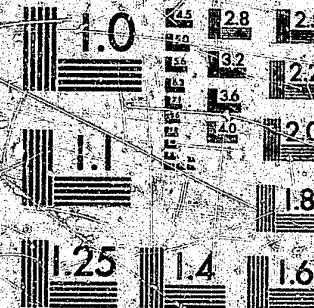


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National Institute  
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Research in Brief

February 1985

## Probing the Links Between Drugs and Crime

Bernard A. Gropper, Ph.D.

The nature and extent of the linkages between drugs and crime are far from being fully understood. Yet, the belief that they *are* linked is fundamental to our efforts to control crime through the prevention and control of drug abuse.

Considerable evidence has been accumulated over the years that drugs and crime are often found together, and many theories have been advanced attempting to explain how many factors—including drugs—may contribute to the onset or continuance of criminal behavior (BJS, March 1983; Gandossy et al., 1980). A recent national survey, for example, reported that almost one-third of all inmates of

State prisons were under the influence of an illegal drug or had drunk very heavily just before they committed the crimes for which they were incarcerated (BJS, Jan. 1983; BJS, March 1983).

Such aggregate data strongly suggest, but cannot directly assess, the degree to which the presence of these substances contributed to the occurrence of these crimes or to their severity because they fail to link individual drug consumption to individual crime commission.

To be a useful guide for public policy, research on the links between drugs and crime must be tailored to specific

policy areas. Aggregate statistics, for example, can tell us something about overall numbers of drug abusers, total costs of drugs to society, or other large-scale questions, but they offer little insight into many other issues important to policymakers. Informed public policy also requires knowledge of individual and small-group questions—the “hows” and “whys” by which drug abuse and crime are linked at the user level.

This article briefly summarizes some findings from recent research that examined the nature and extent of drug-crime links at the individual offender level. The studies reviewed assess some of the fundamental assumptions un-

### From the Director

The National Institute of Justice has made research on the relationship of drugs to crime a priority. In this Brief, Institute staff member Bernard A. Gropper reviews key findings from current research in this important area.

I am pleased that Dr. Gropper has pulled together highlights not only from the studies he has been managing for the Institute but from research sponsored by other agencies that make up our Nation's combined efforts against drug abuse.

The evidence emerging from the research is helping to advance our under-

standing of the “hows” and “whys” of drug-crime linkages. It indicates that intensive narcotics abusers are heavily involved in crime, much of it violent. Contrary to what has been believed, heroin-using criminals appear to be just as likely as non-drug-using offenders to commit violent crimes such as homicide and rape and even more likely to commit robberies and weapons offenses.

Such research has important policy implications. It dispels the myth that the only victims of drug abuse are the consumers. It reveals that many addicts are more violent than was previously believed. And it tells us that targeting enforcement and treatment efforts against the serious, heavy narcotics

abuser is likely to give us the greatest payoff in terms of crime reduction.

The new knowledge emerging from research is important to all those concerned about drug abuse—not just criminal justice officials but parent groups and school officials. Increasingly, they can turn to objective data to inform the debate over drugs. Such information can form the basis for more effective prevention and control policies, thus reducing the possibility that innocent victims may pay the price of uninformed policies.

James K. Stewart  
Director  
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derlying drug control and treatment policies. Among these are:

- Different levels of abuse of such drugs as heroin are directly related to criminality at the individual level, and individuals who abuse such drugs in differing degrees of severity will tend to have corresponding patterns of severity in criminal behavior.
- Even among high-risk individuals with established patterns of both drug abuse and criminality, an increase or reduction in level of drug abuse will be associated with a corresponding increase or reduction in criminality.
- Street-level heroin abusers tend to engage in a variety of criminal acts and other behavior to support their drug habits and personal survival needs, with corresponding costs to their victims, their families, and society in general.

### The role of research in separating myth from reality

Drugs are surrounded by myth and, to some extent, probably always will be. But closer examination and systematic research have shown that many widely held beliefs about drugs and drug users are untrue, and that others are relatively simplistic. The reality of drug abuse is so interconnected with other factors affecting human behavior as to make such beliefs a poor basis for guiding public policy unless those other factors are also taken into account.

**Direct and indirect relations between drugs and crime.** National policy concerns and National Institute of Justice's overall research objectives encompass both the *direct* and *indirect* relations of substance abuse to criminal behavior—the ways in which drug abuse and trafficking affect the behaviors and crime patterns of those *directly* involved (whether they use the drugs themselves or simply deal in them), and the *indirect impacts* of drug abuse and drug-related crime on our criminal justice system and all levels of our society.

