

REDUCING DRUG-RELATED CRIME: AN OVERVIEW OF THE GLOBAL EVIDENCE

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Dr Alex Stevens began by observing that drug policies were increasingly justified by their impact - actual or putative - on drug-related crime. The BFDPP has conducted a review of the international evidence on the cost effectiveness of crime-reduction initiatives.

Drug treatment is probably the most cost-effective drug policy measure. It has been calculated in the UK - on the basis of data collected for the National Treatment Outcome Research Survey (NTORS) - that every £1 spent on drug treatment saves between £9.50 and £18 on the subsequent costs of problem drug use, particularly drug-related crime.

Research shows that 'situational crime prevention' is also effective. A study conducted in Yorkshire, England recorded a 30% reduction in crime on housing estates built on 'secure by design' principles - for example, landscaping of spaces to improve natural surveillance. Dr. Alex Stevens noted, however, that design driven by crime prevention imperatives would not necessarily create good environments for people to live in - for example, straight, brightly lit roads with conspicuous CCTV cameras and a lack of hedges and trees. Early interventions to support vulnerable families - such as the Perry pre-school programme in the US - could also have a positive impact on crime.

The evidence on poverty reduction, suppression of organised crime and alternatives to prison is 'promising' but inconclusive. Other approaches to drug-related crime do not appear to be cost effective; specifically, these include some forms of drug law enforcement, most forms of drug education, the mass imprisonment of drug users, and drug testing without treatment.

Alex Stevens stated that there is no conclusive evidence that imprisonment is a cost-effective policy for either deterrence or rehabilitation. Its retributive function is not amenable to measurement or objective analysis. The incapacitation of drug offenders does appear to have a small positive impact on drug-related crime. A recent US study of the effects of the massive increase in the imprisonment of drug offenders found that it had probably resulted in a small but significant fall in violent and property crime (1-3%). But it also concluded that this was not likely to be a cost effective way of reducing offending when balanced against the economic and social costs of a fifteen-fold rise in the imprisonment of drug offenders in the US since 1980.

Alex Stevens contrasted approaches to diverting offenders from the prison system in the US and in Europe. In the US, drug courts have tended to deal with drug offences, such as possession and supply, and exclude offenders who have committed drug-related crimes, such as robberies to fund drug purchases. It is precisely this latter group that has been targeted by diversionary programmes in Europe, such as Drug Treatment and Testing Orders (DTTOs) in the UK, now called Drug Rehabilitation Requirements (DRRs).

The US General Accountability Office has reviewed the drug court programme in the US. It concludes that there have been positive results on recidivism both during and after participation. Another study of a US programme that does deal with drug-related crimes was also positive. The Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison (DTAP) Programme in New York City has treated over 2,000 people who have pleaded guilty to serious non-violent crimes and would otherwise have gone to prison. Those who participated in the programme were 33% less likely to be rearrested and 67% less likely to be re-incarcerated than imprisoned offenders, according to a study conducted by the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

Research on Drug Treatment and Testing Orders in the UK has been less encouraging. Of the people sentenced to a DTTO in England in 2001, 86% were reconvicted of a further offence within two years. However, Alex Stevens noted that this is not the only possible measure of effectiveness. In particular, offenders completing DTTOs reported that their offending was less frequent.

He also drew attention to the 'net-widening' tendency of programmes designed as alternatives to prison. Rather than providing an alternative for offenders who would otherwise have received prison sentences, these initiatives may drag lower level offenders into the criminal justice system and increase the total number of people under state supervision.

In the UK, there has also been an expansion in the use of drug testing in the criminal justice system, which is often separated from any corresponding duty for the state to provide treatment. Aside from the human rights issues of compulsorily testing people who have not been found guilty of a crime, there is little or no evidence that testing is effective for crime prevention and there is even some evidence that suggests that it may increase offending.

KEY POINTS

Crime reduction is a core aim of drug policy.

Drug treatment is the most cost-effective method of crime reduction. Other effective

measures are 'situational crime prevention' and early interventions for vulnerable families.

Neither drug testing nor mass imprisonment is cost effective.

The diversion of drug offenders from the criminal justice and prison systems appears to have a positive impact on recidivism; at least this is the experience of drug courts in the US.