Rochester SACSI Research
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The Link Between Drugs and Homicide

Introduction

Connections between drugs and homicide are widely acknowledged. Belief in those links has helped to understand the nature of homicide, to direct homicide investigations and to develop approaches to homicide prevention. These connections, however, have rarely been specifically delineated. Thus no common vocabulary for describing the connections between drugs and murder has developed and no common set of variables to consider has been recognized.

As a result of this lack of standardization, estimates of the links between drugs and homicide can range widely. Furthermore, the potential significance of those links for understanding and preventing homicide may not be fully considered due to this lack of a shared methodology.

The detailed information available to the researchers on homicides in 2000 and in 2001 has allowed us to revisit the question of drug and homicide connections (see Working Paper #6). In this paper we attempt to describe the specific ways in which homicide and drugs are linked in a set of Rochester homicide cases.

Methodology

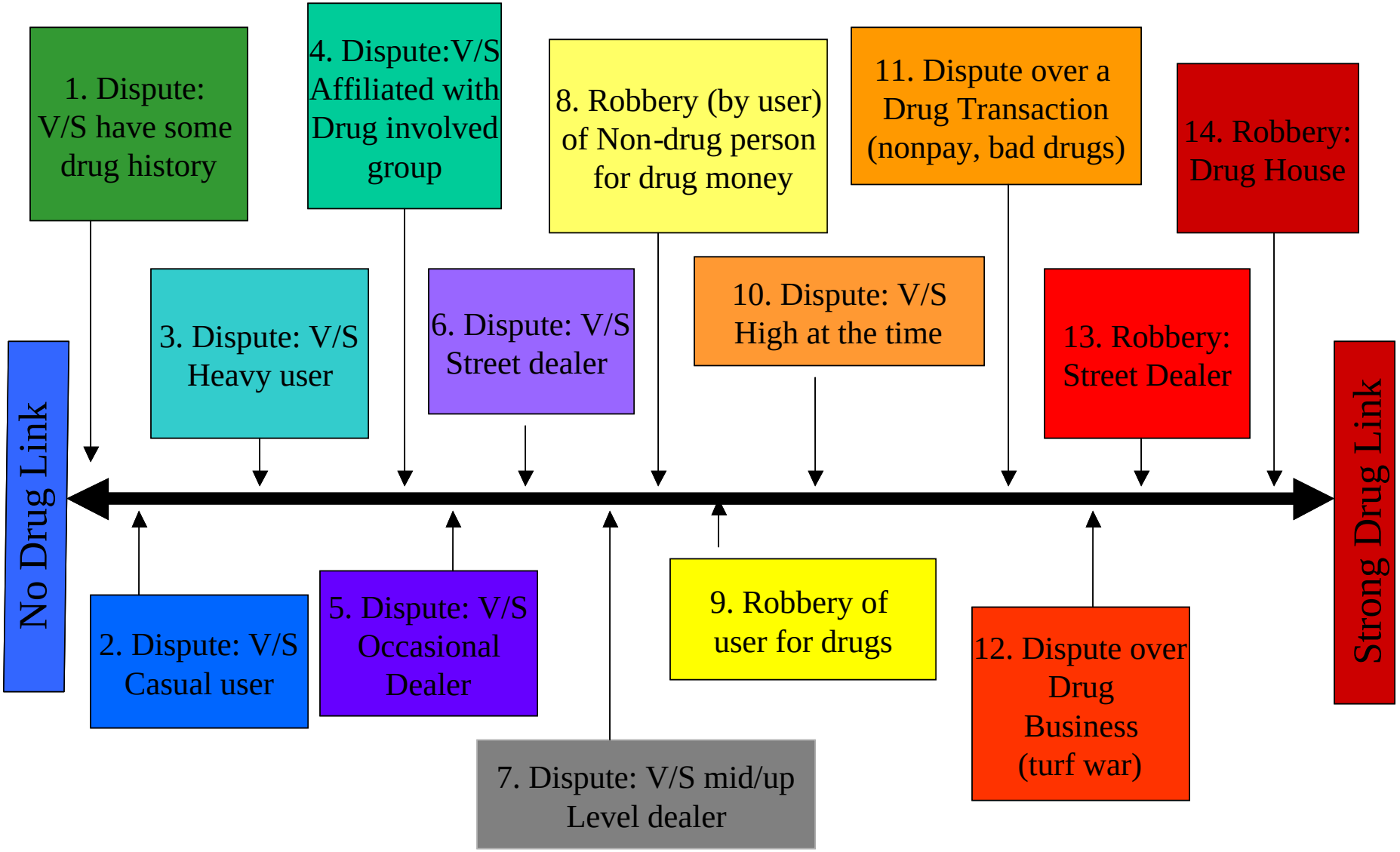
SACSI researchers began by developing a conceptual model of the possible links between drugs and homicide (see figure 1). This model treats homicides as events in which drug experiences of victims and/or suspects, or drug related motives could all be identified as drug links. Drug links in this model was viewed as an ordinal scale running from no link through weak links and on to strong links. We attempted to operationalize that model with the available data.