The *direct impacts* of drugs or alcohol on a user's behavior reflect both physical and physiological factors. The near-

### Effects of drugs on criminality

**Drugs and violent crime.** Recently completed National Institute of Justice-supported studies of career criminals by researchers at RAND (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982) found that a majority of the most serious offenders (the "violent predators," among the inmates in prisons and jails of three States had histories of heroin use, frequently in combination with alcohol and other drugs. Such a history of drug abuse, in fact, proved to be one of the best "predictors" of serious career criminality.

Other National Institute of Justice-funded research (Wish, 1982; Johnson, Wish, Strug, and Chaiken, 1983) indicates that narcotics abusers engage in violence more often than earlier studies would lead us to believe. Recent studies have shown that heroin-using offenders are just as likely as their non-drug-using or non-heroin-using counterparts to commit violent crimes (such as homicide, sexual assault, and arson), and even more likely to commit robbery and weapons offenses.

Data being developed by researchers at the Interdisciplinary Research Center on the Relations of Drugs and Alcohol to Crime (IRC) lend further support to the growing body of evidence suggesting that drug abusers are at high risk for violence. Reports from several cities indicate that one-quarter or more of homicides are related to drug-trafficking (Goldstein, 1982; McBride, 1983).

Perhaps even more disturbing is the finding that 75 percent of all robberies reported by a national sample of youth and 50 percent of the felony assaults were due to a small, but highly criminal, group. This was the sub-sample, comprising less than 3 percent of all youth, who had committed three or more index offenses and were pill or cocaine/heroin users (Johnson, Wish, and Huizinga, 1983).

Robberies and assaults, in fact, are proving to be rare among criminally active youths who are not also involved in illicit drug use. While such data cannot show whether drug abuse is necessarily the primary or only cause of these behaviors, they do show that it is very much a characteristic of serious and violent offenders.

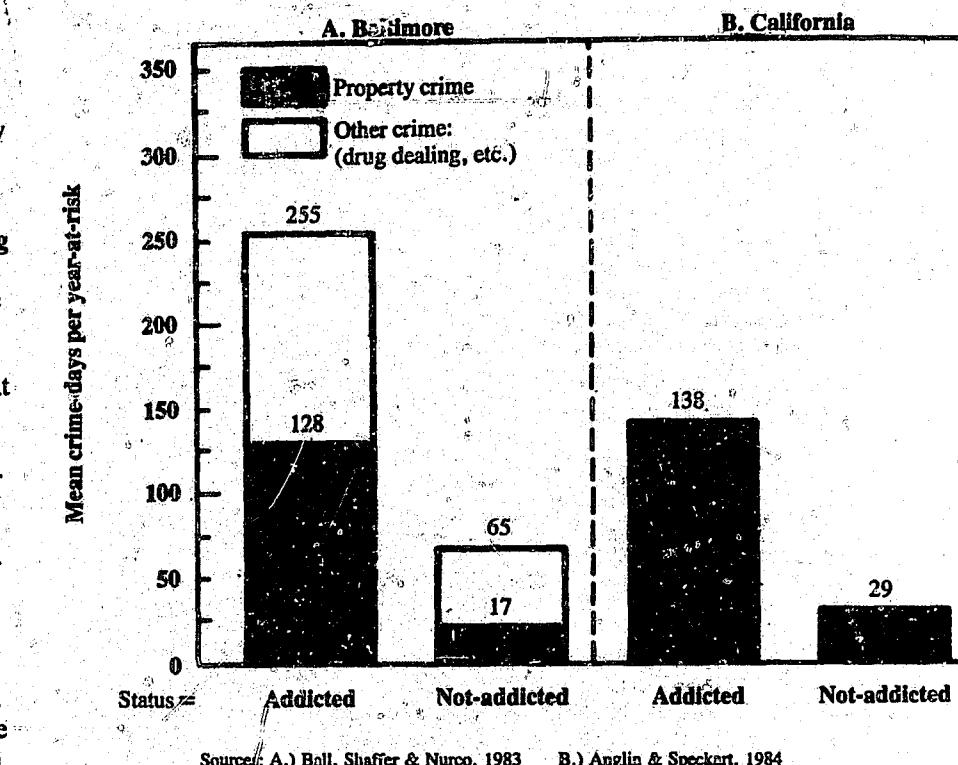
**Changes in crime with changes in drug use.** Among the most compelling evidence of the impacts of hard drug use on crime are the findings reported by teams of researchers in Baltimore (Ball, Shaffer, and Nurco, 1983) and at UCLA (McGlothlin et al., 1978; Anglin and Speckart, 1984). These studies clearly confirm one of the major assumptions of drug treatment—that reducing the level of drug usage can reduce the level of criminal activity, even among relatively hard-core drug users.

