

Drugs, alcohol, and criminal behaviour: A profile of inmates in Canadian federal institutions

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The scientific literature often mentions that there is a statistical connection between alcohol and drug consumption and criminal behaviour. However, there is little information available which would make it possible to quantify this connection, and specify the impact that drugs and alcohol have on criminal behaviour.

Consumption of psychoactive substances has two major effects: intoxication and addiction. These effects are related, respectively, to the psycho-pharmacological and economic-compulsive models of the connection between drugs and crime.⁵ The first model associates drug use and intoxication with a decrease in cognitive functions and a lack of self-control, leading to aggressive impulses, violence and lack of inhibitions. The second model refers to the huge costs that are associated with being addicted to certain drugs. A person addicted to these drugs would need to engage in lucrative criminal activities in order to pay for them.

This article explores and attempts to further define the links between alcohol, illicit drugs and criminal behaviour, taking into account the types of drugs consumed and the types of criminal behaviour displayed.

Methodology

Upon incarceration in a Canadian penitentiary, every offender is asked to fill out a Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument (CLAI) questionnaire. This questionnaire takes approximately two hours to complete. It examines different aspects of the everyday life of the offender before incarceration, including state of health, relationships with family members, friends and members of the community, alcohol and drug consumption, as well as the criminal profile of the offender. Table 1 summarizes the main subjects covered by the CLAI.

Robinson, Porporino and Millson tested the viability and validity of some of the components of the instrument using a sample of 503 offenders. They concluded that the instrument demonstrates good psychometric properties and accurately reflects the information found in inmate files.⁶

The Study group

Since the early 1990s, offenders entering a Canadian federal institution have filled out the CLAI directly

Table 1

Aspects of the everyday life of the offender examined by the CLAI				
Health	Social functioning	Drugs	Alcohol	Criminal behaviour
Nutrition	Spouse	Initiation	Initiation	Initiation
Physical activity	Family	History of drug use	History of alcohol use	Criminal history
Smoking	Friends	Impact on different aspects of everyday life	Impact on different aspects of everyday life	Estimated impact of drugs/alcohol on the crime
Sleep habits	Community	Profile (before 18 years)	Profile (before 18 years)	Number of crimes
Physical health		Profile (6 months before arrest for current sentence)	Profile (6 months before arrest for current sentence)	Most serious crime for the present period of incarceration
Mental health		Profile (28 days before arrest)	Profile (28 days before arrest)	
		Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST)	Alcohol Dependence Scale (ADS)	
		Treatment		

on computer screen. As a result of this procedure, it was possible to compile data on a total population of 8,598 offenders admitted to federal institutions from 1993 to 1995. This was the period chosen for the study, since the most comprehensive data was collected during this time.

The CLAI asks the offenders for their thoughts on the instrument. The answers provided indicated that 80% of offenders felt that the assessment was “easy” to do on the computer, 16% said it was a “little difficult” and the remaining 4% said that it was “quite” or “very” difficult. Among the participants, 81% indicated that the length of the assessment was “just right”, while 12% indicated it was “too long” and 7% felt it was “too short”. More than half (53%) of the participants understood the instructions and the questions “very well”, while 42% understood them “reasonably well” and 5% did not understand them very well. Most of the participants (91%) responded yes to the question: “Overall, did you like doing the Lifestyle survey?” and 90% of the participants would encourage a friend to complete this assessment.

The instrument can be used to identify the individual and sociodemographic characteristics of new inmates (all men). From this information, it can be concluded that, from 1993 to 1995 for the study sample, nearly one offender out of five (18.0%) was born outside of Canada and more than one quarter of new inmates (26.2%) were not white. Aboriginal offenders made up 5.9% of the total number of new inmates, while Black offenders accounted for 9% and Asian offenders 2.8%. The average age of new offenders admitted during the study period was 32 and the median age was 30, with a standard deviation of 9.7 years; 4% were under 20 years old, while 13 were over 70; 6% never attended school, while an additional 7% had a level of education equal to or lower than grade 6.