Researchers reviewed all Rochester homicides[i] from the years 2000 and 2001 (N=81) in an effort to investigate and describe the possible links between the cases and drugs. In this process we examined a variety of data sources including victim and suspect arrests records and records of documents interviews with the police (FIF's), information in the homicide case files, and the content of presentations and discussions of formal incident reviews of the homicide cases. These sources provide a wide variety of information including the informed opinions of homicide investigators about specific drug links.

The review of data allowed us to examine seven drug related measures. We included evidence of a serious alcohol problem in this list.

Fig. 1

How Drugs May Be Related to Homicide



V/S= victim or suspect

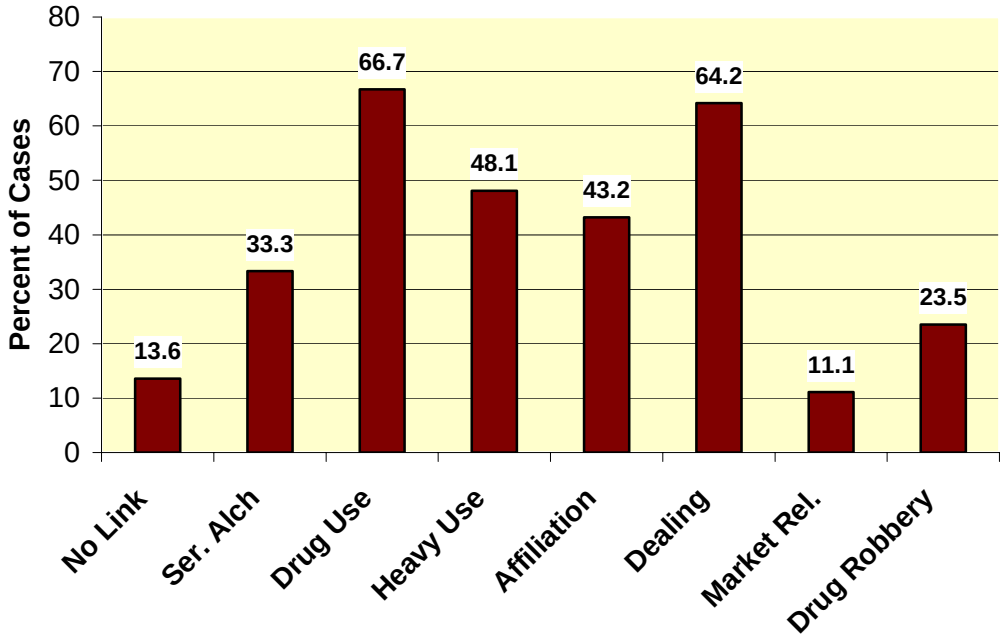
The chart below shows how each of the seven variables representing different types of drug links was measured.

