

## Key findings from the Drug Use Careers of Juvenile Offenders study

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*Funded through the National Illicit Drug Strategy, the AIC has undertaken a major study into the drug use and offending careers of Australian prisoners. The results from surveys of adult males and females highlight the diversity and complexity of the offending and drug use histories of incarcerated adult offenders. This paper extends the Drug Use Careers of Offenders study (DUCO) and presents the key findings of the final component of the study – a survey conducted in Australia with young people incarcerated in juvenile detention centres. The study confirms that these young people have extensive offending and drug use histories, both in terms of violent and property crime, and regularly use alcohol, cannabis and, to a lesser extent, amphetamines. The majority of young people started drug use and offending at an early age, with drug use beginning before or around the same time as offending. As Australia's most chronic or serious young offenders are likely to be in detention centres, it is not surprising that many of the detainees had troubled home backgrounds and poor school results. The study indicates the need to target risk factors such as abuse, neglect and family drug use earlier in a child's life, as well as to have effective programs that address issues such as drug use, housing needs, skills development, individual and family support for chronic young offenders.*

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Director

Whilst juvenile crime is a troubling phenomenon, with the rate of juvenile offending twice as high as rates for adults, the majority of young offenders desist from criminal activity as they mature into adulthood (AIC 2003). A small percentage of juveniles become serious recidivists who account for a large proportion of overall youth crime figures (Coumarelos 1994; cf Chen et al. 2005). In comparison with adult crime, less is known about the interrelationship between drugs and juvenile offending. It is not clear from research to date how well explanatory models of the drug-crime nexus apply to juveniles. A review of the relevant literature revealed some evidence to suggest that the use of hard drugs escalates juvenile offending, at least in relation to property crime. Different studies have concluded that juvenile crime usually precedes drug use. However, in general, adolescents may take multiple pathways through delinquency which at times may include drug use, criminality or both (see Prichard and Payne 2005 for a summary of the research literature).

Drug use among Australian youths occurs in all socio-economic strata (AIHW 2005). Compared with others the same age, however, Australian juvenile detainees tend to (a) use drugs much more often, (b) use a wider range of drugs and (c) start using drugs and alcohol at an earlier age (Putnins 2001; Lennings et al. 2003; Lennings & Pritchard 1999). It is also clear that juvenile detainees frequently experience multiple risk factors in their lives, such as sexual abuse (Dembo et al. 1990), and familial drug abuse (Putnins 2001).

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### About the DUCO juvenile sample

The DUCO juvenile study involved face-to-face interviews with 371 people aged between 11 and 17 years who were sentenced to or remanded in detention in 2004. These youths included 25 females and 346 males with an average age of 16 years. In respect to both age and sex the sample was comparable with the most recent national census of juveniles in detention. It highlights that these people are more likely to be male and have potentially different offending profiles (Charlton & McCall 2004). However, over half of the juveniles (59%) identified themselves as Indigenous, a rate noticeably higher than the 2003 national estimate of 47 per cent (Charlton & McCall 2004). The majority of juveniles (76%) had stopped attending school before they entered detention. The average age of leaving school was 14 years, and the highest grade completed was most likely to be grade eight, compared with grade 12 for the majority of Australian youths (SCRGSP 2005). Nearly one in 10 (9%, n=34) of the youths were parents of children.

In regards to housing prior to detention:

- 53 per cent of youths lived in their parents' home;
- 39 per cent lived in a home belonging to someone other than their parents; and
- eight per cent lived alone or on the street.

Of those juveniles who lived in private homes, 50 per cent stated that the home was public housing, a basic indicator of economic disadvantage.

### History of offending

Young people can find themselves in detention because of involvement in one very serious criminal act, such as murder or rape. However, for most youths, detention is the result of a long criminal history comprised of less serious offences. Detention was not a

new experience for half of the DUCO juvenile sample:

- almost one third of youths had been sentenced to detention once or twice before;
- 17 per cent had been sentenced to detention three to six times prior to their current incarceration; and
- a small group (4%) had been sentenced to detention seven or more times previously.

In a face-to-face interview, juvenile offenders were asked a number of questions relating to their involvement in 11 different offence types (see Figure 1). For each offence, the youths were asked whether they had (a) ever committed that offence, regardless of whether the offence had been detected by the police, and (b) committed that offence often ('regular offending'). Regular offending was self-defined by each offender, a measure which is consistent with the adult male and adult female studies.