Profile of alcohol and drug use among inmates

Historical profile

The study revealed that offenders reported that they had typically consumed large amounts of alcohol or illicit drugs at some point in their lives: 95.1% had consumed alcohol at least once (average age of first consumption: 14.5 years; standard deviation: 4.3 years), while 62.7% were regular users of alcohol (average age of regular consumption: 18 years; standard deviation: 4.7 years). Four offenders out of five (80.5%) had reported using illicit drugs at least once (average age of first consumption: 16.4 years; standard deviation: 5.9 years) and more than half

(52.1%) were regular users of drugs, that is, they used drugs at least once a week for an extended period of time (average age of regular drug use: 17.7 years; standard deviation: 5.7 years). It took less time for an experimental drug user to become a regular drug user than it took for an experimental user of alcohol to become a regular drinker (1.3 years compared to 3.5 years). Although cannabis was the most common gateway drug (in 85.6% of the cases), 4.1% of offenders reported to have used cocaine as a gateway drug and 1% used heroin, one of the most expensive drugs on the market.

Recent use of alcohol and illicit drugs

Three quarters of the offenders reported to have consumed alcohol at least once in the 6 months prior to their arrest, with 56.8% having done so in the 4 weeks prior to their arrest. Half of the offenders used illicit drugs at least once in the 6 months prior to their arrest, with 45.8% having done so in the 4 weeks prior to their arrest.

While 19.1% of drug users took drugs nearly every day, only 13.3% of alcohol users drank nearly every day. Daily consumers of both drugs and alcohol were much more rare (5.7%). Drugs most commonly used either by themselves or with alcohol on a near-daily basis were cannabis, cocaine and heroin (see Table 2). More importantly, nearly half of the offenders (44.4%) consumed alcohol at least once a week, more than one third (33.7%) used drugs at least once a week and 18.1% were weekly users of both alcohol and illicit drugs. The drugs most commonly used at this frequency, either exclusively or with alcohol, were cannabis (24.5% of inmates), followed by cocaine (17.9%) and tranquilizers (6.4%). Heroin was used one or more times a week by 6.4% of the study group.

Table 2

Frequency of consumption of psychoactive substances among inmates in the 6 months prior to arrest

	Every day or almost every day	At least once a week
Alcohol	13.3%	44.4%
Drugs + alcohol	5.7%	18.1%
Drugs	19.1%	33.7%
– cannabis*	10.8%	24.5%
– cocaine*	9.0%	17.9%
– heroin*	2.7%	4.2%
– tranquilizers*	2.1%	6.4%

* These categories are not mutually exclusive.

Type of drugs and alcohol used on the day of the most serious crime

Let us examine the types of drugs used by offenders on the day they committed the crime for which they received the longest sentence (in the case of multiple sentences) (see Table 3).

According to the survey, half of the offenders reported they did not consume alcohol or use drugs on the day of the crime. However, 21% of offenders consumed alcohol, 16% used illicit drugs, and 13% used a combination of both. Violent crimes were the most common type of offence committed by offenders who consumed alcohol on the day of the crime: there were proportionately more instances of alcohol consumption (without drugs) on the day of the crime among offenders incarcerated for committing violent crimes, including assault (38%), murder (31%) or sexual assault (30%), than for any other crime.

Driving Under the Influence (DUI) offences and consumption of alcohol on the day of the crime are systematically linked (83% of DUI offenders drank alcohol on the day of the crime, and another 10% used both drugs and alcohol). The relationship between DUI charges and drug use, however, is far weaker (only 1% of DUI offenders used drugs alone on the day of the crime, while 10% used a combination of alcohol and drugs).

Drug use, either exclusively or combined with alcohol consumption, on the day of the crime is more strongly linked to crimes of acquisitiveness. There were proportionately more instances of drug use (either exclusively or combined with alcohol consumption) on the day of the crime among offenders incarcerated for committing theft (47%), robbery (42%), and breaking and entering (36%) than for any other crime. It should be noted that two types of crime, fraud and drug-related offences, are mostly committed by people who have neither consumed alcohol nor used drugs on the day of the crime. This is likely because the need to appear calm and presentable while committing fraud causes offenders (or at least 78% of them) to refrain from using any substances in order to avoid looking suspicious.

