



## Drugs and crime — a complex relationship

### Towards a definition of drug-related crime

The need to prevent drug-related crime is high on the European policy agenda, as illustrated by the fact that the current EU drug strategy identifies this objective as a key area of action for achieving its aim of ensuring a high level of security for the general public. However, a necessary prerequisite to discussion on the extent of this problem and for considering the impact of interventions is an agreed conceptual framework for describing the problem. This is also recognised in the current EU drugs action plan (2005–08), where the development of a common definition of drug-related crime is an explicit action. In this policy briefing the different types of offences that might be encompassed under a general heading of drug-related crime are explored.

Compared with the general population, offenders report high rates

of drug use and problem drug users are frequently found to be offenders. However, the relationship between drugs and crime is neither simple nor linear. Nor is it universal: many repeat offenders are not involved in drug use and many dependent drug users do not commit any crimes (other than drug use/possession, where it is criminalised).

Although studies do not show any strong link between experimental drug use and offending, they do tend to show that delinquency often precedes involvement with illicit drugs. This is especially true for those drugs particularly associated with dependence and problems, such as heroin or crack cocaine. Studies have also shown that dependent drug users may commit acquisitive crimes as a means of supporting their drug habits. For the career criminal, drugs may form part of the deviant lifestyle, with spending on drugs being a

demonstration of wealth and status. And some may go on to become more regular or dependent drug users, which can in turn lead to their increased involvement in crime or the drug market. Thus, a mutual reinforcement effect between criminal involvement and drug use can exist, with those involved in a deviant criminal subculture being at elevated risk of developing drug problems and those with drug problems being at elevated risk of becoming involved in criminal acts.

Studies have revealed various risk factors (some common, some not) for involvement in offending and in drug use. It has been proposed that the extent to which individuals adopt a deviant lifestyle may affect the various factors (substance-related, individual, social, cultural and environmental) that determine whether offending and drug use continues, progresses or ceases during the course of an individual's life.

### Definitions

The term 'drug-related crime' is used here to encompass four types of crimes.

**Psychopharmacological crimes:** crimes committed under the influence of a psychoactive substance, as a result of its acute or chronic use.

**Economic-compulsive crimes:** crimes committed in order to obtain money (or drugs) to support drug use.

**Systemic crimes:** crimes committed within the functioning of illicit drug markets, as part of the business of drug supply, distribution and use.

**Drug law offences:** crimes committed in violation of drug (and other related) legislations.

### Key issues at a glance

1. There is a great deal of variation in what is meant by 'drug-related crime' across disciplines and professionals; a definition encompassing four categories is suggested here as an aid to conceptualising this issue.
2. Although psychopharmacological violence is most strongly associated with alcohol use, illicit drug use, and particularly the use of stimulants, may lead to criminal behaviour by exacerbating existing psychopathological and social problems, or by increasing the risk of paranoid or psychotic episodes.
3. Economically motivated crimes have often been considered an inherent consequence of drug dependence, and a reduction in such crimes is usually seen as a measure of success for many interventions targeting dependent drug users.
4. Drug markets, because of their illicit status, sustain certain types of crime other than those associated with drug supply and distribution, often violent crimes, which may deeply affect a neighbourhood or a local community.
5. Violations of drug laws account for a significant proportion of law enforcement and criminal justice resources and, by drawing resources away from other areas, may impact on the commission of other crimes.
6. The few attempts that have been made to assess the extent of and trends in drug-related crime at national level show that many issues and challenges (conceptual and methodological) are inherent in such an exercise.

# Defining drug-related crime to assess its extent and patterns

## 1. A definition of drug-related crime

Any attempt to impose a standard definition on such a complex phenomenon as drug-related crime is necessarily reductive. However, such a definition of drug-related crime is essential to any attempt to assess its extent, patterns and trends. A number of different explanatory models for the drugs–crime nexus have been proposed: crime leads to drugs; drugs lead to crime; drugs and crime are correlated through co-occurrence; drugs and crime are mediated by a range of other variables and share a common cause. In practice, each model is sometimes valid and can be applied to some subgroups of the population of drug-using offenders or to some types of drug-related crime. It is important to remember that the relationship between drugs and crime can be a dynamic one and may vary even in the same person over time.

An increasingly common approach in empirical studies has been to apply the tripartite conceptual framework proposed by Goldstein for the relationship between drugs and crime. In this model, drugs lead to violence through an integration of the psychopharmacological, economic-compulsive and systemic models. Although it may not encompass all the possible relationships between drugs and crime, this approach does provide a useful conceptual framework for the analysis of drug-related crime. Additionally, from a policy perspective, it is helpful to include a legal definition model, in which crimes against drug laws are considered to be another type of drug-related crime. The resulting conceptual model, composed of four categories of drug crimes, is the basis for the definition of the term ‘drug-related crime’ used here, the individual components of which are discussed below.

