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Abstract | We used data from interviews with police detainees ($n=2,249$) to measure the extent to which their offending was related to illicit drugs or alcohol. We then used these findings to estimate the total number of principal offences attributable to different substances.

In 2019, 45 percent of all detainees attributed their offending to substance use. Offending was most commonly attributed to methamphetamine (27.6%) and alcohol use (16.5%). Alcohol attribution was more common for violent crimes, while methamphetamine featured prominently among both violent and property offences.

Applying these attributable fractions to recorded crime data for 2019, we estimated that substance use contributed to approximately 156,760 principal offences in Australia. This included 95,990 offences attributable to methamphetamine and 56,627 attributable to alcohol use.

The extent of illicit drug and alcohol involvement in crime: An updated estimate

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There is a well-documented connection between illicit drug and alcohol misuse and criminal offending (Bennett, Holloway & Farrington 2008; Duke et al. 2018). While most people in the general population who use illicit drugs and alcohol do not engage in criminal activity, except where they commit offences related to drug possession or supply, substance use is one among many complex and interrelated factors that can contribute to criminal offending (Zhong, Yu & Fazel 2020). Intoxication can impair judgement and lower inhibition, which increases the risk of intoxicated individuals engaging in criminal behaviours, such as physical violence or public disorder (Darke 2010; McKetin et al. 2014). Some people who use substances may also fund their substance use by committing acquisitive offences, such as theft (Sutherland et al. 2023), particularly if they are dependent on the substance (Bennett, Holloway & Farrington 2008). The connection between substance use and crime varies depending on the substance, the frequency of use and amount consumed, the category of offence, and personal characteristics such as age and sex (Bennett, Holloway & Farrington 2008; Foran & O'Leary 2008; Nagar & Rabinovitz 2024; Zhong, Yu & Fazel 2020).

Understanding the complex interplay between substance use and criminal activity is important in informing law enforcement and health strategies aimed at reducing drug-related crime, allowing policymakers to allocate resources effectively, and providing estimates against which national and jurisdictional policies can be compared and evaluated (Payne & Gaffney 2012). Moreover, these data are important to estimate the costs of drug- and alcohol-related crime to the Australian community (National Drug Research Institute 2020). A lack of contemporary Australian evidence on the extent to which crime is attributable to drug or alcohol use was highlighted in a recent inquiry held by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement (2023). To gain a better understanding of the nature and extent of drug-related offending, the committee recommended that further research be undertaken.

The extent to which substance use contributes to offending has been measured using data collected by the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program. The national DUMA program operated from 1999 to 2021, and involved interviewing police detainees about their drug use, including whether their use of different substances contributed to their offending. Based on DUMA data collected in 2009, Payne and Gaffney (2012) found that nearly half of all police detainees (45%) attributed their current offending to substance use, and that offending was more frequently attributed to alcohol than to all other drugs combined. These findings were consistent with self-report data from 29,138 Canadian offenders surveyed between 2006 and 2016, 42 percent of whom said their offending would not have occurred if they were not seeking or under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Young et al. 2021). Similar results have been found in the United States (National Drug Intelligence Center 2011). Unsurprisingly, research has shown the extent of alcohol and drug involvement varies by crime type (Håkansson & Jesionowska 2018). Violent crime, for instance, is more strongly associated with alcohol and stimulants (such as methamphetamine) than with sedatives or opiates (such as heroin or benzodiazepines).

The proportion of offences attributable to drugs or alcohol (hereafter called the 'attributable fraction') calculated using DUMA data has also been applied to crime statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This produces an estimate of the total number of criminal charges in Australia that are attributable to drugs or alcohol. This approach was demonstrated by Morgan and colleagues (2018), who used data on the involvement of alcohol in violent offending as reported by DUMA detainees (35%) to estimate that 24,798 offenders proceeded against for acts intended to cause injury in 2013–14 attributed their offending to alcohol consumption. This estimate was limited by inconsistencies between definitions used in DUMA and by the ABS, and it is unknown how many more criminal offences would be attributable to alcohol and other drug use if this method were applied to all categories of crime, rather than only acts intended to cause injury.

