

Substance Use by Adolescents and Subsequent Adult Criminal Activity

The relationship between adolescent substance use and adult criminal behaviour has been a continuing issue for researchers. The central question is whether a teenager's frequent use of drugs or alcohol affects the extent, type and variety of crimes committed as an adult.

In a recent study on the subject, the Research and Statistics Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada examined a sample of 503 inmates who had completed the Computerized Lifestyle Screening Instrument (CLSI). The CLSI gathers information from offenders about their drug and alcohol use. It has been implemented as a standard tool for assessing, at reception, inmates who are admitted to federal institutions.

Certain sections of the CLSI focus on the extent of offenders' substance use before age 18. These data were analysed in relation to the inmates' criminal files, obtained from the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC). (CPIC files contain information on all adult offences for which an offender has ever been found guilty and on the dispositions given by the courts.)

Only inmates who were 27 years of age or older were considered for the sample, since it was felt that the adult criminal profile of younger offenders might not yet be fully developed. As a result of this selection, 270 offenders (53% of the total sample), whose average age was 29, were included in the study.

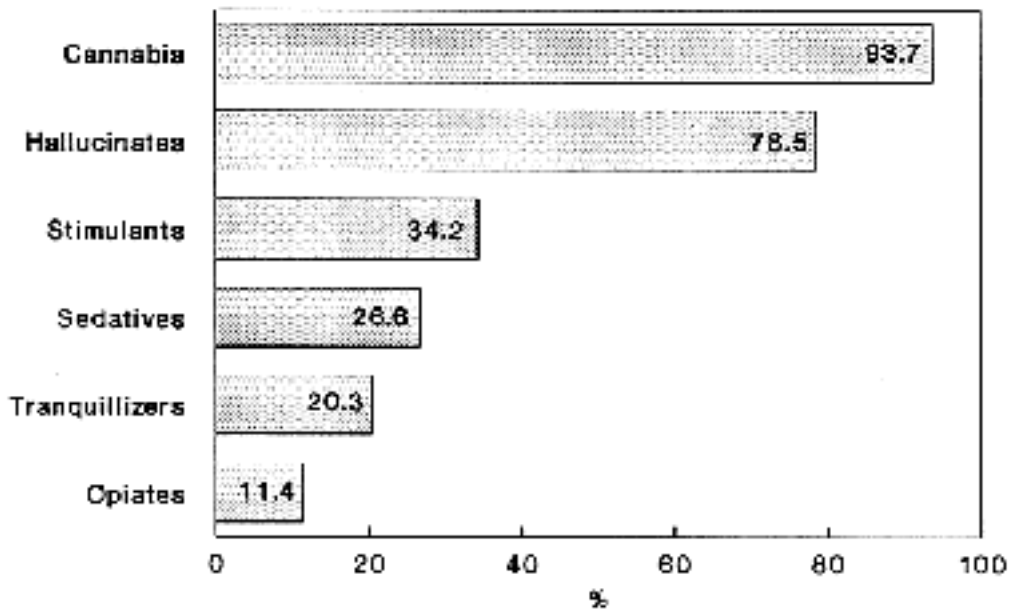
Drug Use

A total of 166 offenders (61.5%) answered that they had used drugs at some point in their lives. Of these inmates, 28.3% did not use drugs before they were 18, 29.5% used drugs irregularly (i.e., less than once a week), and a sizeable 42.2% (70 offenders) reported using drugs regularly (i.e., once a week or more) before the age of 18.

As Figure 1 shows, cannabis products, such as marijuana or hashish, were the most commonly used (93.7%) illicit drugs. Almost three quarters of those who reported regular drug use as adolescents had used hallucinates, and about one third had used stimulants such as cocaine. Only 11.4% had regularly used opiates such as methadone or heroin.

Figure 1

Figure 1
Type of Regular Drug Use
Before Age 18



Total numbers of convictions were compared between offenders who reported no drug use, those who reported irregular drug use (less than once a week) and those who used drugs regularly (once a week or more) as teenagers. The findings were surprising. All three groups had a similar average number of convictions: 18.4 for those who reported no drug use as teenagers, 17.7 for irregular drug users, and 18.6 for those who regularly used drugs before they were 18.

The exact opposite result had been expected - that offenders who frequently took drugs would be involved in a greater number of crimes than those who did not. It seemed that level of drug use before age 18 did not relate to amount of adult criminal activity. In fact, adult offenders who reported no drug use and those who reported regular drug use as teenagers had almost the same average number of convictions.

