse asks individuals living in households about their drug and alcohol use and their involvement in acts that could get them in trouble with the police. Provisional data for 1991 show that among adult respondents (ages 18-49), those who use cannabis (marijuana) or cocaine were much more likely to commit crimes of all types than those who did not use these substances (table 1). Of those reporting use of alcohol, cannabis, and cocaine during 1991, 26.1% also report that they committed violent crimes during the year.

Table 1. Criminal behavior and substance use among 18- to 49-year-olds, 1991 provisional data

| Criminal activity | Percent reporting alcohol and drug use in past year | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|----------------------------|---|--------------|------|
| | Alcohol, cannabis, and cocaine* | Alcohol and cannabis only* | Got drunk monthly (no illicit drug use) | Alcohol only | None |
| Any violent crime | 26.1% | 14.6% | 6.3% | 4.8% | 2.7% |
| Any property crime | 24.7 | 13.0 | 8.0 | 3.8 | 1.7 |
| Driving under the influence | 57.2 | 30.8 | 33.3 | 12.3 | 0.1 |
| Sold drugs | 15.1 | 2.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.0 |

* Indicates use of each of these substances some time during the past year, not necessarily use of both/all at the same time.

Source: Harrison and Gfroerer, 1992.

This fact sheet will focus on the second and third categories. Drug-related offenses and a drug-using lifestyle are major contributors to the U.S. crime problem.

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The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) asks the victims of violent crimes who reported seeing the offender whether they perceived the offender to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. According to the 1993 survey, 42% of victims could not determine whether the offender was under the influence of a substance. Of those who could make a determination, about 50% reported that the offender was under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. About 14% reported that offenders were under the influence of drugs alone or in combination with alcohol.

Arrestees frequently test positive for recent drug use

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) Program measures drug use among arrestees by calculating the percentage of individuals with positive urine tests for drug use. DUF data are collected voluntarily and anonymously at the time of arrest from arrestees in booking facilities in selected U.S. cities.

Data collected from male arrestees in 1995 in 23 cities showed that the percentage testing positive for any drug ranged from 51% to 83% across the cities. Female arrestees ranged from 41% to 84%. Male arrestees charged with drug possession or sales were the most likely to test positive for drug use. Female arrestees charged with prostitution, drug possession, or sales, were the most likely to test positive (table 2). Both males and females arrested for stolen vehicles, robbery, and burglary had high positive rates. Data collected from juvenile male arrestees in 12 selected cities showed that similar to adult arrestees the highest positive rates were found for juveniles charged with drug sales or possession (table 3). Overall, however, juveniles were less likely than adult arrestees to test positive for drug use.

Incarcerated offenders were often under the influence of drugs when they committed their offenses

Sentenced Federal and State prison inmates were asked whether they were under the influence of drugs or drugs and alcohol at the time they committed the offense that resulted in their incarceration. The percentage of Federal and State prison inmates who reported they were under the influence of drugs at the time of the offense varied across the major offense categories (table 4). A 1991 survey of Federal and State prisons, conducted jointly by BJS and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, found that drug offenders, burglars, and robbers in State prisons were the most likely to report being under the influence of drugs at the time of the offense. State prison inmates convicted of homicide, assault, and public order offenses were among those least likely to report being under the influence of drugs. Federal prison inmates were less likely, with the exception of burglars, than State inmates to have committed their offenses under the influence of drugs.

Offenders often commit offenses to support their drug habit

Another dimension of drug-related crime is whether the offense is committed to obtain money (or goods to sell to get money) to support drug use. According to the 1991 joint survey of Federal and State prison inmates, an estimated 10% of Federal prisoners

Table 2. Drug use by selected booked arrestees in 23 cities, by charge at arrest, 1995

