

The Relationship between Criminality and Substance Use, Abuse, and Dependence

Substance Abuse and Criminal Behavior

Extensive research shows the strong correlation between substance abuse and criminal behavior (Gropper 1985). Many criminals start using drugs before progressing to other crimes and shift to heavier drug use and the use of more serious drugs as their criminal careers continue (Green 1981, Inciardi 1986). Research demonstrates that heavy drug users resort to other crimes to support their drug habit (Chaiken and Johnson 1988) and use drugs as part of the crime committing process (Johnson et al. 1985). Heavy illegal drug use is an important factor distinguishing violent career criminals from other types of offenders (Chaiken and Chaiken 1982, Rolph and Chaiken 1987, Dembo et al. 1990, Visher 1990). A study of California parolees found that drug possession or use was a factor in 64% of parole revocations (Blue Ribbon Commission 1990).

Reasons for the Relationship between Substance Abuse and Criminal Behavior

Criminologists believe that a variety of mechanisms link criminal behavior and substance use, abuse, and dependence:

1. Substance use itself is often a criminal act. The possession and use of illicit drugs is by definition criminal. So is public intoxication or the operation of a motor vehicle while intoxicated or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs (AOD).
2. Persons who are incapacitated either temporarily or for an extended period by their substance use are much more likely than other persons to break the law. Thus, for example, intoxicated adolescents are more likely to engage in vandalism, brawling, and other behavior that they would be more likely to avoid when sober. Chronic alcoholics and drug addicts, because of their substance-induced incapacity, lack employment and other ties to the community. As a result they are particularly susceptible to arrest for crimes against the public order and the petty crimes that they may commit to support themselves.
3. Substance use may create psychological states that predispose the user to criminal behavior. Excessive alcohol use, for example, reduces inhibitions at the same time it may increase aggression and a tendency towards violent behavior. Cocaine, amphetamines, and other illicit drugs have similar effects.
4. Career criminals often use these properties of different substances to prepare themselves for committing crimes. For example, a burglar might steady his nerves by drinking himself into a state of intoxication or a mugger might use methamphetamine to increase his rage and violence, thus more effectively intimidating his victims.