Finally, it may appear surprising that 72% of offenders who committed a drug-related crime did not use drugs or consume alcohol on the day of the crime. It is important to note that offenders sentenced to imprisonment in a penitentiary because of a drug-related offence are generally those who traffic in, cultivate or smuggle large quantities of drugs, but they do not necessarily use them.

Table 3

Percentage of inmates who stated they used drugs, consumed alcohol, or a combination of both on the day they committed the most serious crime for which they are being incarcerated (by type of offence)

	Alcohol	Illicit drugs	Both	Neither
Driving under the influence	83%	1%	10%	6%
Assault	38%	9%	22%	31%
Murder	31%	8%	19%	42%
Sexual assaults	30%	3%	11%	55%
Break and enter	20%	24%	12%	44%
Theft	19%	30%	17%	34%
Robbery	15%	25%	17%	44%
Fraud	10%	10%	2%	78%
Drug-related offences	5%	18%	6%	72%
Total	21%	16%	13%	49%

Intoxication and criminal activity

The connection between illicit drugs, alcohol and criminal behaviour can be explained, in part, by the level of intoxication of the offender.⁷ An intoxicated person could experience a loss of cognitive functions, which would cause them to act differently than if they were sober. There are no questions in the CLAI which allow for clear identification of the level of intoxication of the offender at the moment the crime was committed. It is, however, possible to estimate the proportion of offences linked to the use of psychoactive substances.

It has been previously noted that 21% of participants stated they consumed alcohol, 16% stated they used illicit drugs, and 13% used a combination of both on the day of the crime. However, for some people, the use of psychoactive substances is a part of everyday life, and rarely do these people make it through a day without consuming some sort of substance (as shown in Table 2). In cases such as these, it is difficult to establish a direct correlation between the alcohol or drug consumption and the criminal act. However, there is a question in the CLAI which does allow us to further understand the drug-crime relationship; it asks the offender whether he believes he would have committed the crime for which he is serving the longest sentence had he not been under the influence of a substance. Among the participants, 79% of alcohol users and 77% of drug users stated they would not have committed the offence in question if they were sober. These percentages can be applied as a reduction factor to the proportion of

Table 4

Proportion of crimes associated with drug use, alcohol consumption, or both			
Substances	Proportion of crimes associated with consumption	Correction factor	Proportion of crimes associated with consumption (corrected)
Alcohol	0.21	0.79	0.17
Drugs	0.16	0.77	0.12
Both	0.13	0.86	0.11

crimes attributable to the influence of psychoactive substances. The last column in Table 4 shows the estimated proportion of crimes associated with drug or alcohol consumption, once the reduction factor has been applied.

According to the information obtained by applying the factor, 60% of crimes do not appear to be associated with consumption of psychoactive substances. After correction, the percentage of crimes associated with alcohol consumption alone is slightly higher than that of crimes associated with drug use alone (17% compared to 12%). In addition, 11% of crimes were associated with both alcohol and drug use. It is interesting to note that this last group contained the fewest offenders who would have committed the offence even if they had not consumed any psychoactive substances.

Intoxication is not the only factor explaining the association between drug and alcohol consumption and criminal behaviour.

Addiction and criminal activity

Another possible explanation for the link between criminal activity and the use of psychoactive substances is the onset of addiction, and the amount of money required to feed the addiction. Money necessary to buy drugs or alcohol could be obtained using criminal means (economic-compulsive model).

The data collected using the Alcohol Dependence Scale (ADS) and the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) shows that 7% of inmates show signs of alcohol addiction, 22% show signs of drug addiction and 6% show signs of both alcohol and drug addiction.

