



▶ Drugs & Crime Data

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Fact Sheet: Drug-Related Crime

Drugs are related to crime in multiple ways. Most directly, it is a crime to use, possess, manufacture, or distribute drugs classified as having a potential for abuse. Cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and amphetamines are examples of drugs classified to have abuse potential. Drugs are also related to crime through the effects they have on the user's behavior and by generating violence and other illegal activity in connection with drug trafficking. The following scheme summarizes the various ways that drugs and crime are related.

Summary of drugs/crime relationship

Drugs and crime relationship	Definition	Examples
Drug-defined offenses	Violations of laws prohibiting or regulating the possession, use, distribution, or manufacture of illegal drugs.	Drug possession or use. Marijuana cultivation. Methamphetamine production. Cocaine, heroin, or marijuana sales.
Drug-related offenses	Offenses in which a drug's pharmacologic effects contribute; offenses motivated by the user's need for money to support continued use; and offenses connected to drug distribution itself.	Violent behavior resulting from drug effects. Stealing to get money to buy drugs. Violence against rival drug dealers.
Drug-using lifestyle	Drug use and crime are common aspects of a deviant lifestyle. The likelihood and frequency of involvement in illegal activity is increased because drug users may not participate in the legitimate economy and are exposed to situations that encourage crime.	A life orientation with an emphasis on short-term goals supported by illegal activities. Opportunities to offend resulting from contacts with offenders and illegal markets. Criminal skills learned from other offenders.

This fact sheet will focus on the second and third categories. Drug-related offenses and a drug-using lifestyle are major contributors to the U.S. crime problem.

Drug users in the general population are more likely than nonusers to commit crimes

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) National Household Survey on Drug Abuse asks individuals living in households about their drug and alcohol use and their involvement in acts that could get them in trouble with the police. Provisional data for 1991 show that among adult respondents (ages 18-49), those who use cannabis (marijuana) or cocaine were much more likely to commit crimes of all types than those who did

Table 1. Criminal behavior and substance use among 18- to 49-year-olds, 1991 provisional data

Criminal activity	Percent reporting alcohol and drug use in past year				
	Alcohol, and cocaine*	Alcohol and cannabis only*	Got drunk monthly (no illicit drug use)	Alcohol only	None
Any violent crime	26.1%	14.6%	6.3%	4.8%	2.7%
Any property crime	24.7	13.0	8.0	3.8	1.7
Driving under the influence	57.2	30.8	33.3	12.3	0.1
Sold drugs	15.1	2.2	0.2	0.1	0.0

* Indicates use of each of these substances some time during the past year, not necessarily use of both/all at the same time.

Source: Harrison & Gfroerer, 1992

not use these substances (table 1). Of those reporting use of alcohol, cannabis, and cocaine during 1991, 26.1% also report that they committed violent crimes during the year.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) asks the victims of violent crimes who reported seeing the offender whether they perceived the offender to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. According to the 1992 survey, about half the victims could not determine whether the offender was under the influence of a substance. Of those who could make a determination, about 59% reported that the offender was under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. The most common substance identified was alcohol not combined with other drugs. About 20% reported that offenders were under the influence of drugs alone or in combination with alcohol.

Arrestees frequently test positive for recent drug use

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) Program measures drug use among arrestees by calculating the percentage of individuals with positive urine tests for drug use. DUF data are collected voluntarily and anonymously at the time of arrest from arrestees in booking facilities in selected U.S. cities.

Data collected from male arrestees in 1992 in 24 cities showed that the percentage testing positive for any drug ranged from 42% to 79% across the cities. Positive drug tests for females arrested ranged from 38% to 85%. Male arrestees charged with drug sale/possession were the most likely to test positive for drug use. Female arrestees charged with prostitution or drug sale/possession were the most likely to test positive (table 2). Both males and females arrested for burglary and robbery had high positive rates.

