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Research Snippet

Linking Type of Substance Use and Type of Crime in Male Offenders

KEY WORDS: *substance abuse, expressive violence, acquisitive crime, male offenders*

Impetus

Offenders often commit crimes while under the influence of alcohol and drugs (Goldstein, 1985; Pernanen et al., 2002). We explored the association between offence type and explicit use of alcohol or drugs among male offenders serving federal sentences in Canada. Based on previous research, we expected alcohol use to be linked with expressive violent crime (e.g., assault; Haggård-Grann et al., 2005), and other drug use (e.g., heroin, cocaine, pharmaceutical drugs) to be linked with acquisitive crime (e.g., theft; Gossop et al., 2000), It has been reported that drug users are likely to engage in economically oriented crimes to financially support their addiction (Goldstein, 1985).

What we did

The participants were 10,845 male offenders who served Federal sentences between 2002 and 2009 and who completed (self-report) the Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA).[1] The CASA provides information on substance abuse, as well as information on the types of offences committed while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

What we found

A substantial proportion of offenders (63%) reported using alcohol or drugs on the day of their current offence: 22% reported using alcohol, 31% reported using drugs, and 10% reported using both alcohol and drugs[2]. Offenders who reported using alcohol on the day of their current offence were equally likely to have committed an acquisitive crime[3] (51%) or an expressive violent crime[4] (53%)[5]. A greater proportion of offenders under the influence of drugs committed an acquisitive crime (82%) than an expressive violent crime (31%). This pattern held regardless of the drug type reported (e.g., heroin, cocaine, marijuana).

Offence specific findings suggest some differences by substance use (Table 1). In comparison to those who used illicit drugs, a greater proportion of offenders reported using alcohol when they committed an assault (33% vs. 17%), sexual assault (11% vs. 5%) or murder (8% vs. 4%). In contrast, more offenders reported using illicit drugs in comparison to alcohol when they committed theft/fraud (42% vs. 28%), robbery (36% vs. 24%) or drug offences (19% vs. 7%).

A greater proportion of offenders under the influence of drugs on the day of their current offence (34%) reported that they committed their current offence to support their substance use in comparison to offenders under the influence of alcohol (6%).

Table 1: Offence type by type of substance.

	Under Influence of:		
Offence Type	Alcohol (N = 2,384)	Drugs (N = 3,366)	Drugs & Alcohol (N = 1,063)
Theft/Fraud	28%	42%	29%
Robbery	24%	36%	33%
Drug Offences	7%	19%	8%
Assault	33%	17%	27%
Sexual Assault	11%	5%	9%
Murder	8%	4%	9%
Major Driving Offence	20%	7%	9%
Other Violent Crimes[1]	12%	12%	13%
Other Crimes[2]	16%	11%	14%
Total (N=10,845)	22%	31%	10%

[1]*Includes possession of a weapon, kidnapping, and arson*
[2]*Includes escape, obstruction of justice, and other crimes not mentioned*
Note: Percentages do not total 100% because offence types are not mutually exclusive.

What it means

These findings are in line with previous research on the topic of substance use and crime (e.g., Goldstein, 1985). Although a conclusive causal relationship between type of substance and type of crime cannot be inferred on the basis of these results, the findings may have implications for correctional interventions. Specifically, programs targeting violence prevention and substance abuse may want to give some consideration to the relationship between alcohol and violent crime.

References

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[1] Participants were incarcerated in the Atlantic (21%), Quebec (22%), Ontario (42%), Prairie (5%) and Pacific Regions (11%).
[2] Questions linking substance use to current offending were not answered by the 11% of offenders who were appealing current convictions.
[3] Acquisitive crimes include theft, robbery, fraud, drug offences and kidnapping.
[4] Expressive violent crimes include assault, sexual assault, murder, possession of weapon, and arson.
[5] Percentages do not total 100% because offence types are not mutually exclusive.