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Heroin Use and Crime

In April 1985 the National Drugs Summit was held in Canberra and attended by heads of both State and Federal Governments. The major outcome of this Summit was the launching of the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse which allocated funds to combat the problem of drug and alcohol abuse in Australia. One of the primary concerns of the campaign is the relationship between heroin use and crime.

It is difficult to form an accurate picture of the number of heroin users in New South Wales. The number of recorded offences has grown from 8.7 per 100,000 of population in 1974 to 78.11 for 100,000 in 1985 (see Figure 1) (1). The size of heroin seizures has also increased, from 11.7 kilograms in 1977 to 101 kilograms in 1984 (see Figure 2) (2).

Both of these changes, however may reflect increased law-enforcement

activity as much as increased drug crime.

More accurate indications may be derived from the use of arrest-rearrest statistics and changes in the rate of opiate-related deaths (3). The former method suggests that the rate of heroin usage may have doubled since 1979; the latter method suggests it may have tripled since that year. Neither of these methods are particularly precise however, (4) though it is interesting that both suggest an increase in heroin usage over the last ten years.

Whatever the size of the heroin user population it is not difficult to see how a link between heroin use and crime might be forged. Heroin is generally very expensive to buy and regular users by definition require a regular supply. In the absence of a large income there is a strong incentive to commit income-generating property crimes or personal crimes,

(e.g. robbery) to fund an addiction. The fact that such a link is easily envisaged, however, does not by itself establish that there is one. Evidence is required to support such a theory.

The rate of reported property crime has certainly increased over the period 1975 to 1986. Rates of break, enter and steal, for example, as shown in Figure 3, have increased from 989 per 100,000 of population in 1979 to 1,576 per 100,000 of population in 1985/86. Whether this change may be attributed to the apparent increase in heroin usage nonetheless still depends upon finding more direct evidence of a link between heroin usage and property crime.

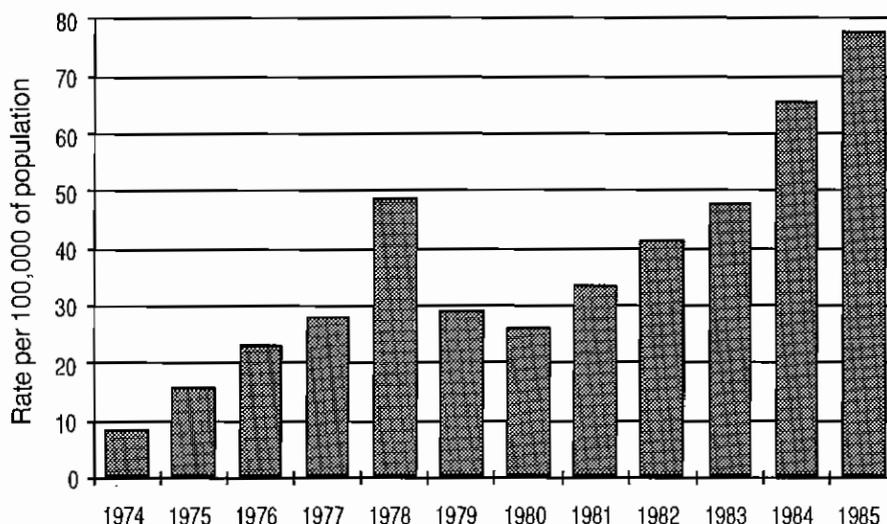
Recent Studies

Two recent surveys, one of persons imprisoned for property offences (5) and the other of individuals seeking treatment for heroin addiction (6), have thrown some light on the relationship in question.

The first surveyed 225 prisoners, seeking their responses to a series of questions dealing with the amount of property crime they committed, the quantity of heroin they required and the link between the two. When offenders were divided into those who did and those who did not regularly use heroin, significant differences were found between the two groups.

