

UNRAVELLING THE DRUG-CRIME RELATIONSHIP: A STUDY OF SUBSTANCE USE AMONG FEMALE OFFENDERS

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ABSTRACT

The correlation between drug use and criminal behaviour is well-documented but often oversimplified. This study explored the intricate dynamics of this relationship, focusing on female substance users—a demographic historically underrepresented in such research. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 female offenders in South African correctional centres, followed by inductive thematic analysis. The findings challenge the conventional narrative that drug use directly causes violent criminal behaviour among women. Instead, it suggests violent behaviour is not inevitable, rather, women often choose to self-isolate or use substances to regulate their emotions. Highlighting these complexities, the study underscores the need for comprehensive investigations into the drug-crime relationship. Understanding this interplay is crucial for effective interventions and policies, particularly among female populations.

Keywords: criminal behaviour, drug-crime relationship, female offenders, gender differences, substance use

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between drug use, crime, and gender has been a focal point of scholarly inquiry, yet the experiences of females in this discourse have often been marginalised. Historically, women were predominantly confined to domestic roles, limiting their visibility in discussions and research surrounding drug use and criminal behaviour. In contrast, men enjoyed greater autonomy to engage in

various activities beyond the confines of the household, including involvement in substance abuse and criminality (Galvin, 2020). Moreover, societal expectations imposed distinct gender roles and moral standards on women, emphasising decorum and adherence to societal norms that proscribed drug use and criminal behaviour (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). These expectations, coupled with socio-economic constraints, further constrained women's agency and autonomy.

Particularly among black women, historical and contemporary socio-economic disparities have perpetuated systemic inequalities, hindering their access to socio-economic freedoms (Samaradiwakera-Wijesundara, 2022). Despite steps toward gender equality, significant segments of black women, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, continue to deal with social and economic challenges that impede their pursuit of socio-economic autonomy (Esnard, 2022; Mahlatsi, 2020). Consequently, black women, especially those from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds, face heightened vulnerability to drug use and involvement in criminal activities due to the intersecting factors of gender and socio-economic status (Amaro, Sanchez, Bautista & Cox, 2021; Quigley, Logsdon, Turner, Gonzalez, Leonard & Becker, 2021; Schuler, Prince, Breslau & Collins, 2020). The imperative for rigorous research arises from the need to investigate the intersectionality of gender, socio-economic status, and the drug-crime relationship, with a specific focus on elucidating the experiences of female drug users within this complex framework.

Historical perceptions of the drug-crime relationship

Anecdotal reports have frequently associated substance use with violence, drawing from the tripartite conceptual framework proposed by Goldstein (1985) and earlier conceptualisations of the drug-crime relationship. Historical perspectives on this relationship have traditionally emphasised psychopharmacological effects, economic compulsions, and systemic frameworks as explanatory factors for drug-related violence, with a focus on male participants (Boles & Miotto,

2003; Bennett & Holloway, 2009; Weiner, Sussman, Sun & Dent, 2005). However, it is noteworthy that a significant portion of the research supporting the psychopharmacological effects of drugs pertains specifically to alcohol (Boness, Watts, Moeller & Sher, 2021; Fagan, 1993; Parker & Auerhahn, 1998). This emphasis on alcohol in research can be attributed partly to its historical prevalence as a mainstream drug (David, 1989). Conclusively, alcohol intoxication and dependence have been implicated in various violent incidents, including sexual assault, homicide, suicide, intimate partner violence, physical assault, and verbal aggression (Eriksson, Bryant, McPhedran, Mazerolle & Wortley, 2021; Grigorian, Brem, Garner, Florimbio, Wolford-Clevenger & Stuart, 2020; Isaacs, Smith, Sherry, Seno, Moore & Stewart, 2022; Kirk-Provencher, Schick, Spillane & Tobar-Santamaria, 2020). This association between alcohol use and violence is acknowledged by some of the referenced scholars as causal, however, the causal link is still arguably anecdotal. Collaborating researchers (Sontate et al., 2021) in the neuroscience field made the conclusion that alcohol-induced aggression results from a complex interplay of biological and social determinants. These determinants include gender, genetic predispositions, co-occurring psychiatric conditions, blood alcohol concentration, and environmental factors.