The percentage of offenders who had been convicted of at least one violent crime was compared for each of the three groups (non-users, irregular users and regular users). About 66% of offenders who reported no drug use before age 18 had committed at least one violent offence. This compares with about 83% of irregular users and 72.8% of regular users of drugs. This finding suggests that rate of conviction for violent crime was not strongly associated with level of drug use as a teenager.

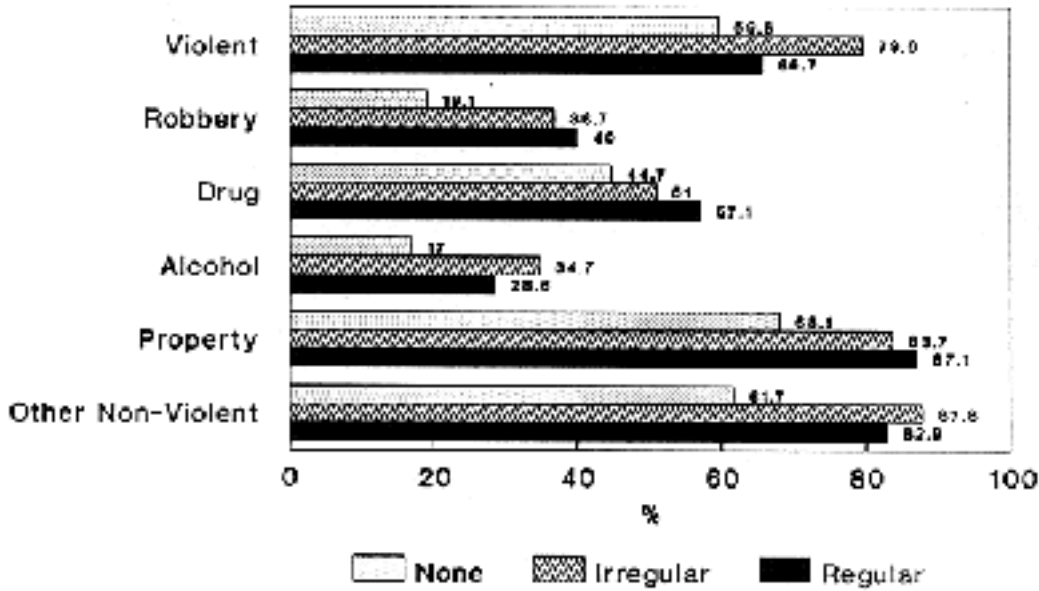
Levels of substance use were also studied in relation to six, more specific offence categories: violent, robbery, drug, alcohol, property and other nonviolent offences.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of offenders who committed crimes within the different offence groupings. Two patterns emerged. Non-users, irregular users and regular drug users had relatively similar conviction rates for violent, drug and alcohol offences. Although the rate of violent convictions was noticeably higher for offenders who irregularly used drugs, subsequent statistical analyses showed that the differences between the groups were not significant. Conviction levels for these types of offences

were apparently unrelated to juvenile drug use.

Figure 2

Figure 2
Regularity of Drug Use Before Age 18
By Adult Offence Categories



A different pattern emerged when the other three offence groupings were examined. There were significantly more convictions for robbery, property and other non-violent offences among inmates who reported either irregular or regular drug use as teenagers (see Figure 2).

According to the above findings, offenders who used drugs as teenagers, regardless of the level of use, were convicted at a significantly higher rate for economically oriented crimes as opposed to violent offences.

It was also important to understand the variety of crimes committed by the three groups. Offenders who did not use drugs as teenagers had, on average, at least one conviction in 2.7 (45%) of the six offence categories. For the irregular and regular drug users, the averages were significantly higher at 3.7 (61.7%) and 3.6 (60%), respectively, out of the six possible categories. It appears that offenders who used drugs before age 18, regardless of the level of use, were convicted of a greater variety of adult crimes than offenders who did not use drugs at all as teenagers.

Alcohol Use

The vast majority of offenders in the sample (84% or 228) indicated that they had used alcohol at some point in their lives. Of these, 14% reported that they did not drink alcohol before they were 18, while 49.1% consumed alcohol irregularly (i.e., less than once a week) and 36.9% drank regularly (i.e., once a week or more) as teenagers.