	Table 1: How Variables were Measured	
Variable Name	Description	**Measurement** (any indicator yields positive measurement)
Ser. Alch	Vic/Susp Serious Alcohol Problem	Prior DWI, DWAI arrest, statement in reports of heavy alcohol intoxication at time of offense
Drug Use	Vic/Susp evidence of drug use	Prior FIFs for use or presence in drug area, possession arrests
Heavy Use	Vic/Susp known as heavy drug user	Present in police report, interviews or police knowledge reported at incident review
Affiliation	Vic/Susp Affiliated with known Drug Group	FIFs, arrests with known drug offenders, present in police reports or reported at incident review
Dealing	Vic/Susp evidence of drug sales	Prior arrests, present in police reports or presented at incident review
Market Rel.	Drug Market Related (turf, transaction)	Conflict over turf or transaction gone bad as reported at incident review or documented in police file
Drug Robbery	Drug Related Robbery	As reported at incident review or documented in police files, robbery of person for drug money, robbery of street dealer, robbery of drug house.

Findings

Using these seven measures, links between homicide and drugs were found in 86.4% of the homicide cases. Figure 2 below shows the most common link was that there was a police record of drug use for the victim or suspect (66.7% of cases). The second most common link was for a police record of drug sales for victim or suspect (64.2%). Heavy drug use or affiliation with a known drug group was also present in more than 40% of cases. The homicides most directly linked to drugs include 23.5% involving drug related robberies and 11.1% involving drug transactions gone badly or battles for turf.

Figure 2: Type of Drug Link to Homicide Cases (N=81)



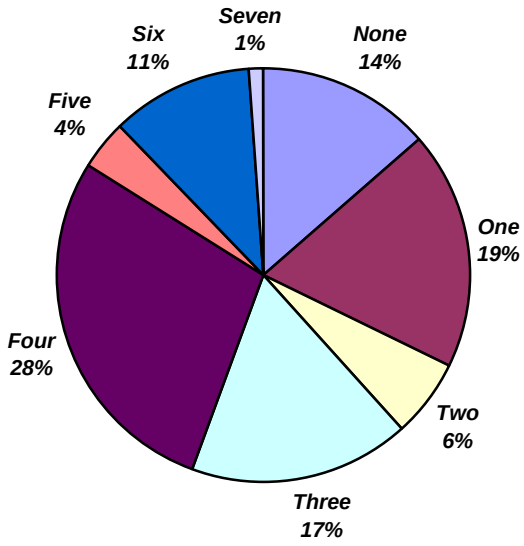
Since there may be more than one type of drug link in any homicide case we also examined the number of links found for the murders. Figure 3 presents these findings. In 44% of the homicides there were 4 (out of 7 possible) or more links to drugs.

As suggested above, it is rare that homicides have only one link to drugs. That is true in only 19% of homicides. In only one case was the link limited to evidence of drug use by victim or suspect. Likewise, there was only one case where heavy drug use was the only link. In four cases each, drug dealing and affiliation with a known drug related group was the sole link between homicide and drugs. In all murder cases involving drug transaction problems or drug robberies the participants also had other links to drugs. The link most often found alone was evidence of a serious alcohol problem. That was the only link found in 6% of homicide cases.

The most common set of two links together in a case was for the presence of evidence of drug use and of drug dealing.[ii] That was present in 58% of the homicides. The most common set of three links was for drug use, serious use and dealing. That was present in 39% of cases. The next most common connection involved affiliation with a

known drug group. Taken together these findings suggest that a nexus of drug use, heavy use, dealing and affiliation with a known drug group is significant among homicide cases.

Figure 3: Number of Drug Links in Homicide Cases



Summary of Findings

1. There is some link to drugs in a large number (86%) of homicide cases.

2. A police record of drug use is the most common link but it is also often tied to a record of selling and reports of heavy drug use.

3. Links to problems in the drug market, including robberies are found in over 1/3 of homicide cases.

Discussion

Great care must be exercised in interpreting the results of this research. This is especially true because we do not have measures of drug links that are independent of the criminal justice system and also because we do not have similar data outside of the realm of homicide. That is, our ability to know the significance of findings about levels of use or selling for understanding homicide is limited by the absence of comparison groups.

