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Part Two: Social Implications of Drug Abuse

Lecture 4: Crime

Objectives

By the end of this lecture, the students should be able to:

1. Analyze how different countries define and legislate drug-related crimes in accordance with international drug treaties, and assess the implications of these definitions on national laws and enforcement practices.

2. Explore the multifaceted relationships between drug use, crime, and social issues, including how drug abuse can lead to increased rates of non-drug-related crimes, money laundering, and connections to violence and terrorism.

3. Investigate the varying perspectives on whether drug use should be classified as a crime, a disease, or a social disorder, and to assess how these views influence public policy, treatment approaches, and societal attitudes toward addiction and drug users.

4. Collect and analyze data on crime trends related to drug abuse, including the effectiveness of crime prevention strategies and the impact of organized crime on drug trafficking, to inform policy decisions and improve responses to drug-related issues at both national and international levels.

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Crime

Nations differ in their definitions of crime. However, in the realm of drug abuse, international drug treaties offer a shared conceptual framework. Many of these treaties impose obligations that necessitate the inclusion of penal measures in national laws for offenses related to illicit trafficking (1, p. 4). The requirements regarding illicit demand are more complex, as countries adopt diverse approaches to fulfilling both supply and demand obligations.

The relationship between crime and drugs is multifaceted and not straightforward. Firstly, the illegal production, manufacturing, distribution, or possession of drugs can be classified as a crime. Secondly, the presence of drugs may heighten the risk of other crimes that are not drug-related. Thirdly, drugs can be utilized as a means to generate income, leading to subsequent money laundering activities. Lastly, drugs are often interconnected with significant issues such as illegal firearm use, various forms of violence, and terrorism.

The classification of illicit drug use as a crime, a disease, a social disorder, or a combination of these is a topic of ongoing debate in various nations. Public policy often reflects a lack of clarity regarding the nature of addiction, with societal views on drug abuse indicating confusion about its causes and the accountability of those involved. There exists a spectrum concerning accepted social behavior and criminality. On one end lies lawful conduct, while the opposite end encompasses criminal actions. In between these two points are behaviors deemed deviant and acts of delinquency. Many individuals on the fringes who engage in drug use do not necessarily become delinquents or criminals. If the idea of progression along this spectrum is not evident within a single country, it becomes even less relevant when considering different cultures. What may be seen as marginal or deviant in one culture could be accepted or even regarded as mainstream in another.

The data gathered by law enforcement or other authorities differs across nations. The level of unreported crime is influenced by numerous factors. Countries that Signatories to international drug control treaties are required to provide the United Nations with information regarding drug abuse. Reports concerning illegal drug trafficking and substance abuse are submitted to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, which convenes regularly in Vienna. Despite the limitations of these reports as indicators of illegal trafficking, they do provide insight into the severity of the issue. Utilizing these diverse information sources, the United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) has recently highlighted the rise of illicit opium poppy cultivation in Latin America, an increase in heroin use in certain regions of Africa and Asia, and a surge in cocaine consumption in Latin America and the Caribbean. These trends, along with other data on current patterns, paint a grim picture (2, p. 2).

The United Nations carries out and releases a series of surveys examining crime trends, the functioning of criminal justice systems, and crime prevention measures in its Member States. Reports addressing crime-related issues, such as the societal impact of organized crime and the management of criminal proceeds, are submitted to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. The most significant rise in crime observed during both the 1980-1985 and 1975-1989 periods was in drug-related offenses and robbery. The increase in drug-related crimes surpassed that of all other crime categories, except for kidnapping, which had a low initial count (3, chap. 11).

For many years, specialists have examined the intricate relationship among drug use, delinquency, and crime. There is often a correlation between substance use and delinquent behavior, particularly as the severity of either increase. Early engagement in sexual activities is closely linked to both delinquency and drug abuse. Girls who have experienced pregnancy tend to report higher levels of prior alcohol and drug use. Additionally, young people who lack a strong bond with their parents are more prone to drug use and delinquency, aligning with earlier findings discussed in the section on family dynamics.

One element of the relationship between drugs and crime is the issue of temporal causation: which is the cause and which is the effect? For individual addicts, drug use might come before criminal activity or vice versa. Researchers in the United States, after studying various groups, have determined that while there are many differences, it is often the case that some form of delinquency or crime occurs before addiction. Their findings indicate that involvement in property crime typically happens prior to the onset of addiction. Once addiction takes hold, property crime tends to rise, along with increased narcotic use. One expert noted that during "... periods of reduced narcotics use due to treatment, levels of property crime significantly decline and drop to very low levels after the addiction period ends" (4, p. 197).

