

Commentary

Revised January 24, 2011

Marijuana, Schizophrenia and Jared Loughner

The mass-shooting in Tucson, Arizona by Jared Lee Loughner, killing 6 and injuring 13, has created a media feeding frenzy over the story's meaning. The initial focus was on possible political motivations for the shootings while later the focus shifted to Loughner's mental disorder. Overlooked by most commentators is Loughner's history of heavy marijuana and alcohol use.¹ An important exception to the widespread failure to focus on the role of substance abuse and violence in this story is the recent commentary by CASA Columbia Chairman and Founder Joseph A. Califano, Jr.² Substance abuse alone did not make Loughner a killer, but it played a significant role in bringing him to that shopping center on that fateful Saturday morning.

Loughner's "symptoms and the trajectory of his disease followed the classic patterns so completely that research psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey could say, without ever meeting Loughner, that 'changes are 99% that he has schizophrenia.'"³ If Loughner indeed does suffer from schizophrenia, he may be "so delusional and disorganized that the world he perceives bears increasingly little resemblance to reality."⁴ Reports of inappropriate behavior at school and multiple run-ins with campus police ultimately led to suspension from college.⁵ Loughner was told he could return only after resolving violations and obtaining mental health clearance. He then dropped out.⁶

One important message that must be heard amidst the chatter over this tragedy is that marijuana is not a harmless recreational drug. The sale and use of marijuana is often trivialized, or even glamorized. Marijuana use is neither trivial nor glamorous. Marijuana use is linked to addiction,⁷ to dropping out of high school,⁸ to lower educational attainment,⁹ to other substance use,¹⁰ and to mental illness.^{11 12}

Marijuana use doubles the risk and hastens the onset of schizophrenia. Once schizophrenia emerges, marijuana use adversely impacts the course of the disease.¹³ Schizophrenics are about twice as likely to smoke marijuana as individuals without this mental disorder. Marijuana use not only makes the symptoms of this disease worse, but it reduces the effectiveness of treatments for schizophrenia. Marijuana use predicts an increase in the severity of psychotic symptoms. The marijuana-associated adverse course of psychotic symptoms in schizophrenia persists even after taking into account other clinical, substance use, and demographic issues.¹⁴

The relationship of schizophrenia to violent behavior is "almost completely determined by drug and alcohol use."^{15 16} Research has shown that "schizophrenia and other psychoses are associated with violence but that the association is strongest in people with substance abuse and most of the excess risk of violence associated with schizophrenia and other psychoses is mediated by substance abuse."¹⁷ In another study, researchers examined national Swedish registers of hospital admissions and criminal convictions for violent offenses from 1973 to 2006, comparing risk of violent crime in patients with schizophrenia to the general population controls. Among patients with schizophrenia, 13.2% had at least

one violent offense compared to 5.3% of the general population controls without schizophrenia. Of the schizophrenic patients with substance use disorders, 27.6% had at least one violent offense. Of the schizophrenic patients without substance use disorders, 8.5% had at least one violent offense, closer to the general population controls of 5.3%. These data show that the coexistence of substance use and schizophrenia increases the risk of violence more than three-fold from 8.5% to 27.6%. These researchers concluded that “the association between schizophrenia and violent crime is minimal unless the patient is also diagnosed as having substance abuse comorbidity.”¹⁸ The primary factor contributing to the tragic event in Arizona was not just Jared Loughner’s mental state, but rather, the combination of psychosis and marijuana use, which creates a much higher risk of violence.

Loughner’s chronic marijuana use and heavy drinking began in high school.¹⁹ He dropped out after his junior year²⁰ and later enrolled in an alternative program at a community college to obtain his diploma.²¹ ²² A math teacher at Pima Community College reported that Loughner appeared to be high on drugs during class last summer.²³ ²⁴ Loughner was previously arrested for possession of drug paraphernalia in October, 2007.²⁵ He faced a second charge for defacing a stop sign in 2008.²⁶ Both charges were dismissed after completion of a drug diversion program in March, 2009.²⁷ An Army official reported that Loughner was rejected for military service after admitting to “excessive drug use” – that he was a regular marijuana smoker.²⁸ These are signs of his continued long-term drug use.

There is a strong relationship between substance use and crime. Drug users are more likely than nonusers to commit crimes.²⁹ Among Federal and State prison inmates, 24.5% and 29%, respectively, reported being under the influence of drugs when they committed violent offenses.³⁰ The Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM II) program conducts interviews and tests for drugs in adult male arrestees held in police booking facilities in ten US counties. Well over half of all arrestees in 2009 (a range of 56% to 82%) tested positive for one or more drug at the time of arrest. Marijuana was the most commonly detected drug among people arrested for crimes in 9 of the 10 sites, ranging from 36% to 48% of tested arrestees.³¹

The combination of serious mental illness and substance abuse worsens both disorders. This combination plays a major role in the violence that is sometimes associated with schizophrenia. Jared Lee Loughner’s marijuana use was not an incidental part of this tragic story; it was central to the tragedy in Tucson on January 8, 2011.

For more information on the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc., visit www.ibhinc.org.

Robert L. DuPont, M.D.

President, Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc.

First Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) 1973 to 1978

Bertha K. Madras, Ph.D.

Professor of Psychobiology, Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

Former Deputy Director for Demand Reduction, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) 2005 to 2007

Established in 1978, the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization working to reduce substance abuse through the power of good ideas. IBH websites include: www.ibhinc.org, www.StopDruggedDriving.org, and www.PreventionNotPunishment.org.

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