

Week 6: Drugs, Gangs and Violence-Myths and Realities

What we will cover:

Our focus this week is on two critical questions:

- (1) Why are some people violent? Is it because of drug use and/or involvement in gangs?
- (2) Do you believe that violent offenders can be changed into non-violent citizens by developing interventions that are designed to curb/eliminate drug use and/or attempt to get individuals to leave the gang?

While there are a number of possible explanations for violent behavior, we will explore two potential causes of violence in detail this week : (1) drug use and (2) gang involvement. My lecture will highlight what we currently know about both the drugs-violence connection and the gangs-violence connection. In both instances, I assert that a careful review of the available empirical research reveals that the links between gangs and violence and between drugs(specifically, drug *use*) and violence have been exaggerated and over-stated. The implications of such misrepresentations for violence prevention and control are examined, focusing on both current drug control policy/ drug treatment and on the latest “innovations” in gang intervention/suppression strategies.

I recognize that there is a lot more we can talk about in this area; but for this class, we will focus on just these two predictors of violence, due to time limitations. However, I recommend you look at the

overview of criminological theories I have included in the resources section for our online class. This chapter is from a forthcoming text I am writing; it emphasizes the link between criminological theory and community corrections practice, but it is certainly applicable to our assessment of violence theory and policy/practice. There are several competing views of violence causation—and crime causation generally—that can be used to consider the influence of both drug use and gang violence on violent criminal behavior, including biological, psychological, sociological, and classical theories of crime. This chapter provides a brief overview of these groups of theories and then highlights their implications for the community control of offenders. Let me know what you think if you read it, because I think you will find that your own perspective on violence causation—and on the influence of both drugs and gangs—is a product of how you weigh the importance of biology, psychology, sociology, and individual “choice” as explanations for violence.

Ok, it is time now for lecture 6! You will notice that I have deliberately kept this week’s lecture material rather brief; given the midterm and term paper outline due this past week, I think this makes sense. However, I have included several excellent links for further reading if either of these two topics is an area of interest. In addition, you may want to take a look at the resource directory materials and/or visit my faculty webpage at Uml.edu for additional materials on both these critical violence topic areas. Hopefully, you are reading this lecture AFTER you’ve completed

your midterm; material included in this lecture will be part of the final exam.

Myth#1: Drugs cause violent behavior

There is no empirical research to support this claim. Explore the links I have identified at the end of this lecture and see what the research demonstrates about the drug –crime connection.

My review of this research can be summarized fairly simply:

(1) **Heroin**: individuals who use heroin do not become violent when they take this drug; in fact, they become very relaxed, often nodding off after consumption. However, addicts need their drug and they will commit crimes to get it, if necessary. The violence seems to be a byproduct of the addiction, rather than a “reaction” to consuming drug. For some of you, this distinction is largely besides the point; but to others, it suggests that we focus on addiction remedies rather than interdiction efforts as a violence prevention strategy.

(2) **Cocaine**: individuals who use either powder or crack cocaine have been described in the media as “crack” heads, coke heads, etc. and the public assumes that if you smoke crack or snort a line

of cocaine, then violent behavior will inevitably result. There is no empirical evidence to support this stereotype.

(3) [Marijuana](#): once again, no evidence of a connection beyond a vague prediction that pot is a gateway to more serious drug use. However, it is often reported that the marijuana being consumed today is not the pot smoked several decades ago in the 60's: it is much more potent—and more expensive-- today. There is also discussion of marijuana “addiction”, which can lead to criminal behavior as a means to an end. Once again, consumption of the drug is not directly linked to violence; but addiction can lead some individuals to crime.

(4) [Alcohol](#): Here, there is a link, and it's a fairly strong one. See my report on this topic, which I provide a link to-- at the end of this lecture.

(5) [Prescription drug abuse](#): this is a second here that research HAS linked to violent behavior, but the link is found in the misuse of these drugs (e.g. oxy), and/or the fact that individuals with serious mental health problems stop taking their meds. Prescription drug abuse is quickly emerging as the most serious drug problem—along with alcohol—in this country. See the report on this problem on the POP(Problem-oriented policing) webpage; it is also included on my faculty webpage under my technology of crime webpage.

(6) **Methamphetamines:** The evidence of a meth-violence link is mixed. See the report on meth I've included at the end of this lecture(again, this report is from the POP website, which contains a variety of reports on different crimes.

(7) **Other drugs:** there is an obvious link between date rape drugs and sexual assault, as well as other club drugs, and violence. An overview of this topic area is found on my faculty webpage under my technology course heading.

Perhaps the best –and certainly most concise— summary of what we currently KNOW about the link between drug use and violence has been provided by Jeffrey Roth. This is what he has to say in a recent article:

Do illegal drugs cause violent crime?

