Illicit heroin use and post-war crime trends in England and Wales

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Acquisitive crime to fund illicit drug use

- **Question:**
  - To what extent did it cause the crime increase of 1980s and crime drop of 1990s-2000s?

- **Context:**
  - Morgan (2014) estimated it accounts for up to half of 1980s increase and a third of crime decrease

- Household crime
- Personal crime

Year: 1993, 1995

Rate per 1000 households or persons
Police recorded crime rate 1950-1998
Crime increase from 1950 with increased crime opportunities

Theft & handling

Burglary

\[ R^2 = 0.9735 \]

\[ R^2 = 0.9642 \]
Percent using heroin or crack in year 1991-2013 (BCS/CSEW)
Percent using cocaine in year 1991-2013 (BCS/CSEW)

- Powder cocaine
- Crack cocaine
- Heroin
“The UK enters the new millennium with a complex and serious drugs problem – the re-emergence of heroin in sections of its youth population.”

(Parker, 2004; 78)
In work for UK Drug Policy Commission:

“...the growing number of new heroin users each year over almost the entire period 1975–2000, on top of which was layered, starting in the late 1990s, the first major outbreak of chronic cocaine use.”

(emphasis added)
Persons found guilty, cautioned or dealt with 1994-2004 (source: HOSBs)
Recent Home Office study

- Claims acquisitive crime to fund illicit heroin and crack use
  - half crime increase of 1980s/90s
  - a third of crime decrease
- Based on indirect estimates of extent of use
Morgan 2014:

Figure 64: Available Indicators Showing the Magnitude of the Heroin Epidemic

- Opiate Overdose Deaths - left axis
- New Heroin Users - right axis
- Number of Heroin Seizures - right axis

Fig 64, p127 of Technical Report (also Fig 10, p. 25 of Research Report 79)
“In the late 1980s and early 1990s, annual increases in the number of registered addicts were consistently of the order of 20 per cent to 30 percent or even higher still. This impression of rapidly escalating drug misuse is however potentially misleading. Arguably the increase reflects the expansion of treatment services – especially for those dependent on heroin

... Certainly the BCS tells a different story.” (p.49)
Number of seizures 1998-2012
(source: HOSB)

- Cocaine
- Crack
- Heroin
Quantity seized 1998-2012

(source: HOSB)
“Drug seizure statistics are helpful ... they can, with care, indicate longer-term trends in drugs most commonly being imported and distributed in (to) the country. But they are not reliable on their own. A more reliable source of drug use levels is the Crime Survey for England and Wales.”
Morgan (2014) estimates

- Use limited indicators

- Look to conflict with
  - BCS drug misuse measures
  - HO Persons found guilty, cautioned or dealt with
  - Global opiate trade
  - Seizure trends post-2000
  - Interpretation by key commentators
    - Parker, Reuter, Home Office (Ramsay); Bennett
So what?

- Lack of quantifiable evidence of decline in illicit heroin or crack use to cause crime drop
- Illicit heroin, crack and cocaine use continue to increase after crime declined
Acquisitive crime has fallen dramatically but ".. it is a leap of faith to assume that this means that drug-related crime has also reduced over this period.

It is possible that it has reduced in line with all acquisitive crime or even by a greater amount. But it is also possible that it has not. Until a better measure is used, it is not possible to determine trends in all drug-related crime."
Conclusions

Since 1950s, rapid crime increase due to new crime opportunities (RAT) – not illicit drug use

Increased illicit heroin and crack use to at least 2000s does not seem to coincide with crime drop
Thank you