In terms of lifetime prevalence, the property offences most likely to have been committed were burglary (86%), stealing without break-in (82%), vandalism (80%) and motor vehicle theft (80%). About one in four juvenile offenders (26%) reported having ever

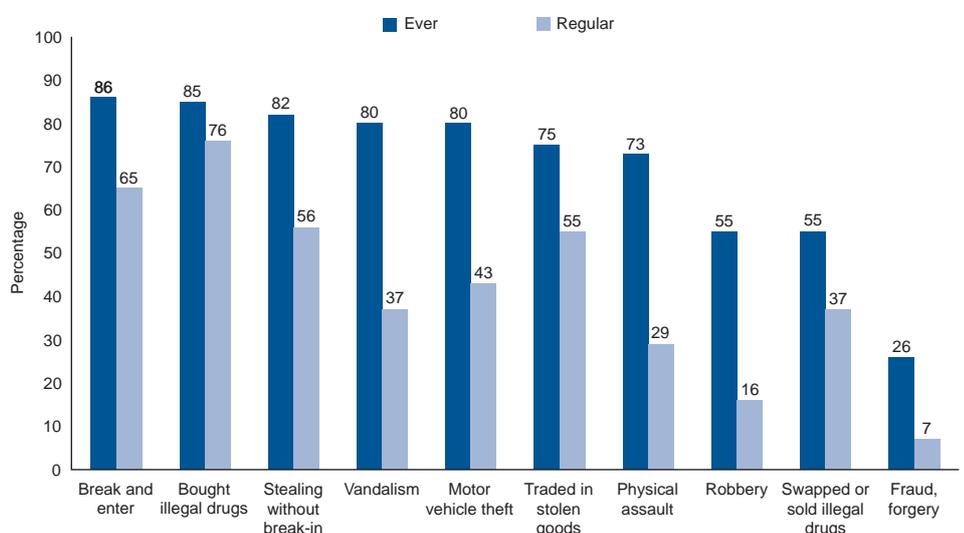
engaged in fraudulent crimes. In terms of violent acts, most juveniles (73%) reported ever physically assaulting another person and more than half (55%) reported having ever engaged in robbery or robbery-related offences.

The most common types of regular offending were buying drugs (76%), burglary (65%), stealing without break-in (56%) and trading in stolen goods (55%). Regular violent behaviour was less prevalent, with 29 per cent of youths indicating that they assaulted others regularly.

'Escalation' is a term which refers to the progression from ever to regular offending. Escalation was most common for juveniles who bought illegal drugs (89 per cent of those who ever bought drugs became regular drug buyers), committed burglary (76%) and traded in stolen goods (72%). Escalation was lowest for fraud (26%) and robbery (29%).

Juveniles in detention report involvement in a wide variety of offence types. Specialisation (the tendency to commit only one offence type) was extremely rare among the juveniles in this study. They reported regularly engaging in five to seven of the offence types listed in this study; therefore

**Figure 1: Lifetime prevalence of offending and regular offending (per cent)**



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Juvenile Survey, 2005 [computer file].

offender classifications using discrete offence types were inappropriate. Instead, it was possible to differentiate the juveniles based on the severity of their regular offending patterns. The final result indicated three categories of juvenile offenders:

- regular violent offenders (35%), who report having progressed to regular violent offending;
- regular property offenders (54%), who had not committed violent crimes regularly, but were actively engaged in property offending on a regular basis; and
- non-regular offenders (11%), who did not report regularly engaging in either property or violent offences.