## 2. Psychopharmacological crimes

According to the psychopharmacological model, the acute or chronic use of psychoactive substances may result in aggression and violence. The effects of such drugs include excitability, irritability, fear/paranoia, disinhibition, drastic mood swings, cognitive distortions and impaired judgement, any of which may lead to criminal behaviour. It is also important to include in this category crimes induced by the victim’s own drug use. Such crimes are less visible, because many go unreported. Thus, psychopharmacological crimes should also include crimes such as sexual assault committed while the victim is under the influence of alcohol or other psychoactive substances, but also robbery or mugging that is made possible because of the victim’s incapacitation and fights instigated under the influence of drugs.

Much of the existing research supports the view that there is a strong association between alcohol intoxication and psychopharmacologically induced crime, especially violence. Following a long way behind alcohol in this regard are the stimulants — cocaine/crack and amphetamines. The use of opiates and cannabis is usually considered to be unlikely to lead to psychopharmacologically induced crime, and may even contribute to reducing it in some individuals, as these drugs (and tranquillisers) tend to reduce violent impulses and aggression. However, irritability associated with the withdrawal syndrome, as well as related mental health problems, may be linked to increased violence.

While the pharmacology of most illicit drugs is well known, the specific mechanisms through which they promote violent behaviours are not fully understood although some substances, usually stimulants, are known to produce

**‘The need to reduce drug-related crime is now recognised as an important policy objective in Europe. Adopting a clear definition of drug-related crime is an essential first step if we are to develop the methodologies needed to assess not only the true extent of this problem, but also the impact of our policies and actions.’**

**Marcel Reimen, Chairman,  
EMCDDA Management Board**

psychotic episodes of behaviour and may well exacerbate existing behavioural problems. That said, no psychoactive substance can be said to have universal criminogenic properties and both individual and environmental factors can influence how the use of psychoactive substances impacts on behaviour.

## 3. Economic-compulsive crimes

Dependence on an expensive substance can lead users to engage in criminal acts to obtain the money they use to fund their drug habit. They may resort to both consensual crimes, such as drug selling or prostitution (where criminalised), and acquisitive crimes (e.g. shoplifting, robbery, burglary). Such offenders are sometimes paid in drugs. This category of drug-related crime also includes the forging of prescriptions and the burgling of pharmacies by drug users, both of which provide medicines that can be used as substitutes for illicit products.

Although many acquisitive crimes committed by drug users are opportunistic, some require more skill and others involve some specialisation. For example, fraud and embezzlement are white-collar crimes that require a specific professional environment.

While the term ‘compulsive’ suggests that a state of dependence is necessary, offenders in this category include all

those whose drug use needs to be supported by illegal income, which will be determined by their type and pattern of substance use, socio-economic situation and extent of deviant lifestyle. Indeed, not all those who are dependent on expensive drugs commit economic crime — they may regulate their use according to their financial resources and drug prices, attempt to increase their legitimate income (social benefits, employment, pawning goods) or avoid expenditures by maximising income 'in kind' (accommodation, meals, etc.). Many drug users utilise a combination of all these means.

#### 4. Systemic crimes

Systemic criminality refers mainly to violent acts (e.g. assaults, homicides) committed within the functioning of illicit drug markets, as part of the business of drug supply, distribution and use. Violence as a strategy of control is used in various situations including territorial disputes, punishment for fraud, debt collection and clashes with the police. In drug production and transit countries where the rule of law is challenged, systemic crimes may also encompass, for example, corruption of businesses, governments and banking systems or crimes against humanity by drug traffickers.

Systemic violence is linked to prohibition as it stems mainly from the illicit nature of a market characterised by huge profits and whose participants cannot resort to standard business law. There is no intrinsic connection with drug use, and it is less clear in general whether drugs (trafficking and use) lead to systemic crime or the reverse, or even whether they are just part of the same general lifestyle. However, the pervasiveness of violence in drug markets may increase the likelihood of drug users becoming perpetrators or victims of violent crimes.

Some commentators have argued that a large percentage of drug-related crime, especially violent crime, is the result of market forces. However, it is more

likely that systemic criminality follows a cyclical course, responding to changes in the dynamics of specific drug markets such as changes in drug demand and drug supply, in profitability and in community norms related to acceptance or rejection of violent behaviours.

#### 5. Drug law offences

Violations of drug-related legislation may include drug law offences such as drug use, possession, cultivation, production, importation and trafficking, but also other related offences such as the illicit manufacture and trafficking of precursors or money laundering. Drug driving (driving under the influence of drugs) offences are also included in this category of drug-related crime.

