

# 3 Regular Property Offenders

**This chapter examines offenders who self-reported having ever been a regular offender of one or more property offences, but not a regular offender of any violent or fraud offence (n=566).**

Regular property offenders made up over one quarter of the total inmate population surveyed within this study. Although this group of offenders were typically younger and more likely to have a history of juvenile detention than the overall sample, their demographic profile was similar to the broader inmate sample in terms of Indigenous status and education:

- around one in four identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
- around one third had not progressed beyond primary school.

**Table 3.1 Demographic characteristics for regular property offenders**

	n	%
<b>Age distribution</b>		
18–20	70	12
21–25	183	32
26–30	138	24
31–35	79	14
36+	96	17
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(566)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
<b>Indigenous status</b>		
Indigenous	129	24
Non-Indigenous	417	76
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(546)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
<b>Educational attainment</b>		
Never went to school	9	2
Completed some primary school	9	2
Primary school	162	29
Year 10	88	16
Apprenticeship	32	6
Year 12	20	4
TAFE/technical college	234	41
Tertiary	12	2
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(566)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
<b>Prior juvenile detention</b>	248	44

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File].

## Offending Histories

Regular property offenders had extensive offending careers, spanning both violent and drug offences. Many reported to have offended across a number of different offences at least once in their lifetime. Table 3.2 illustrates the offending histories of regular property offenders, including lifetime prevalence across all offence types and the rates of regular offending across the five property offences. Ninety-seven per cent self-reported having committed three or more of the offences analysed in the DUCO male survey and 74 per cent reported committing a violent offence at least once. Sixty-nine per cent regularly committed three or more property offences.

Given that they were regular property offenders, all of them must have committed at least one property offence in their lifetime. When broken down among specific offence types, 87 per cent self-reported having committed a break and enter offence at least once, while just over three quarters had stolen a motor vehicle, stolen something without a weapon, and traded in stolen goods. The most common property offence to be regularly committed was break and enter (66 per cent), followed by trading in stolen goods (51 per cent), stealing without a weapon (44 per cent), and motor vehicle theft (37 per cent). Vandalism was a relatively rare regular occurrence among this sample of regular property offenders (11 per cent) as well as among the general DUCO sample.

It is important to note that this sample of regular property offenders also reported a lifetime prevalence of violent offending, but not regular violent offending. That is, throughout their lifetime criminal career they may have been involved in violence but did not progress to become regular violent offenders. In fact, for this sample, criminal activity seemed to be motivated primarily by the acquisition of property through non-violent means. In terms of violent offending, it comes as no surprise that these regular property offenders reported higher lifetime prevalence rates of robbery and armed robbery than the more serious offences of sexual assault and homicide. Robbery and armed robbery are acquisitive crimes that are traditionally classified as violent offences because of the circumstances. The primary factor is that a person was present during the robbery and fear or injury was caused.

**Table 3.2 Prevalence of offending for regular property offenders**

	Ever		Regular		Escalation
	n	%	n	%	%
<b>Property offences</b>					
Break and enter	494	87	368	66	74
Stealing without break in	425	75	245	44	58
Motor vehicle theft	429	76	205	37	48
Traded in stolen goods	425	75	288	51	68
Vandalism	247	44	63	11	26
<b>Drug offences</b>					
Bought illegal drugs	487	86	441	78	91
Sell illegal drugs	330	58	220	39	67
<b>Fraud offences</b>					
Fraud	168	30	–	–	–
<b>Violent offences</b>					
Physical assault	342	61	–	–	–
Armed robbery	159	28	–	–	–
Robbery without a weapon	148	26	–	–	–
Sexual offence	41	7	–	–	–
Killed someone	46	8	–	–	–
<b>Multiple offences</b>					
Three or more offences	546	97	389	69	71

Escalation = 'regular' divided by 'ever'

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

In this sample, the proportions reporting lifetime prevalence of these offences were similar for both armed and unarmed robbery (28 and 26 per cent respectively). It is, however, impossible to discern those instances where robbery or armed robbery occurred unintentionally, especially in the case of a break and enter that 'went wrong'.

