

DRUGS, ALCOHOL, GANGS AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR: A REVIEW OF AWKA METROPOLITAN AREA, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

Drug and alcohol abuse, gang membership and involvement in criminal behavior in urban areas have continued to generate heated discussions among experts, practitioners, and the general public; when a person who both abuses drug and alcohol is also a member of a local gang, then the chances of involvement in criminal behavior is increased. Generally, criminality in human beings is attributed to either personal mental depravity or weakness of character. However, persons with balanced emotional and physical health normally do not indulge in criminality or some form of aggressive behavior. Mostly young people who both abuse drug and alcohol and belong to gangs are associated with most violence in society. Violent conducts tend to occur mostly in urban cities such as Awka Metropolitan Area in Anambra State. Questions have been raised as to the reasons violence appear to persist in most urban areas, as well to the connection between illegal drug use, gang membership and involvement in criminal behavior. Social process theories suggest that this type of behavior can be explained from the process of interaction between individuals and society. Theories here assume that everybody has the potential to violate the law and that criminality is not innate human characteristics, rather criminal behavior is learned in interaction with others, and the socialization process occurring because of group membership is seen as the primary route through which learning takes place. Both drug and alcohol abuse and gang membership are the result of individual choice and learned behavior. The Government, the family and other social groups have failed in their duties to individuals and society; hence escalation of involvement in criminal behavior. Though there appears to be a strong link between drug abuse, gang membership and crime, such that these directly lead to criminal activity; or that those who use illegal drugs generally commit more crime than those who do not, the link is complex. Other factors in the individual and environment must also be considered in seeking explanation. There will be need for cooperative and collaborative action where stake holders are involved in rescuing young people from engaging in anti-social behavior through targeted interventions for a better, peaceful, prosperous, and safe urban cities.

Keywords: Illegal drug; criminogenic; delinquent behavior; gangs; dysfunctional family

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to explore and understand the connection or relation between drug and alcohol abuse, gang membership and involvement in criminal behavior in general, but in Awka Metropolitan Area of Anambra State, Nigeria in particular. While alcohol and drug abuse may be thought of as a crime without victim, this habit obviously erodes the roots of social, economic, and cultural fiber of many societies (Paranjape, 2017). When a person who both abuses drug and alcohol is also a member of a local gang, then the chances of involvement in criminal behavior is exacerbated (Apeh & Abubakar, nd; Usman & Magaji, 2014; Howell & Decker, 1999). Although drug and alcohol abuse are seen as victimless crimes, they nonetheless fall within the category of public order crimes because the activities of those involved in this habit do interfere with the operations of society as well as the ability of the people involved to function effectively; and within short period of time produce secondary victims from family, dependents, friends, and associates. Moreover, drug and alcohol abuse are indicative of the irresponsibility and weakness of character of those involved in the habit. From this perspective a close look at police records or those incarcerated shows some relation between drug/alcohol abuse and aggressive criminal acts especially among younger people (Paranjape, 2017). The most visible form of violence in society is seen and thought to be caused mostly by young people, such that criminal activities are mostly associated with them because of both drug and alcohol abuse as well as gang membership (Apeh & Abubakar, nd; Sullivan & Bunker, 2002).

Extant studies insist that highly organized drug gangs have over many years dominated social and political life in many urban areas of the world starting from the 1980s (Wolff, 2015; Sullivan & Bunker, 2002; Ashton & Bussu, 2020); such that drug/alcohol abuse, and gang membership have been traditionally linked to those irregular behaviors that are not in consonant with accepted norms or consensus way of behavior in society (Apeh & Abubakar, nd; Emenike et al., 2023). Of recent, a lot of interest has been generated in gangs and gang related crimes. Hence scholars have abundant evidence that gang members are associated with delinquent behavior, violent crime, and drug abuse though the causal mechanisms linking gang membership, drug and alcohol abuse are still a subject of debate (Zhang et al. 1999; Boles & Miotto, 2003). According to Howell and Decker (1999, p.2), “the popular image of the youth gangs ties them to drugs and violent crime”. From this point of view, since gang is a criminogenic peer group that usually provides group pressure and consequently drives youths to delinquent behavior, it follows that gang affiliation according to Zhang and his colleagues (1999), is a major cause of delinquency. A number of reasons or risk factors have been advanced for involvement in illicit behavior ranging from poverty and bad social condition (Usman & Magaji, 2014;),