Research pertaining to the relationship between alcohol consumption and aggression has historically lacked specificity, often encompassing a broad spectrum of violent behaviours. Furthermore, the demographic composition of research participants has predominantly skewed towards males. Investigations into other drug types, such as cocaine,

have primarily concentrated on instances of violent crime and intimate partner violence, with comparatively less emphasis on minor offenses (Ogden, Dichter & Bazzi, 2022; Stjepanović, Hall & Leung, 2023; Zhong, Yu & Fazel, 2020). Baumer, Lauritsen, Rosenfeld and Wright (1998) conducted a comprehensive study examining the association between cocaine and crack cocaine usage and crime rates across more than 100 cities. The study revealed that cities with elevated crack cocaine use experienced an uptick in robbery rates, while burglary rates either declined or remained stable. In contrast, analysis of homicide trends in relation to cocaine and crack cocaine usage yielded no statistically significant effects. Their findings suggested a discernible pattern in the criminal behaviours of crack cocaine users, predominantly involving shoplifting, robbery, and burglary, while generally abstaining from violent offenses. Nevertheless, these investigations remained predominantly centered on male subjects. Likewise, research on stimulants, depressants, opioids, and hallucinogens has predominantly featured male participants. Thus far, existing literature underscores the male-centric nature of the drug-crime relationship.

The literature unequivocally demonstrates that drug use is intricately linked to criminal behaviour across genders (De Vogel, Stam, Bouman, Ter Horst & Lancel, 2022; Pierce et al., 2017; Piquero, Schubert & Brame, 2014; Turner, Daneback & Skårner, 2020). In endeavors to elucidate the criminal trajectories of both genders, criminologists have historically juxtaposed male and female criminality. This comparison has often underscored traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Female criminality has

been predominantly associated with offenses such as shoplifting, prostitution, and other forms of sexual deviance (Mukhammadiyah, 2023; Schmidt, 2020). Early researchers posited that women's involvement in street deviance was limited, largely due to societal constraints and their primary roles in familial responsibilities (Campbell, 1982; Klein, 1973). In contrast, male criminal behaviour has been depicted as driven by aspirations shaped by cultural norms, peer influence, and a propensity to deviate from societal expectations (Farnworth & Leiber, 1989). However, evolving societal norms and increased gender equality have reshaped these historical trends. Women's expanding access to various spheres of society has diminished traditional barriers, enabling their participation in a wider array of criminal activities.

Certain studies have sought to deepen the understanding of the intricate relationship between crime, drug use, and gender by focusing specifically on women. However, these investigations have only explored women's involvement in drug use within the public health sphere, and their roles within drug distribution networks (De Angelis et al., 2020; Diviák, Coutinho & Stivala, 2020; Fleetwood & Leban, 2023; Selmini, 2020; Tinjacá & Ortega, 2023). While these studies have produced conflicting findings, they have shed light on the evolving nature of women's roles in illicit drug markets. Primarily centered on street-level drug markets, these research endeavors have examined the opportunities available to women within these contexts. Despite street-level drug markets being perceived as well-organised distribution structures, they are predominantly controlled by men (Selmini, 2020), with women typically

occupying subordinate positions within these hierarchies (Haugen, 2023). Much of the research in this domain has adopted qualitative methodologies, focusing on Western urban contexts. This study addresses the gap by exploring the drug-crime relationship among female offenders in South Africa, offering insights from a non-Western perspective using a qualitative approach.

METHOD

To investigate the lived experiences of female substance users in relation to their criminality and the criminal justice system (CJS), this study employed a qualitative approach. This methodological choice is in line with an inductive research approach, allowing for themes to emerge organically from the data itself (Bazen, Barg & Takeshita, 2021). Qualitative research provides valuable avenues for a thorough exploration that captures the richness of human experience and provides context to social phenomena (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Therefore, it is well-suited for exploring relationships between various entities, such as substance use, crime, and the CJS. Moreover, a phenomenological research design was adopted to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants' experiences with this phenomenon. This design was deemed optimal for capturing the subjective meanings and lived realities associated with the drug-crime relationship among female substance users (Van Manen, 2023).

