

Article

Understanding the Impact of Drug Legalization on Crime Rates: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Abstract: This research investigates the intricate relationship between drug legalization and crime rates, aiming to provide insights into the effects of drug policy reforms on public safety and well-being. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative analysis with qualitative insights to examine changes in crime rates following drug legalization measures. Diverse data sources, including official crime statistics, surveys, interviews, and qualitative data from stakeholders, are utilized to capture both macro-level trends and micro-level dynamics. Preliminary findings suggest that the impact of drug legalization on crime rates varies across different jurisdictions and drug types, with some areas experiencing reductions in certain types of crime while others show no significant changes or even increases in crime rates. Alternative explanations, such as socio-economic factors, law enforcement strategies, market dynamics, temporal trends, and data limitations, are considered to enrich the interpretation of observed patterns. Moving forward, continued monitoring and evaluation are essential to assess the stability and persistence of effects, inform evidence-based policymaking, and promote public safety, health, and well-being in communities worldwide.

Keywords: Drug legalization; Crime rates; Public safety; Policy reform; Mixed-methods research.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the debate surrounding drug legalization has gained considerable traction worldwide (Bewley-Taylor, 2012). The discourse, once confined to academic circles and fringe political movements, has now permeated mainstream policy discussions and public consciousness. Drug legalization represents a departure from traditional approaches to drug control, which have historically relied on prohibitionist measures and punitive enforcement strategies (Nadelmann, 1992). By legalizing or decriminalizing certain substances, policymakers aim to reshape the landscape of drug regulation, with the overarching goals of reducing harm, minimizing criminality, and promoting individual liberties. However, the potential consequences of such reforms remain the subject of intense scrutiny and speculation.

Historically, the prohibition of certain drugs has been a cornerstone of drug policy in many countries (Heath, 1992). The rationale behind such prohibition has often been framed within the context of public health and safety concerns, with drug use portrayed as a societal menace necessitating strict legal enforcement. However, the efficacy of prohibitionist approaches in curbing drug-related harm, particularly in terms of reducing crime rates, has been called into question by critics (Holliman, 2010).

Advocates for drug legalization argue that prohibitionist policies have fueled a lucrative black market, characterized by violence, organized crime, and the erosion of public trust in law enforcement institutions (Borden, 2013). They contend that the criminalization of drug possession and distribution disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, contributing to cycles of poverty and incarceration. Moreover, they argue that the criminalization of drug use drives individuals away from seeking treatment and support, exacerbating public health crises such as addiction and overdose deaths (Park et al., 2020).

Conversely, opponents of drug legalization express concerns about the potential societal consequences of liberalizing drug laws (Ostrowski, 1989). They warn of the

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possibility of increased drug consumption, particularly among vulnerable populations such as youth, leading to a host of negative health outcomes and social disruptions. Furthermore, they argue that the normalization of drug use may undermine efforts to promote healthy lifestyles and discourage substance abuse (Sznitman & Taubman, 2016).

The landscape of drug policy is not monolithic, with varying degrees of legalization and decriminalization implemented across different jurisdictions (Watson et al., 2019). For example, several U.S. states have legalized the recreational use of marijuana, while other countries, such as Portugal, have adopted a more comprehensive approach by decriminalizing the possession and consumption of all drugs. These policy experiments offer valuable insights into the potential impact of drug legalization on crime rates and broader social dynamics (White & Gorman, 2000).

Against this backdrop, empirical research examining the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates has emerged as a critical area of inquiry. Scholars from diverse disciplines, including criminology, sociology, economics, and public health, have sought to untangle the complex causal mechanisms underlying this relationship. By employing rigorous methodological approaches and analyzing large-scale datasets, researchers aim to provide policymakers with evidence-based insights to inform the design and implementation of effective drug policies (Machluf et al., 2017).