dysfunctional family, school, peer pressure as well as lack of equal and legitimate economic opportunity (Ashton & Bussu, 2020). Not left out here is what Wolff (2015), called lack of regular and effective state presence and supervision of the urban areas and other at-risk communities. This situation gives non state actors and criminal groups the opportunity to thrive and unleash their deadly intents on an otherwise a peaceful community thus making members of the community often afraid and insecure (Emenike et al., 2023).

Theoretical Perspective

To clearly understand the trajectory of this paper, it is based on basic tenets of social process school of thought. Proponents of this school of thought argue that criminal behavior is learned in interaction with others, and that the socialization processes that take place as the result of group membership are the primary routes through which learning occurs. This school of thought has a number of theories arising from it that it is also called interactionist theories. Effectively, social process theories draw their explanatory power from the process of interaction between individuals and society (Schmallegger, 2012). Theories here assume that everybody has the potential to violate the law and that criminality is not innate human characteristics, rather criminal behavior is learned in interaction with others, and the socialization process occurring as a result of group membership is seen as the primary route through which learning takes place. Peer group, family, associates in work the place etc., play important roles in the process of socialization because they instill norms in members, and also communicate their acceptable worldviews and patterns of behavior to members. Social process theories hold that the process through which criminality is acquired, deviant self-concepts are established, and criminal behavior results is active, open-ended and ongoing throughout a person's life (Lanier & Henry, 2004; Cullen & Agnew, 2006; Cullen et al., 2006; Schmallegger, 2012).

Among the several theories proposed by the social process school, social learning and social control theories further explain why individuals who are drug and alcohol abusers, belong to a gang group are more likely to be involved in criminal behavior. According to social learning theory, all behavior is learned in much the same way and that crime is also learned. Communication and socialization play important roles in the acquisition of learned patterns of life and of criminal behavior and values that support the behavior (Lanier & Henry, 2004; Schmallegger, 2012). On the other hand, social control theory focuses on the strength of the bond people share with the individuals and institutions around them, especially as those relationships shape their behavior over time. This theory also seeks to identify those features of the personality and of the environment that keep

people from committing crimes (Cullen et al., 2006; Cullen & Agnew, 2006; Schmallegger, 2012).

Illicit Drugs

The history of drug use has been traced back to over 10,000 years, when earlier cultures learned through trial and error that chewing, sucking, or inhaling the leaves, fruits, or roots of some types of plants might induce physical and psychological changes in the user (Schiram & Tibbetts, 2013). Feeman (1988), as cited by Schiram and Tibbetts, further suggests that drug use is indeed woven into the history of civilization. Hence drugs have been used for different purposes including pleasure, social interaction, medicine, rebellion, self-exploration, creativity, religious ceremonies and as commodities in economic trade. It is only over time that drugs were divided into legal and illegal ones. Is it likely that 'legal' drugs may in some ways be more dangerous than illegal ones? The answer to this question depends on who you ask, but experience shows that legal drugs such as alcoholic beverages and tobacco are used by many people and even cause more problems than marijuana, heroin, and cocaine (Thio, 2006). Thio, further explains that other legal drugs such as sedatives, tranquilizers, and stimulants while less popular than alcohol and tobacco are still more widely used than many illegal drugs. The result of this is that use of some legal drugs especially alcohol and tobacco are known to cause more death, sickness, economic loss, and other social problems compared to illegal drug use (Pontell, 2005; Thio, 2006; Apeh & Sadiq, nd). The conclusion that can be drawn here is that legal prohibition or societal disapproval of a drug may not completely indicate how dangerous it is. The disapproval of the use of one drug over another rather indicates more the tempers of time and place. This is in the sense that while opium for instance, is widely condemned today as a cause of all ills in society, there was a time in history it was praised as a panacea that cured all ills.