Participants

This study recruited incarcerated female offenders in South Africa with a

history of substance use prior to incarceration. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and older, the age of a recognised adult in South Africa. Adulthood ensures the ability to provide relevant data aligned with the research objectives because of self-awareness (Carden, Jones & Passmore, 2022). Given the challenges of accessing this specific population, a non-probability sampling technique, specifically snowball sampling, was employed (Raifman, DeVost, Digitale, Chen & Morris, 2022). Since the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) does not categorise inmates based on past or present drug use, snowball sampling proved necessary. Existing participants were asked to identify and potentially recruit other incarcerated women who met the study criteria.

Materials

To gain deeper insight into the relationship between female substance use and criminal behaviour, semi-structured interviews were conducted with incarcerated women from two correctional centres in South Africa. The interview guide inquired into participants' family history, criminal history, and substance use experiences, supplemented by the collection of demographic information. All participants provided consent for audio recording of the interviews, while the interviewer/researcher meticulously recorded field notes to capture non-verbal cues. Following each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, following Thompson's (2022) guidelines, was employed to analyse the transcribed interviews. A qualitative data analysis software, facilitated the coding process by enabling the researcher to highlight and code text segments into designated

categories with labels such as substance use, type of crime, experienced trauma, and upbringing. These coded segments were then synthesised into themes that informed the study's results.

Procedures

The study recruited a total of 29 incarcerated female offenders from two correctional centres in Gauteng, South Africa: Johannesburg Correctional Centre (JCC) and Kgoši Mampuru II Correctional Centre (KMMII). Data collection commenced at JCC, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants. The determination of this number was guided by the snowball sampling method, as no further willing participants could be recruited. Subsequently, interviews were conducted at KMMII, resulting in the recruitment of an additional eight participants. The overall sample size was determined by saturation, a point at which no new insights emerged from the interviews (Sukmawati, 2023). Throughout the data collection process, the interview guide was adapted to facilitate follow-up questions, clarifications, and deeper exploration of participants' experiences. This adaptive approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. Each interview typically lasted for at least one hour.

Measures

This research prioritised ensuring the trustworthiness of its findings through four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by the seminal work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility, essentially, refers to the alignment between participants' perspectives and how the researcher represents them in the study

(Ahmed, 2024). To establish credibility, this study adhered to well-defined procedures for conducting qualitative research (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). Transferability in qualitative research entails the potential applicability of findings to other settings, allowing for a degree of replicability (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). In this study, transferability was achieved by providing rich descriptions of the participants, interview locations, and the broader contextual framework of the research.

The third criterion, dependability, pertains to the consistency of data over time and across different conditions. In qualitative research, dependability is associated with maintaining research focus throughout the study (Ahmed, 2024). To ensure dependability, the researcher meticulously maintained a process log documenting decisions made and the rationale behind methodological and theoretical choices as the study progressed. The final criterion, confirmability, addresses the researcher's capacity to minimise personal biases in data analysis and ultimately present objective findings (Ritter, Koralesky, Saraceni, Roche, Vaarst & Kelton, 2023). Confirmability is inherently linked to the other three trustworthiness criteria. Therefore, throughout the research process, this study explicitly justified the theoretical framework, methodological approach, and data analysis techniques employed.

Data analysis

This study employed inductive thematic analysis, a method that allows themes to emerge from the interview data itself, rather than being predetermined by existing theories (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell & Ranfagni, 2023). While ideally, themes

would not be influenced by the interview questions, the researcher acknowledges that their background and experiences can play a role. To mitigate this bias, the analysis prioritised staying true to the participants' experiences as reflected in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Ethical considerations

Prior to commencing the research, ethical approval was obtained from both the University of South Africa's College of Law (UNISA's CLAW) Research Ethics Committee and the DCS research committee. Informed consent was a pivotal aspect of the semi-structured interviews process (Fons-Martinez, Murciano-Gamborino & Diez-Domingo, 2024). Participants received a comprehensive informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, data collection process, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any point. Considering the participants' vulnerability as incarcerated individuals and drug use, the researcher ensured transparency throughout the process. This entailed providing a clear overview of the research, potential discomforts, and the absence of direct benefits for participation. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withhold information and discontinue the interview at any time.