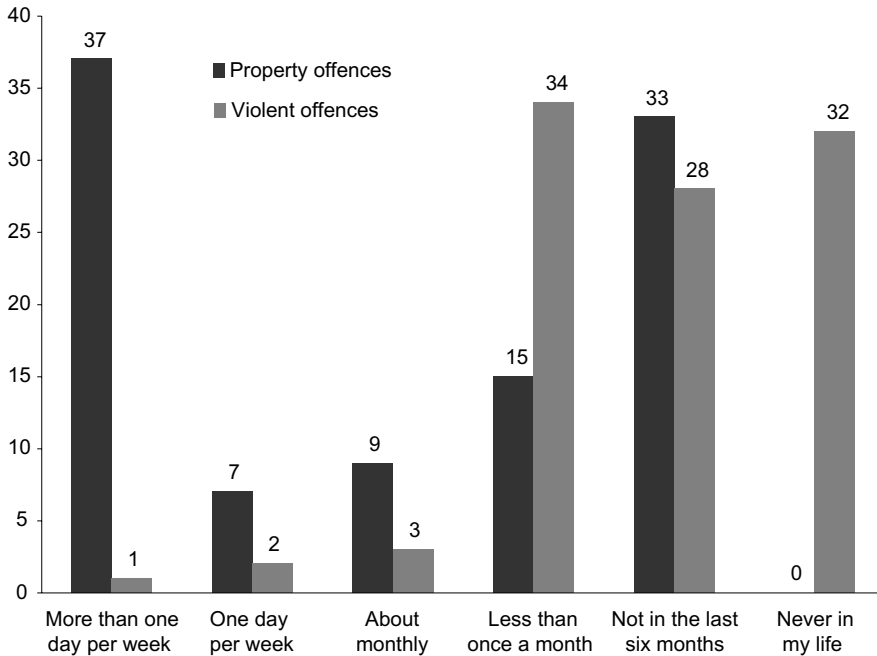
Lifetime prevalence of physical assault was high for the overall sample and regular property offenders reported similar levels of lifetime prevalence (61 per cent). For regular property offenders however, physical assault did not become a regular activity.

A large proportion of regular property offenders were active participants in the drug market, with many regularly engaging in the purchase and sale of illegal drugs. The proportions that ever and regularly bought and sold illegal drugs was higher than for the inmate sample as a whole. For example, 78 per cent of regular property offenders reported regularly buying and 39 per cent were regularly selling; this compares to 57 per cent who were regular buyers in the general sample and 32 per cent who were regular sellers.

Figure 3.1 focuses specifically on self-reported offending behaviour during the six months prior to the arrest that led to the current period of incarceration. More than two-thirds of regular property offenders committed at least one property offence during that time. Forty-four per cent reported that the frequency of their property offending was one or more times per week. One-third stated that they had not committed any property offence in the six months prior to the offence for which they were now in prison. As regular offending was self-defined by the offender and was not restricted to the six months prior to arrest it is possible for an offender to indicate lifetime prevalence of regular property offending, but an abstinence from property offending during the time period in question. This might be indicative of a number of possibilities—that this group of offenders was experimenting with other forms of non-regular offending such as violence or drug crimes; that the individuals were in some way incapacitated during the time period in question; or that they had truly abstained from regular offending but when they did offend, they were detected, charged and convicted.

Just under one third of regular property offenders said they had never committed a violent offence in their lives and 28 per cent said they had not committed a violent offence in the six months prior to arrest. Although 40 per cent had engaged in violence in the six months prior to their most recent arrest, few regular property offenders reported that they were engaged in high levels of violence. Of those who reported violent offending in the past six months, three per cent reported that it occurred at least weekly, three per cent said about monthly, and the majority (62 per cent) said less than once a month. In all, 32 per cent of regular property offenders reported never having ever committed a violent offence.

**Figure 3.1 Volume of offending in the six months prior to arrest for regular property offenders (per cent)**



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

Table 3.3 illustrates the levels of formal interaction with the criminal justice system. On average, regular property offenders reported 67 charges within their lifetime, and of these charges, an average of 54 resulted in a conviction. The conversion between charge and conviction suggests that eight in every ten charges imposed on a regular property offender resulted in a criminal conviction. Furthermore, 41 per cent of all convictions resulted in a prison sentence. The mean number of convictions resulting in a prison sentence was 22. The table also provides the median number of charges/convictions and sentences to prison. The large differences between the mean and the median highlight that a small number of offenders committed disproportionately more crime. However, the likelihood of a charge resulting in a conviction and similarly a conviction resulting in a sentence remain at around 80 to 90 per cent and 30 to 40 per cent respectively, regardless of whether means or medians are used.

