



Motivations and substance use amongst property and violent offenders: Findings from the 2008 & 2013 Illicit Drug Reporting System

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KEY FINDINGS

- The prevalence of property crime remained stable across 2008 & 2013, with 18% of PWID reporting that they had committed a property offence in the month preceding interview. Violent crime remained low and stable at 4% and 3% respectively.
- In both 2008 and 2013, the majority of property offenders reported being under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol the last time they committed an offence (73% and 71% respectively).
- In 2008, the largest proportion of drug-affected property offenders reported being under the influence of heroin (32%) and benzodiazepines (31%). Similarly, in 2013, they largely reported being under the influence of benzodiazepines (29%).
- Property offenders most commonly reported that they had committed their last offence for financial reasons.
- Amongst those who had committed a violent offence, almost three-quarters reported that they were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol (73% respectively).
- In 2008, the largest proportion of violent offenders reported being under the influence of alcohol (36%), followed by methamphetamine (29%). Similarly, in 2013, the largest proportion of violent offenders reported being under the influence of alcohol and heroin equally (32% respectively).
- The largest proportion of violent offenders reported committing their last violent offence for 'opportunistic' reasons.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between drug use and criminal activity is intricately complex and has been studied extensively over the past few decades. International and Australian studies have shown that drug users are more likely to engage in crime than those who do not use drugs (AIHW, 2011; Bennett et al., 2008), and in particular it has been found that property crime is associated with heavier and more frequent use of opioids. There is growing literature to suggest that this is also the case for methamphetamine use, with a recent study of police detainees finding that heavy users of illicit opioids and amphetamines had significantly more property charges than less frequent and non-drug using individuals (Bradford & Payne, 2012). Similarly, substance use has consistently been shown to be associated with an increased risk of violent crime (Hoaken & Stewart, 2003).

There is a vast amount of research which posits a range of theories about why individuals engage in property and violent crime, however very few studies directly ask the individuals about their motivations. This paper aims to fill this research gap by examining motivations and substance use amongst property and violent offenders in Australia. More specifically, this bulletin will:

- 1) Examine the prevalence of property and violent crime amongst a sample of people who inject drugs, in 2008 & 2013;
- 2) Determine whether property and violent offenders were under the influence of drugs the last time they committed an offence; and
- 3) Explore the motivations for committing property and violent offences.

METHOD

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is an annual monitoring system that has been conducted in every capital city across Australia since 2000. The IDRS is supported by funding from the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvements Grants Fund, and acts as an early warning system for emerging illicit drug problems.

The study uses a triangulation of three data sources including: a survey of people who inject drugs (PWID), a survey of key experts who work in the drug and alcohol field, and analysis of indicator data from health and law enforcement sectors. This paper will be using the national data collected from interviews with PWID in 2008 (n=909) and 2013 (n=887).

The IDRS questionnaire covers a range of topics including drug use, mental health, sexual health, driving behaviours, injecting behaviours and criminal activity. From its inception, the IDRS has measured crime using the Opiate Treatment Index (OTI; Darke et al., 1991). The Criminality Scale of the OTI gathers self-report data on four types of crime including property crime, dealing, fraud and violent crime (in the month preceding interview). In 2008 and 2013, participants were also asked whether they were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol the last time they committed an offence, as well as their main motivation for committing the offence. Previous research has shown that self-reports of drug users are sufficiently reliable and valid to provide information about drug use and related problems (such as criminality) (Darke, 1998).

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics and recent drug use

The demographic characteristics of PWID remained relatively stable from 2008 to 2013. However, as can be seen in Table 1, there were a number of significant differences between the two samples. More specifically, participants of the 2013 IDRS were significantly older than the 2008 sample (40 versus 36 years; $p < 0.001$), and they were more likely to be unemployed (84% versus 77%; $p < 0.001$). In regards to drug use, it was found that the 2013 sample were significantly less likely to have used cocaine ($p < 0.05$), cannabis ($p < 0.01$) and illicit morphine ($p < 0.001$) in the six months preceding interview.

Table 1: Characteristics of PWID, 2008 & 2013

	2008 N=909	2013 N=887
Male %	66	64
Age (median)	36	40***
Grade of school completed (median)	10	10
Unemployed %	77	84***
Partner %	43	40
Unstable housing %	23	21
Age first injected (median)	18	18
Drug use (past six months) %		
Heroin	61	60
Cocaine	20	16*
Alcohol	60	59
Cannabis	77	72**
Morphine [#]	47	38***
Oxycodone [#]	28	32
Benzodiazepines [#]	45	47
Methamphetamine	69	66
Pharmaceutical stimulants [#]	14	12
Prison history (lifetime) %	52	54
Arrest history (past year) %	35	32
Mental health problems ^{##} (past six months) %	43	44