Incarcerated offenders were often under the influence of drugs when they committed their offenses

Sentenced jail and prison inmates were asked whether they were under the influence of drugs or drugs and alcohol at the time they committed the offense that resulted in their incarceration. The percentage of jail and prison inmates who reported they were under the influence of drugs at the time of the offense varied across the major offense categories. The 1991 BJS Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities found that drug offenders, burglars, and robbers were the most likely to report having been under the influence of drugs. Prison inmates convicted of homicide, assault, and public order offenses were among those least likely to report being under the influence of drugs. The 1989 BJS Survey of Inmates in Local Jails shows a similar pattern (figure 1).

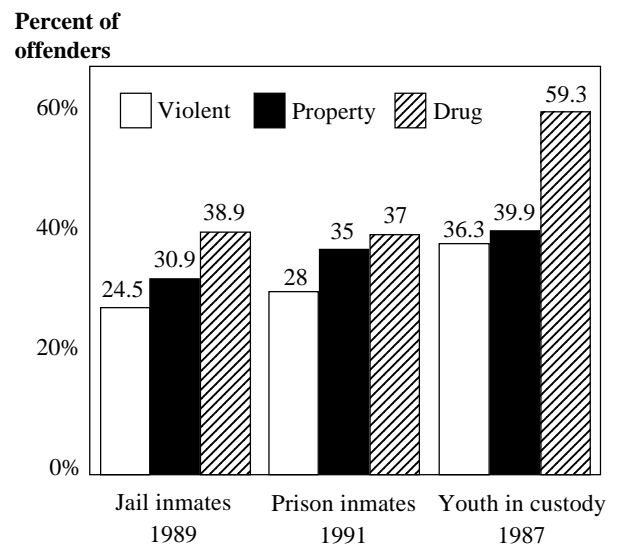
Table 2. Drug use by booked arrestees in 24 selected cities, by charge at arrest, 1991

Charge	Percent testing positive	
	Males	Females
Drug sale/possession	79%	79%
Burglary	68	63
Robbery	65	76
Larceny/theft	64	58
Probation/parole violation	61	60
Stolen property	58	74
Fraud/forgery	56%	51%
Fight/escape/warrant	52	66
Other	51	46
Weapons	49	62
Public peace/disturbance	48	61
Homicide	48	65
Assault	48%	50%
Prostitution	47	85
Damage/destruction of property	45	57
Traffic offense	42	48
Family offense	40	38
Sex offense	37	68

Note: Positive by urinalysis. Drugs tested for included cocaine, opiates, PCP, marijuana, amphetamines, methadone, methaqualone, benzodiazepines, barbiturates, and propoxyphene. Female arrestees were not tested in three cities.

Source: NIJ, *Drug Use Forecasting, 1991 annual report*

Figure 1. Offenders reporting being under the influence of drugs or drugs and alcohol at the time of the offense



Sources: BJS, *Drugs and jail inmates, 1989*; BJS, *Survey of State prison inmates, 1991*; BJS, *Survey of youth in custody, 1987*

The 1987 Survey of Youth in Custody findings are also similar for violent and property offenses, but much higher for drug offenses.

Offenders often commit offenses to support their drug habit

Another dimension of drug-related crime is whether the offense is committed to obtain money (or goods to sell to get money) to support drug use. According to BJS national surveys, the most comprehensive information available, an estimated 17% of 1991 State prison inmates and 13% of convicted jail inmates in 1989 reported committing their offenses to get money to buy drugs (table 3). Offenders convicted of robbery, burglary, and larceny/theft were most likely to commit their offense to obtain money to buy drugs. Offenders convicted of sexual assault and homicide were among the offenders least likely to commit the offense to sustain their drug habit.

Drug trafficking generates violent crime

Trafficking in illicit drugs tends to be associated with the commission of violent crimes. Reasons for the relationship of drug trafficking to violence include:

- competition for drug markets and customers
- disputes and ripoffs among individuals involved in the illegal drug market
- individuals who participate in drug trafficking are prone to use violence
- locations where street drug markets proliferate tend to be disadvantaged economically and socially; legal and social controls against violence in such areas tend to be ineffective.

The proliferation of lethal weapons in recent years has also likely made drug violence more deadly.

BJS examined homicides in the 75 most populous counties in the United States in 1988. Many of the homicides involved drugs or drug trafficking, including the following: drug manufacture, dispute over drugs, theft of drugs or drug money, a drug scam, a bad drug deal, punishment for drug theft, or illegal use of drugs. One of these circumstances was involved for 18% of defendants and 16% of victims.