Further, since the earlier study by Payne and Gaffney (2012), the prevalence and patterns of substance use among Australians have changed. Recent data (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2025a; Voce & Sullivan 2022a) suggest alcohol consumption has decreased over the past decade, while consumption of specific illicit drugs, such as methamphetamine and cocaine, has increased. It is not clear whether the relationship between alcohol and other drug use and crime has also changed over this period.

To better understand the contemporary relationship between drugs and crime in Australia, this study used data from the DUMA program to measure the extent to which police detainees in Australia attributed their offending to illicit drug and alcohol use, updating the results from the Payne and Gaffney (2012) study. These attributable fractions were then used to estimate the total number of recorded offences attributable to illicit drug and alcohol use.

Methodology

This study uses data from the DUMA program collected in 2019. These were the most recent data that were not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was associated with significant short-term changes in alcohol and drug use (AIHW 2025a; Doherty, Sullivan & Voce 2021; Voce, Sullivan & Doherty 2021) and offending (Payne, Morgan & Piquero 2022) among Australians. Wastewater analyses (Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC) 2024) and self-report survey data (AIHW 2025b) show that most Australian illicit drug markets had returned to pre-pandemic levels by mid-2022. Likewise, self-reported alcohol consumption in Australia has remained stable or increased since the pandemic (AIHW 2025b). Nonetheless, the use of 2019 data is a limitation to be considered.

The DUMA program collected drug use, criminal offending, and sociodemographic information from police detainees at watch houses or police stations. Participation in the program was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. In 2019, DUMA collected survey data from 2,330 adult detainees (aged 18 years or over) at five DUMA sites in Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth, and Bankstown and Surry Hills in Sydney. For the current study, detainees were excluded if they answered 'don't know' or declined to answer any of the relevant questions regarding past-month drug and alcohol use ($n=31$) or questions regarding the substance attributions ($n=50$). Of the total remaining sample of 2,249 detainees, 81 percent were male ($n=1,815$), three-quarters (74%, $n=1,660$) self-identified as non-Indigenous, and the median age was 33 (interquartile range=26–41).

The survey asked detainees if they had consumed alcohol or used cannabis, methamphetamine (or speed/ice), heroin or ecstasy (or MDMA) in the past month. For each substance a detainee had used, the survey asked: 'Thinking again about the main reason why you have been detained today ... how much do you think (alcohol/cannabis/heroin/methamphetamine/ecstasy) contributed to what happened?' Detainees could respond 'not at all', 'a little' or 'a lot'. Consistent with previous research (National Drug Research Institute 2020; Payne & Gaffney 2012), we defined detainees who responded either 'a little' or 'a lot' as attributing their current offending (ie offences for which they were detained) to substance use. For each illicit drug a detainee had used, the survey then asked about the reasons why their drug use had contributed to their offending: 'How would you describe the role of (cannabis/heroin/methamphetamine/ecstasy) in what happened?' Detainees could select one or more of the reasons listed, which included that they needed money to buy the drug, they were 'high' on the drug at the time, they were 'hanging out' for the drug, and an 'other' reason related to their use of that drug.

The relationship between substance use and crime is expressed as attributable fractions—the proportion of all detainees, or detainees charged with a specific offence type, who attributed their offending to alcohol or illicit drugs. We used police charge records to obtain offence information for detainees who completed the questionnaire. A maximum of 10 charges were recorded, all of which related to the detainee's current detention. Charges were assigned to each detainee (including their most serious offence type) according to the third edition of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Offence Classification (ANZSOC; ABS 2011). Because detainees were asked about the contribution of alcohol or drugs to the *main* reason they were detained, we used their principal offence—the most serious charge according to the ABS National Offence Index—when determining whether substance use had contributed to their offending (ABS 2023).

