

7 Regular Drug Sellers

Regular drug sellers consist of offenders who reported having been a regular drug seller and not a regular offender of any violent crime, property crime or fraud (n=148).

In terms of age, regular drug sellers did not differ from the overall DUCO male sample. Around one-third were over 36 years of age, while the bulk of offenders were aged between 21 and 30 years (41 per cent). They were, however, less likely than the total inmate sample to identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (nine per cent). Regular drug sellers tended, on average, to be the most educated group of offenders. Ten per cent had completed tertiary study, which compares to five per cent of fraud offenders and seven per cent of homicide offenders. They were also less likely than the total DUCO sample to have ever spent time in a juvenile detention centre (17 per cent).

The analysis of regular drugs sellers is important to this study because it provides data on a sub set of offenders who regularly engage in activities directly related to illegal drugs. Unlike regular property and regular violent offenders, the connection between illegal drugs and the offending career is undisputable, however the nature of that relationship remains contested. Why these offenders begin a criminal career, and to some extent specialise in the sale of illegal drugs remains an important consideration in criminal justice policy and practice.

Offending Histories

The offending histories of regular drug sellers included both property and violent offences (table 7.2). Seventy-three per cent reported ever having committed a property offence while 70 per cent reported violent offences. In all 87 per cent reported multiple offending across three or more of the offences as asked by the DUCO male survey. When broken down by offence type, similar proportions of regular drug sellers reported lifetime prevalence of each property offence not including vandalism. Forty-one per cent reported ever committing a break and enter, 45 per cent trading in stolen goods, and 39 per cent motor vehicle theft. This pattern is not the same for violent offences where assault was, on average,

committed by larger proportions of regular drug sellers than sex offences or robbery with or without a weapon. Twenty-eight per cent of regular drug sellers reported having committed a fraud offence. Compared with the overall DUCO male sample this group of regular drug sellers reported lower lifetime prevalence rates for all property and violent offences. However, they frequently reported lifetime prevalence of three or more offences (87 per cent) when compared with the total sample (74 per cent).

Table 7.1 Demographic characteristics for regular drug sellers

	n	%
Age distribution		
18–20	9	6
21–25	25	17
26–30	36	24
31–35	34	23
36+	44	30
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(148)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
Indigenous status		
Indigenous	13	9
Non-Indigenous	126	91
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(139)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
Educational attainment		
Never went to school	0	0
Completed some primary school	1	1
Primary school	24	16
Year 10	32	22
Apprenticeship	12	8
Year 12	11	8
TAFE/technical college	53	36
Tertiary	14	10
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(147)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
Prior juvenile detention	25	17

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

Regular drug sellers reported an average of only 11 lifetime charges for any offence. This compares, for example, to an average of 92 lifetime charges reported by regular fraud offenders and 67 for regular property offenders. Nine of the 11 charges received by regular drug sellers resulted in a conviction and four (45 per cent) resulted in a prison sentence. When broken down by offence type, regular drug sellers reported receiving an average of four charges for property offences, two for violent offences and three for drug offences. The data in table 7.3 indicate that regular sellers of illegal drugs, although not regular property offenders, were more likely to have come into contact with the criminal justice system for property offences than for violent or drug offences.

Table 7.2 Prevalence of offending for regular drug sellers

	Ever	
	n	%
Drug offences		
Bought illegal drugs	139	94
Sell illegal drugs	148	100
Property offences		
Break and enter	60	41
Stealing without break in	55	37
Motor vehicle theft	57	39
Traded in stolen goods	67	45
Vandalism	26	18
Violent offences		
Physical assault	88	60
Armed robbery	27	18
Robbery without a weapon	21	14
Sex offence	17	12
Killed someone	0	0
Fraud offences		
Fraud	41	28
Multiple offences		
Three or more offences	128	87
Any property offence	108	73
Any violent offence	104	70

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

Table 7.3 Offending outcomes for regular drug sellers

	Any	Property	Violent	Drug
Mean (median) number of				
Charges	11 (6)	4 (0)	2 (1)	3 (1)
Convictions	9 (4)	4 (0)	2 (1)	2 (1)
Prison sentences	4 (2)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)

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

As is consistent with their less prominent criminal histories, regular drug sellers reported less formal contact with the criminal justice system. They reported relatively few prison episodes (see table 7.4), where the mean number of times spent in an adult institution was two. This compares to an average of four for regular property offenders. Compared with regular offenders of property and violent offences, regular drug sellers were, on average, unlikely to have experienced time in a juvenile detention facility.

