Which Factors Cause People to Use Illicit Drugs?

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Abstract

Illicit drug use and its reasons are the areas that many sociologists have not researched thoroughly. The importance of impulsivity in explaining the reason for illegal drug use is dependent on societal constructs like gender, race, age, and income according to the available literature. Assessing illicit drug use is not complete until research examines the strain theory as well as labeling theory. According to the principle of strain theory, social pressure areas such as insufficient income or inadequate education and peer influence drive the members of society to engage in crime. The labeling theory maintains that, relative to how other people label certain individuals, so they behave that way. Treating someone or labeling an individual criminally deviant might foster deviance in them. Thus dissertation determines that the two theories apply in explaining drug use among some groups of people such as age, race, class or gender based on societal pressures and perception of them. This paper utilizes a quantitative approach supported by data gathered from Amazon Mechanical Turk to establish the problem of the study. The survey employs dichotomous questions as well as those based on the demographics of the population sample, $N = 200$, from a portion of the United States population. Descriptive and inferential statistics apply to examine the population characteristics and draw conclusions on the findings. A chi-square test applies in this study to assess the significant relationship between independent variables; age, race, income, and gender and the dependent variable, drug use. The results of this   study show a significant correlation between drug use and race, gender, and income. However, age does not significantly imply drug use.

Keywords: age, race, gender, illegal drugs, strain theory, labeling theory, socioeconomic status

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Introduction

Impulsivity is closely linked to drug use and abuse, both as a contributor to use and as an effect of use (De Wit 2009:1). If this theory is correct, then what could cause the impulsivity? Not every single person has poor impulse control, but it is possible that some groups might face resistance. The research question I am introducing is: which factors cause people to use illicit drugs and why?

The main theory for this research as to why some people are more impulsive than others is the strain theory. It was developed by American sociologist and Columbia University professor, Robert K. Merton. The same high standard for success is set for everyone even though not everyone could reach those standards through conventional means. People are forced to work within the system or become members of a deviant subculture to achieve the desired goal. Merton continued on to say when individuals are faced with a gap between their goals (usually finances/money related) and their current status, strain occurs. There are five main groups of people in society: the conformists, innovators, ritualists, retreatists, and rebels. This study will focus on the retreatists, people who had attempted, but failed, to achieve socially acceptable goals by both legal and illegal means, and had resolved to give up on these goals period, replacing them with the satiation of their respective drug use.

People who are 50 to 64 years old have a much higher rate of illicitly using prescription drugs compared to other adults. Drug arrests for African Americans were three times the rate for whites between 1980 and 2003. Of course, difference in incarceration rates could also be linked to discrimination. Research shows that the racial groups with the highest rates of illegal drug use were Hispanic women at 40%, white men at 41.5%, and Hispanic men at 45.1%. There is

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evidence to support a correlation between socioeconomic status and illicit drug use, but the results are only conclusive for cannabis.

The last example is that self-reported drug use for African-Americans was very high due to their environmental, social, and psychological factors. Females are more likely to use illegal drugs to cope with depression or other psychological severe factors, and males use illicit drugs just for excitement. The last article concluded that women were more likely to abuse prescription drugs. Eventually, all of these four factors will come together to determine the correlation between them and illegal drug use.

This topic is important to research because there might be correlation shown between people's backgrounds and their lack of resistance to using drugs. It is still a very controversial issue in the United States, but we will understand more about the problem if we can study why some people have particular likelihoods.

Literature on Drugs in the U.S.

There has been an increased use of illegal drugs (Johnston 2010). The significant use of these illegal drugs has resulted in drug abuse and addiction which has now raised concerns regarding this issue. A number of questions have been raised that have led to several researches trying to determine what influences the usage of illegal drugs in the country. However, it has been argued by various researchers that illegal drug utilization is impacted through some aspects including age, race, income and gender. Therefore, this paper presents a literature review on how age, race, income and gender impact illegal drug usage.

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Age

Researchers have determined that drug usage varies with age. Every age group is associated with certain types of drugs and the prevalence of illegal drug use varies with age. For instance, people between the age of fifty and sixty four years old tend to possess a higher usage rate of illegal prescribed drugs more than other adults. Moreover, they tend to be more likely to view drugs and substance abuse to be dangerous (Wu and Blazer 2010:481). Similarly, according to a certain study by White, Duncan, Nicholson and Bonaguro (2011:61) identified that in 2006 elderly American were more probable to have given a try to illegal drugs as compare to the 1985 elderly population.

