Drug Dealer and Drug Users: Who’s to Blame for the Drug Crisis?

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Introduction

In the United States of America, drugs have continued to be a raging problem across the country. They have affected every community, rural and urban. There are many opinions on this issue. One that has many different forms is the question of who is to blame for the current drug problem in the country. While there can be many different answers to this question, there are two sides that generally come to the forefront: drug dealers vs. drug users. After I had spent time living in both urban and rural communities, it became clear that where a person lives may have a significant role in how one answered the question. These divergent experiences in my own life led to this research project and the opportunity to explore whether or not the type of community a person lives in might influence their view of who is to blame for the drug crisis. This paper researches two communities, Duluth, Minnesota, and Chicago, Illinois to discuss how their citizens respond to the topic of blame when it comes to the drug problem. It is my hypothesis that in smaller urban communities, like that of Duluth, the common view would be to blame the drug dealers for the drug problem, and in larger urban communities, like that of Chicago, the blame will be placed on the users. This research project explored this hypothesis through interviews with residents and a review of the existing literature related to attitudes that the public has on drug dealing and drug using. Based on the interviews and the coding of the content of them, this research study concludes that the hypothesis was too simplified and the reality is that people’s views about drug dealers and drug users is more nuanced, complicated and probably mixed than originally expected.
Literature Review

While there is not much data written about who communities blame for the drug crisis outright, there is research on the drug problem and how different communities respond to those problems. A key assumption of this study was that there would be different viewpoints and attitudes about drug dealing and drug using dependent on different communities. When doing the literature review, the first link was to locate information on whether there was variability in people’s opinions about the drug crisis (and specifically drug use and dealing) and who people might hold accountable. To do this, general articles about the drug crisis and these topics were gathered. One example was Nathan L. Centers and Mark D. Weist article titled “Inner City Youth and Drug Dealing: A Review of the Problem” which goes into detail about their viewpoint of the “very serious problem of drug dealing and inner-city adolescents.” (Centers and Weist 396). The authors take information from other studies done in the early 1990’s and apply what they found to their work in analyzing drug dealing related topics. This article explored perceptions of drug dealing. In their literature review, the authors summarized an early report from Stanton and Galbraith, 1994, which stated that “many inner-city young residents perceive the informal drug trade economy to offer the most lucrative income opportunities” (Centers and Weist 404). While this does not give data toward the original research question, it does lay the groundwork of why youth might be involved in the drug trade and, therefore, how members of a community might make sense of the reasons why people deal drugs. This article discusses the youth’s perceptions on things in their communities such as the idea that they would be in trouble with local police whether they sell drugs or not. Most youth interviewed believed that selling drugs was their only way of reasonable income and were less worried about getting caught than
they were about being the victims of violence in the community. In a telling statistic, ninety-two percent (92%) of people interviewed in a Weisman (1993) study of 37 residents in an adolescent psychiatric facility in urban northern California cities believed that it was possible to deal drugs without using any. (Center and Weist 404) This was significant because it demonstrated that dealing activity might be very distinct and different than using activity—in other words, that one might have reasonable justifications for becoming a dealer that are not linked in any way to using drugs. In addition, it might indicate that a community member making sense of drug dealing or drug using might explain these behaviors in different ways, such as economic motivation or survival.

In direct contrast to the Center’s article, “Perceived Neighborhood Illicit Drug Selling, Peer Illicit Drug Disapproval and Illicit Drug Use Among U.S. High School Seniors” by Dustin T. Duncan, summarized a study that surveyed high school seniors across the country about different things as they relate to drug use and drug selling in their neighborhoods. The results in these surveys was that 62% of students surveyed had never seen a drug sale. In addition, when it came to the approval rating of drugs like marijuana, 60% of students said their friends disapproved of the use. (Duncan 6). It is notable that in this study, respondents were embedded in a different community context that often had never interacted with drug selling and who, therefore, had a different perspective about selling and using.