The researcher actively monitored participants' comfort levels, pausing interviews to check in and offering referrals to social workers within the correctional centres for debriefing if needed. Furthermore, social and cultural sensitivity towards participants' age, gender, and background was emphasised throughout the interviews. To ensure safety for both the researcher and participants, a DCS official (guard) remained stationed outside

the interview room with the door open. While acknowledging that this protocol could potentially impact data quality and anonymity, most participants confirmed feeling comfortable continuing the interviews.

RESULTS

Demographics

The youngest participant was 21 years old and the oldest was 52, resulting in a mean age of 36.5. In terms of race, there were 15 black participants, four white participants, nine coloured participants, and one participant of Asian descent. The introduction to this article has suggested that black women are at higher risk of drug abuse or involvement in criminal activities. A total of 18 participants were unemployed before incarceration; among those who were employed, most had informal jobs paying below a living wage. Only six offender participants held formal employment in various business industries while informally employed individuals relied on temporary odd jobs without a stable income.

Regarding education levels, 21 offenders did not complete high school with eight dropping out during primary school, five completing matriculation and three pursuing higher/tertiary education after matriculating. The goals for higher education were however not achieved. These findings once again confirm that women facing socio-economic challenges are more likely to engage in criminal activities or substance abuse due to lack of resources for upward mobility towards economic and social freedom. This is evident from the average age for initial substance use being reported as 17.7 years old.

Drug Use Patterns Among Offenders

The prevalence of a drug was determined by its accessibility and affordability. In this study, the most commonly used drug category among offenders was depressants, which were easily accessible in their environments. All but one of the offenders had used depressants at some point in their lives. They either started with depressant drugs or transitioned into using them. Some combined depressant drugs with other affordable drugs from different categories. The only less accessible and affordable depressant drug was gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB). The participant who used GHB was relatively wealthy and had connections to easy access of the substance. Hallucinogens were the least used due to their high cost, with ecstasy being the most expensive. The most prevalent substances used were crystal methamphetamine and cannabis. Prescription drugs were only used by one offender participant; psychiatric drugs were reported to not be preferred as they are neither easily accessible nor affordable.

Less than half of the participants reported that they used alcohol, contrastingly, most women reported that they do not like alcohol. Although alcohol has temporary stimulant effects on behaviour, it is classified as a depressant (Gopakumar, Shine & Anjali, 2023). Alcohol also goes by specific references such as wine, beer, cider etc. based on type. Cocaine occurs in two forms—powder and crack cocaine—with no pharmacological difference between them except for appearance (Donald, Patel, Smith, Clayton & Potru, 2023). Crack appears as rock crystals while the powder form appears powdery; therefore, consumption methods differ accordingly (John, Dos Santos Souza & Ferrão, 2023).

Transition to other substances and polysubstance use

Almost all of the female offender participants had no choice as to the substance to use at the onset, as they used whatever was introduced to them. Later some transitioned into the use of other substances that they preferred over the onset substance. Reasons for these transitions included the need for bigger and better high; the cost of the substance by moving to a cheaper substance; and the availability of a substance based on location:

Participant 04: The thing with ecstasy is that you can't take one pill after the other; it's not possible. You take your pill, you have your high and, when you come down, you can't take another one to get back up there again. Kat kept its high longer, and you can maintain it in the beginning. Ecstasy started fading away and you couldn't get nice ecstasy anymore.

With kat¹ you spend hours constantly chasing the initial high. The more I used it, the worse tasting it became. I just couldn't leave it and that's the reason why I went to look for something stronger, the GHB (liquid ecstasy) and crystal meth. I wanted something stronger. I think my life was also in shambles, I just didn't want to face reality.