To calculate the approximate number of criminal offences attributable to drug and alcohol use during the same year, we used ABS data on the number of alleged offenders aged 18 years or over who were proceeded against by state and territory police between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2019 (ABS 2024). The data report the principal offence (most serious offence) allegedly committed by an individual offender based on the ABS National Offence Index (ABS 2023). Offenders who were proceeded against more than once in the reference period (repeat offenders) were assigned a principal offence for each separate date of police action. Using principal offence as the unit of measurement means the data do not reflect the total number of individual offences that come to the attention of police. However, it is more accurate to rely on data relating to offenders than incidents or victims, given the attributable fractions are drawn from interviews with detainees charged with an offence. We nevertheless acknowledge that there are limitations regarding the direct comparability of data on detainees charged with an offence and data on offenders proceeded against by police.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations to attributable fraction data from the DUMA program must be noted from the outset. The program surveyed adult offenders from select police stations and watch houses in inner-city metropolitan sites, meaning that the attributable fractions may not generalise to the broader offender population in Australia, particularly those living in regional or remote areas (Voce & Sullivan 2022a). Data were not collected from every state and territory (with the Northern Territory, Tasmania, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory omitted). The ACIC's National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program (ACIC 2024) has shown that consumption of major drugs was generally comparable across the states included and excluded from DUMA, particularly in terms of which substances are used more and less frequently. However, it also demonstrates that regional variability exists.

The DUMA program also excluded detainees who did not consent to participate or who could not be surveyed due to intoxication, violent behaviour or other reasons—and they may have been more or less likely to attribute their offending to substance use (Voce & Sullivan 2022a). The data also rely on detainees' self-reported attributions and it is not known whether any systematic biases may influence the degree to which offenders attribute their offending to substance use. For example, some offenders may believe that exaggerating the influence of drugs or alcohol on their criminal activity may reduce their culpability (National Drug Research Institute 2020; Payne & Gaffney 2012). Attribution questions were only asked of detainees who had recently used drugs. Thus, the attributable fractions do not capture those detainees who do not regularly use drugs but whose offending may have nonetheless been influenced by the illicit drug market—for example, drug dealers who engage in violence to recover debts for their buyers (National Drug Research Institute 2020). Moreover, the use of self-report drug attributions among apprehended offenders, along with recorded crime data, means that the current estimates do not account for offences that did not result in an offender being proceeded against or which were not reported to or recorded by police.

Several methodological differences should be noted between the current and previous study of DUMA detainees (Payne & Gaffney 2012). Detainees in 2009 were recruited from nine (rather than five) data collection sites around Australia, including sites in Victoria and the Northern Territory which were not represented in the 2019 survey. In 2009, detainees were asked attribution questions about a much broader range of drugs than in 2019, including illicit opiates, benzodiazepines, inhalants and hallucinogens. These differences should be taken into consideration when comparing the findings between the two studies. For example, we are unable to compare results for all drugs or all substances, and limit any comparisons to those substances that were measured in both study periods. In addition, newer synthetic opioids were not measured in either study but remain of concern (ACIC 2024; Brown & Morgan 2019). Cocaine was also excluded. It is one of the more commonly used illicit drugs in Australia but did not feature prominently among police detainees. Further research is needed to account for the possible role that these drugs might play in offending.

Results

Attributions by substance type

Two-thirds of the sample ($n=1,511$, 67.2%) reported using at least one illicit drug in the past month and 56.5 percent ($n=1,270$) reported drinking alcohol (see Table 1). In total, 84.7 percent ($n=1,905$) of detainees reported some substance use (drugs or alcohol) in the past month. Of detainees who had used in the past month, 53.3 percent ($n=1,016$) reported that their substance use had contributed to their current offending. This is equivalent to 45.2 percent of all detainees. Twenty-nine percent ($n=370$) of past-month alcohol users reported that alcohol had contributed to their offending (16.5 percent of all detainees), and 49.4 percent ($n=747$) of past-month illicit drug users reported that drugs had contributed to their offending (33.2 percent of all detainees). Over half of all detainees who had used methamphetamine in the past month (57.8%, $n=620$) attributed their offending to methamphetamine, the highest attribution rate among all substances analysed. This was equivalent to 27.6 percent of all detainees.