For our purposes here, one assumes that illegal drugs are more dangerous than legal ones primarily because of the general belief that illegal drugs are addictive, and users do so sometimes compulsively, and thus more disposed to deviant behavior when compared to non-users or occasional users (Thio, 2006; Sullivan & Bunker, 2002; Pontell, 2005). According to Apeh and Sadiq (nd), the use of psychoactive substances most of which are illicit drugs is known to cost the user and the society a lot in health, economic and other social implications. Furthermore, drug abuse and sale not only serves as source of revenue for organized crime groups many of whom are involved in some other criminal ventures such as trafficking in arms, armed robbery, kidnaping etc., but also, and most importantly enhances the destabilization of peace and harmony of the community (Emenike et al., 2023).

Effects of Illicit Drugs on Users

In order to understand the relation between illegal drug use and involvement in deviant behavior, there is need to assess the effects of drug abuse on the user. According Thio (2006), drugs are generally classified into two main categories of stimulants and depressants with some adding hallucinogens as the third category. Most drugs are differentiated by their effects on the user's central nervous system-brain and the spinal cord. Examples of stimulants include ("uppers") such as cocaine, crack, caffeine, and nicotine etc. These drugs have the ability to stimulate the central nervous system, temporarily producing alertness and excitement, and suppress fatigue and sluggishness. In effect drugs in this category create a sense of energy, talkativeness, and well-being considered pleasurable to the user. Their physiological effects include increased heart rate, blood pressure, and the dilation of the bronchioles (breathing tubes) in the lungs.

On the other hand, depressants also known as ("downers") are: alcohol, heroin, phencyclidine, morphine, and aspirin etc. Unlike stimulants, depressants reduce the activity of the central nervous system so they can relax muscles, relieve anxiety, alleviate pain, create euphoria, or induce sleep. The third category of drugs is hallucinogens or (psychedelics): lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), methylene-dioxymethamphetamine MDMA (Ecstasy). These drugs not only disturb the central nervous system, but also alter the user's perception of reality, thought process, and mood. Of most illicit drugs, marijuana is in a class by itself because it can affect the user in same way as each of the drugs in the groups, while the other drugs belong just to one category (Vega & Gil, 1998; Thio, 2006). These drugs can also react differently in individual users other than in the ways described here. This on its part depends on a number of other factors that include: gender, age, body composition, length of use, potency of drug, manner of administration, and dosage among other factors.

Alcohol

While alcohol is classified by experts as a psychoactive drug, it is seen by the public differently because of its different uses in many cultures over the centuries. On account of its role in deviant behavior albeit some other good uses, there is need some clarifications here. Alcohol is a drug of choice because it is used to celebrate successes, mourn failures/losses, to celebrate holidays, and cultural/religious festivals. While it is used to celebrate good times and reduces impact of failure, it creates problems with overindulgence. Those involved in heavy alcohol use are at a higher risk of alcohol related consequences: aggression, talking too much, driving under the influence, becoming public nuisance, disorderly conduct, destruction of property, among other

negative consequences (Thio, 2006). Young adults of between the ages of 18-30 are mostly implicated in alcohol consumption. Experience also shows that most adults employed or not do indulge in alcohol consumption with varying degrees of consequences depending on the type and quantity consumed as well as each user's level of absorption. Alcohol can be a great source of enjoyment but also is the source of misery. It plays a significant role in some religious ceremonies, making people feel religious, but at the same time is implicated in most cases of dangerous and deadly criminal behavior (Pontell, 2006; Thio, 2006). Notwithstanding, its health, social, and other negative alcohol induced implications, alcohol use is much more acceptable than other drugs individually or combined.