Participant 13: Rock² is an expensive drug, so I decided to quit it and started crystal meth. I felt better with every smoke. I never smoked it for long. I

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- 1 An amphetamine and has similar effects to cocaine
 - 2 Crack cocaine

then went into nyaope³ because it was cheap. It was R25.

Participant 02: I moved to Joburg at the age of 19, and I got my first child at the age of 20. That's the time when I transitioned from the mandrax to the rocks. I got introduced to rocks here in Joburg. The popular drug in Cape Town was mandrax and here in Joburg it was rocks. Rocks makes you hyperactive and you want to go out, you just want to enjoy life. The tik⁴ only came now, I went on trips to Cape Town and that's how I got introduced to the tik.

Criminality and drug use

Almost all of the female offender participants learned their criminal behaviour from peers or intimate partners who also introduced them to substance use as they explained:

Participant 01: I remember I started hanging out with a group of people from Soweto and I started stealing cars, this is how deep I fell in.

Participant 08: When I got married to this drug lord husband of mine, he introduced me to cars. One day, he gave me a BMW, brand new for my birthday. I got into an accident one day where somebody hit my ass [rear bumper] and I hit the person in front of me. The car was almost a write off. I went for two weeks without a car; I had to drive his; I do not like driving his because I know

my car. He then said to me: 'In this family, you must earn. I think I must show you how to earn a car'. He showed me how to earn by stealing cars. To get my car, I had to steal about three cars, then I had to go out and steal my own car.

Participant 16: He (boyfriend) introduced me to stealing. I just saw him stealing at home, and then I also started stealing at home.

Participant 03: I would steal people's money to buy drugs. I was stealing from the people there in town who were going to do shopping. I was pickpocketing.

When the above participant was asked who taught her to pickpocket, she responded by saying it was her ex-boyfriend.

How substance use habit was supported

Two participants, Participant 14 and Participant 02 were the only participants who committed crimes to support their substance use habit and also to survive. Participant 14 described her substance use as something that was counterproductive to her criminal endeavours. When asked if she used her prescription medication to be able to commit a crime, she stated: *"No, that would be counterproductive. I'm very unproductive under the influence, with everything."*

Participant 14 continued: Then the second time it was a way of living. I grew up very wealthy, but when I had a choice of husband that I took, my father cut me off completely. We were not surviving, and I had my first child. So how that started again was that I sold my wedding ring which was from my grandmother. We met this Nigerian syndicate

3 A common street drug found in South Africa comprised of substandard heroin, cannabis derivatives, antiretroviral medications, and additional substances utilised as diluents.

4 Crystal Methamphetamine

where this guy asked me if I'm interested, and I thought he was approaching me for some human trafficking thing, but it turned out it wasn't. It was just to play the middleman with the diamond smuggling that they had. I would just phone the different diamond corporations like xxx, order things then say that they were robbed and insurance would pay out. Essentially, it was just my voice. Then they would send out an Uber driver to go fetch the diamonds, then I would make those scheduled payments like I used to do, and they would sell the diamonds overseas and I would get my cut.

Participant 02: I would go to spin⁵ (stealing, then selling the stolen goods for quick cash), come back and then relax. When I relax I don't want anyone around me I just want my drugs. No children around me or whatever.

The other female offender participants who engaged in criminal activity, did so for the express purpose of supporting their substance use habit. This included stealing from home, other thefts, depending on their partners for money, using money/allowances received from parents or guardians, hustling, salary from formal employment or odd jobs and sharing substances with friends. They did not practice one form of crime but started with one then moved to another as they progressed in their criminal careers. In some cases, multiple means were used at the same time. Only four of the female offender participants started by stealing from home, then later escalated to theft

from shops or robbery. Prostitution was only resorted to by two of the female offender participants for the purpose of attaining money.

Participant 01: In these six months it was rocks then I escalated to crystal meth. We were doing small thefts; my friend would go to her mother's [place] and steal small things.

Since this participant's friend was stealing from home and sharing with her friends, Participant 01 will be categorised as "sharing with friends". This participant employed two means of supporting her substance use habit.