Users committed significantly more burglaries, armed robberies and frauds than non-users. This higher involvement in crime is exemplified by the fact that for 78.2% of users,

FIGURE 1
Heroin Offences 1974 - 1985



property crime was their main source of income, whereas for 64.4% of non-users their main income was derived by legal means. The survey also found that, among users, the heavier an individual's heroin addiction, the more robberies they committed.

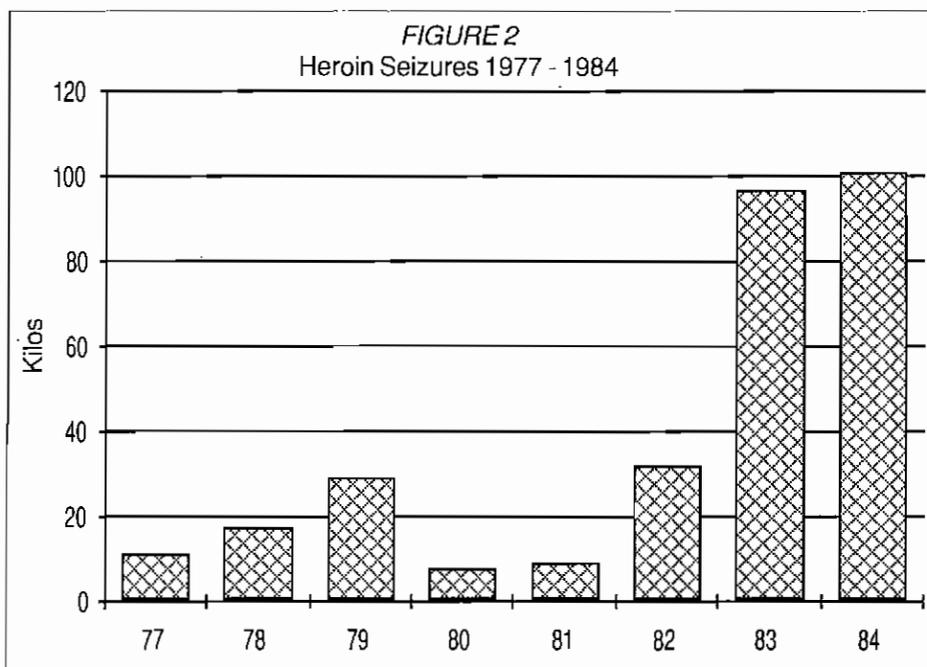
This survey also revealed some of the complexities involved in the link between heroin addiction and property crime. Nearly 72% of heroin users reported committing property crime *before* their first use of heroin. This suggests that heroin use was not the sole factor involved in their turning to crime. It is noteworthy, though, that crimes committed before regular heroin use were both less frequent and less serious than those committed after regular heroin use. This result is suggestive of the possibility that heroin dependence, rather than actually causing a law-abiding person to turn to a 'life of crime', may exacerbate offending among those already committing crimes.

Even if correct as a generalisation about property offenders this conclusion cannot be assumed to be true of heroin users in general. The sample interviewed in prison may not be typical of the general heroin-using population. To establish to what extent the findings obtained through interviews with property offenders hold true of other groups, these groups must also be interviewed.

The second study took a step toward this end. By interviewing persons seeking treatment for heroin dependence along the same lines as those interviewed in prison, comparisons between the two groups were made possible.