[#]Illicit use

^{##}Self-reported

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Prevalence of property and violent crime

Interestingly, the prevalence of property crime has remained stable over the past six years, with 18% of PWID reporting that they had committed a property offence in both 2008 and 2013. Similarly, past month violent crime remained low and stable at 4% and 3% respectively (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Prevalence of past month property and violent crime amongst PWID, 2008 & 2013



Property Offenders

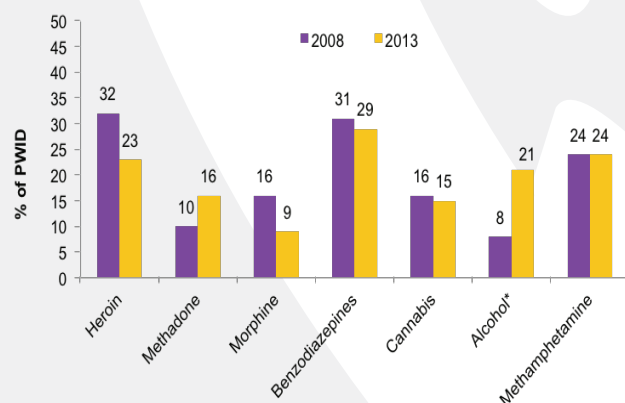
In both 2008 and 2013, the majority of property offenders reported being under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol the last time they committed an offence (73% and 71% respectively). Interestingly, poly drug use didn't appear to be particularly common prior to committing an offence, with the majority of drug-affected offenders reporting that they were under the influence of only one drug the last time they committed a property offence. This remained consistent across 2008 & 2013.

Table 2: Substance use amongst property offenders, 2008 & 2013

Property Offenders %	2008 N=158	2013 N=150
Under the influence of drugs	73	71
Number of drugs under the influence of:	N=115	N=101
One	64	56
Two	24	32
Three	8	9
Four	3	3

Figure 2 shows the drugs that participants reported using prior to their last property offence. In 2008, the largest proportion of drug-affected property offenders reported being under the influence of heroin (32%) and benzodiazepines (31%). In 2013, benzodiazepines remained the most commonly used drug prior to engaging in property crime (29%), although there was a significant increase in the proportion of property offenders who reported being under the influence of alcohol at the time of their last property offence (from 8% in 2008 to 21% in 2013; $p < 0.05$).

Figure 2: Substance at the time of last property offence, 2008 & 2013



* $p < 0.05$

In 2008 & 2013, IDRS participants were asked to nominate the main reason for committing their last property offence. Due to the variation in responses, motivations have been grouped into three categories: financial, opportunistic (e.g. acting on the spur of the moment, the opportunity arose) and psychopharmacological (e.g. under the influence of drugs, coming down). As can be seen in Table 3, in both 2008 and 2013, the majority of property offenders reported committing their last property offence for financial reasons. However, in 2013 there was a significant increase in the proportion of offenders who had engaged in property crime for financial reasons (66% in 2008 versus 75% in 2013; $p < 0.01$). Interestingly, in both years, only 4% of property offenders nominated psychopharmacological reasons as the main motivation for committing a property offence.

Table 3: Motivations for committing last property offence, 2008 & 2013

%	2008 N=160	2013 N=152
Motivations		
Financial#	66	75**
Opportunistic###	10	16
Psychopharmacological###	4	4
Other	21	5***

#Financial includes: needed money to buy drugs, needed money to support myself/family, needed money to repay debts, other financial reasons (e.g. needed money for food, savings, needed to buy something)

###Opportunistic includes: enjoy the rush, lost your temper, looking for revenge, urged on by your friends, acting on spur of moment, opportunity arose, helping a friend out

####Psychopharmacological includes: under the influence of drugs, coming down and hanging out

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

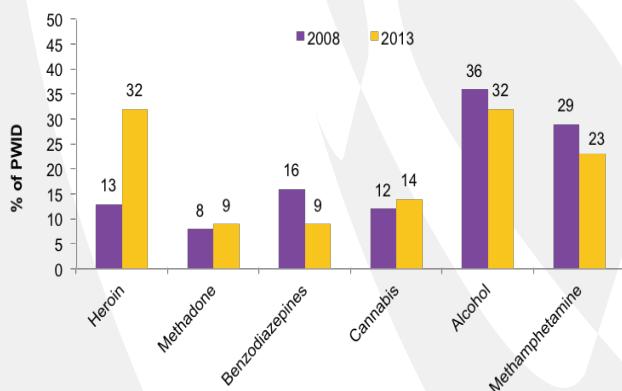
Violent Offenders

As shown in Figure 1, in both 2008 and 2013, only a small minority of PWID reported that they had committed a violent offence in the month preceding interview (4% and 3% respectively). However, of those who had committed a violent offence, almost three-quarters reported that they were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol (73% respectively). Furthermore, in both years, 64% of drug affected offenders reported being under the influence of only one drug the last time they committed a violent offence.

