

DRUGS CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Any illegal activity, such as the supply and use of illicit drugs, involves varying degrees of criminal behaviour. Concern about associated violence, not in a small part fuelled by sensationalist journalism, is inevitable. In September 1986, the *Daily Express* quoted Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Kenneth Newman's prophecy that: "Violence to people on the street could well fall as the need to finance addiction waned. And some of the more perverted crimes such as rape, torture and murder would fall as people breathe a drug-free atmosphere."

To unravel the link between drugs and violence, and to lay to rest some of the myths, three questions need to be addressed.

- ▶ Do illicit drugs *in themselves* incite violence, and in particular violent crimes?
- ▶ What types of crimes do drug takers commit, and what is the associated level of violence?
- ▶ What is the 'arena' of drug-related violence and which groups are its victims?

Do drugs cause violence?

The answer to this question, with one or two qualifications, is no.^{1,2} The most common drugs of abuse are strong nervous system depressants valued for their euphoria-inducing and tranquillising effects rather than as aids to aggression (though it's well-known that depressants such as alcohol can release violence through their disinhibitory effects).

Even in the case of hallucinogenic drugs (such as LSD and phencyclidine or PCP), or amphetamines and other stimulants, there is no convincing evidence for a direct link between pharmacological effects and violent crime.

Hallucinogenic drugs do cause bizarre behaviour, which sometimes leads to violence; but this is sporadic and seemingly random, rather than a predictable effect of the drug, and does not result in aggressive crimes, planned and carried out against the person.

● **Amphetamines:** The case regarding stimulants, especially amphetamines — is more complicated. Until the mid-1970s, research tended to conclude amphetamines were a direct cause of violent behaviour.³ However, this early research has been criticised for concentrating on clinical observations of small numbers of amphetamine users who had exhibited violent behaviour.⁴

Since then, studies have tended to move away from the clinical setting and out on to the streets. The consequence has been to give greater prominence to the mediating

Who, if anyone, needs to worry about drug-related violence? The person on the street, shopkeepers, governments — or drug users themselves? Fieldwork experience in London and a review of the international research literature throws up some unexpected answers.

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effects of personality and context, thereby highlighting the importance of individual differences in reactions to amphetamine.⁵ Taking this point of view one step further, it has been stressed that the link between narcotics and violence has largely been generated by political leaders (and one might add the media) rather than by social and biological scientists.

At another level, common wisdom among regular drug users warns against the erratic and aggressive behaviour of 'speed-freaks' and 'barb-heads'. However, such behaviour is unpredictable, often dependent on the situation, and cannot simplistically be attributed to the effects of the drugs themselves.

Are drug users violent?

The short answer to this question is — no more than anyone else. Drug dependence, and the protracted process of procuring expensive illicit drugs, means that for many drug users crime is the only way to gain sufficient income to meet their needs. But most crime committed by regular drug users is non-violent crime against property (predominantly theft), perpetrated in order to support a drug habit.

Adulterated drug deals, 'rip-offs' and robberies, desperation and greed, are all potential scenarios for violence.

A whole body of research points to the fact that drug users are more likely to be involved in revenue-raising property crime rather than crime against the person.⁶ One US study from the mid-'70s found that drug users, particularly those dependent on heroin, were more inclined to property crimes, whereas non-drug using criminals were more likely to be involved in crimes of violence against the person.

More recently, 75 per cent of crimes (such as shoplifting for resale and burglaries of abandoned buildings) committed by a sample of heroin users in New York were found to have had no clear victims.⁷

Another US study has made a direct link between the price of illicit drugs and the level of property crime, concluding that a one dollar increase in the price of heroin

caused the drug user to commit crimes that would net an extra 30 cents.

Not that drugs and crime are never related. It has been said that criminal enterprises in the USA have a tradition of violence; it would be odd if drug-related crime were a total exception. In Britain, where an equivalent culture of violence is not prevalent, the level of violent crime among drug users is low.

● **Home Office statistics** for opiate addicts first notified in 1979 to 1981 show that 42 per cent were first convicted for theft, 19 per cent for drugs, and 18 per cent for burglary.⁸ Among the convicted population in general, these figures are 60 per cent, two per cent, and 11 per cent respectively.

The proportion of convictions for burglary and theft (the crimes more likely to be associated with violence) among addicts declined over the period just before, and up to two years after, notification. Indeed, the level of violent crime remained lower, at around six per cent of the crimes addicts were convicted of, than the equivalent figure of 12 per cent for the general convicted population. As the Home Office statistics point out: "the involvement of notified addicts in violent crime appeared to be small and stable".⁹

Fieldwork at the Drug Indicators Project among 'addicts' not notified to the Home Office, gives no reason to suspect that the situation is any different for this group, where fraud, shoplifting and theft are the main forms of street-level crime.

IT IS IMPORTANT to make the point that people dependent on illicit drugs come from all walks of life — not all resort to non-drug crime to support their habits. At one end of the scale celebrities like Boy George can maintain a reported eight gram a day (£640) heroin habit from their legitimate earnings. Others hold down a variety of jobs, live on the dole, and bring up families, without becoming involved in fund-raising crime. Yet others get involved in small-scale dealing, or 'serving' to friends, to support their drug dependency.

