

Does Capitalism Cause Addiction? Empirical Analysis of Alexander's Dislocation Theory of Addiction

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So powerful, one taste will have you hooked. Public and political opinion agree; drug addiction is biological. The action of drugs alone drives addiction. Prohibitionist approaches to drug policy and policing rest on this assumption. But evidence of an association between poverty and addiction epidemics undermines this. Why should addiction rates vary when drug use is broadly consistent across societies? Dislocation theory suggests these addiction epidemics are seen because the isolating forces of free market capitalism create a painful psychosocial dislocation from an individual's community that some address through addiction, and that this psychosocial dislocation is experienced more viscerally through economic deprivation. This has never been empirically tested.

This work uses dramatic changes in New Jersey's economy during the financial crash of the early 21st century to provide this first empirical examination. A series of multiple regression analyses were run between variables indicative of psychosocial dislocation – unemployment, debt delinquency, and bankruptcy – and addiction rate measures. Regional personal income estimates were controlled for to ensure psychosocial dislocation was not bifurcated with poverty. While some indicators were found to be unsuitable measures of addiction and dislocation levels for this particular study, overall this analysis established a direct relationship between psychosocial dislocation and addiction. These findings have implications for drug policy; adoption of practices, such as restorative justice, that may serve to rebuild the psychosocial integration of drug users is urgently required.