

## Chapter 10: Drugs, alcohol and crime

Drugs and alcohol use are frequently offered as explanations for crime. The use of so-called 'hard' drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine is cited as one of the causes of a range of crimes, particularly acquisitive crimes; excessive alcohol use is perceived as closely connected with violent behaviour. For many members of the general public and the media, the relationship between drug or alcohol use and criminal activity is clear and the solutions straightforward. This contrasts sharply with the findings of research studies which identify the need for a more complex understanding and consequently, a multi-faceted response.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on drug use and addresses three key issues: the nature and extent of drug use, the relationship between drug use and crime, and strategies for reducing drug-related crime. In the second part, the same issues are explored in relation to alcohol use. It is important to note that the material on drugs and alcohol has been presented separately to aid understanding of a challenging criminological issue. However, this approach runs the risk of glossing over the fact that both the causes and effects of problem drug and alcohol use may be similar, and that alcohol is often a common element in polydrug use among offenders.

In this chapter, the available evidence from research studies and official statistics is pieced together and its limitations acknowledged. This paints a picture of a society in which alcohol use, and to a lesser extent drug use, is widespread but problem use is confined to a minority. Males, especially young males, are most likely to be engaged in problem drug or alcohol use and therefore more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system.

The review of available evidence concludes with suggesting that current knowledge about the relationship between drugs, alcohol and crime remains patchy and prone to misinterpretation. The dangers of relying upon deterministic explanations are explored and it is suggested that 'chicken and egg' arguments about whether drug (or alcohol) use leads to crime or vice versa are both simplistic and unhelpful. A strong argument is advanced for developing a more complex understanding of the relationship between drugs, alcohol and crime which acknowledges the role of other social, economic and cultural factors. It is argued that current policy is based on a partial understanding of the relationship between drugs, alcohol and crime, and thus its impact is likely to be limited.