	Used substance in the past month ^a		Detainees who attributed offending to substance use		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	% of past-month users ^b	% of total sample
Alcohol	1,270	56.5	370	29.1	16.5
Cannabis	1,041	46.3	155	14.9	6.9
Heroin	164	7.3	64	39.0	2.9
Methamphetamine	1,073	47.7	620	57.8	27.6
Ecstasy	93	4.1	11	11.8	0.5
Any illicit drug	1,511	67.2	747	49.4	33.2
Any substance	1,905	84.7	1,016	53.3	45.2

a: Calculated as a percentage of all detainees whose responses to the relevant past-month use and attribution questions were not missing or 'don't know'

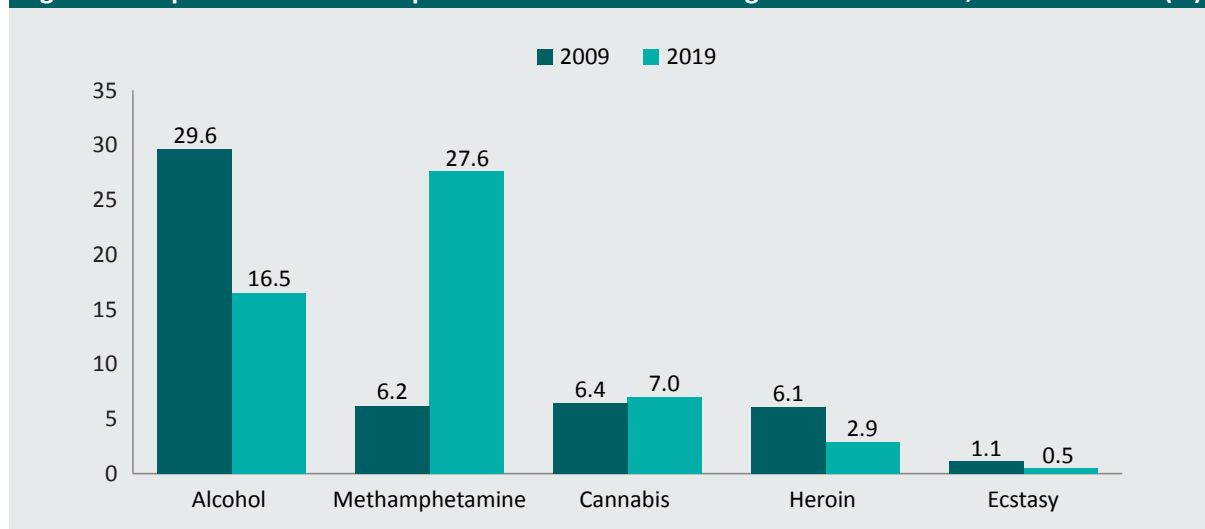
b: Calculated as a percentage of detainees who used a substance in the past month and whose response to the attribution question was not missing or 'don't know'

Note: Total sample size varies for each substance due to missing data. Includes detainees who did and did not have charge data

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2019 [computer file]

We compared the results from the current study with those from the Payne and Gaffney (2012) study. There were several key differences. Most notably, the proportion of all detainees who attributed their offending to alcohol nearly halved, falling from 29.6 percent to 16.5 percent. The proportion of detainees who attributed their offending to heroin also decreased, from 6.1 percent in 2009 to 2.9 percent in 2019 (although the small sample size should be noted; see Table 1). Most notably, the proportion of detainees who attributed their offending to methamphetamine increased significantly, from 6.2 percent in 2009 to 27.6 percent in 2019.

Figure 1: Proportion of total sample who attributed offending to substance use, 2009 and 2019 (%)



Note: Similar trends in attributions are observed when restricting the analyses to only detainees who had used alcohol and other drugs in the past month: with declines in alcohol (40.5% in 2009 to 29.1% in 2019) and heroin (54.3% in 2009 to 39.0% in 2019), increases in methamphetamine (33.1% in 2009 to 57.8% in 2019), and relatively no change for cannabis (13.5% in 2009 to 14.9% in 2019) and ecstasy (10.5% to 11.8%)

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2019 [computer file]; Payne & Gaffney (2012)

Reasons for attributing offending to alcohol and illicit drugs

For detainees who used most drug types, the leading reason they attributed their offending to substance use was that they were high at the time of arrest (see Table 2). Almost two-thirds of methamphetamine-attributing detainees reported they were high (64.6%, $n=388$) compared with 18.6 percent ($n=112$) who reported they needed money to buy drugs. However, heroin-attributing detainees were equally likely to report that they had offended because they needed money to buy drugs (41.3%, $n=26$) as they were to report being high (41.3%, $n=26$). Attributing offending to the need for money to buy drugs suggests the offending relates to acquisitive crime, such as shoplifting or drug dealing. Detainees who said they were dependent on illicit drugs were much more likely than other detainees to attribute their offending to illicit drugs (58.3% vs 14.9%, $\chi^2(1)=465.7$, $p<0.001$).