These contradictions informed this research study by demonstrating that there was not a common monolithic viewpoint that people held about drug dealing and drug using. This, in turn, prompted the exploration of how these different viewpoints might play out. The contrasting viewpoints were found in numerous articles that focused on the public’s perceptions on drugs and notably several of them were done in different parts of the United States at different times.
This supported the researcher’s interest in determining whether or not type of community might influence opinions on drugs, dealing, using and blame. All articles found had limitations such as being dated, the lack of examination of the presence of bias or prejudice by respondents and situating interviews in community contexts. In short, these foundational articles raised more questions than answers.

The discrepancies do not stop there. In both the Centers and Duncan article, marijuana, alcohol, and crack cocaine are the drugs that the studies focused on. However, in other articles, including Jacob C. Warren’s “Perceived Ease of Access to Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Substances in Rural and Urban US Students”, the focus is on a much broader scale of drugs. While alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine are part of the study, many other drugs, like steroids and prescription drugs, are listed as well. The problem this presents is that the data received is not fully completed as these communities have only been asked about certain drugs, and not all drugs, like the Warren report did. (Warren Table 1) To date, Warren’s article is the only one that has studied the differences between rural and urban communities as every other article centered on one or the other. Here again, the concept of type of drug perhaps influencing opinions about users and dealers emerged as an interesting unanswered question.

While fear could play a role in people’s perspective on drugs, there was only one article that talked exclusively on the idea of perceived fear. “Perceived Neighborhood Fear and Drug Use among Young Adults” by Katherine P. Theall studied the relationship between neighborhood safety and drug use in Atlanta, Georgia. At the conclusion of her article, she stated “respondents who indicated greater fear of their neighborhood environment also had significantly greater levels of drug use than did those with lower perceived fear.” (Theall 2).
Overall, the pre-existing research showed that there is indeed a drug problem in communities and that different communities feel differently about it. What was notably missing in the existing articles was the link between people’s opinions and blame and the influence that type of community might have had on opinions.

Because the literature review, while helpful, did not answer the original question, this project used interviews to explore a small subset of respondents from a small urban community and a large urban community to determine if type of community made a difference as to opinions about drug using and drug dealing. This methodology was chosen because it would allow direct exploration of this link in a methodologically sound manner. John W. Creswell’s book “Research Design” laid out the template on which to follow for research of this type. IRB approval was not needed for this research as participants were anonymous and the interview were not recorded. The survey interviewed ten people, five from Duluth, five from the south suburbs of Chicago. The intention was to see if type of community influenced why people held the beliefs they do about drug dealing and drug using. There were difficulties in finding candidates based on finding people with exposure to the drug problem (Duluth) and finding the right demographics (Chicago). The ten respondents were adults from ages 23-60. For the city of Duluth, the genders were three males and two females, and for the city of Chicago, the genders were three females and two males.
Questions

Referring back to Creswell’s book “Research Design,” there was a list of guidelines to follow with forming the questions for the survey and gathering the data. While not recording their response makes things a bit more challenging, it was very important that people have open ended questions that would allow the respondent to provide any information and insight that they chose and guide the interview. By conducting the interview this way, the data collected was a true sense of what people believe and why they believe it instead of simply telling them how they feel and then asking them why they feel this way. By following these methods, the list of questions began to form.

The questions that were asked included:

1. When you think of the word blame what comes to mind?
2. What are factors do you believe contribute to people using illegal drugs?
3. What are factors that you believe contribute to people selling illegal drugs?
4. Who do you blame for the drug problem in your community?
5. What do you think, if any, is the appropriate punishment for someone caught doing illegal drugs?
6. What do you think, if any, is the appropriate punishment for someone caught selling illegal drugs?
7. In your opinion, how have drugs affected your community?

Before getting to the core of the interview questions on drug dealer and drug user attitudes, the interviews began with a general exploration about the respondents view of blame. By getting that sense of how they thought about “blame,” respondents were lightly primed for later questions to either link up or not link up their attitudes. After this was completed, questions
regarding their knowledge of things that contribute to people using and selling was next. By asking this set of questions, the intent was to get an idea of how much people actually knew about these topics without them going into judgement mode about dealers and users. It was essential that these questions were answered before the blame portion could begin. Once that was completed, the concept of who was to blame could be explored. After following guidelines and deciding what information was important, this is the question that were asked of each respondent.

Each interview took about 60 minutes. The interviewer recorded field notes on the content of the respondents’ answers.