- Of all psychoactive substances, **alcohol is the only one** whose consumption has been shown to commonly increase aggression. After large doses of amphetamines, cocaine, LSD, and PCP, certain individuals may experience violent outbursts, probably because of preexisting psychosis. Research is needed on the pharmacological effects of crack, which enters the brain more directly than cocaine used in other forms.
- Alcohol drinking and violence are linked through pharmacological effects on behavior, through expectations that heavy drinking and violence go together in certain settings, and through patterns of binge drinking and fighting that sometimes develop in adolescence. . . .
- Illegal drugs and violence are linked primarily through drug marketing: disputes among rival distributors, arguments and robberies involving buyers and sellers, property crimes committed to raise drug money and, more speculatively, social

and economic interactions between the illegal markets and the surrounding communities.

Roth goes on to make a distinction between drug consumption's effects on an individual's violent behavior and the link between the drug trade and violence. According to Roth, it appears that the PROHIBITION on drugs—particularly the big three(Heroin, Cocaine, and Marijuana) is much more likely to cause violence than the consumption/use/abuse of various controlled substances, with one glaring exception: Alcohol. Of course, the paradox here is that its legal to consume alcohol, the one”drug” that can be consistently linked to a wide range of violent behaviors. Roth offers the following” sober” assessment:

All major authorities agree that the vast majority of drug-related violent crime is caused by the prohibition against drugs, rather than the drugs themselves. This was the same situation which was true during alcohol Prohibition. Alcohol Prohibition gave rise to a violent criminal organization. Violent crime dropped 65 percent in the year Prohibition was repealed.

There are about 25,000 homicides in the United States each year. A study of 414 homicides in New York City at the height of the crack epidemic showed that only three murders, less than one percent, could be attributed to the behavioral effects of cocaine or crack. Of these, two were victim-precipitated. For example, one homicide victim tried to rape someone who was high on crack and got killed in the process.

For more detail, check out the link below:

[Psychoactive Substances and Violence](#), by Jeffrey A. Roth, *Department of Justice Series: Research in Brief*, Published: February 1994

What are the effects of drugs on health and behavior?

I should emphasize that even if the drug-violence link has not been established, there are a wide range of negative consequences that are directly linked to the consumption of drugs.

Drug use has been linked to a wide range of short-term and long term physical and psychological problems. For an overview of these negative effects, check out the specific facts provided on NIDA's Drug Fact Sheet, which I've included below:

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/infofacts/Infofaxindex.html>

InfoFacts Index

Effects of Drug Abuse

[Understanding Drug Abuse and Addiction](#) Revised:
September 2007

[Drug Abuse and the link to HIV/AIDS](#) Revised:
December 2006

[Drugged Driving](#) Revised: October
2007

Health Effects of Specific Drugs

[Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products](#) Revised: June
2007


[Club Drugs](#) Revised: June



All of the materials or messages available through NIDA InfoFacts have been developed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human

	2007
Crack and Cocaine	Revised: June 2007
MDMA (Ecstasy)	Revised: June 2007
Heroin	Revised: June 2007
Inhalants	Revised: June 2007
Khat	Added: December 2007
LSD	Revised: June 2007
Marijuana	Revised: June 2007
Methamphetamine	Revised: March 2007
Prescription Pain and Other Medications	Revised: June 2007
PCP	Revised: June

Services. NIDA supports most of the world's research on the health aspects of drug abuse and addiction. NIDA InfoFacts are updated regularly. There is no copyright on any of the materials available through NIDA InfoFacts, and all can be reproduced for further distribution.

 [NIDA InfoFacts En Español](#)

2007

[Methylphenidate \(Ritalin\)](#)

Revised: June

2007

[Rohypnol and GHB](#)

Revised: June

2007

[Salvia](#)

Added: October

2007

[Steroids \(Anabolic-Androgenic\)](#)

Revised: March

2007

Prevention and Treatment

[Treatment Approaches for Drug](#)

Revised: August

[Addiction](#)

2006

[Lessons From Prevention Research](#)

Revised:

February 2004

[Treatment for Drug Abusers in the](#)

[Criminal Justice System](#)

Added: July 2006

Survey Data

[Costs to Society from Drug Abuse](#)

[High School and Youth Trends](#)

Revised:
December 2007

[Hospital Visits](#)

Revised: April
2005

[Nationwide Trends](#)

Revised:
September 2004

[Treatment Trends](#)

Revised: March
2005

[Workplace Trends](#)

NIDA Information

[NIDA Funding Opportunities](#)

[Information about NIDA Grants](#)

[NIDA's Home Page](#)

[Our Mission and Structure](#)

[NIDA's Opportunities for Special
Populations](#)

Revised: July
2005

Additional Information

[Past Meeting Summaries and Special Reports](#)

[Other Drug Abuse Information Services](#)

Revised:

February 2008

Accessed 4405225 since 3/31/98

[NIDA Home](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Search](#) | [FAQs](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Help](#) | [Privacy](#) | [FOIA \(NIH\)](#) | [Employment](#)



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Questions? See our [Contact Information](#). *Last updated on Wednesday, February 6, 2008.*

Myth#2: Gangs are one of the primary causes of violence.

