Drug Use and Society

Definitions

• Drug - Any substance, other than food, that alters structure or function.

• Psychoactive Drug - Any drug that interacts with the nervous system to affect behavior, cognition, or emotion.
  • Psychopharmacology

• Illicit Drug - Any drug that is unlawful to possess or used unlawfully.

Patterns of drug use.

• Humans have been using psychoactive drugs for 1000s of years.

• Drug use is prevalent in our society.
  • In a typical month…
    … 50% of ages 12 and older use alcohol.
    … 30% use tobacco.
    … 8% use illicit drugs.
What about Psychology 117 students?

- What you reported using in the last 30 days:
  - Alcohol... 88%
  - Nicotine... 32%
  - Marijuana... 28%
  - Narcotic analgesics... 17%
  - Antidepressants… 4%
  - Antianxiety drugs… 9%
  - Cocaine… 4%
  - Amphetamine (& other stimulants).. 1%
  - LSD (& other hallucinogens)... 1%
  - MDMA... 4%

Western concern about psychoactive drug use is a recent development.

Why the concern about drug use?
- Morality Issue

Why the concern about drug use...

Toxicity Potential

- Toxicity distinctions:
  - Acute Toxicity vs Chronic Toxicity
  - Physiological Toxicity vs Behavioral Toxicity
Drugs differ widely on toxicity.

• Thousands of people die each year from heroin overdose...
  … but there has never been a documented death from marijuana overdose.

• Yearly mortality from...
  All illicit drugs: approx. 15,000 people.
  Alcohol: approx. 100,000 people.
  Tobacco: approx. 400,000 people.

Newer “designer compounds” may be especially toxic.

• Designer Drugs - Drugs that are custom engineered in illicit labs.
  • At first this was legal!

Quality control of illicit drug labs can be poor.

• Variability in potency and purity.

• 1982 - A designer drug leads to the creation of “the frozen addicts”.

This illicit drug lab...

- Created synthetic heroin contaminated with a neurotoxin.
- The toxin selectively killed brain cells involved in voluntary movement.
- The result was pseudo Parkinson’s disease.

Why the concern about drug use...

- Potential for addiction.
- Drugs vary in addictive potential.
  - Highly addictive – Heroin, Alcohol
  - Moderately addictive – Cocaine, Nicotine
  - Low addictive potential - Marijuana, LSD.

Why the concern about drug use...

- Relationship between drugs and crime.
  - Two-thirds of felons test positive for illicit drugs.
  - Does drug use cause the user to commit crimes?
    - Not necessarily.
Possible links between drug use and crime.

- Are individuals more likely to commit crimes while “under the influence” of a drug?
  - Not likely with most drugs.
  - Alcohol *may* be the exception.
    - Alcohol is linked with
      - … 60% of all murders.
      - … 40% of assaults.
      - … 33% of all rapes.

Possible links between drug use and crime.

- Are individuals more likely to commit crimes to support drug habits?
  - Unclear if drug abuse will likely *cause* a law abiding citizen to commit crimes.
  - Criminals will increase criminal activity to get drugs.

Possible links between drug use and crime.

- Of course *illicit* drug use is associated with crime...
  - … More than half of federal prisoners were convicted on drug law violations.

- Would legalizing drugs be less costly to society?
  - *Harm Reduction* Approach to Drug Laws