Similar results were found when analysing individual charge histories by offence types. For all regular property offenders, the likelihood of a property offence charge resulting in a conviction was 83 per cent and conviction to prison was 38 per cent. Regular property offenders reported few charges for violent offences and drug offences (two and one charges respectively). It is important to remember that charge information is not necessarily the same as offending. Clearance rates indicate that many crimes are not cleared, and crime victim surveys show that many victims do not report certain kinds of offending to police. The mean number of charges may only be an indicator of the mean number of times each offender has been caught. However it is reasonable to assume that high volume offenders would have a higher probability of arrest. As a result the relative estimates are probably reliable but the point estimates are more than likely a conservative estimate of the overall level of offending.

In addition, convictions resulting in prison sentences as seen in table 3.3 are greater than the total number of times spent in prison seen at table 3.4. In most cases, a number of convictions are sentenced collectively at the one court hearing, and may result in a single term of imprisonment.

**Table 3.3 Offending outcomes for regular property offenders**

	Any	Property	Violent	Drugs	Fraud
<b>Mean (median) number of:</b>					
Charges	67 (22)	61 (16)	2 (1)	1 (0)	2 (0)
Convictions	54 (19)	49 (14)	2 (1)	1 (0)	2 (0)
Prison sentences	22 (6)	19 (4)	1 (0)	0 (0)	1 (0)

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

On average, regular property offenders have been in an adult corrective institution four times (see table 3.4). Very few (16 per cent) reported that that this was their first term of imprisonment while five per cent reported having been in prison more than 20 times within their lifetime. Forty-four per cent of regular property offenders had been detained in a juvenile centre. Among all regular property offenders there was an average of two episodes in a juvenile facility. Offenders who had been detained in a juvenile facility experienced an average of four episodes in a juvenile centre and a total of nine episodes in both an adult and juvenile correctional facility.

**Table 3.4 Prison experience for regular property offenders**

	Mean (median) number of times
<b>Prison experience</b>	
Adult institutions	4 (3)
Juvenile detention centres	2 (0)
<b>Of those having been in a juvenile detention centre (n=241)</b>	
Juvenile detention centres	4 (3)
Both adult and juvenile centres	9 (7)

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

## Drug Use Histories

As for the offending histories of regular property offenders, drug use histories were both complex and extensive. More than 93 per cent of all regular property offenders have tried one or more of the four main drug categories—cannabis, amphetamines, heroin and cocaine. Eighty-eight per cent had used at least one of these drugs in the six months prior to the arrest for which they are now in prison, and more than 80 per cent were defined as a current regular user of at least one drug. The most frequently used drug was cannabis, with 93 per cent reporting having used it at least once (see table 3.5). Seventy-seven per cent reported having ever used amphetamines and 62 per cent reported heroin use. Seventy-nine per cent of regular property offenders reported having ever used two or more of the four main drug types.

The DUCO male survey also sought information on each offender's drug use on or around the time of the offence for which they are now in prison. Eighty-eight per cent of regular property offenders reported using at least one of the four main drug types in the six months prior to being arrested, while 63 per cent reported the use of two or more of these drugs. Again, cannabis was the drug most used by this sample during this time (78 per cent). Amphetamines (59 per cent) and heroin (38 per cent) were the next most frequently used drugs in the six months prior to arrest.

**Table 3.5 Prevalence of illegal drug use amongst regular property offenders (per cent)**

	Cannabis	Amphetamines	Heroin	Cocaine	Any	More than 1
<b>Prevalence</b>						
Ever used	93	77	62	39	94	79
Used in six months prior to arrest	78	59	38	19	88	63
Current regular user	70	46	30	8	81	53
<b>Escalation</b>						
	75	60	47	21	86	67
(n)	(394)	(260)	(167)	(43)	(457)	(299)
<b>Current regular users—frequency of use</b>						
Less than monthly	4	11	6	16		
One to several times a month	7	11	7	23		
One to several times a week	16	22	13	35		
Once a day	15	15	14	9		
Several times a day	59	42	61	16		
(Total)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(100)		

Escalation = 'current regular' divided by 'ever used'

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

Table 3.5 also illustrates the frequency of use for property offenders who were current regular users of each drug type. Among regular users of heroin, around 60 per cent reported that they used heroin several times a day in the six months prior to arrest. The frequency of use reported by heroin users was greater than that for regular users of amphetamines (42 per cent reporting use several times a day). When compared with the general sample, regular property offenders reported higher rates of ever and regular drug use; nevertheless the frequency of use was the same.