Alcohol has been known to have some effects on users some of which are positive while others are negative. Thio, (2006) suggested a list of what alcohol as a drug does to users. It affects the user's mental and physical ability. Though not strictly a stimulant, it acts as one because it increases the functional activities of the body and mind. As a depressant it is in the same class of drugs known as anesthetics, sedatives, and narcotics, and thus reduces the users mental and bodily functioning. On the other hand, when consumed in reasonable quantity, it can be socially, psychologically, and physically beneficial. Heavy drinking however has other health implications including liver damage, heart disease, stroke, impaired memory, cognitive problems, and risk of developing different types of cancer among others. Finally, the social consequences of moderate drinking include: sociability, hospitality, relaxation, and recreation with others. On the contrary, excessive use of alcohol is seen as the leading cause of preventable deaths through accidents and over dosing. Over drinking has also been linked even if indirectly to the commission of various types of serious and violent crimes such as aggravated assault, armed robbery, homicide, and forcible rape Theo concludes. For these negative reasons alcohol is seen as dynamite in the hands of a violent and aggressive individual.

Urban Gangs

There is limited consensus on the hot button issue of the definition of gang. This is in part because gangs are constantly evolving and thus not a fixed phenomenon that can be permeated easily by external influences (Wijnberg, 2012). Ashton and Bussu (2020), argued that gang definitions have been influenced over the years by both academic and political responses to the problem in many countries that four key characteristics emerged from the discuss. These characteristics include: crime, durability, territoriality, and structure. Klein (2001) as cited in Ashton and Bussu, recognized different characteristics of a gang that is differentiated by size, longevity, territory, and criminal activity. Consequently, a gang is an identifiable and relatively stable but unorganized group of

young people with criminal behavior which forms an integral part of their identity. Miller, (1980) as cited in Wijnberg (2012, p.12) defined a youth gang as “a self-formed association of peers bound together by mutual interest, with identifiable leadership, well developed lines of authority, and other organizational features; who act in concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes, which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility, or type of enterprise”.

The two main points of interest in the definition above are illegal activity and territory and these vary over time depending on circumstances and opportunities available. It is for this reason that some gangs have not only become criminal enterprises and even evolved over many generations. According to Sullivan and Bunker (2002), the criminal enterprises have evolved through three generations from traditional turf gangs, to market-oriented drug gangs, to a new generation that includes political and mercenary elements. As these gangs mature through the stages and generational shift, they are influenced by politicization, internationalization, and sophistication. Accordingly, since gang appears to be a ‘brotherhood’; one expects them to possess some characteristics that set them apart from other groups like them. They have similar behaviors and lifestyles, meet face-to-face often, plan and execute their plots together, usually corrupt if they are organized, have strong solidarity as well having a name that sets them apart from others. There are six special elements that set each group apart from the rest and they are: identifiable leadership, violence, tendency to associate continually, identification of a specific purpose, organized in nature, engage in illegal activities, and identified with a territory (Wijnberg, 2012; Howell & Decker, 1999; Schiram & Tibbetts, 2013).

From the fore-going, it is clear that gangs have some things that are common to them, while their differences are mainly seen from their origin and local contexts. This is why traditional street gangs such as the ones seen within Awka Metropolitan area of Anambra State, are mostly turf-oriented. They operate at lower end of extreme societal violence, have loose leadership, and pay more attention on protecting their turf and loyalty within their immediate environments. These street gangs engage in criminal activity based on individual need, opportunity, and victimization through exploitation (Ashton & Bussu, 2020; Sullivan & Bunker, 2002). The problem of street gangs in most urban cities is known to the members of the society. They are often involved in various forms of extortion, development and protection of territories, and involvement in different types of illegal activities. Sometimes they seek control of both economic and social activities within their territory. They do this by investing in some legal businesses as a cover for their nefarious activities. Drug sale and use is also part of their activities and through these they penetrate government secure places such as correctional centers law

enforcement agencies and establishments, as well as establish links with other mafias and syndicates in the area (Howell & Decker, 1999; Wijnberg, 2012; Wolff, 2015).