The Baltimore team analyzed background factors and long-term patterns of crime for 354 black and white male heroin addicts. The sample was drawn from more than 7,500 known opiate users arrested (or identified) by Baltimore police between 1952 and 1976 so as to be representative of the addict male population at large.

The results show how the intensity of the criminal behavior—especially property crime—of such addicts tends to be directly related to their current drug use status. During a 9-year period at risk, their crime rates dropped to relatively low levels during periods when they had little or no narcotic use. While they were actively addicted, however, their criminality was typically about 4 times to 6 times higher (Figure 1). Overall, they averaged 2,000 crime-days (defined as any day on which they committed one or more crimes) per addict. For those who had several periods of addiction and reduction or cessation of narcotics use, the levels of criminality clearly tended to rise and fall with drug usage.

The UCLA team's analyses yield parallel patterns. Their Southern California sample consisted of 753 white and Hispanic heroin addicts admitted to methadone maintenance programs from 1971 to 1978 (see Table 1 for a subsample of this group). Contrasting these addicts' criminal involvements in the year prior to their first addiction

Figure 1. Changes in criminality by narcotic addiction status



Sources: A.) Ball, Shaffer & Nurco, 1983 B.) Anglin & Speckart, 1984

Table 1. Relations of narcotic usage level to criminal behaviors and arrest rates

Ethnic subgroup: Subsample size <sup>1</sup>	White (N = 68)		Hispanic (N = 92)	
	Daily	Less than daily	Daily	Less than daily
<b>Usage level:</b>				
Criminal Behaviors: (per nonincarcerated person-year)				
a) Percent of time at this usage level:	53%	47%	55%	45%
b) Crime-days:				
Overall total:	138	29	129	20
Theft	.77	.24	.81	.12
Burglary	.49	.3	.47	.6
Robbery	.3	0	.2	0
Forgery	.8	1	.2	0
Other	1	3	.8	.4
c) Arrest rates:				
Overall total:	2.37	1.04	2.35	1.12
Drug possession	.77	.23	.87	.28
Burglary	.42	.14	.35	.12
grand theft				
Petty theft	.19	.08	.17	.06
Drug sales	.10	.02	.07	.03
Robbery	.09	.03	.04	.02
Forgery	.06	.01	.02	.00
Violence	.05	.03	.07	.07
Minor & other	.39	.30	.50	.31
d) Crime dollars	14,900	1,500	10,700	1,000

Source: Anglin and Speckart, 1984.

1. Subsamples who reported being addicted between 25 and 75 percent of the time during their addiction careers.

(defined as the first period of daily heroin use for 1 month or more) with their criminality in the year after revealed notable increases.

Arrest rates increased from 40 to 100 percent overall, with the largest increases occurring for burglary and theft. There were 21 to 30 percent increases in the numbers of individuals engaging in crime from the pre- to post-addiction years, and three- to five-fold increases in the numbers of days on which they committed crimes. For example, white males reported 20 crime-days per nonincarcerated year in the 12 months prior to first addiction and 92 in the year after; Hispanic males reported 36 and 107 crime-days, respectively.

#### Costs of street level addiction and crime

Another recent study, under National Institute of Justice and National Institute on Drug Abuse cosponsorship, explored the behaviors and economic impacts of street-level opiate abusers (Johnson et al., 1985). Its findings indicate that, although these abusers are able to obtain drugs and survive through many methods, criminality is very common among them and clearly related to their levels and patterns of drug usage.

The research team, from the IRC at the New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services, gathered data from 201 heroin users who were recruited directly from their Central and East Harlem neighborhoods. The subjects provided 11,417 person-days of self-reported data during 1980 to 1982 on their day-to-day drug usage and how they supported themselves.

The study classified users according to their frequency of drug use: *daily* (6 to 7 days per week), *regular* (3 to 5 days per week), or *irregular* (2 days or less per week). The findings provide a far more detailed picture of the street-level economics of drug usage and crime than has previously been available.