| Charge | Percent testing positive | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|---------|-------|
| | Males | (N) | Females | (N) |
| Drug possession | 86% | 2,577 | 84% | 1,117 |
| Drug sales | 76 | 794 | 80 | 331 |
| Stolen vehicle | 72 | 900 | 76 | 135 |
| Robbery | 71 | 1,056 | 78 | 116 |
| Burglary | 71 | 1,449 | 67 | 205 |
| Larceny/theft | 70 | 2,426 | 56 | 1,051 |
| Stolen property | 67 | 485 | 57 | 97 |
| Weapons | 64 | 1,014 | 59 | 69 |
| Flight/escape/warrant | 64 | 1,053 | 60 | 608 |
| Public peace/disturbance | 61 | 788 | 64 | 440 |
| Obstructing police/resisting arrest | 60 | 511 | 62 | 168 |
| Homicide | 59 | 297 | 59 | 29 |
| Forgery | 58 | 313 | 56 | 217 |
| Fraud | 57 | 191 | 48 | 202 |
| Damage/destruction of property | 56 | 135 | 56 | 63 |
| Assault | 54 | 2,546 | 49 | 766 |
| Prostitution | 52 | 71 | 87 | 673 |
| Sex offense | 50 | 108 | 78 | 50 |
| Sexual assault/rape | 45 | 245 | ** | 2 |
| Driving under the influence | 43 | 70 | 42 | 55 |

Note: Positive by urinalysis. Drugs tested for included cocaine, opiates, PCP, marijuana, amphetamines, methadone, methaqualone, benzodiazepines, barbiturates, and propoxyphene. Female arrestees were not tested in two cities.

** Too few cases to be reliable.

Source: NIJ, 1995 Drug Use Forecasting, special data run.

Table 3. Drug use by selected booked juvenile male arrestees in 12 cities, by charge at arrest, 1995

| Charge | Percent testing positive | (N) |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----|
| Drug sales | 73% | 112 |
| Drug possession | 68 | 288 |
| Obstructing police/resisting arrest | 56 | 45 |
| Stolen property | 51 | 92 |
| Flight/escape/warrant | 50 | 236 |
| Violation home supervision | 48 | 58 |
| Robbery | 48 | 325 |
| Stolen vehicle | 43 | 378 |
| Weapons | 42 | 321 |
| Homicide | 40 | 30 |
| Public peace/disturbance | 40 | 166 |
| Burglary | 36 | 335 |
| Larceny/theft | 32 | 320 |
| Assault | 32 | 492 |
| Damage/destruction of property | 31 | 86 |
| Runaway | 19 | 75 |
| Sexual assault | 12 | 50 |

Note: Positive by urinalysis. Drugs tested for included cocaine, opiates, PCP, marijuana, amphetamines, methadone, methaqualone, benzodiazepines, barbiturates, and propoxyphene.

Source: NIJ, 1995 Drug Use Forecasting, special data run.

Table 4. Offenders reporting being under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the offense

| Current offense | Percent under the influence of drugs at the time of the offense | |
|-----------------------|---|-------|
| | Federal | State |
| All inmates | 17% | 31% |
| Violent offenses | 25% | 28% |
| Homicide | 18 | 28 |
| Sexual assault | 10 | 20 |
| Robbery | 29 | 38 |
| Assault | 20 | 23 |
| Other violent | 15 | 24 |
| Property offenses | 13% | 35% |
| Burglary | 53 | 40 |
| Larceny/theft | 24 | 37 |
| Fraud | 9 | 28 |
| Other property | 11 | 26 |
| Drug offenses | 16% | 37% |
| Possession | 14 | 38 |
| Trafficking | 17 | 36 |
| Other/unspecified | 12 | 43 |
| Public-order offenses | 12% | 18% |

Source: BJS, *Comparing Federal and State Prison Inmates*, 1991.

Table 5. Federal or State prison inmates who committed their offense for money to buy drugs

| Current offense | Percent of inmates who committed offense to get money for drugs | |
|-----------------------|---|-------|
| | Federal | State |
| All inmates | 10% | 17% |
| Violent offenses | 18% | 12% |
| Homicide | 3 | 5 |
| Sexual assault | 0 | 2 |
| Robbery | 27 | 27 |
| Assault | 2 | 6 |
| Property offenses | 9% | 27% |
| Burglary | 32 | 30 |
| Larceny/theft | 13 | 31 |
| Fraud | 7 | 25 |
| Other property | 8 | 14 |
| Drug offenses | 9% | 22% |
| Possession | 7 | 16 |
| Trafficking | 10 | 25 |
| Other/unspecified | 7 | 20 |
| Public-order offenses | 6% | 5% |

Source: BJS, *Comparing Federal and State Prison Inmates*, 1991.

and 17% of State prisoners reported committing their offense to get money to buy drugs (table 5). Offenders convicted of robbery, burglary, and larceny/theft were the most likely to commit their offense to obtain money to buy drugs. Offenders convicted of sexual assault, assault, and homicide were among the offenders least likely to commit the offense to sustain their drug habit.

