



## Research paper

# Criminal justice involvement of crack cocaine users in the city of Rio de Janeiro and Greater Metropolitan Area: Implications for public health and the public security agenda



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The international literature has expressed different and sometimes contrasting perspectives when addressing criminal involvement by crack cocaine users, highlighting psychopharmacological aspects, the cycles of craving and pressing economic need, and the interplay with overall deprivation and structural violence. The current study aims to identify variables associated with the arrest and imprisonment of regular crack cocaine users.

**Methods:** Interviewees were recruited from open drug scenes in the city of Rio de Janeiro and Greater Metropolitan Area from September 2011 to June 2013. Multilevel logistic regression models were fitted to the data.

**Results:** Most of the recruited crack cocaine users were male (78.2% [95%CI: 76.3–79.4]), 18–30 years old (64.7% [95%CI: 62.5–66.2]), non-white (92.9% [95%CI: 91.2–93.4]), single (68.9% [95%CI: 66.8–70.3]), and with 0–7 years of schooling (70.6% [95%CI: 68.5–71.9]). Factors independently associated with arrest were history of inpatient addiction treatment (adjOR 4.31 [95%CI: 1.70–11.32]); male gender (adjOR 2.05 [95%CI: 1.40–3.04]); polydrug use (adjOR 1.82 [95%CI: 1.32–2.51]); and 0 to 7 years of schooling (adjOR 1.64 [95%CI: 1.17–2.32]). As for the outcome variable lifetime history of incarceration, the independently associated factors were: male gender (adjOR 2.47 [95%CI: 1.74–3.55]) and longer use of crack cocaine and related substances (e.g., free base and local varieties/denominations of coca products) (adjOR 1.05 [95%CI: 1.01–1.10]).

**Conclusion:** The study's findings support the use of comprehensive multisector interventions, integrating health promotion and mental health rehabilitation, access to quality education, and management of combined/concomitant use of different substances to reduce and/or prevent criminal involvement by individuals that use crack cocaine and other substances, as well as to prevent/manage relapse.

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## Introduction

The international literature has expressed different and sometimes contrasting perspectives when addressing criminal involvement by crack cocaine users. For instance, the psychopharmacological perspective tends to associate aggressive and violent behavior as a direct consequence of the influence of some substances on individuals' attitudes and behavior. Another complementary perspective emphasizes the short circuits

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experienced by drug users from craving and the pressing need to finance their habit. Moving from the individual and micro-social dimension to the meso- and macro-social contexts and communities, several authors have highlighted the central role of chronic marginalization and deprivation, alongside the structural violence closely associated with drug trafficking (as well as with violent law enforcement). This is usually expressed in the sheer brutality of territorial feuds or drug turf wars between criminal factions (Goldstein, 1985; Toledo, Góngora, & Bastos, 2017; Weiner et al., 2005).

Brazil has recently experienced a nationwide increase in crack cocaine use and trafficking. The association between the (mis)use of crack cocaine and violence and crime, especially in major urban areas (Medeiros, 2014; Roso et al., 2013; Santos et al., 2012), has been highlighted repeatedly by the media and social networks despite the scarcity of sound empirical data to document such a putative association.

A review of media reports on crack cocaine and its associated harms and risks, published in the two leading mainstream newspapers in Recife, Pernambuco State, Northeast Brazil, showed that such reports highlighted both the pronounced anxiety and physical and psychological frailty of users and their purportedly pivotal role in drug trafficking and violent crime. Such social representations supposedly depict hypothetically “average” crack cocaine users as subjects devoid of any evaluative capacity vis-à-vis their own condition, and who are vulnerable but extremely aggressive (Santos et al., 2012).

Mello (2011) reviewed the assumed and actual associations between crack cocaine and violence from a critical perspective, drawing on secondary analysis of data on crimes such as theft, robbery, and homicide (1984–2008) and assessing the so-called “*crack hypothesis*” (i.e. the putative key role of crack cocaine use and trafficking in local criminal dynamics). The author examined whether the emergence of crack cocaine in Greater Metropolitan São Paulo and the rest of the state of São Paulo was associated with an observed increase in these crime rates. Despite some degree of correlation, crack cocaine dealing (but not possession and use) was statistically associated with perpetration of homicide. Meanwhile, no associations were found between trafficking or possession/use and property crime.