# Linking Drugs and Property Offenders

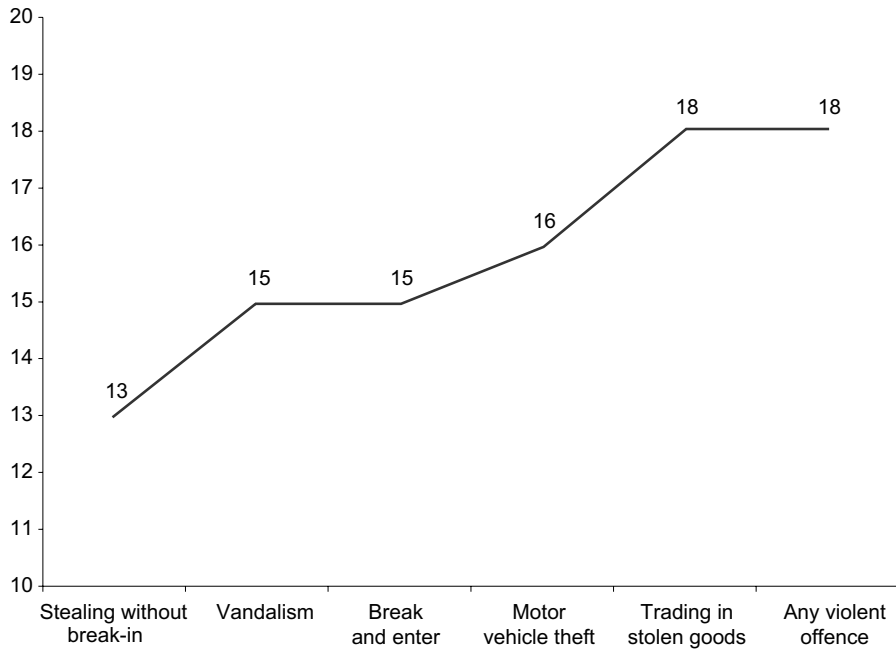
## Age of Onset

One method for inferring a link between drug use and crime is to compare the ages of onset across offence types and drug use. If the onset of drug use occurs before the onset of offending, one can presume that drug use might have been a contributing factor to the onset of criminal activity. Similarly, if the age of first or regular drug use follows the onset of criminal offending but precedes the age of regular offending, it might be inferred that drug use is a contributing factor in the persistence of offending behaviour.

On average, regular property offenders began their property offending careers at approximately 13 years of age (Figure 3.2). The first offence type was most likely to be stealing without a break in (13 years) followed by break and enter (15 years). For offenders of any violent offence (74 per cent of regular property offenders) the mean age for first violent offence was 18 years. Table 3.6 shows the interval between the onset of offending and escalation into regular offending for each of the property offence types. The largest interval was for break and enters with the mean age of first offence being 14 years whereas the mean age of regular offending was 17 years. The only offence where first and regular offending coincide was vandalism.

Table 3.7 examines age of drug use initiation. On average, regular property offenders began their drug use at the approximate age of 14 years. The drug type most likely to be used first was cannabis (14 years), followed by amphetamines (18 years), then heroin or cocaine (20 years). Current regular users reported the same average age of initiation for cocaine and heroin, but a year younger for experimentation with amphetamines. The average time interval between the progression from first to regular use was one year for cannabis and amphetamines, and two years for cocaine and heroin. Regardless of whether it was first or regular use, the use of cannabis preceded other drug use by approximately four years. The next drug to be regularly used tended to be amphetamines followed approximately two years later by heroin and cocaine.

**Figure 3.2 Mean age of first offence for regular property offenders**



Estimates are for those reporting that offence.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

**Table 3.6 Mean age of offending for regular property offenders**

	<b>Stealing without break in</b>	<b>Break and enter</b>	<b>Vandalism</b>	<b>Motor vehicle theft</b>	<b>Trading stolen goods</b>
First offence	13	14	14	15	18
Regular offending	15	17	14	16	19
<i>Interval (regular-first)</i>	2	3	0	1	1
<i>(n)</i>	(245)	(368)	(63)	(205)	(288)

Estimates are for offenders who reported that offence regularly.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