In a comparison of the average number of adult convictions for each of the three groups, offenders who reported no alcohol use as teenagers had an average of 15.7 convictions while the figure for irregular users was almost identical at 15.6. Regular alcohol drinkers had a significantly higher average at 23.2 adult convictions.

This was the expected pattern: it appears that regular alcohol use during the teenage years was related to a greater number of adult convictions.

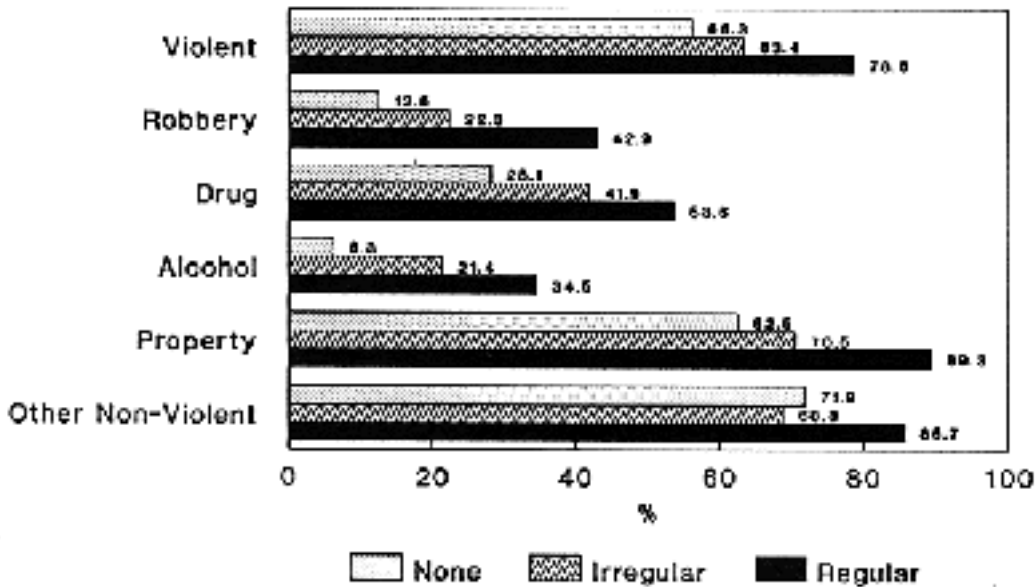
Rate of conviction for at least one violent crime was compared among the three groups. Of those who did not consume any alcohol as teenagers, 59.4% had committed a violent crime. This compares with more than two thirds (66.9%) of those who consumed alcohol irregularly. For those who drank alcohol on a regular basis as teenagers, the rate of conviction for violent crimes was significantly higher at 86.5%.

This finding indicates that alcohol consumption during the teenage years is related to adult conviction rates for violent offences.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of offenders who committed crimes within the different offence categories. Regular alcohol consumers had significantly higher conviction rates within all six offence categories when compared with offenders who did not drink and those who drank alcohol irregularly before age 18. In sum, regular alcohol use during the teenage years was significantly related to conviction rates for both violent and nonviolent crimes.

Figure 3

Figure 3
Regularity of Alcohol Use Before Age 18
By Adult Offence Categories



The variety of crimes committed by regular alcohol consumers was also found to be significantly greater. Offenders who reported no alcohol use before age 18 had, on average, at least one conviction in 2.4 (40%) of the six offence categories, compared with the irregular drinkers at 2.9 (48.3%). For the regular drinkers, this number was significantly higher at 3.8 (63.3%). This finding was expected since the regular alcohol users had a higher conviction rate for both violent and non-violent crimes.

Conclusion

Three noticeable patterns were discovered in the adult criminal activity of offenders who reported varying levels of drug and alcohol use as teenagers. First, offenders who used drugs before the age of 18 had higher conviction rates for economically oriented crimes than those who did not use drugs as teenagers.

Second, offenders who regularly drank alcohol as teenagers had a higher rate of conviction for violent and non-violent crimes than irregular alcohol users and non-users.

And third, offenders who reported a high level of drug or alcohol use as teenagers were convicted of a wider variety of crimes than those who consumed smaller amounts of either substance.

The findings presented here still do not clarify whether the relationship between early substance use and adult criminal behaviour is causal in nature. It may be that drug or alcohol use during the teenage years is simply correlated with other more influential factors in fuelling delinquent and adult criminal activity.

The full report on "Patterns of Alcohol and Drug Use Among Federal Offenders as Assessed by the Computerized Lifestyle Screening Instrument" is available from the Research and Statistics Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada.