



# Motivations, substance use and other correlates amongst property and violent offenders who regularly inject drugs



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Age and opioid dependence were significantly associated with property offending.
- The majority of property offenders attributed their offending to financial reasons.
- Stimulant dependence was significantly associated with past month violent crime.
- Violent offenders largely attributed their offending to opportunistic reasons.

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine the prevalence, correlates and motivations for the commission of property and violent crime amongst a sample of people who inject drugs (PWID).

**Method:** Data were obtained from the 2013 Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), which includes a cross-sectional sample of 887 PWID.

**Results:** Eighteen percent of PWID had committed a property offence and 3% had committed a violent offence in the month preceding interview. Opioid dependence (AOR 2.57, 95% CI 1.29–5.10) and age (AOR 0.96, 95% CI 0.93–0.99) were found to be the strongest correlates of property crime. The majority of property offenders (75%) attributed their offending to financial reasons, however those under the influence of benzodiazepines were proportionately more likely to nominate opportunistic reasons as the main motivation for their last offence. Stimulant dependence (AOR 5.34, 95% CI 1.91–14.93) was the only significant correlate of past month violent crime, and the largest proportion of violent offenders (47%) attributed their offending to opportunistic reasons. The majority of both property (71%) and violent offenders (73%) reported being under the influence of drugs the last time they committed an offence; the largest proportion of property offenders reported being under the influence of benzodiazepines (29%) and methamphetamine (24%), whilst violent offenders mostly reported being under the influence of heroin and alcohol (32% respectively).

**Conclusion:** Criminal motivations, substance use and other correlates vary considerably across crime types. This suggests that crime prevention and intervention strategies need to be tailored according to individual crime types, and should take into account self-reported criminal motivations, as well as specific risk factors that have been shown to increase the likelihood of offending.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between substance use and criminal activity has been studied extensively over the past few decades, with both

international and Australian studies showing that people who use drugs are more likely to engage in crime than those who do not (AIHW, 2014; Bennett, Holloway, & Farrington, 2008). Previous studies report the odds of offending to be three to four times greater for drug users than non-drug users, with the odds of offending varying across drug classes (Bennett et al., 2008).

Property crime has traditionally been associated with heavier and more frequent use of illicit opioids, namely heroin, often as a means to purchase more drugs (Bennett & Holloway, 2005b; Blumstein, Cohen,

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Roth, & Visser, 1986; Bradford & Payne, 2012). There is, however, growing literature to suggest that methamphetamine use is also associated with property offending (Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2005; Gizzi & Gerkin, 2010; Klee & Morris, 1994; McKetin, McLaren, & Kelly, 2005; Wilkins & Sweetsur, 2010). A large Australian sample of police detainees found that heavy users (i.e. 16–30 days of use in the preceding 30 days) of illicit opioids and amphetamines had significantly more property charges than less frequent (i.e. 1–15 days of use in the past month) and non-drug using individuals (Bradford & Payne, 2012). Furthermore, the number of drugs used by an individual influences crime, with polydrug users at increased risk of committing a property offence compared to those using a single drug (Bennett & Holloway, 2005a; Makkai, 2001).

As noted above, motivations for property crime have been linked with income-raising to support drug addiction (Bennett & Holloway, 2005a; Goldstein, 1985; Klee & Morris, 1994; Weatherburn, Topp, Midford, & Allsop, 2000) and are highly correlated with the severity of use and cost of the drug (Blumstein et al., 1986). To date, however, these outcomes have predominantly been explored in the context of heroin use (Ball, Shaffer, & Nurco, 1983; Bennett & Holloway, 2005b; Klee & Morris, 1994). Indeed, it has been reported that heroin users are the most likely to attribute their offending to economic reasons (i.e. needed money to buy drugs), followed by cocaine and other illegal opiate users (Payne & Gaffney, 2012).

Similarly, substance use has consistently been shown to be associated with an increased risk of violent crime (Hoaken & Stewart, 2003). Studies have shown that individuals with substance use disorders contribute more to the public health burden of violent behaviour than all other psychiatric disorders combined (Pulay et al., 2008). Three popular theories surrounding the link between substance use and violent behaviour were proposed by Goldstein (1985) including: psychopharmacological violence, whereby it is argued the violence committed is a direct physiological effect of the substances used (Kuhns & Clodfelter, 2009); systemic violence, which is associated with the aggressive patterns of interaction involved with dealing and trafficking substances; and economic-compulsive violence, the perpetration of economically oriented violent crime to support the costs of their substance use. Violence occurs in this instance due to unanticipated circumstances such as the presence of a weapon or the reaction of the victim (Goldstein, Brownstein, Ryan, & Bellucci, 1989). Drugs most associated with economic-compulsive violence are heroin and cocaine due to their compulsive pattern of use and financial cost (Goldstein, 1985; Hunt, 1991; Nurco, Hanlon, & Kinlock, 1991). Other environmental factors that have been found to be correlated with substance use and violence include lower education, unemployment, a history of imprisonment, as well as a higher number of psychiatric diagnoses.