I have testified before the National Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons on this topic. I have included my

testimony below. Read what I have to say about the gang –violence connection in both prison and community settings. Do you agree with my assessment?

***Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's
Prisons: Summary of Testimony***

By Dr. James Byrne, Professor, Department of Criminal Justice,
University of Massachusetts Lowell

b. The Extent of Gang Involvement in Prison and Community Violence:

Although estimates of the extent of *gang involvement* in various forms of prison violence are not possible using official data, it can be argued that gang involvement in prison violence will likely mirror the patterns of gang involvement in violence found in the community (Thornberry, et al., 2003; Maxson, et al., 2005). According to a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics *Crime Data Brief* (Harrell, June, 2005), which included data from the National Crime Victimization Survey for the period 1998 through 2003, “victims perceived perpetrators to be gang members in about 6% of violent victimizations between 1998 and 2003. On average for each year, gang members committed about 373,000 of the 6.6 million violent victimizations. Nonfatal violent acts measured include rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault” (Harrell, 2005:1).

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However, because victims of these crimes were unsure of gang affiliation in 37 percent of these incidents, it seems likely that the actual level of gang involvement is much higher.

In fact, most community-based gang intervention strategies are based on the assumption that “gangs” are responsible for a large proportion of all community violence, especially in high crime, urban areas. In Boston’s “Operation Ceasefire,” for example, researchers estimated that over 60 percent of the city’s homicides were gang-related. Although the recent replication of “Operation Ceasefire” in Los Angeles revealed that a much smaller percentage of all homicides (perhaps 30 percent) were actually gang-related in that area, these levels are still at least three times higher than official estimates of known gang involvement in homicides found in the FBI’s Supplementary Homicide Reports. A review of these data reveals that “...each year between 1993 and 2003, from 5% to 7% of all homicides and from 8% to 10% of homicides committed with a firearm were gang related” (Harrell,2005:2).

Obviously, the official picture of gang involvement in homicide and other forms of community violence suggests that the link between gangs and violence has been exaggerated. However, the detailed review of the gang-violence connection by researchers studying the impact of “Operation Ceasefire” in Boston and Los Angeles presents a more pessimistic view of the extent of the gang violence problem (Kennedy, et al.,2001; Tita, et al.,2005).

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Despite the ongoing debate on the nature and extent of gang involvement in violence, it would be a mistake to ignore the potential influence of gang culture in both institutional and community settings. Researchers studying community level violence have consistently found that gang influence appears to be strongest in areas where informal social controls are weakest. I would argue that you will find a similar relationship in prison communities. Reidel and Welsh (2002:148) have stated the problem succinctly: *“The gang’s most important role is to provide a source of identity for young males and ,to a lesser extent, females. Trapped in high-crime neighborhoods, attending poor schools, victims of racial and ethnic discrimination, gangs provide a source of identity and pride to young people who believe they have few other alternatives.”*

http://faculty.uml.edu/jbyrne/byrne_james_m.pdf

Concluding Comments

Perhaps it is obvious by this point that I believe that our current strategies to curb violence would be improved if we stopped emphasizing links between drugs, gangs and violent behavior that are –at best—exaggerated. For this reason, I would argue that both our War on Drugs and our recent “WAR on Gangs” are pulling limited CJ resources away from initiatives that will likely have a greater impact on violence reduction in this country. In the excerpt below, I offer this argument, focusing specifically on what some—including me—have called “the great prison experiment”. Do you agree or disagree with my assessment?

http://faculty.uml.edu/jbyrne/44.624/byrne_roberts_typology.pdf

Additional Readings and web-links to explore: Drugs, gang and violence: myths and realities

Text readings: R&W (12,14);

D&C< chapter 9;

Online reading on gangs and Violence; and on gang intervention/Operation Ceasefire Evaluations:

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/192378.htm>

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/192378.htm>

<http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eopssubtopic&L=4&L0=Home&L1=Law+Enforcement+%26+Criminal+Justice&L2=Prisons&L3=Security+Threat+Group+Information&sid=Eeops>

Online readings on drugs and violence:

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/infofacts/Infofaxindex.html>

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/index.html>

http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/2005/RAND_OP121.pdf

http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/whos_in_prison_for_marij/untangling_the_stats.pdf

<http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/basicfax6.htm>

<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/93920.pdf>