Participant 05: I got money from my grandmother. I think she just gave it to me because she probably felt guilty about not believing me. She felt like she owed me, so when I ask for money, she will just give it to me because she didn't want to hurt me. She just wanted to see me happy.

Participant 07: I was working, and my parents would also give me money sometimes when I ask. My sister would be the one that always gives me money when I ask.

Violence resultant from drugs

Most of the female offender participants did not display any violence while intoxicated. When asked if they ever became violent after consuming substances, especially stimulants, the majority responded with a "No!" Of the five that responded with a "yes" had underlying anger issues. When questioned about their anger issues, the response was typically:

5 Stealing, then selling the stolen goods for quick cash.

Participant 14: Yes, I do, but internally I perceive myself as being calm. But, ever since being in here, I react to situations differently. I'm a lot more calmer. But the moment I am on my pills, I do not even have time to reason out with you, I become aggressive.

One participant pointed out that substances simply show more of your personality when intoxicated:

Participant 15: If you're a violent person then you become more violent; if you are quiet, then you will be more quiet. A lot of people that I actually knew that were on heroin were able to rob people at gunpoint because they were naturally of a violent nature. With me, I've never been a violent person. It would just make me more friendly and more giving. I could give away everything when I'm high.

Alcohol often appeared in incidents where violence was displayed. Where participants only used alcohol and no other substances, they often committed murders. This was the case for five (5) of the participants (Participant 06, Participant 09, Participant 10, Participant 11 and Participant 12). However, these participants asserted that the murders they committed were not premeditated and they were unfortunate mistakes.

Participant 06: We had a party just chilling outside with my friends and drinking wine. Suddenly my mother came and sat with us. After that, she took a glass of wine. After she had a second glass, she said she was fine, and she went home and said she will call me. I was 18 at the time.

When she called me I ran home, as I entered the house my mother was angry at me, and I didn't know why. When I asked her she said it's already late, it's around 4:00 AM. My father was sleeping at the time. But my mother suddenly raised her voice and started getting physical with me. I didn't even react. Suddenly there appeared a black pitch on me. When it lighted up again, I saw my mother lying down and me holding a knife. I stabbed her in the left arm. It went through her veins, and she lost a lot of blood.

When I went out to look for help, I did not get it and the ambulance took long to come. When it came, she was already dead.

The common theme in these incidents is that the murders were reactionary, not planned. These participants showed regret for their actions during the interview process.

DISCUSSION

Relation between drug type and offence

Existing literature has indicated that individuals with substance use disorders often engage in money-generating crimes to sustain their substance use habits (Miller, 2021; Rutter & Barr, 2021). Consistent with these findings, this study observed similar patterns among female offender participants from the two correctional centres. Additionally, research has underscored that the proportionality of substance dependence correlates with the extent of criminal involvement (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2021). In this study, the majority of female offenders

exhibited dependency on their respective substances, excluding alcohol, leading to frequent engagement in criminal activities. This finding aligns with broader research suggesting that women are disproportionately affected by substance abuse (Weiss et al., 2022). Notably, this study revealed that while female participants were less prone to violent offenses overall, alcohol-related violence remained prevalent. Moreover, existing literature suggests that the influence of alcohol on violence is largely mediated by environmental factors rather than intoxication itself (Sontate et al., 2021).

Despite one participant reporting an incident of a violent crime (armed robbery), excluding murder, it was primarily a consequence of contextual factors, notably the social environment where the female victim was walking alone at night. The victim's resistance to the theft of her belongings precipitated the violence. Moreover, the female offender involved in the incident served merely as a bystander accomplice, while her male counterparts directly perpetrated the crime. This observation further supports the argument that females exhibit a preference for non-violent offenses (Nemavhola, Melapi, Hoffman & Gerber-Schutte, 2024:6). This assertion finds additional support in Liu, Sun, and Lin's (2020) exploration of conditioning factors influencing the strain-crime association, wherein the authors conclude that women typically assume a more passive role in crime commission (Liu et al., 2020). Specifically, females often act as lures to entrap victims, with males executing the violent acts. Notably, the offender involved in the aforementioned incident expressed a preference for non-involvement in the crime.

