THE THEORY & PRACTICE OF DRUG-RELATED CRIME

By Russell Newcombe.

Introduction

One of the three primary aims of national drug strategy in the 1990s is increasing community safety from drug-related crime. In its 1995 White Paper, the Government estimated that the cost of drug-related crime in England & Wales in 1992 was between £58 million and £864 million among heroin users alone. However, like most research into the drugs and crime, the White Paper provides no clear definition of drug-related crime, though this is clearly a prerequisite for designing and evaluating an acceptable strategy toward these intertwined types of deviant behaviour.

Toward this end, this short paper presents a framework for identifying and assessing the main links in the complex causal matrix underlying the ‘drugs-crime’ concept. This schematic model is based on my ten years’ experience of research into illicit drug use, and focuses on proactive criminal behaviour associated with the use of drugs. Thus, it excludes links between drug trafficking and crime, such as the corruption of public officials and money laundering, and between drug use and being a victim of crime.

The Structure of Episodes of Drug Taking and Criminal Behaviour

To start making sense of the ‘drugs-crime connection’ concept, we must first
recognise that both drug use and crime are labels for whole areas of deviant behaviour. For instance, there are many distinguishable sub-groups of drug taking and criminal activity. More importantly, drug use and crime are episodes of social behaviour, each having a standard internal structure. In short, each begins with an intention, which requires certain preconditions to be met in order for the necessary action to be undertaken. Once the action is performed, and assuming no obstacles are encountered, the desired short-term effects are achieved. Finally, various after-effects may also follow on, most of which are unintended and unpleasant though typically foreseeable. This five-phase structure of an episode of drug-taking behaviour or criminal activity is summarised in the chart below.

FIVE PHASES OF EPISODE OF DRUG-TAKING OR CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRUG/TIME</th>
<th>INTENTION</th>
<th>PRECONDITIONS</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE</th>
<th>SHORT-TERM EFFECTS</th>
<th>AFTER-EFFECTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WANT (fun); Craving</td>
<td>Knowledge &amp; access</td>
<td>Prepare and ingest</td>
<td>Intoxication</td>
<td>Come-down; Harms</td>
<td>Power/Wealth; Punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WANT (need); Impulse</td>
<td>Knowledge &amp; opportunity</td>
<td>Set up &amp; carry out</td>
<td>Gain; Satisfaction</td>
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Focusing on the drug-using episode, the two key components in each of the five phases is described and illustrated below:

(1) Intention to consume the drug

1. Motivation to use the drug eg curiosity (experimental use), hedonism (recreational use) or craving/withdrawals (dependent drug use).
2. Trigger events eg offer of drugs, increased craving with the passage of time.

(2) Preconditions for consuming drugs

1. Knowledge of how to use the drug eg dose needed effective method of use.
2. Accessing the drug eg having money/resources to purchase/produce drug.

(3) Consumption of the drug
a. Preparing the drug for ingestion eg loading up ‘works’ for injectable drugs.

b. Ingesting the drug ie eating/drinking/smoking/sniffing/injecting/etc.

(4) Short-term effects (intoxication)

1. Experiencing intoxication, ie feeling high, thinking and perceiving differently
2. Exhibiting signs of intoxication, eg disorderly behaviour, altered pupil size.

(5) After-effects (post-intoxication consequences)

a. Medium-term effects, notably the come-down, including craving/withdrawals.

b. Long-term effects, notably health damage, socio-legal problems, and death.

The Prime Suspects for Drug-Crime Connections

It has been argued that the ‘drugs-crime connection’ can be broken down into several theoretically possible links between the core components of episodes of drug-taking and criminal behaviour. Some of the more recognisable or interesting causal links are briefly described below, under three broad headings drug use ‘causing’ crime, crime ‘causing’ drug use, and other factors ‘causing’ both crime and drug use. The first connection listed (1a) is the classic drug-crime link, namely economic necessity. The fourth link described (1d) is the popular notion of pharmacologically-driven crime, in which intoxication leads directly to aggressive or anti-social behaviour, via some kind of psychological disruption (see Power).

