

Cocaine and crack

Just how true are the stories about cocaine and crack?

Cocaine

Are more people using cocaine because the price has fallen?

Although in the last couple of years there may have been a decrease in the price of cocaine and a rise in the number of those having used it, these two trends can easily be misinterpreted. The rise in use is far more pronounced among certain age groups (young adults) and in certain parts of the country (London and the South East). It is also important to note that the price of cocaine (or any other commodity) is just one factor that people consider prior to purchasing / using it.

Figures show that approximately 7% of 16-29 year olds in the UK have tried cocaine hydrochloride (powder) on at least one occasion. Whilst this is not an insignificant figure, it is hardly the case that 'everyone is using it'. Another piece of research found that most of the increased use actually took place in London and the South-East (as opposed to being a uniformly national trend) (British Crime Survey, 2000).

It is important to note that whilst falling prices of any commodity will affect the number of people using it, other factors are also involved in people's decision on whether or not to use a drug (or to purchase any other commodity). Certain recent accounts in the media have suggested a rather deterministic relationship between drug prices and the number of users, i.e. cheaper simply equals more users. As we know, human behaviour is more complicated than this. Interestingly, some research suggests that many young people are using cocaine in preference to ecstasy because they believe the former to be safer than the latter.

This led one study to ask the question, 'are we paying for the alarmist and questionably accurate portrayal of the dangers of ecstasy in increased cocaine consumption?' [Boys, Dobson, Griffiths and Marsden, 2001]. Whilst some would attempt to justify sensationalist reporting of drug issues on the grounds of discouraging people from using them, such evidence suggests that this simply encourages users to consider other substances instead.

Is cocaine addictive?

Cocaine 'addiction' is frequently misunderstood. Cocaine users may develop a psychological dependence, (that is to say that they may become dependent upon the positive feelings that use of the drug engenders), but attempting to stop use will not bring about feelings of physical illness (as may be experienced in heroin withdrawal). However, in practical terms, withdrawal from severe levels of use may be so problematic in terms of depression that it makes no sense to differentiate between physical and psychological dependence.

As has been argued elsewhere, dependence is not simply a property of a drug, it is a relationship and, therefore, in considering the question of dependence we also need to be aware that some individuals may be more vulnerable to this (for all sorts of reasons - social, psychological etc.), while other users can go through periods of heavy or moderate use without developing a dependency.

'Crack'

Does crack drive users to commit crime?

Such ideas are another version of the drugs cause crime belief. It has been argued [elsewhere](#) that whilst a small but significant proportion of drug users do have problems of dependency (including some 'crack' users) that may require hundreds of pounds per week to finance - some of which is acquired through criminal activities - many of these people will have been involved in crime before using drugs. It is, therefore, not as simple as 'crack' or other drugs causing or driving users to commit crime. The belief that drugs can cause users to do all sorts of questionable things is a common thread in the history of how drugs and users have been represented and is primarily rooted in the exaggerated 'power' that drugs have consistently been believed to hold over users.

Is crack instantly and inevitably addictive?

It is frequently believed that the use of certain drugs will bring about instant and / or inevitable addiction within users. During the late 80's and early 90's, 'crack' cocaine was regarded in this way by many (heroin has also been portrayed in this manner). Some portrayals in the media at that time reflected the belief that 'one try' was all it would take to bring about

addiction. This, however, is simply not true. Research has consistently shown that many of those who use 'crack' do so on an irregular basis - which hardly reflects the archetypal pattern of addicted use. The reality is that it may take months of use before a user reaches a state of dependent use.

The crack epidemic:

The language frequently used to talk about drug-related issues is very often highly metaphorical and has a tendency to misrepresent what is going on. In relation to certain illicit drugs, and 'crack' is only one example of this, the prevalence of their use may often be portrayed as growing and spreading at an alarming rate, often across the various socio-economic groups. Particular metaphors are often drawn on in such exaggerated accounts, most typically the public are given accounts which mention drug 'epidemics' and / or drug 'plagues'.

As an example of this, media coverage around 'crack' during the late 80's and early 90's often exaggerated the prevalence and geographical distribution of its use. Some of this coverage would have had the public believe that 'crack' was everywhere in the U.S. and that it was inevitable that this situation would repeat itself in the U.K. - with a 'crack' epidemic 'hitting our shores'. The reality was that while 'crack' use may have been present across America to some degree, it was inner city areas in the U.S. (where it was not as common as reports stated) that witnessed concentrated and socially problematic use. The U.K. had experienced nothing like an epidemic in 'crack' use - and has still not done since. While 'crack' use may be quite prevalent in some areas, it is inappropriate to employ the term 'epidemic' to describe 'crack' use. Prevalence surveys continue to suggest that only 0.2% of the 16-59 population have used crack within the last year.

Does crack make people violent?

It is unlikely that drugs (even drugs such as crack cocaine or PCP (Angel Dust) actually *make* people violent. It is usually the case that those committing violent acts under the influence of drugs have pre-drug use violent histories. Drug use is therefore, not a sufficient cause to explain violence. It is more likely that those with a predisposition towards violence seek out particular drugs that compliment (and that they believe compliment) aggressive behaviour.

Much of crack's reputation for violence is derived from the chaotic and relatively violent crack markets of the early 1980s in the US. Even within this context violence has shrunk as the market has matured.

While chronic cocaine use can lead to sleep deprivation, which in turn may make some individuals more likely to be aggressive or paranoid, this is not causal in any simple sense as it does not occur in all users that experience sleep deprivation. As has been argued elsewhere, whether the individual tends to be aggressive per se is an important consideration. As already stated drug use alone is not a sufficient cause to explain violence.

'Crack babies'

Babies born to 'crack' using mothers have often been portrayed as suffering from a range of problematic symptoms derived from foetal damage caused by the use of crack cocaine. However, when socio-economic deprivation is also taken into account little difference is found between such babies and others from comparable social and health-related backgrounds particularly in respect of long-term behavioural or educational outcomes.

References

Boys, A. et al (2001) "Blurred Images: Young cocaine users' perceptions of cocaine", Drug Link, July / August, ISDD.

Fagan, J. (1993) 'Interactions Among Drugs, Alcohol and Violence', Health Affairs, pp.64-79.

Goldstein, P. Brownstein, P. Ryan, P. Bellucci, P. A. (1997) 'Crack and Homicide in New York City: A Case Study in the Epidemiology of Violence', in Reinerman, C. & Levine, H. (eds.) Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice, London, University of California Press.

Morgan, J. and Zimmer, L. 'The Social Pharmacology of Smokable Cocaine: Not All It's Cracked Up to be' in Reinerman, C. & Levine, H. (eds.) Crack in America, London, University of California Press.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2002) Research Report Series, Cocaine Abuse and Addiction, <http://www.drugabuse.gov/ResearchReports/Cocaine/cocaine4.html>

Reinerman, C. and Levine, H. G. (eds.) (1997) Crack in America: Demon drugs and social justice, University of California Press, Los Angeles.

Roth, J. A. (1994) Psychoactive Substances and Violence, Series: Research in Brief, US Dept. of Justice. 19 pages. <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/GOVPUBS/psycviol.htm>

For more information please contact [Ruth Goldsmith](#)

©2008 DrugScope
Built on [OneStopCMS](#)