Another outstanding fact lies within a study undertaken by a researcher referred to as Beth Han which forecasts that Substance Use Disorder will be prevalent among adults of the age of 50 years or older more than other age groups in 2020. The outcomes obtained out of the results showing the total adult population of fifty years old experiencing Substance Use Disorder tends to be anticipated to be twice the current population from about 2.8 million annually up to about 5.7 million in the year 2020, emerging from the intertwined impacts of a 39% population growth and a 44% population growth rate of adults experiencing substance use disorder. In 2020, the total population of 50 years old people in need of illegal drug or alcohol treatment is probable to surpass the projected 5.7 million populations (Han et al. 2009).

Additionally, illegal drug use impacts adolescents significantly. A certain journal provides evidence, data implying that teenagers who often smoked marijuana performed terribly in cognitive-based tests that were undertaken (Spueglia, Jacobus, and Tapert 2009). Remarkably, it is determined that juveniles utilize marijuana significantly as compared to adults, while adults consume heroin and cocaine a lot as compared to the adolescents (Leal and Mier 2016). The

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other social group besides age that could support the idea of certain groups using specific drugs

is race.

Race

Apart from age, race is another social group that is believed to influence people's

capacity to use illegal drugs. In a certain article discussing about drug usage the findings asserted

that African Americans' drug arrests rate were triple to that of the whites in 1980 to 2003. It also

made a stand that whites tend to use cocaine more than African Americans (Fellner 2009). Albeit

African Americans being more probable to be arrested, it is possible that whites usage of drugs is

of the same rate as those of African Americans. Similarly, McCabe and colleagues (2007)

attested that Hispanic people were the highest-ranked racial group in terms of illegal drugs

usage. The findings were 40% of Hispanic women and 45.1% of Hispanic used illegal drugs

compared to only 40% of white men and women.

A research undertaken by Shinew & Parry (2005) put their emphasis on Greek college

students. They polled 740 undergraduate students over the course of several semesters at an

American Midwestern research university. The research showed that 23.9% of Caucasians

indicated they used illegal drugs, 10.7% of African Americans, and 14.6% of Asians (Shinew

and Parry 2005). Beckett, Nyrop and Pfingst (2006) determined whether there was any form of

racial disparity among the arrested people for using illegal drugs. The researchers identified that

Latinos and African Americans are overrepresented in the group of the people arrested for

having possessed drugs in comparison with the population of those utilizing drugs habitually and

in dangerous methods. The police placed their emphasis greatly on those who use crack and not

on the basis of race or ethnic composition for the serious illegal drug users. This resulted in a

significant racial discrimination for the drug possession arrests as this research proved that the

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minority cannot take up the majority population of illicit drug users (Beckett, Nyrop, and Pfingst 2006).

A study by Mitchell and Caudy (2016) focusing on racial disparities among drug offenders in a study comprising of 8,901 people. Mitchell and Caudy showed that about 5.2% populations of African Americans, 1.5% population of the whites and 2.4% population of the Hispanic. It is evident from these Mitchell and Caudy that African Americans' probability of arrests was 247% while the Hispanics were 60% more probable to be arrested as compared to the whites due to illegal drugs use. Nonetheless, the same findings indicate that the whites have a high rate of involvement in drugs in terms of statistics as more than African Americans whereas the variance between Hispanics and the whites in terms of drug usage is of statistical significance [$p < 0.05$] (Mitchell and Caudy 2016). Even though minorities are overrepresented in the arrest rates for drug use, white people are just as likely to become drug users. Another factor to look into besides race is income.

Income

Level of income determines one's illegal drug use. A certain article concluded that there exists a relationship between illegal drug uses with social disadvantages, albeit mainly applying to cannabis. Contrary, it was identified a small but strong evidence supporting the assumption claiming childhood disadvantage to be attributed to alcohol or drug use and abuse later in life (Daniel et al. 2009). Albeit illegal drugs being utilized by people in all levels of SES, drug-associated mortality and morbidity tend to be unproportioned and higher on lower SES groupings (Galea and Vlahov 2002).

