

Are drugs to blame?

Alex Stevens considers the evidence on drug-related crime.

Myths are useful. In recent years, the myths that drugs cause about half of both violent and property crimes have been heavily used by both academics and politicians. This short article will trace and criticise the development and deployment of this idea. Even if it has been put to some good purposes, it has served to obscure the link between socio-economic deprivation and crime.

Drugs and crime

Academically, we can trace this notion back to the most heavily cited framework for analysing the relationship between drugs and crime. Paul Goldstein's (1985) article posited a tripartite link from drugs to violence. It has since garnered nearly 250 citations, putting it way ahead of its nearest rivals for 'impact' in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Goldstein and colleagues (1989) developed an empirical test of this framework by applying it to 414 murders in New York City in 1988. They found that 53 per cent of them fitted into their three categories of drug-related crime. This study related only to murder and was done at the height of the crack epidemic – one of the most violent years in a violent city's history. A close reading of the 1989 study shows how it misclassifies several of the murders in its sample. The authors did not test the tripartite framework. They started from the assumption that it was valid, and then shoehorned in crimes to fit their assumption, in viciously circular

fashion. This has not prevented Goldstein's tripartite framework from achieving academic renown, along with the claim that drugs are responsible for half of murder.

Political myths

It is not so easy to trace the origin of the political myths on drugs and crime, although a likely candidate is a speech that Tony Blair gave in 1994. He claimed that drugs cause half of property crime. As he continued his famously successful campaign to wrest the issue of law and order from his Conservative opponents' grasp, he stepped up the rhetoric,

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making drugs the cause of crime on which New Labour could afford to be tough. In a policy paper of 1996, Jack Straw included drugs amongst a list of social causes of crime that Labour promised to deal with once in power. But after the 1997 election was won, drug use was the only issue that featured directly in crime policy making, with the inclusion of the Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Parliamentary debates on the DTTO featured many claims on the nature and scale of drug-related crime. The most heavily inflated came from Tessa Jowell, who

claimed that drugs were behind 70 per cent of crime.

The DTTO was not the only policy outcome of this focus on drug-related crime. It was also used by treatment and probation professionals in the newly formed Anti-Drug Coordination Unit and National Treatment Agency to argue for significant new investment in drug treatment. Their argument that treatment is the solution to drug-related crime was evidently persuasive. The numbers in treatment more than doubled in the subsequent decade and waiting lists fell as money poured into the drug treatment system.

Drugs Act 2005

As New Labour continued its efforts to manage away the impacts of crime on poor communities, its servants developed the exaggeration of drug-related crime. In a 2003 policy paper that prepared the way for the *Drugs Act 2005*, civil servants claimed that drugs cause 56% of the total number of crimes on the basis of their 'team analysis' of the New-ADAM study. This was a study that asked arrestees to provide a urine sample for testing, and to answer questions about their offending. It showed that high proportions of these arrestees were drug users. But its authors have repeatedly warned against the assumption of a simple, mono-causal link from drug use to crime. Indeed, their multi-variate analysis showed that socio-economic variables – such as poor education, unemployment and homelessness – were more important in predicting the frequency of offending.

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Another reason to doubt the civil servants' analysis is that the New-ADAM study did not use a random sample of offenders. It studied only those who were unfortunate or incompetent

enough to be arrested. Other studies of self-reported offenders have shown that drug users are significantly more likely than non-drug using offenders

to be arrested. Studies of arrestees will therefore exaggerate the scale of drug-related crime.

Exaggeration

Another exaggeration was then included in policy making, despite explicit advice not to do so by its authors. Their 'preliminary' estimate was that the annual cost of drug-related crime in 2000 was £13.9 billion. It was based on reports by drug users entering treatment in the NTORS study of their offending over the previous three months. However, other studies have shown that, first, drug users entering treatment are atypical of the drug using population; their problems and offending are more intense. And second, their offending tends to peak in the weeks immediately before treatment entry, making it unsafe to extrapolate from NTORS' three months for some users to an entire year for all users.

In the *Drugs Act 2005*, the government beefed up the powers available to the police for the Drug Interventions Programme. This programme aimed, in the words of the 2003 policy report, to 'grip' 'high harm causing users' of heroin and crack and to coordinate their treatment through the criminal justice system. It led to the introduction of rapid referral to opiate substitution treatment in many areas. However, this emphasis on treatment did not lead to a reduction in the use of imprisonment for drug offences. On the contrary, the size of this category of prisoners increased by 91% between 1996 and 2008 in England and Wales, with particularly rapid increases for foreign nationals and members of visible minorities. Neither did the introduction of treatment alternatives – such as the DTTO and its 2005 replacement, the Drug Rehabilitation Requirement – reduce the overall number of people sentenced to prison. This number stayed stable at around 90,000 per

year, while the numbers of people sentenced to treatment in the community increased from 2,000 to 12,000.

Deployment of the myths

So the deployment of the myths of drug-related crime led both to increased treatment and to a widening of the penal net. They also diverted attention from the other social issues that Labour had identified while in opposition. US evidence is instructive on this point. Reductions in crime there have often been attributed to the reduction in the size of markets for crack. However, other researchers have shown that crime fell fastest in cities that reduced their levels of socio-economic deprivation, regardless of the size of their drug market. In some states, crime has fallen while drug use has stayed stable (Zimring, 2010). In others, crime has stayed stable while drug use fell (Dobkin and Nicosia, 2009). There appears to be no direct link between levels of drug use and levels of crime, even if many offenders use drugs.

The myths of drug-related crime have also served to strengthen the discursive link between drug use and deviance. If drugs are seen, as they have been by one particularly ignorant politician, as 'the greatest cause of all crime', then it is less likely that people will welcome attempts to reduce punishment of users. The drug-crime link reinforces the idea that illicit drug use is inherently pathological, rather than – as it is in most cases – relatively harmless, subterranean play (Young, 1971).

The Coalition Government seems to be less entranced by these myths than its predecessor, although it has used the £13.9 billion exaggeration of the costs of drug-related crime (for example, in the recent public health White Paper). It still presents drug treatment as a way to reduce crime, but the focus is now tilted towards

getting drug users to 'recover' to abstinence, rather than reducing their offending through enrolment in opiate substitution programmes. There are now encouraging signs that the use of heroin, especially by injection, is falling in England (Hay et al., 2010). The expansion of drug treatment may well have played a part in this welcome trend. If this is true, then the use of the myths of drug-related crime may have produced some benefit. The danger is that – as the axe falls on welfare, housing and education budgets – the myths of drug-related crime will continue to justify a penal rather than a social approach to problematic drug use. ■

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References

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