Many of the 'other' reasons detainees cited related to the illegal nature of drug use, such as failing urinalysis testing and being arrested for possession and selling of the drug. To further examine whether the legality of drugs was the reason detainees attributed their offending to illicit drugs, we disaggregated data according to whether detainees were charged with a drug possession offence. The vast majority of detainees (85.1%) were not charged with a drug offence and, among those who were, most (87.8%) were also charged with another offence type. Detainees who were charged with a drug possession offence were more likely to attribute their offending to illicit drugs (65.7% of detainees for whom this was their only offence type, 65.2% of detainees also charged with other offence types) compared to detainees not charged with a possession offence (45.7%, $\chi^2(2)=36.2$, $p<0.001$). However, most detainees who attributed their offending to illicit drugs were not charged with drug-related offences (74.6%).

Table 2: Reasons for attributing offending to drug use among detainees who had used in the past month

Substance type	I needed money to buy drugs		I was high at the time		I was hanging out for drugs		Other	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Cannabis	17	11.4	81	54.4	17	11.4	45	30.2
Heroin	26	41.3	26	41.3	12	19.1	13	20.6
Methamphetamine	112	18.6	388	64.6	76	12.7	111	23.2
Ecstasy	0	0.0	4	40.0	0	0.0	4	80.0
Total	138	19.1	452	62.6	103	14.3	167	27.1

Note: Totals are calculated from the sample of detainees who had used that drug in the past month and who had attributed their offending to their drug use. Responses across multiple drug types were permitted

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2019 [computer file]

Attributions by charge type

The proportion of crime attributable to drug and alcohol use was examined by charge type based on each detainee's principal or most serious offence (see Table 3). The subsample sizes for some crime types are small and these findings should be interpreted with caution. Similarly, we excluded ecstasy and heroin from Table 3 because too few detainees attributed their offending to these substances.

Drug or alcohol use contributed to offending among most detainees charged with homicide and related offences (66.7%); dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons, such as reckless driving (69.6%); robbery, extortion and related offences (58.9%); and unlawful entry with intent, breaking and entering, and related charges (59.5%). Some charge types were more likely to be attributed to illicit drugs than to alcohol and vice versa. More than half (57.8%) of charges relating to unlawful entry with intent were attributed to illicit drug use, compared to five percent attributed to alcohol use. Conversely, almost four times as many detainees charged with sexual assault or other sexual offences attributed their offending to alcohol (18.6%) than to illicit drugs (5.1%).

Type of offence	<i>n</i>	Alcohol	Meth- amphetamine	Cannabis	Illicit drugs	Any substance
Homicide and related offences	12	33.3	41.7	0.0	41.7	66.7
Acts intended to cause injury	500	23.4	21.6	9.8	29.0	44.8
Sexual assault and related offences	59	18.6	5.1	0.0	5.1	23.7
Dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons	46	19.6	54.4	13.0	58.7	69.6
Abduction, harassment and other offences against the person	8	37.5	37.5	0.0	37.5	50.0
Robbery, extortion and related offences	56	37.5	16.1	7.1	25.0	58.9
Unlawful entry with intent/ burglary, break and enter	116	5.2	48.3	9.5	57.8	59.5
Theft and related offences	443	9.7	36.8	6.6	42.4	49.2
Fraud, deception and related offences	43	7.0	18.6	0.0	18.6	23.3
Illicit drug offences	172	5.3	40.7	11.1	51.2	53.5
Weapons and explosives offences	35	8.6	14.3	8.6	22.9	31.4
Property damage and environmental pollution	41	24.4	7.3	4.9	12.2	34.2
Public order offences	98	34.7	15.3	4.1	18.4	45.9
Traffic and vehicle regulatory offences	106	19.8	12.3	2.8	14.2	30.2
Offences against justice procedures, government security and government operations	488	14.3	27.1	5.1	30.9	41.6
Total	2,306	16.4	27.8	7.0	33.5	45.4