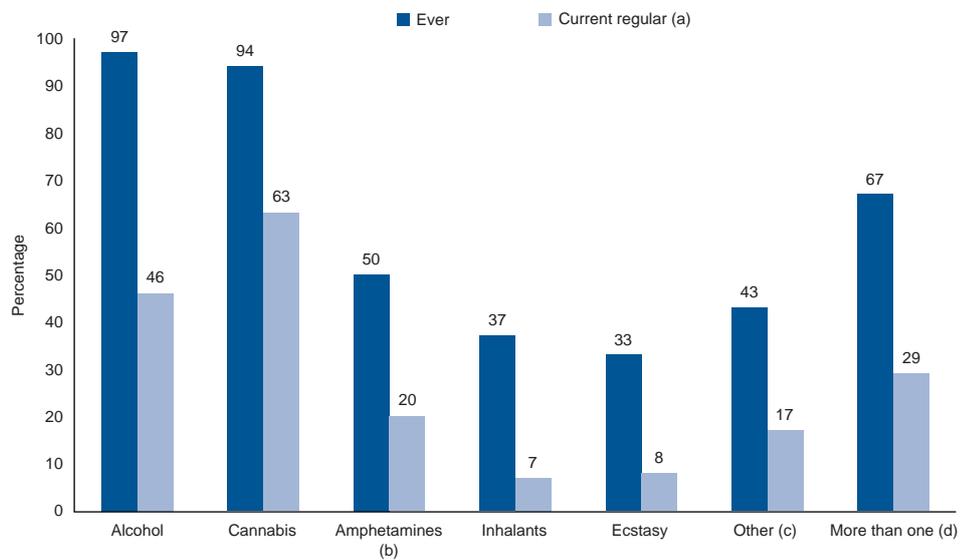
### History of substance use

Almost all juveniles had used at least one substance prior to their current period of detention. By drug type, a greater number of juveniles had used alcohol (97%) than cannabis (94%), amphetamines (50%), inhalants (37%) or ecstasy (33%). Two thirds of the DUCO juveniles had used two or more of these substances.

Regular use was self-defined and applied only to the six months prior to the current period of detention. While alcohol was the substance most likely to have been ever used, more juveniles reported regularly using cannabis (63%) than alcohol (46%) during this period. Moreover, one in five juveniles were current regular users of amphetamines and 29 per cent were regularly using two or more substances in the six months prior to their arrest.

Using the results from the 2005 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) it is possible to compare the DUCO sample with the general juvenile population. Although the general age of respondents differed slightly (the DUCO sample was aged 10-17 years and the NDSHS were 12-19 years) the results indicate that for all substances other than alcohol the detainees reported markedly higher rates of lifetime

**Figure 2: Lifetime prevalence and current regular use of drugs, by drug type (per cent)**



(a) Current regular users are those reporting regular use in the six months prior to detention

(b) Excludes the licit use of that drug

(c) Includes heroin, cocaine/crack, street methadone, and morphine as well as illicit use of dexamphetamines and benzodiazepines.

(d) Includes alcohol

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Juvenile Survey, 2005 [computer file].

prevalence than youths in the general population (AIHW 2005):

- detainees were five times more likely to have ever used cannabis, and 10 times more likely to have used amphetamines;
- one in three detainees had tried inhalants compared with one in 50 youths in the general population; and
- detainees are six to 10 times more likely to have tried ecstasy.

### Temporal order of drug use and offending

Debates over the causal relationship between drugs and crime have relied heavily on the examination of the temporal order in which they occur. This can be done by comparing the percentages of youths who (a) used substances before they began offending, (b) began substance use and offending at the same time (i.e. within the same year) and (c) began substance use after their criminal behaviour started. The results indicate that about half the juveniles had commenced offending before their first use of drugs (47%), one quarter had

first used drugs in the same year as their first offence, and one quarter were drug users prior to their first offence. This pattern is similar to that seen in the DUCO adult male sample (Makkai & Payne 2003).

### Link between drug use and crime

Seventy per cent of youths reported that they were under the influence of substances at the time of committing the offence leading to their detention (Table 1). This rate is higher than reported by incarcerated adult males (62%) and adult females (58%) in reference to the offences for which they had been imprisoned (Makkai & Payne 2003; Johnson 2004). Similar numbers of juveniles reported that at the time of the offence they were intoxicated by drugs (24%), alcohol (22%), or both (24%). Further analysis revealed the drugs most commonly used by young people prior to offending were cannabis and amphetamines. Moreover, of those who had been high at the time of their last offence, 64 (35%) reported being intoxicated by two or more drugs.

**Table 1: Link between drugs and crime**

	n	%
<b>Intoxication at time of offence</b>		
Drugs	85	24
Alcohol	77	22
Both drugs and alcohol	84	24
None	108	31
<b>Sick or hurting (from lack of drugs) at time of offence</b>		
	76	21
<b>Lifetime impact of drugs on crime</b>		
Impact	255	72
No impact	98	28

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Juvenile Survey, 2005 [computer file].

Regardless of whether they were intoxicated at the time of their last offence, one in five juveniles indicated they were sick, hurting or 'hanging out' from a lack of drugs.

The juveniles in this study were asked whether their personal use of drugs had impacted on their lifetime offending. The majority (72%) agreed that their criminal offending was affected by their personal use of drugs (see Table 1).

### Risk factors for drug use and offending

The DUCO juvenile study was designed to capture basic information about the risk factors associated with substance use and offending. As a sample of juvenile detainees, it was possible to link these risk factors to more serious and problematic behaviours such as substance use and offending. The risk factors examined in this study were derived in consultation with key stakeholders and the international literature. They included:

- juveniles' history of abuse and neglect;
- family substance abuse; and
- problems at school.