Table 7.4 Prison experience of regular drug sellers

	Mean (median) number of times
Prison experience	
Adult institutions	2 (2)
Juvenile detention centres	0 (0)
Of those having been in a juvenile detention centre (n=25)	
Juvenile detention centres	2 (1)
Both adult and juvenile centres	5 (4)

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

Drug Use Histories

It could be presumed that regular drug sellers come into contact with illegal drugs on a regular basis. They might then be more likely to report use and regular use of illegal drugs. This is confirmed with almost 100 per cent having ever tried one of the four main drug types—cannabis, heroin, amphetamines and cocaine—while 91 per cent reported having used more than one of these drugs in their lifetime. Cannabis use was most prevalent (97 per cent), followed by amphetamines

(82 per cent), heroin (67 per cent), and cocaine (60 per cent). These were the highest prevalence rates for any of the crime types analysed for this report.

In the six months prior to the arrest for which these offenders are now in prison, 90 per cent of offenders had used one of the four main illegal drugs. Cannabis was again most likely to have been used (80 per cent) followed by amphetamines (54 per cent). Heroin was used by 35 per cent of regular drug sellers in the six months prior to arrest. Escalation from experimentation to current regular use of heroin and amphetamine was lower than for regular property and fraud offenders but higher than for regular violent offenders.

Table 7.5 Prevalence of illegal drug use amongst regular drug sellers (per cent)

	Cannabis	Amphetamines	Heroin	Cocaine	Any	More than 1
Prevalence						
Ever used	97	82	67	60	99	91
Used in six months prior to arrest	80	54	35	28	90	64
Current regular user	77	41	28	10	87	51
Escalation	79	50	42	17	88	56
(n)	(114)	(60)	(41)	(15)	(128)	(76)

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

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

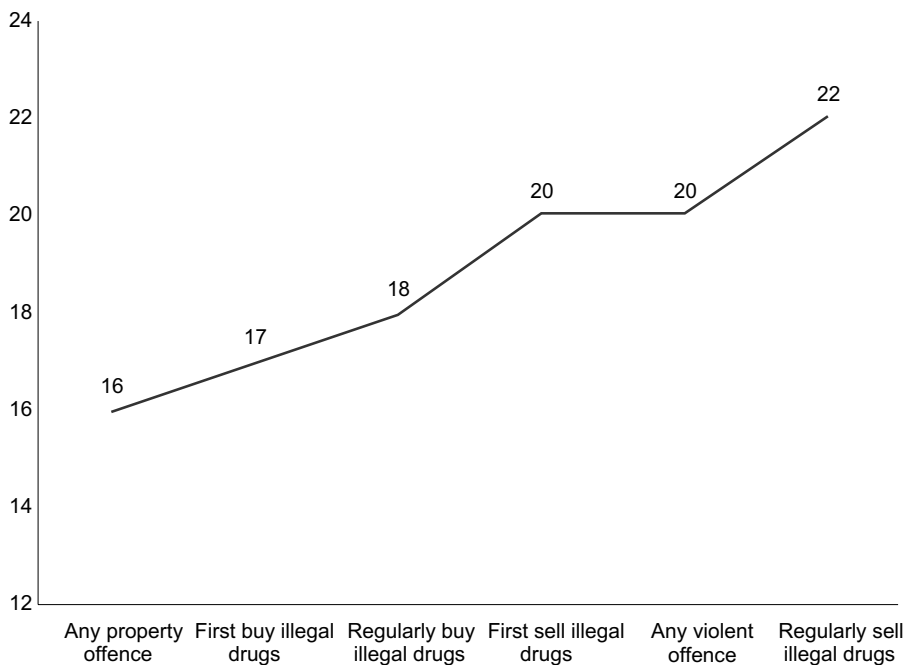
Linking Drugs and Regular Drug Sellers

Regular drug sellers typically began their offending careers at the mean age of 16 years. This is consistent with the lower rates of juvenile incarceration. The first offence was most likely to be a property offence followed four years later by a violent offence (20 years). Drug offending started in most cases with the purchase of illegal drugs followed by the sale of illegal drugs. There was a mean time difference of three years between when offenders first purchased illegal drugs and when they began to sell them.