Studies of drug-related crime have often overlooked drug law offences as the link between drugs and crime is of a very different nature — in this case drugs and crime are linked by definition in the law, rather than by any effect of one behaviour on the other. Such offences are indeed intrinsically dependent on the prohibition of a set of psychoactive substances. However, it is important to consider the illicit status of these drugs as it is a factor in drug market violence and may exacerbate economically motivated offending by increasing drug prices. In addition, drug law offences account for a substantial share of law enforcement and criminal justice system activities and resources.

Drug use may also have an indirect impact on crimes other than drug law offences. Indeed, from an economic perspective, which views crime as a reaction to prices and incentives, any increase in the proportion of available resources allocated to the enforcement of drug laws would reduce the resources allocated to other crimes. This would make such crimes relatively less costly (through reduced probability of arrest and shortened incarceration) and therefore may increase their incidence.

#### 6. Measuring drug-related crime — issues and challenges

Many studies have been carried out on the links between drug use/trafficking and crime, mostly in the United States. Typically studies have looked at offending patterns in captive populations, such as those in drug treatment or arrestees and therefore provide a restricted view of the complex relationships between drugs and crime in a total population.

Estimating the true total volume of any type of crime, the 'dark figure', based on the fraction that is reported, is always difficult, and this is especially the case for drug-related crime. With the obvious exception of drug law offences, whether or not a reported crime can be reasonably considered drug-related is neither assessed nor recorded, making official statistics on crime of limited value in estimating the size of the drug-related crime problem when taken on their own. However, some studies have attempted to estimate the proportion of different types of offence that are drug-related and then apply this fraction to produce overall estimates of drug-related crime.

It is especially difficult to determine the nature of the link between drugs and crime, and particularly whether one behaviour is sufficient for the other to occur (a strict causal relationship) or merely necessary (a weak causal relation). However, it is important in any study of drugs and crime to distinguish between a causal link between the two behaviours in terms of overall life pathway (linked to temporal order) and one that pertains only to the specific situation in which a crime is committed.

The four categories of drug-related crime suggested, and the models on which they are derived, are not mutually exclusive. Both the models and the categories of crime can overlap, as can the populations to which they refer. Rather, the categorisation should be considered to demonstrate 'ideal types' that allow drug-related crime to be conceptualised and facilitate comparisons.

**Drugs in focus** is a series of policy briefings published by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), Lisbon. The briefings are published three times a year in the 23 official languages of the European Union plus Norwegian and Turkish. Original language: English. Any item may be reproduced provided the source is acknowledged.

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## Conclusions

### Defining drug-related crime – policy considerations

1. A range of factors and conditions lead offending and drug-using populations to follow a variety of pathways, each of which may express a specific connection (or not) between drugs and crime. Responses to tackle drug-related crime therefore need to be complex, differentiated and targeted.
2. Understanding the links between drugs and crime is not merely of theoretical interest but has profound implications for public policy as knowledge of these links determines how society responds to drug-related crime. Thus, it is necessary to promote research in Europe on the drug–crime link and its various expressions in order to determine how to reduce drug-related crime.
3. Although defining drug-related crime is a reductive exercise that cannot account for the whole complexity of the drug–crime nexus, a clear definition of the term ‘drug-related crime’ is required as a prerequisite for evaluation.
4. There is a need in Europe to develop sound methodologies, based on multi-source models, for assessing the extent and patterns of, and trends in, drug-related crime.
5. National estimates of the extent and patterns of drug-related crime are essential if studies of the social costs of drugs are to become meaningful, as such studies often face difficulties in taking into account crimes other than drug law offences.
6. Methodologies to estimate drug-related crime will help to improve evaluation of the effect of interventions and measures aimed at reducing drug-related crime, both in the field of drug demand reduction (treatment, harm reduction) and crime prevention/reduction (situational crime prevention, alternatives to imprisonment, social crime prevention).

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## Web information

### Australian Institute of Criminology, Australia:

DUMA (drug use monitoring) project: <http://www.aic.gov.au/research/duma/>

DUCO (drug use careers in offenders) project: <http://www.aic.gov.au/research/projects/0019-intro.html>

### Home Office, United Kingdom:

Drug Harm Index: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/notes/rdsolr2405.html>



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**OFFICIAL PUBLISHER:** Office for Official Publications of the European Communities  
© European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2007  
**DIRECTOR:** Wolfgang Götz  
**EDITOR:** Peter Fay  
**AUTHOR:** Chloé Carpentier  
**GRAPHIC CONCEPTION:** Dutton Merrifield Ltd, United Kingdom  
*Printed in Belgium*