Drugs, Alcohol, Gangs Nexus

Extant studies indicate that tracing the relationship or the connection between drug/alcohol abuse, gang membership and criminal behavior is a subject of much debate (Sullivan & Bunker, 2002; Howell & Decker, 1999; Emenike, 2023). From the general public's point of view, the link between drugs and crime is relatively straightforward. Researches show there is a strong link between drug abuse, gang membership and crime such that these directly lead to criminal activity. Those who use illegal drugs generally commit more crime than those who do not, but the link is more complex than meets the eye (Zhang, et al., 1999; Schiram & Tibbetts, 2013; Howell & Decker, 1999). To the question as to whether drug/alcohol abuse causes crime. The answer is yes and no depending various factors. There are several factors that must be noted according to Schiram and Tibbetts, and Emenike and his colleagues (2023), in order to understand the relationship between drug/alcohol abuse and gang membership, and involvement in criminal behavior. First, Drug/gang-defined crimes involve the sale and/or possession of an illegal substance. Secondly, drug related crimes involve violent behaviors induced by the effects of a drug or illegal activity that is motivated by continued drug use. Thirdly, crimes associated with drug use involve illegal activities that may have occurred while a person was under the influence of an illegal substance but those activities were not a direct result of the drug use. Finally, those enslaved to drug use are thought to be forced into a life of crime because they cannot afford to pay for the prohibitively expensive drug habit unless they rob or steal to get money for their next fix. This is in turn modified by other factors such as, socio-economic status, poverty, family problems, inadequate education etc., (Ashton & Bussu, 2020; Schiram & Tibbetts, 2013; Wolff, 2015).

Additionally, Goldstein (1985) as cited in Howell and Decker (1999), and Blumstein (1995), suggested three possible relationships between drug/alcohol abuse and gang membership criminal behavior. First, is that the pharmacological effects of drugs and alcohol on the gang member can induce violent behavior. Often the exorbitant cost of drugs and alcohol can force abusers to be involved in "economic compulsive" crime in support of their habit. There is also "systemic" violence which is a common feature of drug distribution system that includes protection or expansion of market share arising from drug distribution, or retaliation against market competitors who go against the rules governing deals, or maintenance of gang membership and drug trafficking organization.

Further, there is a close resemblance between the structure of drug/alcohol abusers and gang membership. Certain patterns of lifestyle and behaviors make it easier to link

criminality to drug/alcohol abusers and gang members. From this perspective, crimes are mostly planned in bars and outlets where drugs and alcohol are sold; criminals generally consume alcohol and or drugs to overcome inhibitions and emotional strains; juvenile delinquency and drug/alcohol abuse are very closely connected; while these illegal behaviors are forbidden by the law, involvement in them brings about other illegal activities such as smuggling, racketeering etc.; alcohol and drug use assist in removing self-criticism from the offender in relation to his actions; the illegality of the possession and use of these substances makes them deviants (Paranjape, 2017).

From the point of view of general deviance, the correlation between drug/alcohol abuse as well as gang membership and crime does not mean that drug use for instance causes crime since most drug users with a criminal record have already committed crime before using drugs. Being a drug user and continuing to commit crime as a drug user are cut from same cloth, that is, general tendency towards deviance (Schiram & Tibbetts, 2013); while there is evidence that drug/alcohol abuse and gang membership are associated with criminal behavior and violent crime, some of the basic causal mechanisms linking them to criminality are yet unknown. Illicit drug use plays a role in violent behavior, but the relationship between substance abuse and violence is truly a complex one moderated by a number of other factors in the individual and environment (Boles & Miotto, 2003). Does a delinquent youth seek out gang members or gang membership supports deviant behavior (Zhang, 1999). To answer this question, one has to go back to the theoretical perspectives of rational choice and social learning theories chosen to explain involvement in this type of behavior.