Indeed, the drug–crime nexus can vary considerably across drug classes and crime types. The importance of examining different types of crime separately was recognised by Horyniak et al. (2014), who examined the correlates of property and violent crime amongst a sample of people who inject drugs (PWID) over a ten year period. It was found that property crime was significantly associated with age, recent heroin injection, employment status, recent benzodiazepine use and recent arrest; whilst violent crime was associated with age, Indigenous status, daily alcohol consumption, recent arrest and lifetime prison history (Horyniak et al., 2014). However, the study did not account for a number of important variables that have been shown to lead to an increased risk of offending, including severity of substance use, polydrug use, drug expenditure and mental health. This paper will build upon the work done by Horyniak and colleagues by including such variables.

Whilst a number of studies have examined the relationship between substance use and crime, very few studies directly ask the individuals about their criminal motivations. In addition, little is known about how particular drugs influence motivations to commit property and violent crime. Subsequently, this paper will examine the prevalence, correlates and motivations for the commission of property and violent

crime amongst a sample of PWID. Identification of self-reported motivations for offending will improve our understanding of the complex relationship between substance use and crime, and assist with targeting both prevention and intervention efforts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Study design and participants

This paper uses data from the 2013 Illicit Drugs Reporting System (IDRS). The IDRS is an Australian national monitoring study funded by the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund. It is aimed at detecting emerging trends in illicit drug markets and has been conducted in all states and territories of Australia since 2000. The main component of the IDRS involves conducting face-to-face interviews with people who regularly inject drugs. In order to be eligible, IDRS participants had to be 16 years of age or older, have a minimum six-month injecting history (with at least month injecting), and have been residing in the city where the interview took place for at least 12 months prior to the interview. Participants were recruited through drug treatment services and by peer referral, and were reimbursed AUD\$40 for their participation. In 2013, 887 participants were recruited across June–August.

### 2.2. Measures

The interview schedule covers various topics including demographics, lifetime and past six-month licit and illicit substance use, health-related trends associated with substance use (including injection-related harms, risk behaviours, overdose) and law enforcement-related harms associated with substance use (including prison history and recent criminal activity). In 2013, all participants were asked the Severity of Dependence Scale (SDS; Gossop et al., 1995) for opioids and stimulants. The SDS is a 5-item questionnaire which generates a score between 0 and 15; the higher the score, the higher the level of dependence. The cut-off score for stimulant dependence varies according to the type of stimulant being consumed. Since the majority (89%) of stimulant users answered the SDS in relation to their methamphetamine use, a cut-off score of four has been used to measure stimulant dependence, as previously recommended (Topp & Mattick, 1997). A cut-off value of five was used to measure opioid dependence (Castillo, Saiz, Rojas, Vazquez, & Lerma, 2010).

To assess mental health, participants were also administered the Kessler 10 (K10) Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003). The K10 is a brief screening measure of psychological distress and involves ten questions about emotional states each with a five-point response scale (1 'none of the time' to 5 'all of the time'). The minimum score that can be obtained is 10 (indicating no distress) and the maximum is 50 (indicating very high psychological distress). A cut-off score of 22 or more was used to measure high to very high levels of psychological distress. The K10 has been shown to be a reliable and valid screening tool for current affective disorders amongst PWID, with a high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.84$ ) and high predictive accuracy for the presence of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV affective disorder diagnosis (77%) (Hides et al., 2007). Participants also answered self-reported questions about their mental health and attendance to a mental health professional over the previous six-month period.

From its inception, the IDRS has measured crime using the Opiate Treatment Index (OTI; Darke, Ward, Hall, Heather, & Wodak, 1991). The Criminality Scale of the OTI gathers self-report data on four types of crime: property crime, dealing, fraud and violent crime (in the month preceding interview). In 2013, participants were also asked whether they were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol the last time they committed an offence in the past month, as well as

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