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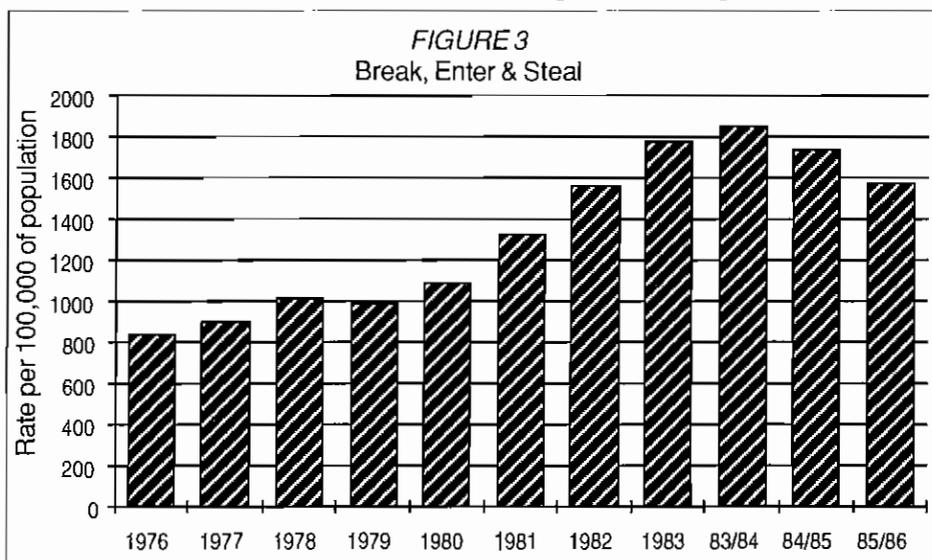
Most differences between the two groups occurred in relation to the level of drug use and to the degree and nature of criminal activity. Overall, the heroin consumption and expenditure rates of the treatment group were far less than those of the user/property offenders. The treatment group generally reported average use and



expenditure levels which were half those of user/property offenders.

Whereas the average daily heroin consumption and expenditure level of the user/property offender group was one "street" weight gram and \$300, respectively, the treatment group mostly reported using approximately half a gram and spending only \$150. Also, whereas 78.2% of user/property

the treatment group period prior to treatment. For example, four individuals reported committing 715 break, enter and steals, one individual reported committing 26 robberies (unarmed), two individuals reported committing 303 frauds and one individual reported committing 800 larcenies. When looked at individually these respondents were found to be using above-average amounts of



offenders reported that property crime was their main source of income, the most common sources of income for the treatment group were drug sales 33.1%, social security 28.3%, employment savings 27.6% and drug property crime 25.2%.

Comparing reported property crimes in two groups, it is clear that the treatment group was far less criminally active. Even so, a significant number of property crimes were reported in

heroin and consequently spending proportionally more than the majority. As such they resembled the user/property offenders.

As with the property offender group, though, among those already committing offences in the treatment group, the transition to regular heroin use was generally associated with higher rates of offending. This was true, both of those involved in property offences and those involved

in illegal drug sales. (See Figure 4).

More important than any of these findings was the fact that 48% of the treatment group said that stealing was not an option they had ever seriously considered in order to support their drug dependency. Where they had committed such a crime it had often been a "one-off" or on an opportunistic basis. When compared with the fact that 87.2% of user/property offenders reported being regularly involved in some sort of property crime in the past it was obvious that heroin dependence has widely varying effects on different individuals.

The treatment group was more active criminally in the supply of drugs. A large majority (85.8%) of the treatment group had sold drugs on at least one occasion, with 69.3% of all respondents having done so on a regular basis in the past. This regular involvement in drug distribution was still in evidence for a significant number in the period prior to treatment. Nearly half (48.0%) were involved in the distribution of drugs during the period prior to treatment; 64.0% of these stating that they sold heroin on a daily or regular basis.

Although similar numbers of user/property offenders were involved at some stage in the sale of drugs only 9.0% specified drug sales as their main source of income before arrest. This was in comparison to the 33.1% of the treatment group who reported drug sales as one of their main income sources for drugs.

Implications

These results raise a number of

interesting and important questions relating to the different effect of heroin dependence on the two surveyed groups.

For example, does the finding that many individuals seeking treatment for heroin addiction committed little or no crime mean that they are able to regulate their habit more effectively and do not have to commit crimes to fund it? Or does it mean that they simply had a larger legal income than those who turned to crime to support their addiction? They might also have had a lower level of dependence, as suggested by differences in heroin consumption between the two surveyed groups. But this raises another possibility which needs to be addressed.