Several studies contend that involvement with law enforcement and the criminal justice system is more frequent among crack cocaine users than among users of other illegal drugs. For example, in 2005 in Vancouver, Canada, DeBeck et al. (2007) interviewed 275 injection drug users who also used crack. Their study found frequent use of crack cocaine was more closely associated with illegal activities to obtain cash (OR = 4.6 [95%CI: 2.6–7.2]) than was the misuse of other substances, whose pattern of use is more evenly distributed over time (instead of binges, which prevail in crack cocaine scenes) and less pressing, such as with heroin and other opiates (OR = 2.7 [95%CI: 1.7–4.6]).

The international literature has discussed which factors may explain the observed association between the misuse of some drugs and crime. Some studies have associated criminal conduct with the use of such substances, since their effect can influence perception and behavior, thus increasing the odds of criminal behavior. An alternative explanation emphasizes that crack cocaine users tend to lack sources of formal income and instead engage in illegal practices like petty theft and smuggling or reselling illegal drugs, thus exposing themselves to law enforcement (Burr, 1987; DeBeck et al., 2007; Fischer, Monga, & Manzoni, 2005; Seddon, 2006).

Hall, Bellband, and Carless (1993) highlight the need for a detailed analysis of the contexts and variables potentially associated with criminal involvement by crack cocaine users, as

well as those that could be targeted by public policies to reduce individual and social harms, including incarceration.

There is a scarcity of epidemiological studies on factors associated with criminal involvement by crack cocaine users in Brazil and an in-depth understanding of the dynamic of drugs vis-à-vis violence and crime is crucial for formulating evidence-based interventions. In response, this article aims to identify factors associated with involvement with the criminal justice system by crack cocaine users found in open drug scenes in the city and Greater Metropolitan Area of Rio de Janeiro (September 2011–June 2013).

## Method

### Study design

The study analyses data from the *National Survey on Crack Cocaine Use* (FIOCRUZ, 2014), a representative national population-based survey that used a time–location sampling (TLS) strategy to reach and recruit individuals clustered in previously mapped open drug scenes (Karon & Wejnert, 2012). Once mapped, open drug scenes were stratified in day and shift strata (e.g., Monday mornings versus Saturday evenings) and were randomly selected for subsequent visits, recruitment, and interviewing according to the selected scene, day or shift strata.

The national sample consisted of three sampling strata, namely: all state capitals and the Federal District, selected municipalities from the nine metropolitan areas, and a pool of non-metropolitan large, medium-sized, and small municipalities. The sample for the city of Rio de Janeiro (capital of the state of Rio de Janeiro) was thus selected in two steps: (i) scenes and their respective day/shift strata and (ii) individuals found (and asked to be interviewed) within the latter. Greater Metropolitan Rio de Janeiro included three selection stages: (i) municipalities belonging to this metropolitan area, (ii) scenes/shifts/days from the selected municipalities, and (iii) users belonging to such scenes/shifts/days (a detailed explanation of the sampling strategies is available at FIOCRUZ, 2014).

In Rio de Janeiro city, we visited 107 scenes where we observed and/or recruited individuals that use crack cocaine (note that observation of the scenes did not necessarily lead to immediate interviewing, due to the violent conflicts that can present difficulties for interviewing individuals in a given setting).

In Greater Metropolitan Rio de Janeiro (including Rio's impoverished outskirts), we visited 27 scenes in Duque de Caxias, 8 scenes in Niterói, 11 scenes in São João de Meriti, 10 scenes in Queimados, 6 scenes in Itaguaí, 21 scenes in Belford Roxo, and 8 scenes in Seropédica where there was observation or recruitment of people who use crack cocaine.

The present analysis used part of the national dataset corresponding to the city of Rio de Janeiro and selected municipalities from the Greater Metropolitan Area. Based on the international literature, selected variables consisted of a subset of socio-demographic and behavioral variables, as well as variables on the involvement of crack cocaine users with the criminal justice system.

Crack cocaine users were interviewed from September 2011 to June 2013. The study sample consisted of men and women  $\geq 18$  years of age who had used crack cocaine and/or related substances (e.g., freebase or local varieties/denominations of coca products) on a regular basis (i.e., for at least 25 days in the previous 6 months, according to the CODAR criteria, as defined by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), 2017), who were frequenting open crack scenes mapped and selected for the study.

Interviews were conducted in secluded spaces adjacent to the open crack scenes or in health units located close to the scenes. The study sample consisted of 930 crack users (544 from the city of Rio

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