Another research conducted in France indicated that participants of lower socioeconomic position literally started substance usage at a tender age compared to those from a higher

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socioeconomic position. Moreover, low education attainment projected tobacco usage instead of

cannabis as well as polysubstance usage (Redonnet et al. 2012). Essentially, another study

asserted that out of the results obtained from this study implying that teenagers who have more

financial resources as well as a high family social status tend to use substances a lot more as

compared to SES teenagers. Actually, financial resources seem to be the most prominent SES

determining factor for teenage drugs and substance usage (Hanson and Chen 2007). Ultimately, a

certain article portrayed those adolescents with sufficient resources and those who spend a lot of

money showed more substance usage while college students who spend a lot of money were

engaging in more alcohol use (Humensky 2010). All of these studies have contradictory findings,

but it is more proof that everyone is equal no matter what their socioeconomic status is and the

last factor to consider is gender.

Gender

A certain article by Barnes, Welte, and Hoffman (2002) laid its focus on the relation

between alcohol and illegal drug usage. It identified that relationships between initial alcohol

consumption age and illegal drug usage did not have a significant difference between males and

females, even though more men had their first alcoholic drink than women did. Similarly,

another article gave an explanation that women and men's purposes differ when they abuse illicit

drugs. Women are most probable to utilize illegal drugs as a way of coping with depression or

serious mental factors, and males use illegal drugs just for excitement (Ettore 2004). Another

different article concluded that women were more probable to abuse prescribed drugs. Such

women usually obtain their drugs from other family members (Berenson and Rahman 2011).

An article about first drug use opportunities and transformation to the first usage of drugs

gives an explanation that all drugs such as cocaine, heroin, marijuana and hallucinogens

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substantially reported that more men than women use each drug. The gender variance in drug usage seems to emerging out of the way men and women perceive the opportunity to utilize drugs. Men are more probable to get an opportunity for using each drug as compared to women, though not as probable to utilize the drug when presented the opportunity unto them (Etten and Anthony 1999).

A survey was conducted which lasted for thirty three years which focused on the illegal drug use by college students. It was determined that men used illegal drugs more than women in the 12th grade age group. This finding is interesting because other studies determined that men and women have the similar rates of using illegal drugs (Johnston 2010). Another different study revealed that the main risk time period for beginning to use cigarettes, marijuana and alcohol are usually at the age of 20 and more prevalent at the age of 16 to use cigarettes and the age of 18 to use alcohol and marijuana (Chen and Kandel 1995). In essence, the general risk patterns are same for both men and women though both genders differ from each other.

A certain short study regarding the risk of men and women developing drug disorders in New Haven, Baltimore, and St. Louis showed that the significant risk for males to be higher than that of females. There is a difference between the genders in the risk for developing a drug disorder, but it is still not great. In the youngest age group of the study, which was ages 18-24, there was an equal risk for both sexes (Robins and Przybeck 1985). In another, study focusing on the lifetime drug usage of Brazilian college students, it was determined that as males consumed more alcohol, cocaine, anabolizes, crack and inhalants as compared to women. Both men and women showed equal results in marijuana, amphetamines, tobacco, hallucinogens and anticholinergics. Women used amphetamines through prescribed medicines as compared to men

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(Wagner et al. 2007). Although men and women are equally as probable to use illegal drugs, it varies on which types they use and questions if gender is a significant factor at all.

To sum up, various researches have been conducted trying to answer how age, income, race, and gender influence illegal drug use by people. The above literature has vividly argued their points with evidence to support their arguments. Therefore, the above literature review has proved that illegal drug use by people is significantly influenced by at least one of these social factors including; race, income, gender, and age.

Methods

I used a quantitative approach to my research, including the quantitative software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). I will gather all of my quantitative data by conducting my surveys on Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The types of survey questions that I will use are dichotomous and demographic questions. Dichotomous items are generally "yes/no" questions, and they will be utilized in my survey top separate people or branch into groups of those who have done illegal drugs or not. Demographic questions are a very crucial part of any questionnaire. In this survey, they will be used to identify characteristics such as of age, gender, household income, and race. Lastly, I will use the Likert scale because I would need to know how often those people use drugs and what their impulse levels are. Dichotomous questions are known to be very simple, but they can help categorize the participants into different groups. Demographic and Likert scale questions are known to be more reliable because they can further analyze the respondents' experiences with illegal drugs.

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Sampling

For my study, I examined a small representative number of the United States national

population using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Amazon Mechanical Turk is a website where

researchers conduct surveys for quantitative research, and they pay respondents a couple of

dollars to take one survey. The more people who answer the survey, the more money the

researchers have to spend. The number of the people who answered the survey was two hundred

participants. The demographics of the respondents should be as random as possible and give me

the best results. See Table 1 for the demographics of the participants.