Studies indicate a strong link between substance abuse, criminal activity, and societal perceptions. An examination of the literature on crime and drugs (5, p. 270) highlights three key points: individuals addicted to heroin are often heavily engaged in criminal acts; daily use of opiates significantly heightens criminal behavior; and a considerable number of heroin users show little interest in seeking treatment, even though drug rehabilitation programs can lower the criminal behavior of addicts during their time in treatment.

The involvement of causality in these relationships remains uncertain. Illicit drug use, delinquency, and crime are best understood as interconnected behaviors, particularly when they coincide with the availability of illegal drugs. It is essential to view drugs and crime as linked rather than in isolation, especially when they arise from similar circumstances. Numerous studies support the strong association between drug use and criminal activity. A national survey conducted in the United States explored the connection between drug use and criminal behavior, revealing that "drug use is a significant correlate of being arrested for a criminal offense, although age is a more critical factor in criminal involvement. There were minimal differences in the models predicting violent versus property crime, although minority status was a stronger predictor of violent crime, while poverty was a more significant predictor of property crime" (6).

Research indicates a strong link between crime and drug use, particularly in studies involving individuals who have been arrested. The Drug Use Forecasting Program, managed by the United States National Institute of Justice, tracks drug consumption among recently apprehended individuals in various cities. Regular assessments are performed on a sample of arrestees at booking facilities. A 1989 study focusing on males across 14 U.S. cities employed urine tests and selective confirmation methods for 10 different drugs. Priority for inclusion in the testing program was given to individuals charged with serious offenses unrelated to drugs. Out of nearly 3,000 tests were conducted, a significant proportion of those in New York (76%), Philadelphia (74%), and the District of Columbia (65%), tested positive for cocaine. In contrast, smaller cities reported lower rates of positive results, with Indianapolis at 26% and San Antonio at 24%. The testing method only detects drug use from 2-3 days before the arrest, suggesting that the actual level of drug use among arrestees may be higher than indicated. Interviews with arrestees showed a surprisingly high incidence of needle sharing, with the lowest rates in Detroit (10%) and San Antonio (48%). Overall, between one-fourth and three-fourths of serious non-drug offenders tested positive for cocaine, many also showed positive results for other substances, and a significant number of these individuals are at considerable risk of contracting HIV and other blood-borne diseases.

When drug issues in a community are viewed as severe, residents are confronted with difficult options. They can either acknowledge the presence of drugs in their area and adjust to a situation that seems unchangeable in the short term; modify their way of life to mitigate the risks of drug trafficking and violence in their neighborhoods; engage in community initiatives to alter their surroundings, with or without police assistance; or, if feasible, relocate to safer accommodations.

However, many of these options are not accessible to individuals living in poverty or with limited resources. Consequently, with fewer alternatives available, those in lower socioeconomic conditions bear a heavier personal burden from drug-related problems than others.

Another consequence of crime is that the political landscape becomes dominated by issues related to drug abuse and associated challenges, including concerns about violent crime, the susceptibility of young people, and a rise in prostitution. Community responses range from acceptance and apathy to proactive engagement and opposition. Certain citizen groups have come together and developed strategies to hinder traffickers, utilizing methods such as reporting through hotlines and securing vacant properties that were once inhabited by drug users (5, p. 275).

Various terrorist groups and organized crime syndicates are either engaged in or have strong connections to the illegal drug trade, with the primary motivation often being financial gain and power. One analyst provides an instance of collaboration between terrorists and drug traffickers, stating: "Colombian political terrorists ... finance a significant portion of their activities through the drug trade, leading to violent retaliation from some traditional drug lords" (5, p. 52). Colombia has become a hub for cocaine trafficking, merging well-structured social and economic interests with an underground network focused on drug-related crimes (8). Organized crime is not confined to a single region; in Italy, where a deeply rooted criminal presence exists, the government has implemented laws targeting the Mafia to confiscate illegally obtained assets. These measures, designed to cut off the financial resources of organized crime, have reportedly yielded positive results (9).

Political shifts can influence patterns of smuggling, organized crime, and substance abuse. Research on the implications of border openings within the European Union has highlighted concerns regarding drug trafficking, terrorism, and cybercrime. Historically, there have been strong connections among terrorist organizations across various European nations. The reduction of checkpoints between EU member states could hinder the ability to ensure sufficient security. In the former Soviet Union and with the liberalization of Eastern Europe, significant transformations are occurring in social regulations, laws, and controls. The emergence of new borders presents opportunities for drug traffickers and other smugglers (11, p. 29).