However, not all addicts commit crimes in order to obtain their drugs. The CLAI explores this by directly asking participants if they committed the crime in question in order to obtain alcohol or drugs for their personal consumption. The answers to this question show that 2% of the offences were

committed by persons addicted to alcohol, 11% were committed by drug addicts in order to obtain an illicit substance and 6% were committed by persons addicted to both drugs and alcohol in order to feed their addictions.

Note that there is a risk of counting the same offence twice when considering drug-crime relationships: a person may have committed a crime in order to obtain an illicit substance while in an intoxicated state. Therefore, it would be incorrect to simply add the number of offenders who consumed alcohol on the day of the crime to the number of offenders who committed the crime in order to feed their addiction; it is important to consider the intersection of these two groups. If addicts who were under the influence of drugs and alcohol on the day of their crimes (already counted) were excluded from the group of offenders who committed crimes to feed their addictions, the proportion of crimes associated with alcohol addiction, drug addiction, or a combination of the two, only amounted to 2%, 1% and 3% respectively. In conclusion, 17% of the most serious crimes committed by offenders admitted to Canadian federal institutions from 1993 to 1995 appear to be related solely to alcohol, 13% solely to illicit drugs and 14% to a combination of both, for a total of 44% of crimes associated with either the consumption of, or addiction to, a psychoactive substance (see Table 5).

Conclusion

The data summarized above show that offenders consume a large amount of psychoactive substances, and although recent drug use is prevalent among offenders, alcohol remains the most commonly used substance before incarceration.

Table 5

Proportion of crimes associated with use of and addiction to alcohol, illicit drugs, or both			
Substances	Corrected proportion of crimes associated with drug and alcohol intoxication	Proportion of crimes associated with drug and alcohol addiction	Proportion of crimes associated with a combination of drug and alcohol intoxication and addiction
Alcohol	0.17	0.02	0.17
Illicit drugs	0.12	0.11	0.13
Both	0.11	0.06	0.14
Total	0.40	0.19	0.44

More specifically, half of the offenders were under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or a combination of both on the day they committed the crime for which they received the longest sentence. The most common substance consumed was alcohol, either exclusively or in combination with illicit drugs. There seems to be a connection between alcohol and violent crimes, crimes which attract the greatest amount of interest and cause the most concern in society. We conclude, in agreement with Roth, that we must not exclude an in-depth study of alcohol consumption when examining the connection between crime and thought-altering substances.⁸ In terms of drug use, cocaine was the most commonly used drug on the day of a crime. It was used far more often than cannabis, the second-most commonly used drug. We must note, however, that the effects caused by each substance could determine whether it would be consumed prior to committing a crime. Cocaine is a stimulant, which would better serve the offender's needs. While evaluating the connection between drugs and crime, it is important to note that a number of offenders who consumed an illicit substance before committing their crime report that they would have committed the same crime while sober.

Financial need is also associated with the crimes committed by offenders addicted to cocaine and heroin in particular, as these drugs command a high price on the black market. In this case, criminal behaviour is a means to acquire these drugs for the purposes of consumption. However, according to Hunt, consumption is not the only factor explaining the connection between drugs and criminal behaviour.⁹ Other factors, such as the price of a drug compared to a user's income and the level of the user's dependence, must be considered. It is

important to note that not all people addicted to drugs commit crimes in order to feed their addictions.

To conclude, the study clearly shows that there is a connection between drug and alcohol consumption and criminal behaviour. However, the study also shows that this connection can assume various forms. Intoxication can hamper cognitive functions, and thus facilitate criminal activity and even exacerbate an individual's aggressive behaviour. In this regard, the use of alcohol, more so than the use of drugs, is associated with crime, and in many cases with violent behaviour. Where criminality is associated with drug addiction, the crimes are often of an acquisitive nature. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that financial difficulties associated with drug addiction, coupled with high black market prices, cause addicts to resort to lucrative criminal activities. ■

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The January 2002 issue of *FORUM* will focus on "Academic Contributions to Corrections".

The May 2002 issue of *FORUM* will focus on "Health Care".