**Table 3.7 Mean age of illegal drug use for regular property offenders**

	Cannabis	Amphetamines	Heroin	Cocaine	Any
<b>First use</b>					
Mean age	14	18	20	20	14
(n)	(528)	(436)	(346)	(220)	(531)
<b>Of current regular drug users</b>					
First use	14	18	19	19	
Regular use	15	19	21	21	
Interval (regular–first)	1	1	2	2	
(n)	(394)	(260)	(167)	(43)	

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

**Table 3.8 Mean age of illegal drug use by regular offending<sup>1</sup>**

	Cannabis	Amphetamines	Heroin	Cocaine	Any
<b>Vandalism</b>					
First use	13	16	16	17	14
Regular use	14	17	17	18	–
(n)	(48)	(28)	(19)	(7)	(59)
<b>Stealing without break in</b>					
First use	13	17	19	19	14
Regular use	15	18	21	20	–
(n)	(196)	(139)	(80)	(21)	(230)
<b>Motor vehicle theft</b>					
First use	13	17	19	18	14
Regular use	15	18	20	19	–
(n)	(166)	(123)	(71)	(18)	(198)
<b>Break and enter</b>					
First use	14	17	19	18	14
Regular use	15	19	21	19	–
(n)	(291)	(196)	(129)	(25)	(348)
<b>Trading in stolen goods</b>					
First use	14	17	19	20	14
Regular use	15	19	21	21	–
(n)	(236)	(174)	(115)	(31)	(280)

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are for regular offenders of that offence type, and regular users of that drug type.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

Table 3.8 provides a clearer picture of when the onset and persistence of drug use occurred for each of the property offences. The general pattern mirrors the total group with the exception of vandalism. The pattern seems to be that onset and persistence was much younger for those who reported regularly being engaged in vandalism. Although relatively few offenders reported that they regularly engaged in vandalism, it may be a significant risk factor for the onset of illegal drug use that results in persistence at an earlier age.

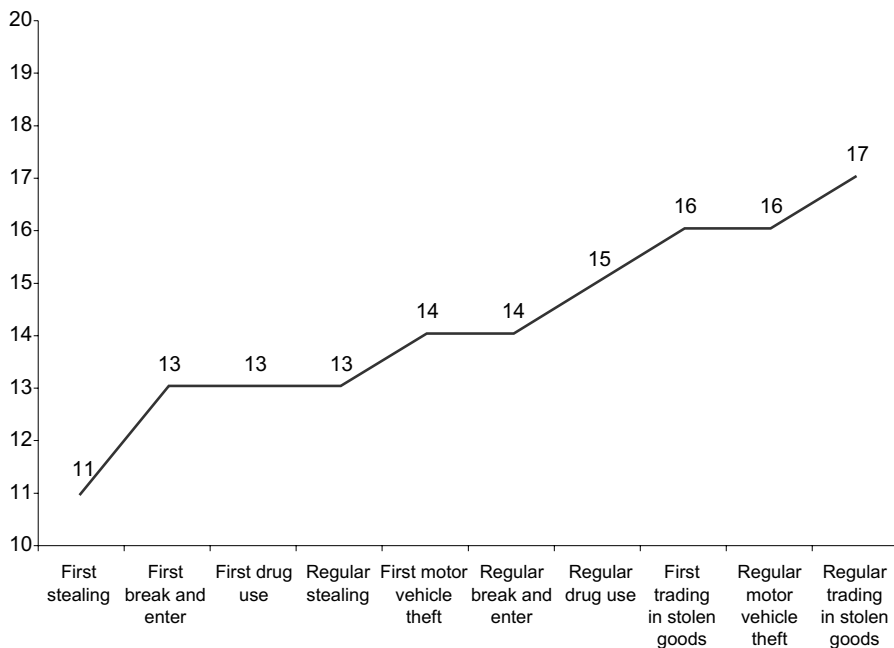
To understand the overall lifetime career for regular property offenders it is possible to combine the data presented in tables 3.6 and 3.7. It shows that across all property offenders the average age for first stealing without break in was 13 years. This was followed by 14 years for first use of cannabis, 15 years for break and enter and vandalism, 16 years for motor vehicle theft, 17 years for amphetamines, 18 years for trading in stolen goods and finally 20 years for first use of heroin and cocaine.