Age

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	18-25 years old	36	18.0
	26-35 years old	90	45.0
	36-45 years old	33	16.5
	46-55 years old	15	7.5
	56-65 years old	18	9.0
	65 or more years old	8	4.0
	Total	200	100.0

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Gender

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Female	116	58.0
	Male	84	42.0
	Total	200	100.0

Race

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Asian	18	9.0
	Black	26	13.0
	Hispanic	12	6.0
	Other	3	1.5
	Pacific Islander	1	.5
	White	140	70.0
	Total	200	100.0

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Income

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 50k	107	53.5
50-80k	58	29.0
80-100k	17	8.5
100k-200k	18	9.0
Total	200	100.0

Procedures

For operationalization, I will take the vague concepts of age, gender, and race, which are independent variables as well as illegal drug use, which is a dependent variable. I will establish a connection between those variables to find out if there are certain phenomena in all of these groups of people that I study. The instructions to the participants will be to remain as honest as possible, and of course, the respondents will stay anonymous. These methods lead to results within the next month and show statistical findings and consistent tables and figures. Many students and professors have very positive reviews about the response rate of Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and I am sure that I have found the number of results that I need.

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Results

Gender and Illegal Drug Use

A chi-squared test was conducted to examine the relationship between illegal drug use and gender. The relation between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, $N = 200 = 5.925$, $p<.05$**.** Males were more likely than females to use drugs. There was an equal percentage of men who used or did not use illegal drugs and there were more women who never used illegal drugs.

Gender

			Female	Male	Total
Drugs	Not used illegal drugs	Count	63	31	94
	Used illegal drugs	Count	53	53	106
Total		Count	116	84	200
		% who used drugs	45.7%	63.1%	53%

Table 2. Crosstabs of Gender and Illegal Drug Use

This graph shows the percentage and number of men and women who have used or not used illegal drugs.

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Race and Illegal Drug Use

A chi-squared test was conducted to examine the relationship between illegal drug use and race. The relation between these variables was significant, X^2 (5, $N = 200$) = 11.5225, $p<.05$. Whites were the most likely to use illegal drugs than other races. It could be due to the fact the white people make up a majority of the United States, so that is why 70% of the survey respondents are white. Even though the random samples for blacks made up 9% and Hispanics made up 2%, the numbers of those who used illegal drugs is also quite high. 6.5% of blacks said they had used illegal drugs and 1.5% of Hispanics said that as well.

Race

			Asian	Black	Hispanic	Other	Pacific I	White	Total
Drugs	Not used illegal drugs	Count	14	13	5	0	1	61	94
	Used illegal drugs	Count	4	13	7	3	0	79	106
Total		Count	18	26	12	3	1	140	200
		% who used drugs	22.2%	50%	58.3%	100%	0%	56.4%	53%

Table 2d. Crosstabs of Race and Illegal Drug Use. "Pacific I" means Pacific Islander/Hawaiian

This graph shows the different groups of races and the percentage and number of each have used or not used illegal drugs. "Pacific I" means Pacific Islander/Hawaiian.

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Income and Illegal Drug Use

A chi-squared test was conducted to examine the relationship between illegal drug use and income. The relation between these variables was significant, X^2 (1, $N = 200$) = 14.453, $p < .05$. The majority of the people who took illegal drugs made less than $50k per year and the percentage were 32%. They made up 54% of those who answered this poll. The lower end of the spectrum was the higher-end SES groups, each making up around 8%-9% of the respondents.

Income

Drugs			100-200k	50k-80k	80-100k	Less than 50k	Total
Drugs	Not used illegal drugs	Count	10	27	14	43	94
	Used illegal drugs	Count	8	31	3	64	106
Total		Count	18	58	17	107	200
		% who used drugs	44.0%	53.4%	17.6%	53.5%	53%

Table 4. Crosstabs of Income and Illegal Drug Use

This graph shows the percentage of each SES group who have used or not used illegal drugs.

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Age and Illegal Drug Use

A chi-squared test was conducted to examine the relationship between illegal drug use and age. The relation between illegal drug use and age was not significant, X^2 (5, $N = 200$) = 5.463 , $p > 0.05$. The majority of the people who took illegal drugs were aged 26-35 years old and the percentage was 26%. They made up over 45% of those who answered this poll. The lower end of the spectrum was the 65 and older crowd, making up 3% of the respondents.