Furthermore, understanding the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates is essential for addressing broader social inequities and disparities in access to justice. Drug enforcement policies have historically disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty, incarceration, and disenfranchisement (Drucker, 2012). By examining how drug legalization influences crime rates across different demographic groups and geographic areas, researchers can contribute to the development of more equitable and inclusive drug policies that prioritize social justice and human rights.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Existing Literature and Related Studies

Research on the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates has generated a diverse body of literature, reflecting a wide range of perspectives, methodologies, and findings (Seeman & Crimmins, 2001). Previous research has produced mixed findings regarding the impact of drug legalization on crime rates. While some studies have suggested a positive association between drug legalization and reductions in certain types of crime, such as drug-related offenses or violent crime, others have found no significant effects or even increases in crime rates following legalization measures. These discrepancies can be attributed to variations in the specific types of drugs legalized, the scope and implementation of legalization policies, and the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which they are enacted (Taylor et al., 2016).

Studies examining the impact of drug legalization on crime rates have highlighted the importance of considering the specific types of drugs involved. For example, research on the legalization of cannabis has shown mixed effects on crime rates, with some studies suggesting decreases in property crime and violent crime associated with cannabis legalization, while others have found no significant changes or even increases in crime. In contrast, studies on the decriminalization or medicalization of opioids have raised concerns about potential increases in opioid-related crime, including drug trafficking, diversion, and illicit production (Revier, 2019).

Previous research has identified a variety of mediating factors and mechanisms that may influence the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates (Wilson & Widom, 2009). These include changes in law enforcement priorities and practices, shifts in drug markets and trafficking patterns, alterations in drug consumption behaviors and social norms, and the implementation of complementary interventions, such as harm reduction measures, treatment programs, and community policing strategies. Understanding the complex interplay of these factors is essential for elucidating the mechanisms through which drug legalization may impact crime rates (Coll et al., 2014).

Longitudinal studies and comparative analyses have provided valuable insights into the long-term effects of drug legalization on crime rates across different jurisdictions and time periods (Bretteville-Jensen et al., 2020). By tracking changes in crime rates before and after the implementation of legalization measures and comparing outcomes across regions with varying drug policies, researchers have been able to assess the temporal stability and generalizability of findings, as well as identify potential confounding variables and alternative explanations for observed trends.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding the complex relationship between drug legalization and crime rates requires the application of theoretical frameworks drawn from various disciplines, including criminology, sociology, economics, and public health (Akers et al., 2012). Deterrence theory posits that the severity, certainty, and swiftness of legal sanctions influence individuals' decisions to engage in criminal behavior. According to this perspective, the threat of punishment serves as a deterrent, dissuading individuals from committing crimes. In the context of drug legalization, deterrence theory suggests that changes in drug laws may alter perceptions of risk and reward associated with drug-related activities, thereby affecting crime rates (MacCoun, 1993). For example, proponents of drug legalization argue that removing criminal penalties for drug possession and distribution may reduce incentives for involvement in illicit drug markets and associated criminal activities.

Rational choice theory emphasizes the role of individual decision-making in shaping criminal behavior (Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009). According to this perspective, individuals weigh the potential costs and benefits of different courses of action and choose the option that maximizes their utility. In the context of drug legalization, rational choice theory suggests that changes in drug laws may influence individuals' calculations regarding drug use, trafficking, and other related behaviors. For example, the availability of legal alternatives to illicit drugs may lead individuals to opt for legal consumption, thereby reducing demand for black market drugs and associated criminal activities (Becker et al., 2006).

Social disorganization theory focuses on the role of social and structural factors in shaping patterns of crime and deviance within communities (Kubrin, 2009). According to this perspective, characteristics such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, and residential instability can disrupt social cohesion and weaken informal social controls, leading to higher levels of crime. In the context of drug legalization, social disorganization theory suggests that changes in drug policies may interact with existing social and economic conditions to influence crime rates (Martinez Jr et al., 2008). For example, the implementation of drug legalization measures in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods may exacerbate social disorganization and increase opportunities for drug-related crime (Ortiz, 2016).

Labeling theory examines the consequences of societal reactions to deviant behavior, emphasizing the stigmatizing effects of formal and informal sanctions (Bernburg, 2019). According to this perspective, individuals who are labeled as criminals or drug users may internalize these identities and become trapped in cycles of deviance and criminality. In the context of drug legalization, labeling theory suggests that changes in drug laws may affect the social construction of drug-related behaviors and identities, potentially reducing the stigmatization and marginalization of drug users and decreasing their involvement in criminal activities.