**Patterns of drug use and crime:** Like the Baltimore addicts, most of the Harlem heroin abusers committed a large number of nondrug crimes and

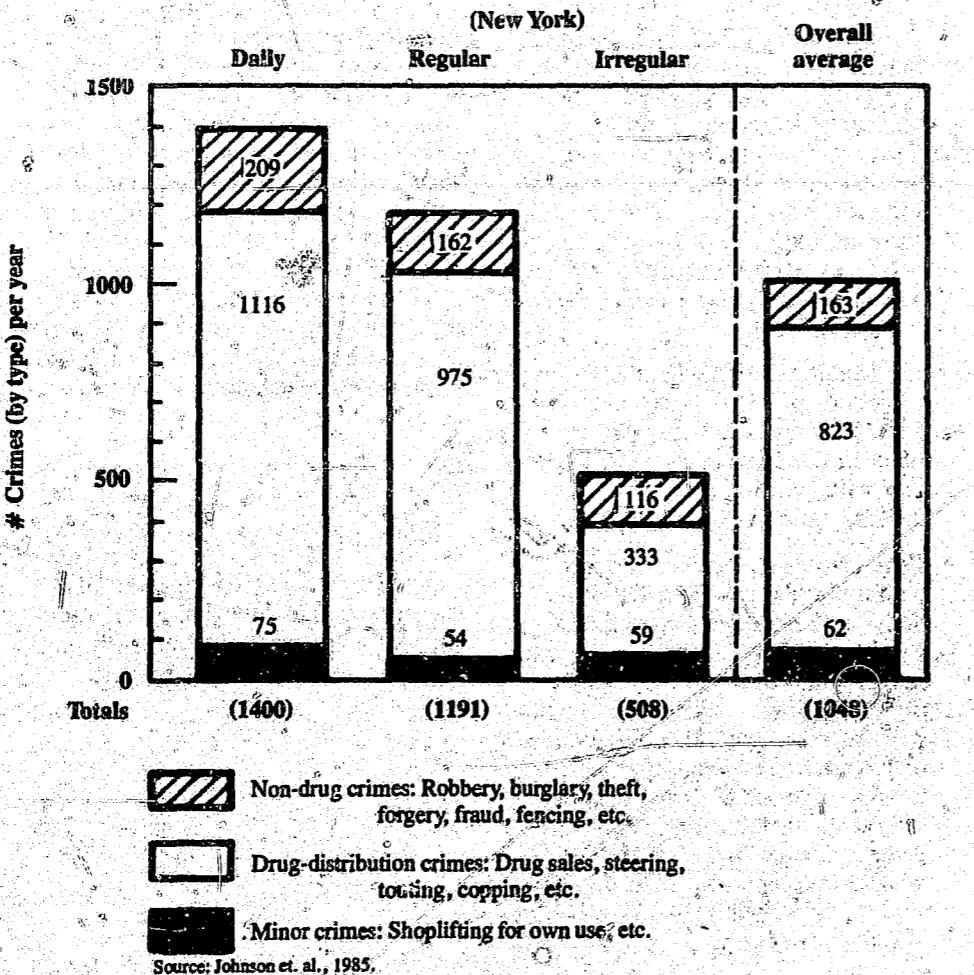
an even larger number of drug distribution offenses. Daily heroin users reported the highest crime rates (Figure 2). They averaged 316 drug sales per year and participated in 564 more drug distribution offenses through "steering" (directing customers to sources of supply), "touting" (promoting a particular dealer's drugs) or "copping" (conveying drugs and money between buyers and sellers, who may not actually meet). Daily heroin users also committed more violent crimes (i.e., robberies), one-quarter or more of which were committed against other drug users or dealers, drunks, and other street people.

Almost all tended to use a variety of other drugs in addition to heroin; 90 percent also used cocaine and alcohol, and 73 percent used marijuana. Some drug use occurred on 85 percent of the days—heroin on 54 percent of the days, alcohol on 51 percent, cocaine on 27 percent, and illicit methadone on 10 percent.

The daily heroin users each consumed over \$17,000 worth of drugs per year, compared to about \$5,000 for the irregular users, with *noncash arrangements* covering about one-third of their consumption. Daily heroin users also committed about twice as many robberies and burglaries as regular users, and about five times as many as the irregular users.

However, the daily heroin users did *not* tend to commit more crimes per day than the other groups. Most of them had more criminal cash income during a year only because they were criminally active on *more days* (209 nondrug crimes per year compared with 162 among regular and 116 among irregular users). The daily users did *not* tend to have significantly higher arrest or incarceration rates than the less intensive users, and may thus be considered more "successful" as criminals since they committed more crimes and used more drugs than the less regular users.