Age

			18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	Over 65	Total
Drugs	Not used illegal drugs	Count	15	38	17	7	11	6	94
	Used illegal drugs	Count	21	52	16	8	7	2	106
Total		Count	36	90	33	15	18	8	200
		% who used drugs	58.3%	57.7%	48.5%	53.3%	38.8%	25%	53.0%

Table 5. Crosstabs of Age and Illegal Drug Use

This graph shows the different age groups and the percentage and number of each group that has used or not used illegal drugs.

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Discussion

The chi-squared tests reflected a significant relationship between the independent variables of gender, race, and income and the dependent variable of illegal drug use. It did not show a significant association between the independent variable of age and the dependent variable of illicit drug use. Current literature shows no significance between age and illegal drug use, and this data suggests that age is not a significant factor in whether this person has used illicit drugs or not. Although there is a group of people who said they did use drugs at a certain age, this independent variable does not determine how likely someone is to use drugs based on how old he or she is.

The relationship between gender and illegal drug use is interesting because there is still a high number of women who use illicit drugs, especially minority women. Otherwise, the results were expected because most people who get caught with drugs and go to prison are men. Since there are more male prisoners for the most harmful drugs, it makes sense that more men in this survey admitted to using any illegal drug.

The relationship between race and illegal drug use is intriguing because it stated that whites are more likely to use illicit drugs. It could be due to the fact the white people constitute more than 60% of the United States, so that could be why 70% of the survey respondents are white. Blacks made up 9% of the respondents, and 2% were Hispanics. However, 6.5% of blacks said they had used illegal drugs, and 1.5% of Hispanics said that as well. 39.5% of whites admitted to using illicit drugs, so these other numbers are pretty high for their race groups as well. It is very consistent with literature since they said whites, blacks, and Hispanics are the most likely to use illegal drugs.

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The relationship between income and illegal drug use is also fascinating because there are still a high percentage of people with higher socioeconomic status who have used illicit drugs in the past. 83% of the people who answered the survey made under $80k per year and made up 90% of the respondents who did say they used illegal drugs. However, eighteen people responded saying they made around $100-$200k per year and 44% of them admitted to using illicit drugs. It is very likely that people of lower socioeconomic status answer surveys more often, but almost half of the upper-class respondents had experimented with harmful drugs. These findings are consistent with the articles that say illegal drug use is more present among lower SES groups, but also with the reports saying it is not unusual for young people from high socioeconomic status backgrounds to also use illegal drugs.

In the conclusion of my studies, I found that marijuana was the most common type of illegal drug that people have used. Aside from the strain theory I have mentioned at the beginning of my thesis, there is another theory that could suggest why marijuana has become more socially acceptable than other types of illegal drugs. According to American sociologist and Northwestern University professor, Howard S. Becker, he supports the reason being the labeling theory in his classic journal article "Becoming a Marijuana User." He explained that "people begin smoking marijuana in the presence of peers or groups who are experienced marijuana users" (Becker 1953:238). The strain theory might apply to the other illegal drugs, but in the case of marijuana, U.S. society has become more progressive over the years, and marijuana users are not retreatists, but it is how they relax instead.

In the future, I would recommend that other researchers do not use the same methods I did. Future researchers perhaps could have asked what types of illegal drugs they used, but that would be far too much variation in the data. I would want the next researcher to ask the

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respondents to type in their age number instead of selecting an age group. It makes a lot more sense that way since people never explain how old they are based on specific age groups. Maybe those results will be more significant if other researchers ask respondents to write down their age number or put in their birthdate. Many people in the future might continue to have a problem with the gender question because I only asked if someone identifies as a male or female. However, I recommend that future researchers ask respondents their gender the way I did in my research because it is best to keep the question as simple as possible and not include multiple gender categories that are not scientifically proven to exist.

The results of this study seem to reflect current research, and the results were significant enough in all categories except age. If future researchers continue similar studies, they can improve their findings by going undercover in Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Sociologists should also expand on my results in the future by either observing certain environments or interview drug or non-drug users who are based all over the United States. Larger sample size with Amazon Mechanical Turk would consist of a sample of over a thousand respondents. There is still debate to this day if the cause of illegal drug use is due to strain theory, structural functionalism, or labeling theory, symbolic interactionism. However, I did find that marijuana is the most common type of illicit drug used in the country. The reason why this drug has become more socially acceptable than other drugs was that the United States has become more progressive over the past few decades, and people do not use it to escape reality, but as a way to enjoy leisure.

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