Table 4: Substance use amongst violent offenders, 2008 & 2013

Property Offenders %	2008 N=33	2013 N=30
Under the influence of drugs	73	73
Number of drugs under the influence of:	N=22	N=22
One	64	64
Two	27	36
Three	5	0
Four	5	0

In 2008, the largest proportion of violent offenders reported being under the influence of alcohol (36%), followed by methamphetamine (29%). Similarly, in 2013, the largest proportion of violent offenders reported being under the influence of alcohol and heroin equally (32% respectively). Due to small numbers, it is difficult to make any meaningful comparisons between violent offenders in 2008 and 2013. However, as can be seen in Figure 3, there was a non-significant increase in the proportion of participants who reported being under the influence of heroin at the time of last offence (13% in 2008 versus 32% in 2013; $p>0.05$).

Figure 3: Substance at the time of last violent offence, 2008 & 2013


As can be seen in Table 5, in both 2008 and 2013, the largest proportion of violent offenders reported that they had committed their last violent offence for opportunistic reasons.

In 2013, one in five violent offenders (20%) nominated self-defence as the main reason for their last violent offence. Similar to property offenders, only a minority of violent offenders nominated psychopharmacological reasons as the main reason for committing a violent offence.

Table 5: Motivation for committing last violent offence, 2008 & 2013

%	2008 N=33	2013 N=30
Motivations	N=33	N=30
Financial [#]	15	10
Opportunistic ^{##}	42	47
Psychopharmacological ^{###}	12	13
Self-defence	0	20
Other	30	10

[#]Financial includes: needed money to buy drugs, needed money to support myself/family, needed money to repay debts, other financial reasons (e.g. needed money for food, savings, needed to buy something)

^{##}Opportunistic includes: enjoy the rush, lost your temper, looking for revenge, urged on by your friends, acting on spur of moment, opportunity arose, helping a friend out

^{###}Psychopharmacological includes: under the influence of drugs, coming down and hanging out

CONCLUSION

In 2013, it was found that eighteen percent of PWID had committed a property offence and three percent had committed a violent offence in the month preceding interview. This appears to have remained relatively stable over the history of the IDRS, with similar rates of property and violent crime reported in the first year of data collection in 2000 (19% and 7% respectively) (Topp et al., 2001). Interestingly, property crime amongst PWID appears to be relatively low when compared to other drug using populations, with previous studies reporting past month prevalence rates of 38-39% (McKetin et al., 2008; Patterson et al., 2000; Ross et al., 2005). The prevalence of violent crime, on the other hand, appears to be fairly comparable to other studies (4-15%) (McKetin et al., 2008; Patterson et al., 2000; Ross et al., 2005).

In regards to crime and substance use, it was found that the large majority of both property and violent offenders were under the influence of drugs the last time they committed an offence. This remained consistent across 2008 and 2013, and is not surprising given that the IDRS sample is made up of people who inject drugs. However, it is important to note that the data collected from the IDRS does not measure the level of intoxication at the time of offence, which can be subject to factors such as dosage, route of administration, and the onset of action and duration of effects. Indeed, when asked about the main reason for committing a property or violent offence, very few participants reported 'psychopharmacology' as the main cause. This is in contrast to a study of police detainees, which found that 40% of detainees attributed their current offending to being high and/or drunk (Payne & Gaffney, 2012).

Given the level of poly drug use amongst this sample, it was interesting to find that the use of multiple drugs was generally not evident at the time of last offence. Rather, in both years, the majority of drug affected property and violent offenders reported that they were under the influence of only one drug at the time of their last offence. In 2013, the largest proportion of drug-affected property offenders reported being under the influence of benzodiazepines the last time they committed a property offence, whilst drug-affected violent offenders mostly reported being under the influence of heroin and alcohol. This raises important questions regarding the relationship between pharmaceutical drugs and crime, with a growing body of research suggesting that benzodiazepine use can lead to disinhibited, aggressive, and bizarre behaviour, as well as feelings of invincibility (Smith et al., 2007). Indeed, it has been found that illegal benzodiazepine users who reported attribution to these drugs nominated the psychopharmacological effect as the main reason for the drug-crime connection (Payne & Gaffney, 2012).

Motivations for committing a property or violent offence remained relatively consistent across 2008 and 2013. More specifically, motivations for committing a property crime were found to be largely financial in nature, although it is interesting to note that in 2013, there was a significant increase in the proportion of property offenders who nominated financial reasons as the main motivation for their last offence. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that in 2013 there was also a significant increase in the proportion of IDRS participants who were unemployed at the time of interview. In contrast, motivations for committing a violent crime were largely opportunistic, and this remained consistent across 2008 and 2013.

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