Drug trafficking generates violent crime

Trafficking in illicit drugs tends to be associated with the commission of violent crimes. Reasons for the relationship of drug trafficking to violence include:

- competition for drug markets and customers
- disputes and ripoffs among individuals involved in the illegal drug market
- individuals who participate in drug trafficking are prone to use violence
- locations where street drug markets proliferate tend to be disadvantaged economically and socially; legal and social controls against violence in such areas tend to be ineffective.

The proliferation of lethal weapons in recent years has also likely made drug violence more deadly.

BJS examined homicides in the 75 most populous counties in the United States in 1988. Many of the homicides involved drugs or drug trafficking, including the following: drug manufacture, a dispute over drugs, theft of drugs or drug money, a drug scam, a bad drug deal, punishment for drug theft, or illegal use of drugs. One of these circumstances was involved for 18% of defendants and 16% of victims.

The drug/crime relationship should be interpreted cautiously

The drug/crime relationship is difficult to specify because—

- most crimes result from a variety of factors (personal, situational, cultural, economic), so even when drugs are a cause, they are likely to be only one factor among many
- what is meant by “drug-related” varies from study to study; some studies interpret the mere presence of drugs as having causal relevance while other studies interpret the relationship more narrowly
- reports by offenders about their drug use may exaggerate or minimize the relevance of drugs; drug use measures, such as urinalysis that identifies only very recent drug use, are limited.

Conclusion

The evidence indicates that drug users are more likely than nonusers to commit crimes, that arrestees and inmates were often under the influence of a drug at the time they committed their offense, and that drug trafficking generates violence. Assessing the nature and extent of the influence of drugs on crime requires that reliable information about the offense and the offender be available, and that definitions be consistent. In face of problematic evidence, it is impossible to say quantitatively how much drugs influence the occurrence of crime.

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Why statistics on drug-related crime are difficult to interpret: Homicide as an example

Homicide statistics illustrate the difficulties in quantifying the drug-crime relationship. Homicide, like most types of crime, can be related to drugs in any of the ways described above. Data on homicides are more complete than for other offenses, because homicides are more likely to be reported to the police and tend to be more thoroughly investigated. The two examples of drug-related homicide statistics given here demonstrate some of the difficulties of quantifying the relationship between drugs and murder.

The FBI Uniform Crime Reports present data on two types of drug-related homicides: murders that occur—

- during a felony narcotics offense (such as drug trafficking)
- during brawls due to the influence of narcotics.

| Type of drug-related homicide | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Narcotic drug laws | 6.2% | 5.7% | 5.6% | 5.6% | 5.0% |
| Brawl due to influence of narcotics | 1.2 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 1.0 | 0.9 |

Source: FBI, *Crime in the United States, 1995*, table 2.14, p. 21.

The FBI does *not* include as drug-related a murder that occurs during a robbery or a burglary committed by someone under the influence of drugs or a murder that occurs during a robbery committed to obtain money to buy drugs. In these cases, the homicide is recorded in terms of its relationship to the most serious offense only, and robbery and burglary are more serious than drug trafficking in the FBI offense classification and in most State laws. Thus, current FBI homicide information may not categorize a large number of drug-related murders as so related. However, the FBI is developing an enhanced reporting system, the National Incident-Based Reporting System, that would involve reporting all crimes committed during an offense. This system has been implemented in only a few States so far.

The following example further illustrates the difficulties of estimating drug-related homicides.

Drug-related homicide rates as defined using differing criteria in four cities, 1990

| Definitional criteria | Percent drug-related | | | |
|---|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| | City 1 | City 2 | City 3 | City 4 |
| | 36.0% | 25.7% | 39.0% | 44.6% |
| Committed during commission of a narcotics felony | | x | x | x |
| Dispute between dealers | | x | x | |
| Offender under the influence of drugs | | | x | |
| Victim under the influence of drugs | x | | x | |

Note: Data were obtained by the ONDCP Drug Policy Information Clearinghouse.

The percentage of homicides thought to be drug related reflects both the frequency of such murders as well as how the relationship is specified.

“What proportion of homicides is drug related?” This simple question is difficult to answer. The FBI’s definition is consistent but limited. Cities or police departments may have broader but inconsistent definitions. For offenses not as reliably reported or as thoroughly investigated as homicides, the question is even more difficult because no complete information is systematically available at the national level for *any* definition of “drug related.”

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