**Findings**

*A. On the concept of blame:*

When asked about the concept of blame generally, the respondents from Duluth and Chicago answered similarly. The common theme was people were not taking responsibility for their actions and that many people place responsibility elsewhere on someone else, not themselves. The displaced responsibility would be another person or an object of some sort. One respondent said when reflecting on “blame”: “That song by Akon comes to mind” (Chicago resident June 17, 2019 referencing the pop/rap song “Sorry, Blame It on Me” by Akon in 2007). The respondents from Chicago painted more visual pictures when describing what blame looks like. For instance, the story of Steve Bartman and the Chicago Cubs came up. This story involved a Chicago Cubs player who tried to catch a fly ball into the stands when a fan, Steve Bartman, hit the ball and preventing the catch. After this fan intervention move, the Chicago Cubs unraveled and lost this critical game. In this story line, Steve Bartman, the fan, was the scapegoat to explain the Cubs loss. Overall, respondents from both cities agreed that blame
involved people not taking responsibility for their own actions and looking for someone else to be responsible for their experiences.

B. *Factors that lead people to use drugs:*

Before the issue of blame was brought up, it was important to understand what the interviewees knew about their view of the reason why people used and sold drugs. Finding out these reasons could give an explanation as to why they blamed the parties that they did without them even realizing it or overtly stating it. When it came to those who used drugs, both sets of respondents had a wide range of reasons that were similar. For instance, the common reasons cited by numerous respondents included peer pressure and curiosity by youth getting involved in drugs. For adults, the reasons that were most frequently listed were mental health, loss of loved one or a job, and addictions.

When talking about factors that lead people to use drugs, the Chicago respondents talked about the everyday struggles that they go through that lead them down those roads. One respondent stated “I watched my mother get high off drugs just to escape the idea of not being able to pay the rent”. (Chicago, July 18, 2019) For this community, drug use was one of the only ways people could escape from the challenges of their lives. Chicago respondents referred to a sense of empathy or understanding of why someone might choose to escape their lives into drug use. By contrast, the Duluth respondents expressed less empathetic views about drug use and although they did not go so far as to blame users for their own undoing, they held users more responsible for their situation. In essence, their answers reflected a sense of more blaming of the users for their own predicament. For some, the concept of blaming came out before even asking the question about who do you blame for drug use. While the drug problem was prevalent in Duluth, most respondents felt they were unaffected by it.
C. Factors that led people to sell drugs:

This question was met with drastically different answers between respondents in Duluth and Chicago. For starters, the respondents from Chicago were quick to point out that the primary cause of people selling drugs was the systemic economic system that forced people to make money in any way that they could. As one respondent stated: “One felony charge and they got you, what else do they expect them to do?” It was clear that no one thought people were selling because they didn’t want to get a “real job”. As another Chicago respondent stated “Nobody is getting rich off selling dope. The media be lying”. (Chicago, July 18, 2019) The interviews followed what Centers and Weist talked about in their article. The things that were leading people to sell drugs in the opinions of the residents of Chicago were every day economic struggles such as needing money, paying bills and easier accessibility to users who would purchase. Another interesting aspect was the assumption that drug dealers had more trust in the people on the streets and were more trustworthy than corporations and other “regular” jobs. This, in turn, helped provide an explanation for why people sold drugs that allowed a more empathetic view of dealers.

For the Duluth respondents, drug dealers were perceived as “outsiders” and not part of the community. Unlike the Chicago respondents, who definitely viewed drug dealers as part of the local community, Duluth respondents separated their connection to dealers and made them as “other.” In addition, this perspective was linked to a puzzlement or lack of explanation for why people would deal drugs. One respondent from Duluth implied that they didn’t know why the dealers did what they did. The Duluth respondents had no economic explanation model to justify drug dealer conduct. One respondent offered this explanation: “People want to make a quick
“buck” and there is “no real work ethic.” Two Duluth respondents specifically linked drug selling with gangs but when asked to offer evidence of the link or clarity, they could not.