Figure 2. Crime rates of street heroin abusers by level of drug usage



**Relatively modest returns per crime.** The returns per-crime proved to be relatively small, though they tended to be somewhat greater for the daily users (\$41 per crime) than the \$25 per crime netted by the irregular users. The average returns from robbery (\$80) and burglary (\$81) were modest compared with the risks. The typical drug sale or distribution offense provided \$5 or less cash income.

The average daily heroin user gained over \$11,000 per year cash income from crime. This rose to over \$18,000 total when the economic value of the drugs received without cash payment is included. In comparison, an irregular user netted only \$6,000 total.

**Economic impacts on victims and society.** These figures do not represent the full range of economic consequences that heroin users impose upon other persons and upon society. To provide a somewhat more extensive picture, Johnson et al. (1985) developed estimates of 33 different types of economic harm imposed by such street heroin abusers. Among them were:

- **Nondrug crime.** The average street heroin abuser committed "nondrug" crimes (including burglary, robbery, and theft) from which victims suffered an economic loss of almost \$14,000 annually, based on the retail value of stolen goods. The toll from such nondrug crimes by daily heroin users was nearly four times (almost \$53,000) that of the irregular users (almost \$6,000).

- **Freeloading.** The public and relatives or friends of daily heroin users contributed over \$7,000 annually to them in the form of public transfer payments, evasion of taxes, cash "loans," and shelter and meals.

- **Drug distribution crimes.** Street heroin abusers contribute substantially to the "underground economy." In addition to being drug consumers, they function as low-level drug dealers and distributors. In this New York sample, the average daily heroin user distributed approximately \$26,000 per year in illegal drugs. From this, they received about 40 percent in cash or drug "wages," while 60 percent went to higher level dealers and others in the illegal drug distribution system.

The combined costs imposed on society by the daily heroin users in this study totaled about \$55,000 annually per offender. Regular heroin users cost society about \$32,000, and irregular users about \$15,000 each per year. These costs are *in addition* to those due to other economic factors typically addressed by prior research on social costs—such as foregone productivity of legitimate work; criminal justice system expenses for police, courts, corrections, probation and parole; treatment costs; private crime prevention costs; and less tangible costs due to fear of crime and the suffering of victims.

#### Policy implications

What sort of overall picture can we draw from the types of studies summarized here? And, when combined with data from other ongoing efforts at monitoring the current "drug scene," what are some of the implications for our policies to prevent and control drug abuse and drug-related crime?

Perhaps the foremost finding is that heroin abusers, especially daily users, commit an extraordinary amount of crime. These studies reveal a lifestyle that is enveloped in drug use and crime. The major impetus for most of their criminal behavior is the need to obtain heroin or opiates. A large majority reported that they were only sporadically employed, if employed at all, during their active addiction periods, that they were generally helped or supported by a relative or friend, and that they had little legally generated income of their own.

Other information on the changing street scene suggests that heroin and other drugs are now typically so "cut" or impure that true addiction is less likely than in the past. Together with the insights into how street-level users support their needs through cash and noncash means, these findings suggest

the notion that addicts typically have uncontrollable cravings that compel them to commit crime immediately in order to get money to buy drugs is less valid for today's users.

Although narcotic addicts and users as a group engage in a great deal of crime, the amounts and types of crimes committed vary considerably among individuals. For the majority of users, their current patterns of criminality are strongly influenced by their current drug usage status. Based on the findings discussed here, treatment and education programs targeted toward reducing drug usage by the most frequent and intensive users could gain more significant reductions in drug-related criminality than undirected efforts or those aimed toward lesser users.

Information from other ongoing studies is also providing greater insight into the specific roles of drug and alcohol use in criminal events, both among heroin abusers and the general youth population. These confirm that street-level "addicts" can control their compulsion for drugs to some extent and can decrease or stop their drug usage for significant periods of time. In addition, both hard-core and less intensive users tend to modulate or defer their use until the social or criminal situation is more appropriate, typically taking few or no drugs before critical events—such as before committing a theft—and deferring intensive usage for safer situations or settings, such as after the crime is completed (Johnson, Wish, and Huizinga, 1983).

This article is a "progress report" on the continuing research efforts to develop current and indepth knowledge on how drugs affect crime. These findings are only part of a larger, broader series of interrelated efforts by both National Institute of Justice and other organizations to improve our understanding of the nature and extent of drug-crime linkages. Together, they help provide sound informational bases for the guidance of public policies directed toward the prevention and control of drug-related crime.

**END**