

# Crack Down on Gin Lane

Marcus Roberts reviews evidence about drugs, alcohol and crime, and argues that the relationship is more complex than causal.

On 15 March, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit finally published the *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy* for England. As Prime Minister Tony Blair observes in a foreword, concern about alcohol use is being fuelled not only (or, indeed, primarily) by the health harms associated with chronic drinking, but also by growing alarm about the links between binge drinking and crime and anti-social behaviour in town and city centres. Bluntly, as Tristram Hunt commented in *The Sunday Times*, "if you have ever picked your way through Newcastle, Blackpool or Bradford after 11pm on a Saturday and witnessed the unedifying weekly ritual of vomiting, brawling, screaming and falling, you will have instinctive sympathy with the Home Secretary's latest crack down".

As Hunt notes, similar concerns have been periodically expressed throughout Britain's history, or at least from the eighth century onwards. He writes that "fear over the effects of excessive drinking is woven into our cultural fabric. In the 18th century the great moral panic was gin. In 1742 a population barely a tenth of the size of today's consumed 19 million gallons of gin – 10 times as much as it drunk today. William Hogarth graphically depicted the spirit's lethal consequences in his 1751 print *Gin Lane*, with its allegorical litany of drunken rioting, collapsing family bonds and endemic poverty" (Hunt, *The Sunday Times*, 21 March 2004).

Similarly, New Labour's approach to illicit drugs has, of course, highlighted the link with crime. So, in his foreword to the updated *Drug Strategy 2002*, Home Secretary David Blunkett writes that dependency on hard drugs "turns law-abiding citizens into thieves ... [and] ... contributes dramatically to the volume of crime as users take cash and possessions from others in a desperate attempt to raise the money to pay the dealers".

In fact, the relationship between both alcohol and drug use and crime has remained controversial. The Nacro report *Drink and Disorder – alcohol, crime and anti-social behaviour*, concludes that "it is very difficult to demonstrate a causal relationship between alcohol and crime" (Nacro 2001).

In a similar vein, Richard Huggins of Oxford Brookes University has argued that "the perception that there is a direct and causal relationship between drug use and criminal activity is too readily presented as an accurate description of 'reality' when the relationship is far more complex" (*The Observer*, 2001). Do drugs cause crime? Does alcohol? For many, the denial of a causal relationship is

intellectual onanism, readily cured by a trip to a city centre at chucking out time or a prison or treatment centre. So who is right?

## Common sense and evidence bases

The facts, it might be thought, speak for themselves. For example, the Alcohol Strategy states that the annual cost of alcohol misuse includes 1.2 million violent incidents (around half of all violent crimes) and 360,000 incidents of domestic violence (around a third) which are linked to alcohol misuse. As for hard drugs like heroin and crack cocaine, research has shown that many people are supporting drug habits that cost £10,000, £20,000 or even £50,000 a year with no legitimate income other than social security benefits. As recent Home Office research on the crime careers of crack users concludes: "Acquisitive crime was the single most important form of funding for their habit. A quarter relied principally on acquisitive crime; a further quarter 'used it as a subsidiary strategy'; one-sixth relied on drug dealing and one sixth on prostitution as their main strategy" (Brain *et al* 1998).

More recently, a landmark study concludes that the economic and social costs of Class A drug use are between £10.1 billion and £17.4 billion – £35,455 per user per annum (Godfrey *et al* 2002). It proceeds to say that drug-related crime accounts for a staggering 88% of this total.

## A more complex relationship

Tackle the problem of drug dependency and acquisitive crime will fall substantially. Tackle the problem of binge drinking and there will be far less violence and disorder, both on the streets and behind closed doors. In the face of the available evidence, it would – frankly – be perverse to deny this. So, does it really matter, at least for all practical intents and purposes, whether or not these relationships are described as 'direct and causal'?

Consider the claim 'alcohol causes domestic violence'. This is surely wrong. It is impossible to understand domestic violence without reference to social relationships. And what about other contextual factors such as inadequate housing, financial pressures on families and mental health problems? Similarly, if alcohol consumption is sufficient to explain all the violence and disorder at 11pm in Newcastle, Blackpool or Bradford, then why are drunk young men almost invariably hitting other young men on the streets, and not, say children or middle-aged women? Clearly, it takes more than a lot of lager or



alcohol to obliterate the norms and constraints of a culture. Our society has not only been complacent about alcohol-related violence, but also markedly indifferent to the violent victimisation of young men.

The relationship between drug dependency and acquisitive crime may seem a lot more straightforward. People get addicted to drugs and this compels them to steal things. But, again, things are more complicated. Generally speaking, affluent drug users don't burgle council flats. Indeed, official Home Office research failed to uncover evidence for a "gateway effect for drugs into crime", concluding that "the average age of onset for truancy and crime are 13.8 and 14.5 years respectively, compared with 16.2 for drugs generally and 19.9 for hard drugs ... thus, crime tends to precede drug use not *visa versa*" (Pudney, 2002). To say 'drugs cause crime' is to conjure up the image of an hermetically sealed box with an arrow going directly from drugs to crime. In reality, both hard drug use and criminality need to be placed in a wider cultural and social context, and (while a drug habit will tend to exacerbate a criminal career) will typically both be symptoms of other problems, such as a history of abuse, a lack of opportunity and/or urban decay.

All this has practical significance. Of course, it is vitally important to tackle alcohol and drug misuse, not least through further investment in treatment services. But it is also important not to fixate exclusively on the proximate triggers for criminality and to lose sight of the bigger picture. Both crime

and problematic alcohol and drug use need also to be (literally) 'kept in their place' and understood within their wider economic, cultural and social context.

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#### References

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