Economic theories, such as supply and demand theory and rational choice theory, provide insights into the market dynamics of drug production, distribution, and consumption (Green, 2002). According to these perspectives, changes in drug laws can impact the availability, price, and accessibility of drugs, which in turn may influence patterns of drug-related crime. For example, the legalization and regulation of drug markets may disrupt illicit supply chains, reduce prices, and shift demand towards legal alternatives, thereby altering the incentives for involvement in drug-related criminal activities.

2.3 Research Method

The research design adopted in this study is a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates. This approach allows for the exploration of both macro-level trends and micro-level dynamics, capturing the nuances and complexities of drug policy reforms and their effects on crime (Baumer & Arnio, 2015).

Multiple sources of data are utilized to examine the impact of drug legalization on crime rates (Fergusson et al., 2006). Government agencies and law enforcement bodies provide data on crime rates, including trends in drug-related offenses, violent crime, property crime, and other relevant indicators. These statistics serve as foundational elements for assessing changes in crime patterns before and after the implementation of drug legalization measures.

Surveys and questionnaires are administered to gather quantitative data on public attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors related to drug legalization and crime (Apel, 2013). These instruments allow for the systematic collection of data from representative samples of the population, enabling statistical analysis of trends, correlations, and associations between variables of interest.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are conducted with key stakeholders, including policymakers, law enforcement officials, community leaders, and individuals affected by drug policies (Philbin et al., 2008). These qualitative methods provide insights into the implementation and effects of drug legalization measures, as well as the underlying social, economic, and political dynamics shaping drug policy outcomes.

Probability sampling techniques, such as random sampling or stratified sampling, are used to ensure the representativeness of samples in quantitative surveys and questionnaires. By randomly selecting participants from the population of interest, researchers can minimize bias and enhance the generalizability of findings.

Purposeful sampling techniques, such as snowball sampling or maximum variation sampling, are employed in qualitative interviews and focus groups to identify participants with diverse perspectives and experiences related to drug legalization and crime. This allows researchers to capture a wide range of viewpoints and narratives, enriching the qualitative analysis.

Statistical analysis software, such as SPSS or R, is used to analyze quantitative data on crime rates and other relevant variables (Bryman & Cramer, 2004). Regression analysis, correlation analysis, and other statistical techniques are employed to examine the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates while controlling for confounding variables.

Qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti, is used to code, categorize, and interpret qualitative data from interviews and focus groups (Woods et al., 2016). Thematic analysis, content analysis, and narrative analysis techniques are employed to identify themes, patterns, and divergent perspectives within the qualitative data.

Ethical principles, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for human dignity, are upheld throughout the research process. Measures are taken to protect the privacy and anonymity of research participants, and ethical approval is obtained from relevant institutional review boards where applicable.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result

Our analysis suggests that the impact of drug legalization on crime rates varies depending on the specific types of drugs involved. For example, in jurisdictions where cannabis legalization has been implemented, we observe mixed effects on crime rates, with some areas experiencing decreases in certain types of crime, such as property crime and violent crime, while others show no significant changes or even increases in crime. In contrast, preliminary evidence suggests that the legalization or medicalization of opioids may be associated with heightened concerns about opioid-related crime, including drug trafficking, diversion, and illicit production.

Our findings underscore the importance of adopting a nuanced and context-specific approach to understanding the impact of drug legalization on crime rates. Rather than assuming uniform effects across all drug types and jurisdictions, policymakers and researchers must consider the unique characteristics of different substances, as well as the diverse social, economic, and cultural contexts in which drug policies are implemented. By recognizing the heterogeneity of drug policy outcomes, stakeholders can tailor interventions to address specific challenges and opportunities in different communities.

The preliminary findings highlight the potential for unintended consequences and secondary effects of drug legalization measures on crime rates. While some areas may experience reductions in certain types of crime following drug policy reforms, others may see increases or shifts in criminal activity. It is essential for policymakers to anticipate and mitigate these unintended consequences through targeted interventions, such as community policing initiatives, diversion programs, and harm reduction services. By proactively addressing secondary effects, policymakers can maximize the benefits of drug legalization while minimizing potential harms to public safety and well-being.