(1 ) Drug use leading to crime
a. Meeting preconditions for drug use may involve crime money is needed to buy drugs, leading to user stealing goods/money in order to fund purchases.

b. Consumption directly involves criminal offences (eg possession, premises).

c. Intoxication in some settings is a crime (eg driving under the influence of drugs).

d. Intoxication or after-effects may lead to disinhibited or disturbed mental state, resulting in crime (eg methedrine use leading to violent reaction).

(2) Crime leading to drug use

a. While setting up a crime, the people contacted and places visited may provide opportunities for drug consumption (eg using cocaine while planning crime).

b. After planning a crime, intoxication may be used to ass the carrying out of the crime (eg tranquilisers reducing anxiety of smugglers, alcohol giving ‘Dutch courage’ robbers, amphetamines giving energy and alertness burglars).

c. Drug consumption may follow on from some crimes for various reasons, including celebration, having lots of spare cash, to filling in time while having to ‘lie low’ to avoid detection

1. Other factors underlying both drug use and crime

a. Other causal factors in the present may be responsible for both drug taking and crime, eg poverty an unemployment have been claimed to be underlying causes of both heroin use and acquisitive crime, or of a broader ‘street’ lifestyle based on ‘taking care of business’.
b. Causal factors rooted in the past may underlie both drug use and criminality, for instance, inherited genes and/or childhood experiences may result in a predisposing personality (eg extrovert, unstable). A recent review the literature found most support for this hypothesis (Otero-Lopez et al). Research has generally found that, for the majority of drug-using offenders, criminal behaviour preceded use of illicit drugs though initiation into drug use increases their level of involvement in crime. There is also a growing body of evidence that ‘problem behaviours’ among young people are inter-correlated, ie come together as part of a package of problems exhibited by ‘risk-takers’ or ‘delinquents’.

Furthermore, in addition to influencing the intention to commit a crime, drug use may also influence the performance of the crime or its’ short to long-term effects. For instance, anecdotal reports suggest that drug users who inject Temazepam frequently experience the delusion that they have become invisible to other people. Accordingly, when such drug users go shoplifting, they may make far less effort to conceal acts of theft than they would when not on Temazepam. Consequently, they are much more likely to be seen and thus apprehended by store detectives. Exclamations of "How did you see me?" combined with expressions of genuine surprise apparently have little influence on their fate.

**Overview and Conclusions**

This paper has briefly described a schematic model of the causal connections between drug use and crime. More precisely, it has identified some key hypotheses* about specific causal links between the phases of the drug-taking-episode and the crime episode (ie intention, preconditions, performance, short-term effects, and after-effects). These specific hypotheses can be organised under three general headings: drug use leads to crime, crime leads to drug use, and other factors (eg social context, predispositions) lead to both drug use and crime. When studies of drug-crime links are classified within this model, it can be seen that just a few of the proposed connections have been well researched (eg economic necessity), while most have received scant attention (eg drug use enabling crime, post-crime drug use).

The sketchy model of the drugs-crime connection presented here glosses over many of the complexities of drug users’ psychology and social behaviour. Although space restrictions preclude a more detailed assessment, this paper concludes by taking a quick look at one of these ‘real world’ issues: the nature of the link between the desire for drugs, stealing things, and buying and using drugs. For instance, studies based on interviews with drug users often ask a question of the form "How do you pay for the drugs which you use?". It is well-known that heroin users, driven by physical addiction, typically carry out acquisitive crimes such as burglary and theft in order to fund their habit. However, in my experience, regular users of other drugs may
also use the proceeds of acquisitive crime to purchase drugs if they have no legal means of paying for them.

A broader picture emerges when the ‘drug funding’ question is converted into a different form, namely: “What are the main things you want to buy for which you carry out acquisitive crimes?” The common response of drug users to this question is to list several commodities not just drugs, but also food, transport, entertainment, accommodation, and so on. In short, many socially deprived young people commit acquisitive crimes to provide a source of income for all of their ‘costs of living’ from essential items to luxury goods. From this real-world perspective, claiming that an unemployed drug user steals in order to provide funds to purchase illicit drugs has no more ‘truth value’ or meaning than claiming that an employed tobacco smoker goes to work in order to provide funds to buy cigarettes. In conclusion, if the reduction of drug-related crime is to become a realistic goal for the second half of the 1990s, future research should pay closer attention to the real-world nature of the causal connections between people’s drug consumption and their income-generating behaviour.

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References


