



# Chain reaction

The link between drug addiction and crime is not as strong or as clean-cut as the government is making out.

Researchers **Trevor Bennett** and **Katy Holloway**, who have investigated drug-crime links for the Home Office, reveal the truth behind the myths.

The new drug strategy is based on various assumptions about the nature and extent of drug-related crime. While most of these are soundly-based on research evidence, there are others that are less well grounded. It is important that the reality of drug-related crime is properly understood if it is to be the target of a multi-million pound strategy.

According to government policy, an offence committed by drug users is only drug-related if their drug use provided the financial motivation for the offence. If a drug user was motivated to commit the same offence for other reasons, then it would not be a drug-related crime. This problem is highlighted in the operation of mandatory drug testing of arrestees whereby officers of inspector rank or above have the discretion to request a test when they suspect that Class A drug use was a causal or contributory factor in the commission of a non-trigger offence. Yet establishing motivation is not required in relation to trigger offences, such as burglary and vehicle crime, which in practice might have nothing to do with drug use. Without knowing offender motivation it is not possible to identify which crimes are drug-related.

One of the motors driving the current drug strategy is that a high proportion of all crime is drug-related. An arbitrary figure of about 50 per cent is often cited as the proportion of all crime that is drug-related. This proportion can be found in *The Updated Drug Strategy 2002* which states: "There is a strong link between drug misuse and crimes such as shoplifting, burglary, vehicle crime and theft. Heroin, crack and cocaine users are responsible for 50 per cent of these crimes." This is a very important statement to make, yet no references are made to the source of this percentage, nor are there the statistics

available to conclude this.

Another belief driving the drug strategy is that reducing drug-related crime will make communities safer. The drug strategy progress report *Tackling Drugs Changing Lives* is subtitled 'Keeping Communities Safe from Drugs' and one of the aims of the *Updated Strategy 2002* is to reduce drug-related crime and its impact on communities. In order for the strategy to impact on communities, drug-related crime must be committed in communities.

However, the results of the NEW-ADAM (New English and Welsh Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring) programme, which interviewed more than 4,000 arrestees tested for drugs, showed that the most common offence committed by drug-misusing offenders was shoplifting (35 per cent) followed by handling (28 per cent), drug supply (15 per cent) and fraud (12 per cent). By comparison, few drug users said that they committed burglary in a dwelling (five per cent), robbery (three per cent), or theft of a motor vehicle (nine per cent) in the last twelve months.

In other words, drug users tend to commit offences not normally committed in residential communities while they tend not to commit offences common in residential areas. It could be argued from this that the crimes of drug users are dominantly against businesses rather than against neighbourhoods. This casts some doubt on whether the drug strategy is really focusing on the right kind of crime.

That a large proportion of crime is drug-related is based on several assumptions. The first is that crimes committed by drug users are connected to their drug use. The research evidence provides some support for this in showing that a high proportion of drug users report that their crimes are



drug-related. However, this needs to be balanced against the fact that a substantial proportion say that they are not.

The results from NEW-ADAM found that 39 per cent of drug-using arrestees said that there was no connection between their drug use and offending. An even higher proportion was found in Australia where over half of drug-misusing arrestees said that there was no connection. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that crimes are drug related simply because they are committed by drug users.

The second assumption is that when there is a connection between drug use and crime it is solely to obtain money for drugs. The NEW-ADAM surveys found that 83 per cent of users who reported a connection gave financial need as a reason for their offending. A slightly lower proportion was found among arrestees in Australia. However, research has also shown that drug use and crime are connected in several other ways. Almost one-quarter of drug users in the NEW-ADAM surveys mentioned pharmacological effects of the drug – including judgement impairment and increased confidence – as catalysts for committing offences. A further six per cent said that they bought drugs to celebrate a successful crime. In at least some of these cases, it is possible that crime caused drug use rather than drug use caused crime. It does not appear wholly justifiable to focus the entire drug strategy on just one possible connection when the research evidence suggests multiple connections.

There is no doubt that drug users commit crime and there is clear evidence that drug use and crime are connected. But much less is known about the mechanisms of the connection and whether drug use actually causes crime in the way implied in the strategy.

The debate is not helped by the concept of drug-related crime and the uncertainty about its definition, especially as far as what has motivated a crime. A better understanding is required of the innumerable ways in which drugs and crime are connected in practice, so that the strategy can be targeted towards these in an open and realistic manner.

A fuller picture can be gained by providing more realistic estimates of the proportion of crime that is drug-related. It is not good enough simply to assume that it is about 50 per cent. A realistic method of estimating the proportion is required so that progress in reducing it can be measured. At the moment, it is hard to measure drug-related crime and even harder to establish whether it has been reduced by the government's drug strategy.

■ Based at the University of Cambridge, **Trevor Bennett** was the principal investigator and **Katy Holloway** was the statistical analyst on the NEW-ADAM programme. They are now at the Centre for Criminology at the University of Glamorgan.

## WHAT IS A DRUG-RELATED CRIME?

An important starting point is to understand what is meant by 'drug-related crime'. The term was first introduced in 1994 in *Tackling Drugs Together: a consultation document* and was defined as, "...not only the offence of supply and possession of illegal drugs but also other criminal activity directly or indirectly associated with drug misuse". A more comprehensive definition was provided in 1995 in *Tackling Drugs Together: a strategy for England* which included offences committed under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, offences committed by persons acting as a consequence of drug misuse, acquisitive offences to finance drug misuse, laundering of profits of drug trafficking, and violent offences carried out in the course of drug distribution and trafficking.

It is clear that drug-related crime was originally conceived in a broad sense to cover not only acquisitive crimes committed for money for drugs, but also a wide range of other offences. Since then, strategy documents have continued to use the term without confirming the 1995 definition. This has resulted in the term being used in several different ways. On some occasions it is used narrowly as a synonym for crimes committed to fund drug misuse. In the consultation paper *Drugs: Our Community, Your Say* published in April 2007 it states that 'drug-related is crime is falling' and cites as evidence figures for recorded acquisitive crime. On other occasions, it is used more broadly to include most of the offences mentioned in the 1995 definition. In relation to mandatory drug testing of arrestees, trigger offences include a selection of acquisitive crimes and offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, Fraud Act 2006 and Vagrancy Act 1824. The uncertainty of whether the term refers to the broad or narrow version is unnerving as it confuses debate and makes measurement impossible.

## BUSTED! MYTHS ABOUT DRUG-RELATED CRIME

### MYTH 1:

*Most burglars are crack addicts desperate for cash to buy their next fix*

### FACT:

Only five per cent of drug-tested offenders carried out a burglary in the last year

### MYTH 2:

*Locking up all the Class A addicts will make communities safer*

### FACT:

Most drug-related crimes are against businesses rather than neighbourhoods

### MYTH 3:

*Drug-related crimes are motivated by money to buy drugs*

### FACT:

A quarter of arrestees said taking drugs was the cause, not the object, of offences

### MYTH 4:

*Half of all crime is drug-related*

### FACT:

Expert researchers in the field say this figure is not based on fact