In terms of abuse and neglect, 66 of the juveniles (18%) in this study reported being left alone for long periods of time as children, while one in three (36%) reported that they had suffered violent abuse and/or emotional abuse (27%). In all cases, the perpetrator of the abuse was most likely to be a parent or

guardian – 60 per cent in the case of violent abuse and 70 per cent for emotional abuse. One in five of the juveniles reporting violent abuse stated that the perpetrator was a sibling (23%).

In all cases, self-reported regular juvenile offenders (both violent and property) reported a higher prevalence of neglect and abuse than non-regular offenders (Table 2). In terms of recent substance use, frequent users (at least weekly use in the six months prior to detention) reported a higher prevalence of neglect, violent abuse and emotional abuse than those who were not frequently using substances. Moreover, juveniles who reported any form of neglect or abuse typically commenced

substance use at an earlier age than those who did not report such experiences, with the difference as much as a full year.

Finally, it was evident that neglect and abuse were linked to whether a juvenile was living at home or away from their parents at the time of the most recent offending. Table 2 indicates that juveniles not living at home with their parents were more likely to have reported neglect, violent abuse and emotional abuse. Given that these factors were also linked to a greater prevalence and frequency of offending and drug use, it is not surprising that juveniles not living at home also reported more frequent substance use and offending behaviours.

Parental use of substances has been identified as a risk factor for both juvenile substance use and criminogenic behaviour (see for example Sheridan 1995). In the present study, two thirds of the juvenile detainees reported that at least one person in their family drank too much or used illicit drugs while they were growing up. Generally, it was more commonly reported that parents abused alcohol, while siblings were more likely have been using illicit drugs.

**Table 2: Prevalence of neglect and abuse, by offending and drug use indicators**

	Neglect	Violent abuse	Emotional abuse
<b>Offender type (per cent)</b>			
Regular violent offender	25	45	29
Regular property offender	15	32	28
Non-regular offender	8	23	15
<b>Drug use (frequency) (per cent)</b>			
Daily or more	20	38	28
Weekly	16	34	31
Monthly or less	13	30	21
<b>Drug use initiation (mean age)</b>			
Age of first substance use	10.2	10.4	10.6
Comparative age (no neglect or abuse)	11.2	11.3	11.1
<b>Living at home (prior to detention)</b>			
Living at home	14	29	20
Not living at home	23	44	35

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Juvenile Survey, 2005 [computer file].

Analysis of parental substance use revealed a clear connection to more serious and problematic juvenile substance use. Juveniles who reported family substance use were more likely to be frequent substance users in the six months prior to their detention, to have committed their first offence and first used any substance at an earlier age and more likely to have become a regular offender (see Figure 3).

The vast majority (90%) of juveniles in this study reported truancy from school and two in five reported truancy on a regular basis. Similar proportions reported being suspended from school at least once (89%) and being suspended from school on a regular basis (44%). Expulsion, the most serious punishment for misconduct at school, was reported by more than half (59%). Further analysis indicated a connection between more serious offending profiles and problems at school. Regular violent and regular property offenders were more likely to have reported truancy, suspension and expulsion from school. It appears that problems within school are also linked to an earlier onset of substance use.

### Indigenous juveniles

More than half (59%) of the juvenile detainees in this study identified as Indigenous and their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system has been well documented (Charlton & McCall 2004). Recent research of adult male Indigenous prisoners indicates that Indigenous men have higher levels of contact with the criminal justice system and at an earlier age (Putt et al. 2005). Moreover, when compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts, Indigenous adult male offenders were more likely to report dependency on alcohol or cannabis, more likely to attribute their offending to alcohol, report lower levels of education and were less likely to have been employed.

This DUCO juvenile study examined the lifetime prevalence of offending and drug use among Indigenous juvenile detainees. Because Indigenous juvenile offenders were over sampled in this study, both the weighted (for Indigenous status and jurisdiction) and unweighted data were compared. The results illustrated that compared with non-Indigenous juvenile offenders, Indigenous juvenile offenders were:

- more likely to have been detained for burglary, and more likely to self-report a lifetime history of burglary;
- equally likely to report lifetime prevalence and daily use of cannabis and alcohol, but less likely to report daily use of amphetamines and ecstasy;
- equally likely to have used inhalants, but first used inhalants at a much younger age;
- equally likely to attribute their criminal activity to drug use;
- less likely to report that a family member was using drugs or alcohol when they were growing up;
- more likely to report physical or emotional abuse as a child; and
- more likely to report truancy, suspension and expulsion from school.