Our analysis suggests that changes in drug laws can influence the demand for law enforcement resources and the prioritization of crime prevention efforts. Policymakers and law enforcement agencies must adapt their enforcement strategies and resource allocation to align with evolving patterns of drug-related crime. This may involve reallocating resources from traditional drug enforcement activities to community-based interventions, diversion programs, and treatment services aimed at addressing the root causes of drug-related harm. By adopting a proactive and evidence-based approach to enforcement, stakeholders can enhance public safety and reduce the burden on criminal justice systems.

The preliminary findings underscore the importance of adopting collaborative and multidisciplinary approaches to drug policy and crime prevention. Addressing the complex interplay of factors shaping drug-related crime requires the involvement of diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, law enforcement officials, healthcare providers, community organizations, and individuals affected by drug policies. By fostering partnerships and knowledge exchange across different sectors, stakeholders can leverage complementary expertise and resources to develop comprehensive and effective strategies for addressing drug-related crime and promoting public health and safety.

Our findings highlight the need for continued monitoring and evaluation of the effects of drug legalization on crime rates over time. As drug policy reforms evolve and new evidence emerges, stakeholders must remain vigilant in assessing the impact of these changes on crime trends and patterns. Longitudinal studies, comparative analyses, and rigorous evaluations are essential for identifying emerging trends, evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, and informing ongoing policy decisions. By maintaining a commitment to evidence-based policymaking and continuous learning, stakeholders can adapt their approaches to address evolving challenges and opportunities in drug regulation and crime prevention.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Results in Light of Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Our analysis provides evidence to support the research objective of assessing the impact of drug legalization on crime rates. By examining changes in crime rates before and after the implementation of drug legalization measures, we have identified trends and patterns that suggest a complex relationship between drug policy reforms and criminal activity. While some areas experience reductions in certain types of crime following drug legalization, others show no significant changes or even increases in crime rates, highlighting the heterogeneity of outcomes across different jurisdictions and drug types.

Our findings partially support the hypothesis that drug legalization will lead to decreases in crime rates. While some areas exhibit reductions in certain types of crime following drug policy reforms, others show no significant changes or even increases in crime rates. These divergent outcomes suggest that the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates is contingent upon various contextual factors, including the specific types

of drugs involved, the design and implementation of drug policies, and the socioeconomic conditions of affected communities.

Our analysis provides mixed support for the hypothesis that drug legalization will reduce drug-related crime. While some areas experience decreases in drug-related offenses following drug policy reforms, others show no significant changes or even increases in drug-related crime rates. These findings suggest that the impact of drug legalization on drug-related crime is complex and multifaceted, influenced by factors such as changes in law enforcement priorities, shifts in drug markets, and the availability of treatment and harm reduction services.

Our findings suggest that the relationship between drug legalization and public health outcomes is nuanced and context-dependent. While drug legalization may contribute to reductions in certain types of crime and drug-related harm, such as overdose deaths and transmission of infectious diseases, it may also give rise to unintended consequences, such as increases in drug use or shifts in patterns of drug consumption. These findings underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to drug policy that prioritizes harm reduction, prevention, and access to treatment services.

Our analysis provides insights into the potential for drug legalization to promote criminal justice reform by reducing the burden on the criminal justice system and addressing systemic inequalities in drug enforcement. While some areas experience decreases in drug-related arrests and convictions following drug policy reforms, others show no significant changes or even increases in law enforcement activity. These findings highlight the need for continued efforts to reform drug policies, prioritize alternatives to incarceration, and address racial disparities in drug enforcement practices.

3.2.2 Alternative Explanations for Study Findings on Drug Legalization and Crime Rates

While our study has provided valuable insights into this complex phenomenon, alternative interpretations may shed further light on the multifaceted dynamics at play. Alternative explanations may center around socioeconomic conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, and income inequality, which have long been associated with higher levels of crime. It is plausible that changes in crime rates following drug legalization are influenced by shifts in these underlying socioeconomic factors rather than direct effects of drug policy reforms. For instance, areas experiencing economic downturns or demographic changes may witness increases in crime rates irrespective of drug policy changes.

Variations in law enforcement strategies and practices across jurisdictions could also explain differences in crime rates following drug legalization. Changes in policing tactics, resource allocation, and community engagement efforts may affect crime rates independently of drug policy reforms. For example, areas with proactive community policing initiatives may experience reductions in crime rates, regardless of changes in drug laws.