Reasons for the Escalation of Drug Gang Related Violence Urban Areas

Existence of violence or constant deviant behavior in whatever shape it appears in any community not only brings about anxiety and fear in the citizens, is thought to be worse when it is brought about by drug/alcohol abuse and gang membership. When this happens development, peace and security of such a community are negatively affected (Usman & Ahmed, 2014). Apeh and Sadiq (nd), suggested that personality traits, drug/alcohol abuse as well as the dearth of educational attainment predispose young people for criminal behavior. On his part Wolff (2015), emphasized that inadequate state presence and active informal authority are to be blamed for rising criminal activities in urban areas. When the security of life and property cannot be guaranteed, nor is there fast and easy dispute resolution, and less attention to the welfare of the people, criminal elements are more likely to resort to self-help. Application of the law differentially, the ability of criminal elements to align themselves in order to get coverage (either to avoid arrest or get quick release and return to status quo), are all problematic and have been thought to exacerbate

criminal behavior in urban cities. Informal authorities such as family, peer groups, role models, religious bodies, and similar entities are being fingered as unable to play more positive roles to ensure that young people in urban areas and elsewhere are not only law abiding but stay away from making the community unsafe. Ashton and Bussu (2020), rightly argued that family members and some of these groups can act as either a risk factor or protective factor for involvement in delinquent behavior, directly by facilitating membership, or through proper parenting style and supervision.

In urban cities such as Awka Metropolis in Anambra State, drug/alcohol abuse as well as gang membership is not only on the increase, but is also the primary cause of the breach of the peace, insecurity of life and property, retardation of much needed development (Emenike et al., 2023; Usman & Ahmed, 2014). Emenike and his colleagues went further to state that most major cities in Anambra State are infested with insecurity, sluggish economic activities, and other social malaise as a result of drug/alcohol abuse and gang membership. The result of this is that citizens sleep with one eye open for fear of either being attacked at home or on the road because of the quest to get rich quick because of involvement in illicit drug use and sale coupled with gang membership. In their seminal work Afunugo and his colleagues (2023), suggested some of the reasons for the prevalence of cultism in Awka Metropolitan area, which always involves drug and alcohol abuse. For these scholars, politicians who serve as godfathers often sponsor members of this group because they will be used as political tools during campaign and elections to fight their opponents. Arrested offenders are rarely investigated not to talk of prosecution because they have some 'oga' (master) somewhere who ensures they are freed as soon as they were caught. Parents on their part now rarely serve as role models to their children such that those who are supposed to serve as first agents of socialization for their children for some flimsy excuse fail in their most important task. There is equally the state of lawlessness or even near anarchy in relation to law and order because of lack state presence in the most needed and critical areas of the urban city.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Studies as this have some policy implications. Involvement in criminal behavior by humans has been attributed by some to their either mental depravity, personal choice, or some learned behavior over time. It is also safe to state that those with balanced emotional and physical health ordinarily will not indulge in criminal or aggressive conduct (Paranjape, 2017). The work of controlling and maybe eradicating youth involvement in drug/alcohol and gang membership and the attending criminal behavior cannot not be left for a few people or the government alone. It must be a joint effort where every person and the government must contribute some positive idea for a better society. While the State

Government needs to use its power to make enforceable laws and assign different law enforcement agencies in the effort to make urban areas safer, families and other social groups must contribute their quota as well. Parents for instance, must take the moral and religious upbringing of their children very serious. Furthermore, government on its part must assess the situation and check both for at risk areas and persons and give them the needed attention through public enlightenment on the evil and ills of drug/alcohol abuse and gang membership. Both the religious and moral upbringing of young people must be emphasized from the beginning, and laws banning politicians from using people of certain age as followers or thugs strictly enforced (Afunugo et al., 2023).

The usefulness of empowering at risk young people by the government or non-governmental organizations cannot be over emphasized since this can go a long way to keep them busy hence out of trouble (Usman & Sadiq, 2014). It might be difficult to completely rid the society of delinquents, but taking the right step in the right direction especially with regards to redirecting the minds of young adults in society can go a long way to making the community a more peaceful and secure place for all. Laws on drug/alcohol sale and use as well gang membership must be reemphasized and strictly enforced. Those caught breaking them should be treated in such a way as to serve a lesson and deterrence to others but also rehabilitated in the process such that they will be able reenter the community and avoid reoffending.

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