Note: Totals exclude detainees with missing data on most serious offence (*n*=24). Miscellaneous offences (*n*=2) and charges attributed to MDMA (*n*=11) or heroin (*n*=64) are not reported separately due to low cell count

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2019 [computer file]

Estimated number of principal offences attributable to substance use

The proportion of police detainees who attributed their offending to specific substances was used to estimate the approximate number of principal offences resulting in an offender being proceeded against that are attributable to drug or alcohol use. In 2018–19, the ABS recorded 345,286 principal offences allegedly committed by adult offenders. By applying the attributable fractions identified in the total sample of detainees, we estimate that alcohol use contributed to 56,627 principal offences, illicit drug use contributed to 115,671 principal offences, and all types of substance use contributed to 156,760 principal offences.

Attributable fractions were then applied to specific categories of crime (Table 4). For some categories, the number of offences could not be estimated due to small sample sizes or inconsistencies in the coding of specific offences between the DUMA dataset and the ABS recorded crime statistics dataset (see Table 4 note). Nonetheless, many high-harm offences were attributed to drug or alcohol use, including an estimated 480 homicides or related offences, 1,729 sexual assaults or related offences, and 30,956 assault or other acts intended to cause injury. Methamphetamine (which had the highest attribution rate among all substances analysed) was estimated to have contributed to approximately 95,990 offences, including 300 homicides and related offences, 3,962 unlawful entries with intent, and 12,414 offences relating to theft.

It is important to note that the estimated numbers of principal offences attributable to alcohol and other drugs are only approximations. These figures should be considered broad estimates, especially since the attributable fractions calculated from the DUMA dataset were applied to the recorded crime statistics based on the overarching ANZSOC division (highest level of classification) rather than specific ANZSOC subdivisions or groups.

Type of principal offence	Recorded offenders	Principal offences attributable to:			
		Alcohol	Methamphetamine	Illicit drugs	All substances
Homicide and related offences	720	240	300	300	480
Acts intended to cause injury	69,099	16,169	14,925	20,039	30,956
Sexual assault and related offences	7,263	1,351	370	370	1,729
Abduction, harassment and other offences against the person	3,551	1,332	1,332	1,332	1,776
Robbery, extortion and related offences	2,230	836	359	558	1,313
Unlawful entry with intent/burglary, break and enter	8,202	427	3,962	4,741	4,880
Theft and related offences	33,733	3,272	12,414	14,303	16,597
Fraud, deception and related offences	11,064	774	2,058	2,058	2,578
Illicit drug offences	71,849	3,736	29,243	36,787	38,439
Weapons and explosives offences	14,134	1,216	2,021	3,237	4,438
Property damage and environmental pollution	11,751	2,867	858	1,434	4,019
Public order offences	49,275	17,098	7,539	9,067	22,617

Note: Traffic and vehicle regulatory offences are not included in the ABS recorded crime dataset. In the ABS datasets, dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons do not include those charged with dangerous or negligent operation of a vehicle (subdivision 041). Many DUMA detainees with a most serious offence of this type (dangerous or negligent acts endangering persons) had been charged with 041 subdivision offences, and as such, this offence category has not been calculated in the table above. Similarly, offences against justice procedures and offences against government security and government operations exclude charges relating to breaches of bail conditions (code 1523) in the ABS datasets. As many DUMA detainees' most serious offence related to breaches of bail, this category of offences (offences against justice procedures, and offences against government security and government operations) has not been included in the table above. In addition, the category of miscellaneous offences has not been calculated as very few DUMA detainees reported such offences as their most serious offence (n=2). Estimates rounded to nearest whole number

Source: AIC DUMA collection 2019 [computer file]; ABS recorded crime dataset (ABS; 2024)