Figure 3.3 tracks the offenders from onset to persistence through a variety of illegal drug use and property offending careers. To simplify, the model pathways are described for regular offenders who reported lifetime prevalence and regular offending across four main property crimes—stealing without break in, motor vehicle theft, break and enter and trading in stolen goods (n=45). These data show a complex picture of offending careers which, in most cases, began with minor property crime such as shoplifting followed by an escalation to more serious and frequent forms of property offending. For these offenders, a career in property crime began with stealing at the mean age of 11 years. Two years later, offenders first committed a break and enter offence, at which time minor stealing had already become a regular activity. Regular break and enter followed one year later at the age of 14 years along with the commencement of motor vehicle theft. After a further two years, motor vehicle theft had become a regular activity and these serious offenders had begun to trade in stolen goods. Finally the escalation ended with offenders regularly trading in stolen goods at the average age of 17 years.

Clearly the data presented in figure 3.3 demonstrate a model of escalation in property offending that started with minor offences and develops to more serious and frequent offending at a later stage in the career. Where cannabis was included in the model, the mean age of first drug use occurred two years after the first property offence, which in this case was stealing without break in. Offenders who began to experiment with illegal drugs also escalated their offending in both volume

and seriousness, where stealing and shoplifting became a regular activity, and offenders first began break and enter offending. One year after experimentation with illegal drugs, break and enters became a regular occurrence and the theft of motor vehicles began. At the approximate age of 15 years, regular use of illegal drugs began, followed one year later by trading in stolen goods and regular motor vehicle theft. Regularly trading in stolen goods again ended the escalation at a mean age of 17 years.

**Figure 3.3 Pathways model for ages of first and regular offending—including cannabis (age in years)<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> Estimates are offenders who reported regularly stealing without break in, break and enter, motor vehicle theft, trading in stolen goods, and regularly using any of the four main drug types (n=45).

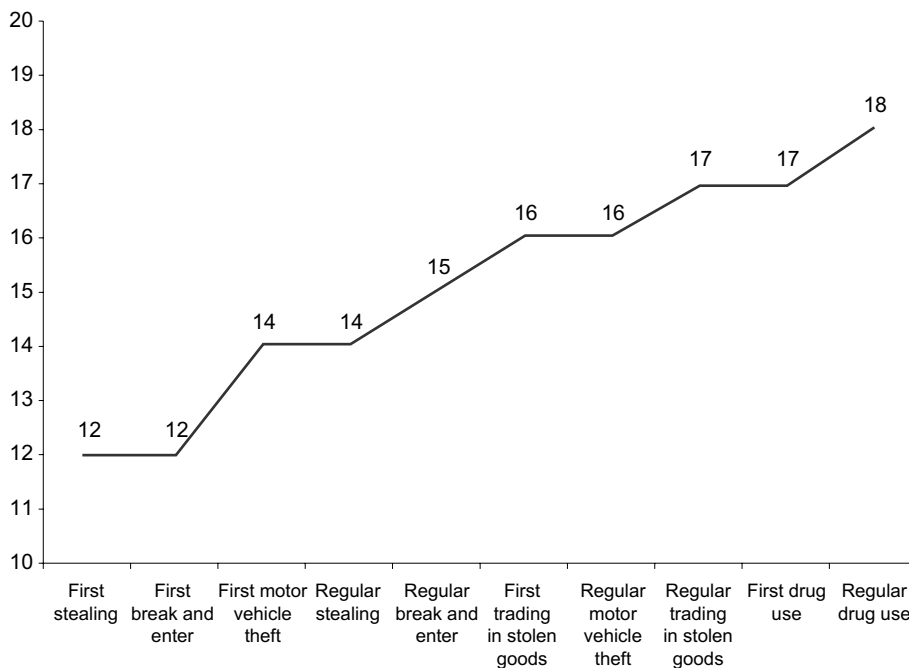
Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

As previously shown, drug use most often began with cannabis experimentation followed by the use of harder drugs such as heroin, amphetamines and cocaine a number of years later. Many studies have shown that more serious drug use is most often preceded by cannabis use at an earlier age, however the causal associations between the two are more difficult to ascertain. In particular, cannabis and other illegal drug use may be the result of other social factors such as family, environment and socio-economic status.

Nevertheless, among regular property offenders the average interval between first cannabis use and first amphetamine use was four years.

The second model presented in figure 3.4 excludes the age of first use of cannabis. As a result, the model illustrates that illegal drug use played a less significant role in the escalation of property offending. Among this group of regular property offenders, the first age of use for heroin, amphetamines or cocaine was 17 years. It was at this same age that these offenders reported regularly engaging in the trade of stolen goods and that the escalation of the property-offending career peaked. Regular use of either of these three drugs began one year later at the age of 18 years, by which time these offenders were already entrenched in a property-offending career.