D. On who’s to blame for the drug problem:

When first asked the question on who’s to blame for the drug problem, there was not a single respondent from Chicago who stated either drug user or drug dealer as the initial source for the blame. In fact, of the five people who were interviewed from Chicago, three people blamed the government for the drug problem in the community, while one blamed medical doctors who prescribed the original medicine to people, and one blamed the ones who traffic the drugs from other countries. This finding from this small subset was surprising since the original hypothesis had simplified what the expected range of responses might include. It clearly is more complicated than assigning blame to one group or another.

The common theme of those who blamed the government asserted that the drugs had gotten into the community from an outside source and that the government helped play a role in that. One person pointed to the idea that governments and big corporations “go hand in hand” in drugs being funneled into communities. One Chicago respondent stated “Instead of pointing the finger at Jerome [a reference to a standard African American male], how ‘bout we point it at Jim or Bob or whoever else is in charge of J.P Morgan trying to get cocaine into the community.” (Chicago, July 18, 2019) One resident from Chicago who had lived there for fifty years stated that they held the government responsible because they made it available for a cheap price with no alternative. As the respondent stated: “Drugs was an easier choice than a job, sports, or schools”. (Chicago July 17, 2019)

One thing that every one of the Chicago interviewees agreed on was their level of blame for dealers in that not a single respondent placed blame for the drug crisis on dealers. The most
common reason that the Chicago respondents gave for drug dealing behavior was “drug dealers were businessmen who were doing what they needed to do to provide for their families.” This line of reasoning mirrors what was in Nathan Center’s article—the idea that selling drugs was the only way someone could provide for families was echoed through the Chicago interviews. People talk about the distrust that people in the communities have of corporations and the system. Some specifically stated that drug dealing is all they can do. And the sympathy and empathy that exists for this reality was clear in every respondent’s answer.

On the other hand, the Chicago respondents had a different view on drug users. While there were those who believed that those who used drugs were addicts and needed professional help and thus blame was unwarranted, there were those who believe that those who used should hold at least some of the responsibility for the positions they were in. One Chicago respondent stated: “Users make the cycle continue. Without the demand for the drug, there would be no need for the supply.” (Chicago, July 17, 2019) One person talked about the responsibility they have to their children not to use drugs: “A person can do drugs all they want, the moment they have kids they should stop, otherwise they are part of the problem.” (Chicago, July 17, 2019) All Chicago respondents agreed that no youth who used drugs were responsible for their actions. Yet, if and when they became adults, and still had a drug problem, then that was on them (the user) to fix. Despite the difference in perspective between youth and adult drug users, it was a clear theme that the most culpable are the ones who control the drugs: the government and corporations.

The respondents from Duluth had a much different response to the question. No respondent from Duluth held the government responsible for the drug crisis—it simply was never referenced. Rather, Duluth respondents held either (or both) users and/or dealers
responsible for the issue. They did not assign blame to outside forces. The Duluth respondents sometimes divided on whether dealers or users were equally to blame. One interesting finding from the Duluth respondents was how often the city of Chicago came up. One respondent stated: “They come up from Chicago and bring that poison into our city” (Duluth, June 5, 2019).

Another observation involved the role of media coverage into Duluth resident perception. One respondent stated: “Whenever you see the news, you see drug bust and the ones arrested are said to be from Chicago. Where else would the drugs be coming from?” (Duluth, June 12th, 2019)

Duluth respondents did not distinguish between drug users and drug dealers as key categories but rather focused on a “we vs. them” mentality of people who are involved in drugs (either users/dealers and people who are not. One other interesting finding was Duluth respondents focused on type of drug making a difference. Chicago respondents focused more on drugs in general being an issue whereas Duluth respondents focused more on classical street drugs being an issue. Type of drug also seems to be linked to underlying assumptions about types of people.

One Duluth respondent stated: “you see a lot of minorities as dope heads who are lazy and don’t want to work, yet get assistance from the government, you don’t see the problem?” (Duluth, July 1, 2019).

In Duluth respondents, there was an assumption that if you dealt drugs, you used drugs. This was an interesting contrast to some of the literature review research that indicated a clear distinction between drug users and sellers. Because Duluth respondents tended to see both groups as interrelated, when pressed to distinguish between them, Duluth respondents tended to not be able to explain their reasoning very deeply. They wouldn’t pick a side between drug users and drug dealers because both groups are the same group. Drug dealing became associated with a demographic of people, rather than specific people. Overall, the concept of drug dealing as a
separate activity seemed like a foreign concept to the ones who were being interviewed from Duluth.