We have, however, touched upon the link between drugs and homicide in several recent working papers. Those findings may be seen as complimentary to those suggested here. An examination of toxicology reports (Working Paper #16, forthcoming) found a relatively low proportion of victims with drugs in their systems. This suggests that intoxication may make a limited causal contribution to homicide.

We also examined the criminal records of homicide victims and suspects and compared them with the records of a matched sample of young minority men from the same neighborhoods (Working Paper #17, forthcoming). This showed that while arrests are frequent in the matched sample, arrests for serious drug crimes and violence are rare when compared with the homicide victims and suspects. Homicide victims and suspects are more likely to be tied to drug markets and culture, as identified by the police, than their neighbors.

Describing the relationship between drugs and homicide is a complicated task. Even where that link may appear to be strongest, it may not necessarily mean that drugs caused the homicide. Drug related robbery murders, for example, might have little to do with drugs and much to do with robbery. Drug robbers may simply rob drug dealers for the same reason Willie Sutton robbed banks; because "that's where the money is."

The SACSI research suggests however that describing indirect causal influences of drugs on homicide may be most appropriate. In Rochester young minority men living in poor neighborhoods are over represented in homicides. Their criminal records and their level of involvement with drugs often distinguish them, not only from the population at large, but also from other minority men in their neighborhoods.

This suggests that the influence of drugs on murder may best be understood as most often indirect and reciprocal. Drug connections thus influence and are influenced by behaviors, attitudes and values that increase the likelihood of involvement in homicide. That is, high degrees of engagement in drugs, in terms of heavy use, selling and affiliation with known drug related organizations, could be understand as part of a limited subculture also marked by high potential for violence, intolerance of perceived insults and access to illegal weapons. Of course, that subculture also shares the problems of poverty, educational failure and limited employment

Implications for Policy and Intervention

This research provides some useful information for interventions intended to prevent homicide.

1. It highlights the significance of efforts to keep young minority men in poor neighborhoods away from drug involvement and particularly from intense involvement in drug use, heavy use, selling and affiliation with known drug related organizations.

2. It supports the notion that homicide prevention efforts should focus on individuals identified through records of prior violence and, in particular, involvement in heavy drug use, drug sales and affiliation with known drug groups. This support intervention through efforts such as Project CeaseFire and the Notification of Special Enforcement program (NOSE). And it supports using record of heavy drug use, selling and drug group affiliation among the selection criteria for those programs.

3. The research supports the need to focus on the problem of drug robberies. That is, to improve intelligence about the extent of the problem and to improve efforts to identify and incapacitate drug robbers and to utilize methods such as "knock and talks" which may help prevent drug robberies.

4. Finally the research supports the idea of finding ways of identifying disputes in poor neighborhoods and intervening particularly when the disputants involved have records of heavy drug use, selling drugs and affiliation with known drug groups.

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[i] Of all cases 54% were cleared with an arrest, in 20% of cases there was a suspect but an arrest had not occurred and in 26% of cases there were no suspects. The decision was made to include all cases in the analysis because there was substantial information available on cases even where there was no data on suspects. The difference between the proportion of cases with drug links across cases where arrests had been made and where there was no suspect averaged 14.9% for the seven possible drug links. Thus the effect of including the cases where there is no suspect is to underestimate rather than overestimate the links to drugs.

[ii] The correlations between the seven variables are presented below

Table 4: Correlations	1. Ach. Prob	2. Drug Use	3.Heavy Use	4.Dealing	5. Drug Affiliation	6.Mkt related
1. Alcohol Problem						
Drug Use	.22					
3. Heavy Drug Use	.31	.58				
4. Drug Dealing	.02	.35	.06			
5. Drug Group Affiliation	-.07	.67	.36	.44		
6. Drug Market related	.33	.25	.21	.33	.18	
7. Drug related Robbery	.10	.27	.23	.23	.17	.18