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AIC *Crime reduction matters*



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Does drug use cause crime? Understanding the drugs-crime link

The existence of an association between drug use and involvement in crime is widely accepted. Many studies have repeatedly established a close relationship between drugs and crime.

But what is the nature of this relationship? Does drug use cause or lead to crime? Or does crime lead to drug use? Could it be that those who use drugs and those who are inclined to be criminals just happen to share many characteristics in common?

Properly answering these questions has important public policy implications.

There is a general belief that the drug-crime link is causal. More importantly, it is assumed that drug use causes crime. The criminological evidence to support this belief is not as strong as some might imagine. In fact, the best available research has generally concluded that the relationship is extremely complex and defies attempts to sort out directionality.

The common view, widely reflected in policy approaches here and overseas, is that at the very least drug use makes criminal involvement worse. Therefore action to reduce drug involvement (either through law enforcement or treatment) will probably reduce offending although it might not reduce the overall number of offenders.

Consequently one single model cannot account for the drug-crime relationship. Rather there are multiple paths that lead to drug use and crime. Research suggests that drug use and crime involvement have common origins. Factors such as poor social support systems, difficulty in school, membership of deviant peer groups, early contact with government services and a lack of access to economic support systems are common in the backgrounds of both drug users and criminals.

Action to address drugs and crime therefore must be a balanced mixture of measures designed to address long-term underlying causes as much as the immediate problems through education, law enforcement and treatment. This is reflected in many current Australian policy responses to the prevention and reduction of drug-crime problems. These include significant efforts to divert drug users from further involvement in drug use as a way of reducing criminal involvement.

The next two AICrime reduction matters (no. 23 and no. 24) look at current Australian examples of drug-crime diversionary programs and the drug court approach in particular.

Further reading:

National Institute of Justice 2003. *Toward a drugs and crime research agenda for the 21st century* NCJ 194616 Washington: US Department of Justice <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/194616.pdf>

Makkai T & Payne J 2003. Key findings from the drug use careers of offenders (DUCO) study. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* no 267 Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi267.html>