Changes in drug market dynamics and criminal behavior patterns may influence crime rates following drug legalization. Shifts in drug supply chains, pricing strategies, and consumer preferences could impact the prevalence of drug-related crime, regardless of legal status. Additionally, criminal organizations may adapt their operations in response to drug policy reforms, leading to changes in crime rates that are not directly attributable to legalization.

Long-term temporal trends and historical contexts may provide alternative explanations for changes in crime rates following drug legalization. Pre-existing trends in crime rates, as well as historical events or policy shifts, may influence the observed patterns. For example, changes in crime rates following drug legalization may reflect broader societal changes or cyclical patterns unrelated to drug policy reforms.

Alternative explanations may also stem from limitations in data quality, measurement methods, or analytical techniques. Variations in data collection practices, reporting standards, and definitions of crime may introduce biases or inaccuracies into the analysis. Moreover, statistical models used to assess the relationship between drug legalization and crime rates may overlook important confounding variables or fail to capture complex interactions.

3.2.3 strengths and limitations of the study

As with any research endeavor, our study investigating the impact of drug legalization on crime rates possesses both strengths and limitations. One of the key strengths of our study is the adoption of a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights. This methodological pluralism allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between drug legalization and crime rates, capturing both macro-level trends and micro-level dynamics.

Our study utilizes diverse data sources, including official crime statistics, surveys, interviews, and qualitative data from stakeholders. This multi-source approach enhances the validity and reliability of findings, enabling triangulation of results and validation of conclusions across different data sources.

We recognize the importance of contextual factors in shaping the impact of drug legalization on crime rates. By considering socio-economic conditions, demographic characteristics, and local enforcement practices, our study provides nuanced insights into the heterogeneity of outcomes across different jurisdictions and drug types.

Ethical principles, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for human dignity, are upheld throughout the research process. Measures are taken to protect the privacy and anonymity of research participants, ensuring the ethical conduct of the study.

Establishing causality between drug legalization and crime rates is challenging due to the presence of confounding variables and alternative explanations. While our study employs statistical techniques to control for confounders, the possibility of unobserved factors influencing the results cannot be entirely ruled out.

The generalizability of our findings may be limited due to variations in drug policy contexts, socio-economic conditions, and enforcement practices across different jurisdictions. While our study aims to capture diverse perspectives and experiences, the specific findings may not be applicable to all settings.

The reliability and validity of data sources, such as official crime statistics and self-reported surveys, may vary, affecting the accuracy of findings. Efforts are made to address data quality issues through rigorous data collection and validation procedures, but inherent limitations may still exist.

Our study examines the impact of drug legalization on crime rates at a specific point in time, limiting our ability to capture long-term trends and dynamics. Future research employing longitudinal designs can provide insights into the temporal stability and persistence of effects over extended periods.

Despite efforts to minimize bias and subjectivity in data collection and analysis, the presence of inherent biases and subjective judgments cannot be entirely eliminated. Transparency and reflexivity in the research process are essential for acknowledging and addressing potential biases.

4. Conclusions

Our research has provided valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted relationship between drug legalization and crime rates. Through a mixed-methods approach encompassing quantitative analysis and qualitative insights, we have explored the impact of drug policy reforms on various dimensions of criminal activity, shedding light on the intricacies of this pressing issue. Our findings underscore the importance of adopting a nuanced and context-specific approach to understanding the effects of drug legalization on crime rates. While some areas experience reductions in certain types of crime following drug policy reforms, others show no significant changes or even increases in crime rates. These divergent outcomes highlight the heterogeneity of effects across different jurisdictions, drug types, and socio-economic contexts. Alternative explanations, such as socio-economic factors, law enforcement strategies, market dynamics, temporal trends, and data limitations, offer additional perspectives on the observed patterns, enriching our understanding of the underlying dynamics at play. By considering these alternative interpretations, we can refine theoretical frameworks, enhance methodological approaches, and inform evidence-based policymaking aimed at promoting public safety, health, and well-being. Moreover, efforts to address the root causes of crime, such as poverty,

inequality, and social disorganization, must be prioritized alongside drug policy reforms to achieve meaningful and sustainable reductions in criminal activity.

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