When asked about the issue of drug users, the respondents from Duluth split users into two different groups: students and “others”. One Duluth respondent stated: “Of course, in any college town, you’ll have an influx of drug use on campus, but they aren’t the problem.” (Duluth June 2, 2019). This was a common theme in the Duluth respondents. While drugs were still considered bad, as long as drug use was only happening on campus, and students were still functioning, then one could turn the other way. However, in communities like West Duluth and Lincoln Park, the same courtesy was not given. Duluth respondents consistently named these communities as problems in the Duluth area, and the citizens living in these neighborhoods received a heavy load of the respondent’s blame.

E. The Idea of Punishment for drug dealers and users

Like the concept of who to blame, the idea of punishment for drug dealing and drug using varied between the two groups of respondents. Chicago respondents stated an interest in leniency toward both drug dealers and users and the obligation to provide help from the community. Respondents from Duluth did the opposite and embraced a crime and punishment approach. For instance, when asked about punishment for dealers who are caught dealing, the majority of Chicago respondents said they thought that the government should help a drug dealer or user find different methods of making money that would provide for their families or giving them the resources that could do this. Some mentioned specific aid such as reliable transportation to job sites, providing working computers in the community centers and other direct aids toward lawful jobs. Only one respondent in Chicago thought jail time was the preferred response.
When it came to users, none of the Chicago respondents thought prison should be an option for those caught using. As one respondent from Chicago stated: “They’re just gonna go to jail and use harder drugs” (Chicago July 24, 2019). Mandatory help was suggested numerous times by Chicago respondents, while one person stated, “they should be offered help, and if they turn it down, let them have the drugs so they can kill themselves.” Chicago respondents also distinguished between addicts and other users. For example, one Chicago respondent stated: “If the person is a functioning addict, let them be; if not, force them to a rehabilitation center.” (Chicago, July 17, 2019) Overall, the only groups that all of the Chicago respondents referenced should face prison time is the government and corporations because of their culpability in enabling drug use and dealing.

Duluth, respondents were similar to Chicago respondents in that they also did not favor prison as a punishment for drug users but they made it clear that prison was still necessary sometimes. As one Duluth respondent stated: “They have to get them off the streets.” And the idea of prison was more acceptable for the Duluth respondents for dealers who were found in the community. As one Duluth respondent stated: “They already need help, locking them away won’t help anyone”.

F. Drugs and the Community

When asked about how drugs have affected the community, most respondents in both Chicago and Duluth, responded that drugs have a negative effect. Those in Chicago talked about drugs splitting families apart and leading to a high death rate. For some, the toll of seeing family members “doped up” tore them apart and shifted their outlook on life. For the Duluth respondents, people spoke at length about the effects drugs have had on their community. As one
Duluth respondent stated: “There’s places I won’t even bring my children because of this, downtown is such a mess.” (Duluth, June 20, 2019)

However, one respondent from Chicago had a different view on how drugs affected the community. They stated: “Drugs has given black people a chance to survive.” (Chicago, July 23, 2019). This respondent spoke at length about how “the drug game has given people a voice in their community, “and while frowned upon by others, gives them the means to support their families when the government does not.

In summary, the findings in respect to the seven questions revealed surprising results and invite additional research. The sense of respondent perception of both drug users and drug dealers is more nuanced than originally assumed and adding an element around the concept of blame and the presence or absence of empathy might be an interesting future research trajectory.

**Conclusion**

When it came to the idea of blaming and drugs, the original hypothesis stated that communities like Duluth (smaller urban) would lean toward blaming drug dealers for the drug problem in their communities while more urban areas (like Chicago) would lean toward blaming users for the problem. This hypothesis was proven incorrect through this McNair project. Future research could be done around the intersection between blame, empathy, drug users and drug dealers. Additional interviews with broader groups of respondents might allow deeper exploration of how members of the public make sense of these two groups and their relative responsibilities to the drug crisis.
Works Cited