The literature identifies a range of offenses commonly committed by individuals with substance use disorders, including prostitution, property theft, burglary, fraud, drug trafficking, and breaking and entering (Gavrilova, 2022; Nemavhola et al., 2024; Young et al., 2021). Evident in this study, was that the predominant offenses among individual female substance users were contact crimes and other serious categories, specifically theft, housebreaking, and shoplifting. Contact crimes observed, primarily comprised aggravated robbery and murder, although the murders were reported to be unintentional by the offender participants, often occurring in states of alcohol intoxication. For aggravated robbery, participants predominantly served as accomplices, resulting in guilt by association. It is worth noting that these offenses represent only a portion of those reported in the literature. While drug trafficking, breaking and entering, prostitution, and fraud were each reported by one offender participant, existing literature suggests that higher positions within the drug trafficking hierarchy are typically inaccessible to females. Women usually occupy roles of drug mules (Klein, 2020; Sumter, Wood & Whitaker, 2024). Notably, the single incident of fraud in our study aligns with this pattern, as the participant was apprehended for involvement as a drug mule. These crimes are evidently driven by the financial and social constraints experienced by female substance users in supporting their drug habits.

The types of crimes perpetrated by the female offender participants in this investigation typically do not necessitate high levels of expertise or access to additional resources required for more intricate criminal activities. This observation aligns

with the assertions of Schäfer (2022), who argue that expertise in any behaviour, including criminal, are acquired through the repetition of the same actions. Moreover, Goulette (2020) and Hachtel, Nixon, Bennett, Mullen and Ogloff (2021) note that women are more likely to be apprehended when engaging in crimes traditionally associated with male offenders. Additionally, these types of offenses often entail minimal risk of prosecution, leading to a pattern of repeat offending among female participants. Upon initial apprehensions for these money-generating crimes, participants were often detained for short periods without formal trial proceedings, resulting in minimal legal repercussions. This leniency in punishment may contribute to the preference for such crimes among female offenders in this investigation.

Kerr, Small, Johnston, Li, Montaner and Wood (2008) assert that individuals enter the drug market, such as drug dealing, to sustain their substance use habits or exchange their services for substances. However, this study did not uncover any evidence of such instances among the female participants. These women lacked direct access to drug markets unless facilitated by a male companion. This finding aligns with literature indicating that females typically encounter barriers to accessing drug markets and often require association with a male counterpart who possesses such access (Sumter et al., 2024). Moreover, women in South Africa predominantly remain economically dependent on men, as highlighted in the introduction. Contrary to these prevailing trends, female offender participants engaged in criminal activities independently in this study, with minimal assistance from male counterparts, except for one Caucasian participant.

Drug use for coping

This study revealed that female substance users often had motivations beyond the mere intention of committing crimes, with the primary reason being to cope with their traumatic experiences. Consequently, the type of drug consumed may not significantly influence the type of crime committed. Instead, female offenders participating in this study predominantly engaged in non-violent crimes to procure funds to support their substance use. This suggests that the relationship between drug use and crime, when considering gender as a variable, exhibits a weaker causal link from a psychopharmacological perspective. Female participants indicated that engaging in criminal activities was not their first choice, and they would prefer lawful means to support their substance use habits if available. This underscores the prioritisation of substance use over criminal behaviour among the female offenders. Zhong et al. (2020) posits that high addiction levels are associated with increased violent crimes, while low dependence on a substance corresponds to lower levels of criminal involvement. The female offender participants in this study exhibited a pattern of escalating substance use leading up to their apprehension. They reported a progressive increase in substance use frequency, often transitioning to more potent substances over time. This escalation may be attributed to their unresolved traumas and past victimisations, leading them to rely on substances as a coping mechanism. Consequently, as their substance use intensified, the need to engage in money-generating crimes became more pressing. Violent offenses were still however avoided.