**Figure 3.4 Pathways model for ages of first and regular offending—excluding cannabis (age in years)<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup> Estimates include offenders who reported regularly stealing without break in, break and enter, motor vehicle theft, trading in stolen goods, and regularly using any of the three main drug types (n=38)  
 Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

Regardless of whether cannabis is included or excluded in the analysis of the pathways model, it is clear that property offending, and the escalation of that offending commenced before the first use of any illegal drug. Cannabis use invariably occurred after the commencement of minor property crime, but before escalation into more serious crime. The use of harder drugs was not usually evident until after the establishment of a significant property-offending career.

## Lifetime Offending Attributions

It is clear that a large proportion of regular property offenders reported having used illegal drugs, and that they were regular users prior to incarceration. The extent to which property offending can be causally attributed to the use of illegal substances is measured in two ways:

- the proportions of property offenders who reported illegal drugs as the reason for committing their current most serious property offence; and
- the nature of the impact of illegal drugs on their lifetime offending career.

From a policy perspective, the first measure helps to quantify the proportion of property offenders who attribute illegal drugs to their current property offending, while the second helps to provide an indication of the overall lifetime effect of illegal drugs on the property offending career. The latter, as we have seen, might also include violent and drug offences.

Estimating the proportion of offenders who causally attribute their current most serious offence to illegal drugs or alcohol is complicated and further discussion is detailed later in this report (see Chapter 12). To help identify the effect of drugs and alcohol on the lifetime offending career, offenders in the DUCO male study were asked the following question:

*"In your own words, what has been the effect of your personal alcohol and drug use history on your criminal activities?"*

It is important to recognise that lifetime attributions to illegal drugs or alcohol are not necessarily causal. Offenders were not asked to nominate the extent to which drugs or alcohol caused their lifetime crime, but simply how it had been affected. Of those property offenders who provided an answer which could be defined as a numerical representation of the possible relationship, 26 per cent

self-reported that all (100 per cent) of their criminal activities could be in some way attributed to their personal alcohol or drug use histories. A further 33 per cent reported that their drug use histories affected most (75 per cent) of their criminal activities, while 29 per cent stated that there was no effect. The verbatim responses were also coded into a qualitative coding scheme. Fifty-four per cent provided a qualitative response. Twenty-nine per cent stated that the effect was psychopharmacological. Thirty-one per cent stated that their offending activities were driven by the economic/compulsive effects of drugs and alcohol, while a further 27 per cent stated that drugs and alcohol lead to crime, but did not provide further information on how this was the case.

**Table 3.9 Lifetime offending attributions for regular property offenders**

	n	%
<b>Of those who quantified the effect</b>		
0 per cent	104	29
25 per cent	26	7
50 per cent	18	5
75 per cent	117	33
100 per cent	92	26
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(357)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
<b>Of those who qualified the effect</b>		
Psychopharmacological	90	29
Economic/compulsive	96	31
Drugs and alcohol lead to crime	84	27
Other	37	13
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(307)</i>	<i>(100)</i>

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

Questions relating to the effect of personal drug and alcohol use on the lifetime offending career were open ended and invited an individual response that was recorded in verbatim. While providing this response, some offenders went on to specify the type of substance that had the most significant impact on their offending career. While not all property offenders causally attributed their lifetime offending to one substance only, attributions generally varied by drug type (see table 3.10). Where the lifetime effect of alcohol and drugs on the offending behaviour was considered psychopharmacological, significant proportions of property offenders mentioned alcohol as the main substance having had that

effect (39 per cent). This is markedly different from offenders reporting an economic/compulsive effect, where illegal drugs only were more likely to be implicated as the substance having had the greatest impact (74 per cent). Offenders reporting that drugs and alcohol lead them to crime were more likely (than offenders citing other reasons) to have reported a combination of illegal drugs and alcohol as having the greatest effect on their offending careers.

**Table 3.10 Lifetime offending attributions by the drug mentioned for regular property offenders (column per cent)**

	Psychopharmacological	Economic compulsive	Drugs and alcohol lead to crime
Illegal drugs only	29	74	51
Alcohol only	39	5	18
Alcohol and illegal drugs	7	5	12
Unspecified	26	16	19
(n)	(90)	(96)	(84)

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

The link between lifetime attributions and drug use in the six months prior to arrest is further explored in table 3.11. Regular heroin users were more likely to have reported an economic/compulsive reason for the criminal career, while regular amphetamine users were more likely to have reported a psychopharmacological explanation for their offending career.

