

The cost of heroin-related crime

New light on the key issue in the political debate over drug policy

THE RELATIONSHIP between drugs and crime is central to some very high profile policy debates, whether as a 'cause of crime' to be tough on (or not) or as a major 'social cost' which some claim tips the balance in favour of legalisation or more liberal prescribing. It is also a relationship drug workers often view with unease: if the link is *too* strong, all drug users can be tarred with the 'thieving' brush – but if it is denied, one possible mitigating factor is lost and drug users who commit crimes are more likely to be treated simply as criminals.

For their report (see page 7) the Central Drugs Coordination Unit asked ISDD to calculate the cost of heroin-related crime in England and Wales. Previously, the most recent (and widely remarked upon) calculation was that of the Greater Manchester Police, from whose work others had extrapolated that half of acquisitive crime by value in England and Wales is committed by opiate or cocaine addicts.¹

ISDD found this estimate was based on a number of faulty assumptions:

First, it was based on an overestimate of heroin consumption (each addict taking a gram a day) so overestimated the financial needs of heroin users.

Secondly, it made no allowance for the fact that some (probably most) heroin buys are funded by means other than acquisitive crime.

Thirdly, it relied solely on Home Office notifications of heroin addicts, so underestimated the number of dependent heroin users.

If, for instance, it had been assumed that there are twice as many dependent heroin users as are notified to the Home Office (at the lower end of the ratios usually employed), then the same calculations would have resulted in *all* the value of acquisitive crime being attributed to dependent heroin users!

Bearing in mind these problems, ISDD set out to recalculate values or ranges of values for:

- the number of dependent heroin users in England and Wales;
- the quantity of heroin consumed by each user;
- the cost of that heroin per user;
- the multiplier for the value of stolen property sold by the user;
- the percentage of heroin users' incomes derived from acquisitive crime.

All these factors were calculable from English and Welsh data, with the exception of the last one. To get a basis for estimating this we had to look to Scotland, Holland, Germany and America.² We assumed that the situation in England and Wales fell somewhere within the range for these other countries – where between 16 and 48 per cent of heroin users' incomes are reported to come from acquisitive crime.

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Our new estimates for England and Wales were based on the following assumptions:

- the number of dependent heroin users is between twice and five times the number notified to the Home Office

Previous estimates are no longer tenable

(the range conventionally used);
– on average, each of these users (who also typically use other drugs) consumes one third of a gram of 'street' heroin on 228 days of the year;³
– the price of this heroin approximates to the retail prices collated by enforcement agencies (£50-£100 a gram);⁴
– stolen property is sold for only a third of its value;
– between 16 and 48 per cent of the cost of heroin is financed by acquisitive crime.

On this basis, dependent heroin users in England and Wales raise *between £58 million and £864 million* from acquisitive crime in order to purchase heroin. Which end of this wide range is closest to reality depends on (a) whether there are two or five times as many dependent heroin users as are notified; (b) whether their heroin costs them £50 or £100 per gram; and (c) whether 16 or 48 per cent of their cash income comes from acquisitive crime.

• This estimate amounts to *between 1 and 21 per cent* of the total cost of acquisitive crime in England and Wales.⁵ With such poor data, a more accurate estimate cannot be made. What is clear is that the widely quoted estimate that half of all acquisitive crime in England and Wales is due to heroin users' purchases of heroin is no longer tenable. ○

1. Greater Manchester Police. *Drugs/crime working group*. 1992.

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2. Hammersley R. *et al.* "The relationship between crime and opioid use." *Brit. J. of Addiction*: 1989, 84, p.1029-43.

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