American research in the 1970s showed that the percentage of dependent drug users resorting to crime as their primary means of support, ranged from a low of about 30 per cent (among white females) to ▶

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a high of 80 per cent (among black males).¹⁰ Later research confirmed the lower levels of criminal activity among women drug users.

Who suffers?

Again, there is a short answer: violence takes place largely between drug users and drug dealers themselves, though this is not the whole story.

At one level, the violent exploits of internationally organised criminal syndicates in the drugs trade, such as the Mafia and the Triads, are legend. The upsurge of cocaine trafficking and the value of the 'narcolire' has meant high stakes are involved. Dramatic machine-gun shoot-outs between importers and distributors on the streets of New York and South Florida, and violent incidents between cocaine dealers in London, have made gripping news.¹¹

Such extremes of violence are very much contained within the trafficking world itself, where high rewards and strict codes of conduct mean fierce economic competition, and cursory penalties for misconduct.

At another level, a link can be made with 'terrorist' acts, with both left- and right-wing groups involved in the sale of drugs for revenue to buy arms. The IRA, the Red Brigade, and Basque separatists in ETA, plus a range of neo-nazi groups, have all been implicated in trafficking in heroin or cannabis for arms.

At one end of the political spectrum, drugs and arms trading have created links between European fascists and Lebanese Phalangists. At the other, Turkish left-wing groups were found to be exchanging heroin for guns in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia.

In 1982, Omega 7, the anti-Castro organisation, were responsible for a series of bombings in the USA. After finding 40 pounds of marijuana in the flat of one of its members, the FBI concluded that drug trafficking was helping to finance the group's armoury.¹² In this convoluted way, another chain in the link between drugs and violence can be made.

However, it is between and among drug users themselves that violence more direct-

Fieldwork experience at the Drug Indicators Project has confirmed that a group of non-drug using criminals have been identifying, threatening, and robbing drug dependent women, who more often than not are living on their own with small children. Out of economic necessity, these women have turned to small-scale dealing to maintain their drug habits and support their families. Pinpointed as particularly vulnerable, they have been systematically threatened by the gang until drugs and money are handed over. Shotguns have been pointed into babies' prams, knives pressed to small children's throats, and bottles of acid held over their heads. That no serious injury has occurred is due to the fact that the women concerned have always given over whatever drugs or money were in their possession.¹³

SUMMARY

- ▶ Drugs do not of themselves cause violent criminal behaviour. Drug effects may raise or lower resistance to violent behaviour, but personality, situation and culture remain critical determinants.
- ▶ The vast majority of drug-related crime is against property, accomplished to support a dependence upon expensive (and sometimes elusive) illicit drugs.
- ▶ Very few regular, dependent, drug users relish petty crime; nor are they proud of it.
- ▶ Violent acts are perpetrated by drug users — but so are they by every sector of society. Some will kill for a £10 bag of heroin or a 'line' of cocaine. Others will kill for the price of a taxi fare or on the result of a football match.
- ▶ Most violence directly associated with drugs and drug dealing takes place between and among dealers and users themselves.
- ▶ However, there is an indirect link between violence and drugs, both with respect to international 'terrorism' and organised syndicated crime.
- ▶ People dependent on illicit drugs are sometimes on the receiving end of intimidation and violence from the public they are supposed to threaten.

ly related to drugs tends to take place. The daily round of 'scoring' and 'dealing', which fills much of a regular drug user's time, is the arena in which most violence occurs. Adulterated drug deals, 'rip-offs' and robberies, desperation and greed, are all potential scenarios for violence.

A description of the amphetamine scene in San Francisco makes a point that has general application:

"Most of the criminality is directed towards other members of the drug scene . . . Most of the violence . . . results from an interaction among drug effect, lack of social controls within the subculture, and a variety of economic factors, including the way the market place is sustained by the individual users."¹⁴

● **Not only do drug users** face violence from fellow users and participants in the illicit drugs market: they are also vulnerable to abuse from other sources. Operating to a large extent outside the protection of the law, isolated and unprotected drug users are easy prey for other criminal groups, who are safe in the knowledge that

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their activities will not be reported to the police.

Such predatory violence has been common on the London drug scene for some years, but has reached frightening proportions in recent months (see box for an example). Even when criminals threatening drug users are charged and imprisoned, other groups are all too ready to take their place, so the harassment and violence continues.

In recent years, drug users have been accused of being responsible, not only for the increase in crime and the promotion of drug use among the young, but also for outbreaks of serious unrest, such as the Handsworth riot.

Encouraged by dramatic newspaper headlines and media stereotypes, it is no surprise that public opinion is firmly set against this group of people and 'vigilante' groups have been active on estates in several cities. For example, in Dublin, suspected 'pushers' were threatened with eviction; others were harassed by chanting crowds.¹⁵ More recently, well-publicised anonymous phone lines have given resi-

dents in many areas of the UK the chance to identify suspected dealers.

NO ONE WANTS a drugs problem on their own doorstep. Harassment and intimidation, often based on prejudice and misinformation, are no answer. Persecuting drug users and even burning down a rehabilitation centre¹⁶ does nothing to help problems of dependence; neither does it further our understanding of a social issue of serious and worrying proportions.

I have hoped to show that the link between drug users and dealers, violence, crime, drugs and the public, is complex. It is neither clear-cut in terms of causation, nor unidirectional in effect. □

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