**Table 3.11 Lifetime offending attributions by the current regular drug use of regular property offenders (column per cent)**

	Cannabis	Amphetamines	Heroin	Cocaine <sup>1</sup>
Psychopharmacological	26	26	15	–
Economic/compulsive	35	29	39	–
Drugs and alcohol lead to crime	26	31	28	–
Other	13	14	18	–
(n)	(225)	(158)	(95)	–

<sup>1</sup> Insufficient sample size.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

These attributions are important as they support the notion that different drug and crime pathways operate within a relatively homogenous group of regular property offenders. Those who attributed their offending career to psychopharmacological factors were the group who, on average, started property offending at a younger age. Those who reported economic/compulsive reasons started both offending and drug use at the same time on average. Those who said that drugs and alcohol led them to crime actually reported, on average, the onset of offending prior to the onset of drug use, with regular offending occurring some three years later.

Age of regular drug use was the same for regular property offenders reporting different lifetime causal attributions for their offending. What differed, however, was the age at which regular offending occurred. For those who attributed psychopharmacological reasons, the age of regular offending occurred simultaneously at 15 years, while for offenders reporting economic/compulsive reasons it occurred one year later. For offenders reporting that drugs and alcohol lead to crime, regular use of illegal drugs occurred two years prior to regular property offending. These data suggest that there exists a number of different pathways between drugs and crime that vary by:

- drug type;
- attribution type;
- age of onset; and
- experimenters and regular drug users.

As discussed previously, cannabis use complicates data on the ages of initiation into illegal drug use. By excluding the age of first and regular cannabis use, the commencement of property offending and the escalation to regular property offending occurred, on average, prior to the use and regular use of illegal drugs (heroin, amphetamines and cocaine). This was the case for offenders reporting psychopharmacological or economic/compulsive attributions. For offenders who stated that drugs led them to crime, the onset of drugs and regular property offending occurred at the same age.

**Table 3.12 Mean age of initiation by lifetime offending attributions for regular property offenders<sup>1</sup>**

	First property offence	Any drug use	Regular property offending	Regular drug use	(n)
<b>Including cannabis</b>					
Psychopharmacological	12	13	15	15	(65)
Economic/compulsive	13	13	16	15	(89)
Drugs and alcohol lead to crime	13	14	17	15	(72)
<b>Excluding cannabis</b>					
Psychopharmacological	12	17	16	19	(52)
Economic/compulsive	13	17	16	18	(73)
Drugs and alcohol lead to crime	13	17	17	19	(61)

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are for current regular users of any drug.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Male Survey, 2001 [Computer File]

## Conclusion

Regular property offenders comprised one quarter of the male inmate prison population. These offenders:

- engaged in a range of offending, including violent offences such as sexual assault and homicide;
- regularly bought illegal drugs;
- were likely to report committing property offences (one in three) on a daily basis in the six months prior to their arrest;
- have high levels of contact with the criminal justice system;
- were current regular users (80 per cent) of at least one of the four drugs prior to their recent arrest; and
- were regular users of either heroin, amphetamines or cocaine (approximately 50 per cent).

Regular property offenders were on average more likely to have started their career with minor offending prior to any experimentation with illegal drugs. The first drug they were most likely to start with was cannabis, followed by

amphetamines, heroin and, for a very small group, cocaine. Where cannabis is excluded, first use did not occur until 17 years on average; this is well into the criminal career of a regular property offender.

Around one quarter of offenders attributed their total offending career to the effect of drugs and a further one third indicated that more than half was due to drugs. The three major explanations for the effect of drugs was psychopharmacological, economic/compulsive and drugs and alcohol lead to crime.

Of those who reported illegal drugs as a factor in their criminal careers, an analysis of the onset and persistence of drug and property offending careers indicates that engagement in minor property crime usually preceded the onset of illegal drug use. They then proceeded to regular property offending and then to regular drug use. These data lend support to the escalation model of drug use amongst offenders; it does not seem to be the case that they became enmeshed in a drug-using career that compelled them into a life of crime. Instead they were already engaged in risky activities and probably had ready access to illegal drugs. Once they began regular drug use they then escalated to regular property offending.