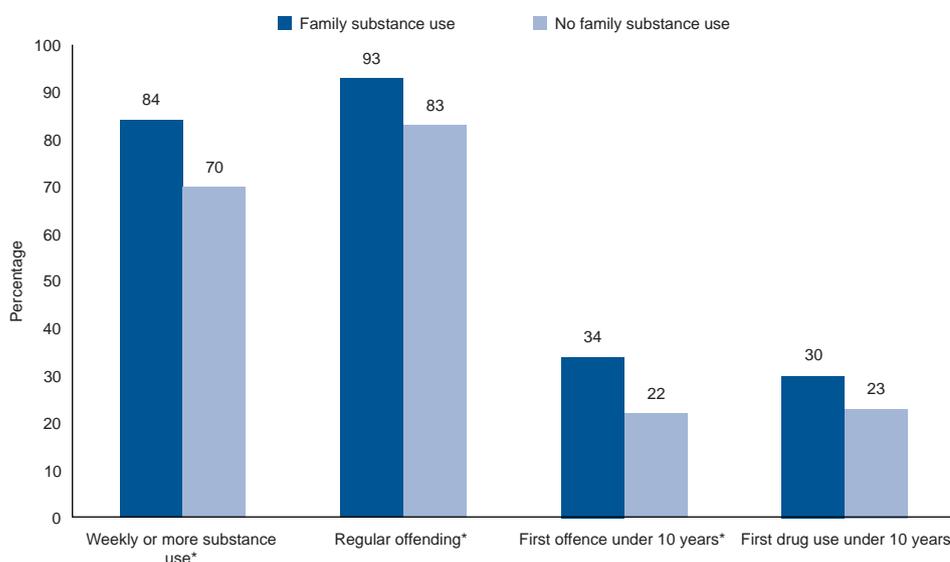
### Conclusions and policy implications

The DUCO study has made a significant contribution towards furthering our understanding of the link between drugs and crime. The results of this survey indicate that juveniles (males and females combined) in detention report significant offending profiles, engaging in between five and seven different offence types on a regular basis. Offence specialisation was rare. The juveniles who had already served a sentence of detention reported more serious offending profiles than those who were in detention for the first time.

In terms of substance use almost all juvenile detainees reported having ever used alcohol or cannabis, and half reported amphetamine use. In the six months prior to their detention, two thirds of the juveniles reported using cannabis on a regular basis and one in five reported regular amphetamine use. The links between drugs and crime were measured in a number of ways in this study and the results suggest that:

- the majority of juveniles did not commence drug use until after their first offence; however

**Figure 3: Offending and drug use indicators, by family substance abuse**



\* Statistically significant at p<0.05.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, DUCO Juvenile Survey, 2005 [computer file].

- two thirds reported being intoxicated (either drunk on alcohol or high on drugs) at the time of committing the offence/s for which they were now in detention; and
- the majority of juveniles reported that drug use had a definite impact on their lifetime criminal offending behaviour.

Three factors emerged as important for identifying juveniles at a high risk of serious offending and drug use: family substance use, childhood experiences of abuse and neglect, and problems at school. Combined, more than 90 per cent of the juveniles in this study reported at least one of these problems while growing up, and one third reported all three. Those juveniles who experienced all three risk factors were more likely to be daily drug users and to report regularly engaging in a greater number of offence types.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of early intervention programs for breaking the cycle of drugs and crime – interventions that target not only the criminogenic behaviours of juveniles, but the environmental circumstances that may give rise to such activities. The role of the family emerges as a cornerstone for the transmission of pro-social behaviours. In the first instance, interventions should aim to reduce the prevalence of parental drug use, childhood abuse and neglect as well as providing adequate support services for juveniles who do find themselves in such situations.

This DUCO juvenile report highlights the ‘temporal development’ of drug use and criminal careers, as well as the risk

factors which appear to hasten its progression. Identifying juveniles at risk, preferably through a matrix of indicators, is essential for targeting early intervention initiatives. Such a course would require investment in screening and assessment, and greater collaboration between key government agencies where a coordinated effort is likely to be the most effective.

### Acknowledgement

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Note: The full report, Alcohol, drugs and crime: a study of juveniles in detention, *Research and public policy series* no 67, is available from the Australian Institute of Criminology, and is online at [www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/67/index.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/67/index.html).

Other publications from the DUCO study include:

- Drugs and crime: a study of incarcerated male offenders. *Research and public policy series* no 52, online at [www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/52/index.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/52/index.html);
- Drugs and crime: a study of incarcerated female offenders. *Research and public policy series* no 63, online at [www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/63/index.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/63/index.html); and
- Indigenous male offending and substance abuse. *Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 293, online at [www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi293.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi293.html).