We can cautiously use these data to estimate the number of offences in subsequent years. As we have already shown, rates of drug–crime attributions for certain illicit drugs have changed over time. In particular, the role of methamphetamine in criminal offending has increased, largely due to the increased use of the drug over this period. According to the most release from the ACIC’s (2024) National Wastewater Drug Monitoring Program (Report 23), after falling during the pandemic, the consumption of illicit drug types measured as part of this study were at similar levels in 2024 as they were in 2019. Assuming that rates of drug–crime attribution for illicit drugs have also remained relatively stable since 2019, we estimate that approximately 98,451 principal offences in 2023–24—the latest year for which national data on recorded offenders were available—were related to illicit drugs (ABS 2025). Alcohol use has declined over this period (Tscharke et al. 2024); however, rates of alcohol-related victimisation have remained stable (AIHW 2024). Assuming this is also true for the involvement of alcohol in offending, we estimate there may have been up to 48,197 principal offences related to alcohol in 2023–24. The number of offences was smaller in 2023–24 than in 2018–19 due a decline in the total number of principal offences for many crime types.

Discussion

More than half of detainees who participated in the DUMA program during 2019 and who had recently used at least one substance, and 45 percent of all detainees, attributed their current offending to illicit drug or alcohol use. Attribution rates varied for specific drugs, from ecstasy (0.5%), heroin (2.9%) and cannabis (6.9%), up to alcohol (16.5%) and methamphetamine (27.6%). These fractions are consistent with those reported by Canadian offenders ($n=29,138$) between 2006 and 2016, who also reported low rates for cannabis (5%) and opioids such as heroin (5%), and higher rates for alcohol (17%) and stimulants such as methamphetamine (31%).

Since 2009, attribution rates for alcohol use have declined by 13 percentage points. Most strikingly, there has been a fourfold increase in the reported role of methamphetamine use in detainees’ offending since 2009 (from 6% to 28%). In 2019, 58 percent of detainees who had used methamphetamine in the past month attributed their offending to the drug. This trend is likely due, in part, to the rising prevalence of methamphetamine use among police detainees since 2009 (Voce et al. 2021; Voce & Sullivan 2022a). Changes in the preferred form of methamphetamine from powder to the more potent crystalline methamphetamine (‘ice’) may also have contributed to the increased attribution rate. Australian evidence suggests that, compared to powdered forms, use of crystalline methamphetamine is associated with more frequent use and dependence (Degenhardt et al. 2017), which in turn is associated with a greater risk of criminal involvement (McKetin et al. 2020).

Attributable fractions derived from samples of police detainees can be used to estimate the number of criminal offences committed in Australia that are related to drugs or alcohol use. Methamphetamine use alone was estimated to contribute to over 95,000 offences, whereas alcohol use contributed to over 56,000 offences. In total, more than 156,760 offences were attributable to alcohol or one of the illicit drug types measured as part of the DUMA program. This is likely an underestimation, given our results are limited to principal offences, adult offenders and certain illicit drug types.

These figures reflect the substantial societal harms that illicit drugs inflict on the Australian community, and the major criminal justice costs that must be expended to investigate and prosecute crimes linked to illicit drug use (National Drug Research Institute 2020). For example, offences attributable to substance use included almost 31,000 acts intended to cause injury, such as assaults, and most of these were attributed to methamphetamine use. This high rate of violent offences reflects the established link between illicit drug use and violence (Duke et al. 2018) and, more specifically, the link between heavier methamphetamine use among dependent individuals in Australia and violent behaviour (McKetin et al. 2014), including domestic violence (Morgan & Gannoni 2020).

Importantly, the vast majority of detainees who attributed their offending to drug use said they did so because the drug influenced their decision-making with regards to their offending. Very few detainees said they attributed their offending to their drug use because they had been arrested for possessing or selling drugs. Most detainees who were surveyed as part of the DUMA program were not charged with drug possession offences, and the majority of principal offences attributed to illicit drug use were not drug selling or possession offences or justice offences. Rather, they were offences against an individual or business, particularly property offences.

Our results therefore demonstrate the importance of reducing alcohol and illicit drug use among individuals who are involved in or at risk of offending behaviour. While substance use is one among many complex and interrelated factors that can contribute to criminal offending, compelling evidence shows that demand reduction programs, including programs targeting people in contact with the criminal justice system, can reduce drug-related crime and the cost to victims (Voce & Sullivan 2022b). These programs need to be delivered alongside targeted supply reduction efforts that are also supported by evidence (Mazerolle, Egginson & Higginson 2020).

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