Heroin users in the treatment group were found to be using less heroin and committing fewer offences than those in the property offender group, though both groups were found to increase their rates of offending after the development of regular heroin use. Could the treatment user group simply represent an earlier stage in the development of a heavy addiction, later on becoming more substantially involved in the commission of property crime? Or are some individuals sustaining their need on the basis of legally obtained income, some turning to the sale of illegal drugs and others turning to property crime?

This question is partly answered in the responses of the two groups to questions about their treatment experiences. Nearly half (47%) of the property offender sample had never had any prior treatment experience. In

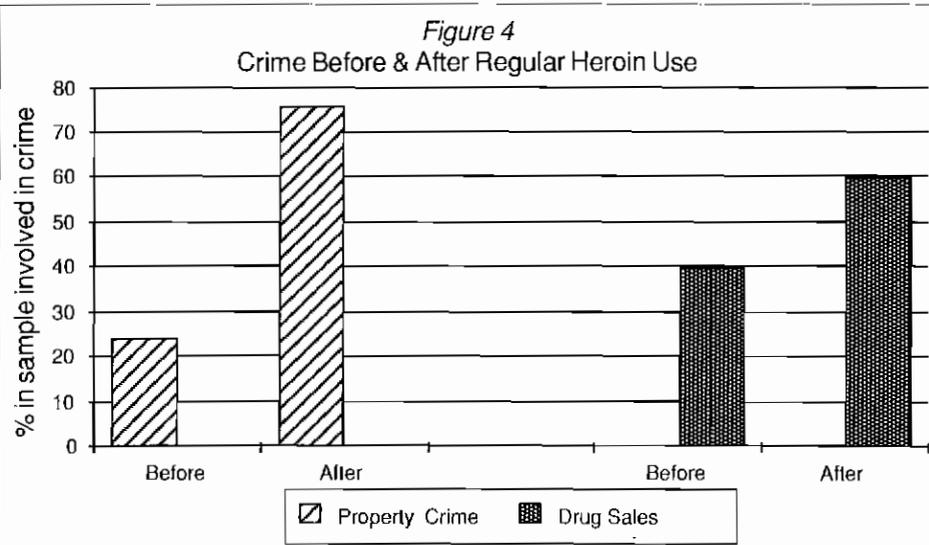
contrast to this some 75% of the treatment sample had been in treatment for heroin dependence before. If heroin-using property offenders just represent a group of heroin users at a later stage of their addiction than those in treatment, the treatment experiences of the two samples should be fairly similar. If anything, property offenders should have had more treatment experiences. The survey evidence is inconsistent with this implication. But this raises other questions as to the origin of the differences between the two groups.

It will be some time before the answers to these questions are known, but they highlight the caution which is required when considering the impact of heroin dependence on crime. Even more caution is required when considering the policy implications of a finding that, in some circumstances at least, heroin dependence markedly increases rates of offending. Many of those surveyed in both groups cited as their major reason for continuing dependence, the influence of their peer group or the 'scene'. It may be that patterns of criminal behaviour and heroin use are formed in a social milieu which has its own rewards. If this is true the provision of heroin for addicts or the discovery of effective treatment programs may not necessarily lead to marked changes in criminal activity.

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References

- 1) New South Wales Police Department. *Annual Report*, 1985.
- 2) *Illicit Drugs in Australia. Situation Report*, 1985. Australian Federal Police. Canberra, A.C.T., 1985.
- 3) For a technical discussion of These methods see R.L. Sandland. *Methods of Estimating the Number of Heroin Users in New South Wales*. Siromath Consultants. Project No. MAN/N83/DAA/1. 1984.



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4) *ibid.*

5) I. Dobinson and P. Ward. *Drugs and Crime*. Research Study No. 2. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1985.

6) I. Dobinson and P. Ward. *Drugs and Crime Phase II*. Research Study No. 6. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1987.

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