The drug/crime relationship should be interpreted cautiously

The drug/crime relationship is difficult to specify because—

Table 3. State prison and local jail inmates who committed their offense for money to buy drugs

Most serious offense	Percent of inmates	
	State, 1991	Jail, 1989
All offenses	17%	13%
Violent offenses	12%	12%
Homicide	5	3
Sexual assault	2	2
Robbery	27	32
Assault	6	3
Property offenses	26%	24%
Burglary	30	31
Larceny/theft	31	28
Motor vehicle theft	NR	7
Drug offenses	22%	14%
Possession	16	10
Trafficking	25	19
Public-order offenses	5%	3%

NR = Offense category not reported separately.

Sources: BJS, *Survey of State prison inmates, 1991*; BJS, *Drugs and jail inmates, 1989*

- most crimes result from a variety of factors (personal, situational, cultural, economic), so even when drugs are a cause, they are likely to be only one factor among many
- what is meant by “drug-related” varies from study to study; some studies interpret the mere presence of drugs as having causal relevance while other studies interpret the relationship more narrowly
- reports by offenders about their drug use may exaggerate or minimize the relevance of drugs; drug use measures, such as urinalysis that identifies only very recent drug use, are limited.

Conclusion

The evidence indicates that drug users are more likely than nonusers to commit crimes, that arrestees and inmates were often under the influence of a drug at the time they committed their offense, and that drug trafficking generates violence. Assessing the nature and extent of the influence of drugs on crime requires that reliable information about the offense and the offender be available, and that definitions be consistent. In face of problematic evidence, it is impossible to say quantitatively how much drugs influence the occurrence of crime.

Why statistics on drug-related crime are difficult to interpret: Homicide as an example

Homicide statistics illustrate the difficulties in quantifying the drug-crime relationship. Homicide, like most types of crime, can be related to drugs in any of the ways described above. Data on homicides are more complete than for other offenses, because homicides are more likely to be reported to the police and tend to be more thoroughly investigated. The two examples of drug-related homicide statistics given here demonstrate some of the difficulties of quantifying the relationship between drugs and murder.

The FBI Uniform Crime Reports present data on two types of drug-related homicides: murders that occur—

- during a felony narcotics offense (such as drug trafficking)
- during brawls due to the influence of narcotics.

Type of drug-related homicide	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Narcotic drug laws	5.6%	7.4%	6.7%	6.2%	5.7%
Brawl due to influence of narcotics	1.1	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.1

Source: FBI, *Crime in the U.S., 1992*, table 2.13, p. 21

The FBI does *not* include as drug-related a murder that occurs during a robbery or a burglary committed by someone under the influence of drugs, or a murder that occurs during a robbery committed to obtain money to buy drugs. In these cases, the homicide is recorded in terms of its relationship to the most serious offense only, and robbery and burglary are more serious than drug trafficking in the FBI offense classification and in most State laws. Thus, current FBI homicide information may not categorize a large number of drug-related murders as so related. However, the FBI is developing an enhanced reporting system, the National Incident-Based Reporting System, that would involve reporting all crimes committed during an offense. This system has been implemented in only a few States so far.

The following example further illustrates the difficulties of estimating drug-related homicides.

Drug-related homicide rates as defined using differing criteria in four cities, 1990

Definitional criteria	Percent drug-related			
	City 1	City 2	City 3	City 4
Committed during commission of a narcotics felony	36.0%	25.7%	39.0%	44.6%
Dispute between dealers		x	x	x
Offender under the influence of drugs			x	
Victim under the influence of drugs	x		x	

Note: Data were obtained by the ONDCP Drugs & Crime Clearinghouse.

The percentage of homicides thought to be drug-related reflects both the frequency of such murders as well as how the relationship is specified.

“What proportion of homicides is drug-related?” This simple question is difficult to answer. The FBI’s definition is consistent, but limited. Cities or police departments may have broader but inconsistent definitions. For offenses not as reliably reported or as thoroughly investigated as homicides, the question is even more difficult because no complete information is systematically available at the national level for *any* definition of “drug-related.”

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