The age of onset and persistence with drug use indicates that these offenders first began illegal drug use at the age of 15 years; cannabis was the drug most likely to be used first. The mean age of first use for heroin, amphetamines and cocaine was

the same (21 years). There was a significant time lag between first cannabis use and first use of amphetamines or heroin (6 years)—a delay that is not mirrored among any other offending group. The data also suggest a two-year delay between the onset of first drug use to the first purchase of illegal drugs. Current regular users of each drug reported first use at an earlier age than offenders who had not escalated from experimentation to regular use. This was the case for amphetamines, cocaine and heroin, but not for cannabis, where the mean age of first use remained at 15 years.

Figure 7.1 Mean ages of first offence for regular drug sellers¹



¹ Estimates are for offenders reporting lifetime prevalence of that offence type.

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

The story of onset and persistence among many of the offender groups within the DUCO male sample is one that shows that offending (primarily property offending) began one or two years before first drug use. First use of illegal drugs, most often cannabis, was followed by the onset of regular property offending and then regular drug use. Violent offending, if at all present, did not usually begin until after the onset of regular drug use. For regular drug sellers however, the story was different.

A comparison of onset and persistence data in figure 7.1 and table 7.6 show that, for regular drug sellers, first drug use (most often cannabis) began at the age of 15 years, which was older than regular property offenders but younger than regular violent offenders. This was followed by the first property offence or drug purchase offence at the mean age of 16 years. Regular cannabis use began one year after the onset of offending, which in turn was followed by regular offending (primarily the purchase of illegal drugs).

Table 7.6 Mean age of illegal drug use for regular drug sellers

	Cannabis	Amphetamines	Heroin	Cocaine
First use				
Mean age	15	21	21	21
(n)	(141)	(123)	(98)	(86)
Of current regular users				
First use	15	19	20	20
Regular use	17	21	23	23
Interval (regular–first)	2	2	3	3
(n)	(114)	(60)	(41)	(15)

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

Lifetime Offending Attributions

The DUCO male study asked offenders a number of questions relating to the effects of drugs and alcohol on the lifetime offending career. The data in table 7.7 demonstrate that more than half of all regular drug sellers attributed their offending careers in some way to the affect of alcohol or drugs. Twenty-six per cent of this sample reported that all of their offending behaviour was related to their personal alcohol or drug use, while 24 per cent reported that most of their offending could be in some way attributed to these factors. In all, 42 per cent reported that drugs or alcohol had no effect on their offending career. This compares, for example, with 29 per cent of regular property offenders, 27 per cent of regular multiple offenders and 53 per cent of regular violent offenders who reported no effect of alcohol or illegal drugs on their lifetime offending career.

Offenders who reported that drugs or alcohol had an effect on their offending career most often stated that drugs led them to crime (30 per cent). This result is

consistent with the onset and persistence of cannabis use prior to any offending and is unlike other crime types, where persistent use usually occurred after regular offending. A further 27 per cent reported that the effect was most likely psychopharmacological, while 19 per cent said that the economic/compulsive effects of their personal drug use was the primary motivation for their lifetime offending careers. Further analysis indicates that compared with regular violent offenders and regular property offenders, these offenders more often reported that the illegal status of drugs is what essentially motivated their offending career. A small number of offenders (13 per cent) stated that the reason for their offending was because of the illegal status of drugs.

Significant differences exist in the attributions between regular drug sellers whose most serious offence is violence or drugs. More than 40 per cent of offenders whose most serious offence was a drug offence stated that the effect of drugs and alcohol on their lifetime career was primarily economic/compulsive. Offenders with a current violent most serious offence were more likely to report a psychopharmacological effect (47 per cent).

Table 7.7 Lifetime offending attributions for regular drug sellers

	n	%
Of those who quantified the effect		
0 per cent	38	42
25 per cent	5	6
50 per cent	2	2
75 per cent	22	24
100 per cent	24	26
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(91)</i>	<i>(100)</i>
Of those who qualified the effect		
Psychopharmacological	18	27
Economic/ compulsive	13	19
Drugs and alcohol lead to crime	20	30
Illegal status of drugs	9	13
Other	7	11
<i>(Total)</i>	<i>(67)</i>	<i>(100)</i>

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

Conclusion

Regular drug sellers were more likely to have completed tertiary studies, to be non-Indigenous and less likely to have spent time in a juvenile facility. They reported the highest drug use prevalence rates of any crime type analysed within this report. However, there was a longer time delay between moving from cannabis to the other drugs, and on average the interval between onset and persistence across all four drug types was longer than for other offender types.

The criminal and drug-using career of this group differed from the other crime types analysed in this report. The onset of cannabis preceded the onset of offending. When attributing factors that might explain their offending careers, they were more likely to report reasons that focused on 'drugs cause crime', including the illegal status of drugs.