

Box 3. Effect of expanding treatment as a means of reducing drug related crime in the United Kingdom

In 2001 the United Kingdom government created the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse (NTA) to “improve the availability, capacity and effectiveness of drug treatment in England”; one of the key objectives was to reduce drug-related crime. The agency oversaw the implementation of a new drug treatment system based on the best available evidence according to experts in the field of substance abuse.

The introduction of treatment programmes overseen by the NTA has led to a large increase in the number of drug users in treatment, from around 100 000 in 2001 to 210 815 in 2008/09. The new system was also more efficient, with shorter waiting times for treatment: in 2001 the average waiting time for an appointment was 9 weeks while in 2008/09 it was 5 days. A study on the effect of treatment on outcomes (Drug Treatment Outcomes Research Study, 2009) showed that the greatest reductions in drug use were found in problem drug users: 12 months after the baseline interviews, 49% of heroin users and 61% of crack users were no longer using drugs. Treatment also affected risk behaviours such as sharing injecting equipment; of the people who inject drugs who reported sharing at baseline, 77% had stopped sharing 1 year later. Treatment also had a positive effect on crime: around 40% of users at the start of the study had committed offences in the previous 4 weeks; this fell to 16% after 1 year. Interestingly, the study also showed that users referred to treatment by the criminal justice system were as likely to complete treatment successfully as users referred by other sources. The net benefit to society per person undergoing treatment, considering their improved outcomes in terms of health and crime, was £6527. In addition, for every £1 invested in drug treatments, £2.50 are returned to society. A more recent study by the NTA (Estimating the crime reduction benefits of drug treatment and recovery, 2012) estimated that drug treatment prevented approximately 4.9 million crimes in 2010/2011, corresponding to £960 million in savings to society (including the public, businesses and the justice and health systems).