Withdrawal symptoms and violence

Apart from alcohol consumption, withdrawal symptoms from other drugs led to tendencies towards violence among female offender participants. They described feeling irritable and aggressive when experiencing withdrawals. This finding is supported by the literature, which suggests that long-term use of certain substances could lead to violent behaviour during withdrawal (Radcliffe et al., 2019, Schifano et al., 2020). However, participants in this research chose to remove themselves from the environment when experiencing withdrawal symptoms. They either isolated themselves or used substances to alleviate the symptoms, avoiding displays of violence whenever possible. If they did not have drugs to relieve the withdrawal symptoms, they felt compelled to commit money-generating crimes out of desperation. Contrary to this study's findings, existing literature suggests that violence is inevitable during withdrawal symptoms.

Polysubstance use and criminality

Ten female offender participants reported engaging in polysubstance use, meaning they used more than one substance simultaneously. Existing literature suggests that individuals who engage in polysubstance use are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Cumming, Kinner, McKetin, Li & Preen, 2020; Winkelman, Chang & Binswanger, 2018). Polysubstance users are also more inclined to engage in money-generating crimes than those who use only one type of drug (Vergunst et al., 2022). However, these reports from the literature are not supported by this present study, as there was no noticeable difference between polysubstance users and those who used

only one type of drug. However, the small sample of this study is not enough to draw comparisons with the literature from the quantitative studies. The primary reason polysubstance users reported using multiple substances simultaneously was to self-regulate between being high and experiencing the comedown from that high. For instance, they would use a stimulant drug to achieve a high, followed by a depressant drug to ease the comedown, aiming to restore their appetite for food or sleep. This suggests that female polysubstance use may be driven by the desire to stabilise and control their social behaviour. Nevertheless, research on polysubstance use among females remains limited, and a more comprehensive understanding requires further exploration of all the interplaying facets in the drug-crime relationship.

Limitations

The study's reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias and inaccuracies. Participants may have underreported or overreported their substance use and criminal behaviours due to social desirability bias or memory limitations. This reliance on self-reported data raises concerns about the validity and reliability of the findings, especially when drawing direct associations between substance use and criminal behaviour. Furthermore, the study design may have restricted the depth of understanding of certain variables. For example, the examination of withdrawal symptoms and their association with violent behaviour was based on self-reported experiences, which may not capture the full spectrum of responses to withdrawal across different individuals. This limitation hinders a comprehensive

understanding of the potential links between substance withdrawal and violent behaviour among female offenders.

Additionally, it is important to note that a DCS official was always stationed just outside the room where the interviews were conducted, with the door remaining open for security reasons. This presence may have influenced the responses of the participants. Lastly, the study may have been limited in its ability to capture the complexities of polysubstance use among female offenders. Given the limited understanding of polysubstance use in the context of female criminal behaviour, the study's findings may not fully capture the nuances of this behaviour. The multifaceted nature of polysubstance use and its implications for criminal behaviour among female offenders may require more comprehensive research to provide a thorough understanding.

Recommendations

Policymakers should advocate for and allocate resources towards the development of diverse support and intervention programs tailored specifically for female substance users involved in criminal activities. These programs should address the complex needs of this demographic, including but not limited to substance abuse treatment, mental health support, vocational training, and reintegration assistance. By recognising the unique challenges faced by female offenders with substance use disorders, policymakers can effectively enhance the efficacy of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Additionally, early identification of substance use disorders can facilitate timely intervention and treatment, ultimately reducing the likelihood of involvement in criminal activities among women.

CONCLUSION

The literature on male drug use revealed correlations between certain substances and specific types of crimes. In contrast, this study focusing on females found no distinct correlation between the type of crime and the specific drug used. Female participants in this study tended to avoid violent offences and instead engaged in property theft crimes to fund their drug use habits. The findings highlighted a co-existence of drug use and offending behaviour within the same social sphere for female offenders, with alcohol often leading to an increased likelihood of violent acts. Of note, this research indicated that criminality could result from substance use rather than preceding it as commonly observed among female substance users; contrary to male counterparts where criminal behaviours typically precede substance use. These finding challenges widely held beliefs by the general public and policymakers alike regarding the causality between drug use and criminal behaviour. This suggests that perceptions around how drugs cause or lead to criminality should not be considered an absolute truth but rather should undergo a thorough examination before influencing policies related to drug misuse.

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