The illegal drug trade yields substantial profits. Money is acquired in or converted to a global currency and subsequently transferred to financial hubs that can electronically circulate the funds worldwide. This transfer process obscures the original source of the money, making it indistinguishable from legally earned currency. To facilitate this, various tactics are employed, including the use of shell companies, ghost operations, or front businesses, particularly those that deal with significant cash transactions.

Financial flows resulting from drug trafficking can be estimated through both direct and indirect methods (1 2, pp. 4-6). The direct method involves examining international banking and capital account data related to the balance of payments. In contrast, indirect methods rely on estimates of global drug production, the consumption patterns of drug users, or the actual confiscation of illegal drugs. An OECD Financial Action Task Force report on opium, coca, and cannabis has indicated that "while a significant portion of heroin, cocaine, and cannabis is consumed in developed nations, considerable amounts are also used in producing countries, particularly heroin, which generates profits there as well. Psychotropic substances like amphetamines/methamphetamine and LSD are manufactured in secret labs, including some located in Task Force member countries. These also yield substantial cash, though not to the same extent as cocaine and heroin" (12, p. 5).

Utilizing the methods outlined earlier, this report estimates that the annual sales of cocaine, heroin, and cannabis in the United States and Europe reach around $122 billion. Of this total, between 50 to 70 percent, or up to $85 billion annually, could potentially be laundered and invested (12, p. 6). Given the scale of these figures, the economies of the involved countries are likely to be significantly impacted by drug-related finances. In nations where the economy relies heavily on commodities, like Colombia with its coffee exports, significant declines in global commodity prices may heighten the role of drug money in the national economy.

The estimated annual revenue of $85 billion from illegal trafficking in heroin, cocaine, and cannabis surpasses the Gross National Product (GNP) of about 75% of the 207 economies globally. This figure exceeds the GNP of both Poland and Portugal, while being just a bit less than that of Hong Kong. On another front, medications, which are crucial in the interaction between doctors and patients, can also lead to illegal activities. Patients may exert pressure on physicians to prescribe drugs that are not necessary. A significant number of individuals misuse medications or seek psychoactive substances for non-medical purposes or for resale. According to an official from a prominent medical association, it is estimated that 3 percent of patients somehow misuse prescriptions for controlled substances. A report on prescription drug abuse in the United States states that "in surveys conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, over half of the patients who sought treatment for or died from drug-related health issues were abusing prescription medications" (13). Physicians and pharmacists sometimes contribute to this issue for various reasons: for financial gain, adherence to outdated professional practices, being misled by patients, or failing to identify forged prescriptions.

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In some countries, the absence of proper drug management by physicians and pharmacists is compounded by the widespread availability of counterfeit and illegally manufactured medications. These drugs, whether produced in secret labs or diverted from legitimate pharmaceutical stocks, generate substantial profits for those who sell them. While pharmaceutical production regulations ensure quality, these drugs are often stolen and sold through the easiest and most lucrative channels. Major categories of illicit drugs include stimulants, depressants, hallucinogens, and sedative-hypnotics. A common trend involves psychotropic drugs being produced in developed nations and then distributed globally. Given that legitimate pharmaceutical companies have extensive distribution networks and significant profit potential, theft can occur at any point in the distribution process. Some dealers may purchase or steal equipment to manufacture pills or capsules, establishing operations that seem to engage in legitimate drug production.

The effects of drug abuse on law enforcement are significant. Throughout the stages of production, distribution, and consumption, drugs affect operations by redirecting time, energy, and resources from other duties. Activities such as intelligence gathering, surveillance, interdiction, seizure, prosecution, adjudication, sentencing, and managing prisons, probation, and parole may require specialization to address the intricacies and high volume of drug-related cases. In certain countries, specialized drug courts are necessary to handle the influx of these cases. The overall societal costs associated with drug abuse are increasingly becoming a focal point in the development of national and international policies.

The illegal trafficker, the agricultural producer, the small-time vendor in the community, the money launderer, and their supporters can all reap quick financial gains. However, the exact number of individuals who get apprehended is unclear, as is the duration of their operations. It's possible that the earnings of minors dealers are overstated. A study involving 186 drug dealers found that the median monthly income from drug sales was $721, with those who sold drugs daily earning around $2,000 per month. "Street-level drug dealing seems to serve as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, legitimate jobs, and it appears to be less lucrative than what media portrayals suggest" (15, p. 477). Regarding the futures of most dealers, it is probable that more choose to exit the trade voluntarily than are caught and prosecuted. The goal of the criminal justice system is not to apprehend every dealer but to be sufficiently effective in discouraging the majority are not engaging in such illegal activities from the outset.

References for further reading & Notes

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