

Substance use and violence: a meta-review

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Introduction / Issues: The effects of alcohol on violence is widely established, but a review that summarises and compares the effects of other specific drugs is needed. This meta-review presents evidence on the relationship between drug use and violence. We reviewed evidence of those drugs for which there is a reasonable amount of evidence on their relationship to violence, namely, cannabis, opioids and stimulant drugs.

Method / Approach: We searched in PubMed and PsycINFO for systematic reviews and meta-analyses that examined the relationship between specific drugs and violence/crime. We examined various types of evidence, including animal studies, human experimental and neuroimaging studies, epidemiological studies of drug use among violent offenders and of violence among persons who use drugs, and intervention studies.

Key Findings: For studies that have investigated individual drugs, cannabis has been most studied. There is suggestive evidence of a dose-response relationship between the frequency of cannabis use and violence, most clearly among persons with serious mental illnesses. There is emerging evidence on stimulant use, but evidence on opioids or sedative use is more limited.

Discussions and Conclusions: A large proportion of studies have investigated the use of all illicit drugs combined. This is less informative because differing drugs have different neurological impacts and, therefore, different behavioural outcomes. The suggestive link between cannabis use and violence is limited by large heterogeneity and lack of control for confounding. The effects of increased potency and use on violence after cannabis liberalisation remains to be studied.

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