

Drug Use and Urban Violence: An Ethnographic Study of the Interactions of Emotion, Economy, and Social Networks in Tébessa Province

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Abstract:

This study investigates the complex relationship between drug use and urban violence in Tébessa Province, Algeria, exploring how structural, socio-economic, emotional, and spatial factors interact to produce violence pathways among current and former substance users. Employing a qualitative-ethnographic approach, fieldwork was conducted between January-August 2025 with 32 participants comprising 17 current users, 9 former users, and 6 key informants. Data collection utilized participant observation in cafés, public squares, and drug-prevalent spaces, complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews and life narrative techniques, while thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework identified emergent patterns across individual, spatial, and network dimensions.

The study revealed three distinct violence pathways that challenge linear causation models. Spontaneous violence emerges from drug-induced impulsivity and emotional dysregulation, where substances reshape users' emotional thresholds and threat perception. Functional violence operates as economic mechanisms for substance financing through theft and robbery, transforming violence into survival strategies within precarious urban conditions. Collective-spatial violence manifests in marginalized neighborhoods, cafés, and public squares during high-risk periods, where peer networks, dealer disputes, and weak social control create violence hot spots.

Results demonstrate that violence emerges not as direct pharmacological consequence but through complex interactions between individual emotional states, socio-economic pressures, peer networks, and urban spatial structures. These findings challenge unidimensional explanations while demonstrating the need for integrative theoretical frameworks combining psychological, social learning, anomie, and conflict theories. The study contributes contextual understanding to Arab urban settings and informs multi-level intervention strategies targeting youth in marginalized neighborhoods, economic alternatives, and strengthened social control institutions.

Keywords:

Drug use, Urban violence, Ethnographic study, Social networks, Spatial structures

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1. Introduction :

Drug use is considered one of the most prominent socio-psychological phenomena affecting young populations in cities, where its impact is not limited to the individual's health dimension, but extends to threatening social security through its increasing association with patterns of urban violence. This phenomenon gains its severity from its spread in both marginalized and central neighborhoods alike, generating collective fights, individual assaults, and property attacks, which negatively reflects on the social fabric and public security.

Despite the abundance of literature on drugs or urban violence separately, the majority of studies have focused on quantitative or medical-psychological approaches, neglecting to delve deeply into the voices of the actors themselves and their daily experiences, particularly in the Arab context where unemployment, urban fragility, and weak social control institutions intersect. Furthermore, few studies have clearly documented how drug use intertwines with property attacks or how neighborhoods and public spaces produce complex pathways to violence.

Hence, the problem of this study emerges in attempting to understand how urban violence is reproduced through different pathways of drug use in Tébessa Province, based on narratives from current and former users and key informants, considering the interaction of structural, socio-economic, emotional, and spatial pressures.

The relationship between drug use and urban violence is neither simple nor linear, as it cannot be reduced to a direct causal equation (drug use = violence). Rather, it is a complex phenomenon where several levels intersect: the socio-spatial structure of neighborhoods, coercive economic pressures and unemployment, the psychological-emotional states of users, and social networks of companions, dealers, and informal protection. Based on the above, the problem of this study can be formulated as follows: *How can the relationship between drug use and urban violence be explained in light of the interaction of socio-spatial, economic, and emotional factors, as narrated and lived in the daily experiences of users and those around them?*

Starting from the central problematic, this study was formulated as a set of sub-questions aimed at deconstructing the pathways of the relationship between drug use and urban violence as narrated and lived in the daily lives of the actors:

- How do actors narrate their experiences with drug use within urban life, and what connections do they establish between these experiences and their involvement in acts of violence against persons?
- What are the socio-spatial structures (neighborhoods, networks, nightlife venues, peak times) that are viewed as facilitating contexts for escalating violence during or after drug use?
- How do emotional states (impulsiveness, anxiety, misjudgment of threats) reshape pathways of violent interaction in the moment, according to participants' narratives?
- In what ways do actors describe the overlap between economic motives (financing substances) and life pressures (unemployment, urban fragility) and resorting to violence?

1.1. Objectives:

This study aims to analyze how actors narrate their experiences with drug use within urban space and elucidate the connections they weave between these experiences and their involvement in acts of violence against persons. It also seeks to identify socio-spatial structures including neighborhoods, networks, nightlife venues, and peak times that are viewed as facilitating contexts for escalating violence during or after drug use. Additionally, the study aims to explore the role played by emotional states, such as impulsiveness, anxiety, and misjudgment of threats, in reshaping pathways of violent interaction in the moment according to participants' narratives, while deconstructing the overlap between economic motives related to financing substances and daily life pressures represented by unemployment and urban fragility, and resorting to violence as a survival pathway or adaptation mechanism.

1.2. Significance:

The significance of this study lies in its examination of a complex phenomenon with serious social consequences, represented by the interplay between drug use and urban violence within the neighborhoods of Tébessa Province. It fills a knowledge gap in literature that has often focused on medical or legal aspects while neglecting the lived experience of actors. Moreover, its qualitative-ethnographic approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how economic pressures, emotional states, spatial structures, and social networks intersect in producing violence. The practical significance lies in the possibility of utilizing its findings to formulate preventive policies and social interventions that are more realistic and suitable to the specificities of the local urban field.

1.3. Definitions and Conceptual Framework

- **Drug Use :** Non-medical/illegal use of psychoactive substances (2025، معمري و خالد). Scope of substances in this study: cannabis and its derivatives, psychotropic substances (pills/sedatives without prescription), stimulants.
- **Urban Violence Crimes:** Individual/collective physical assault, violence with bladed weapons, fights related to neighborhood/public space, threats under substance influence, and crimes against property: simple theft, robbery, pickpocketing.
- **Actors:** Current or former users who have been involved (according to their narratives) in urban violence incidents; and key informants to support triangulation (social/psychological specialist, association activist, community police).

1.4. Theoretical Framework for the Integrative Approach

Explaining the drug use-urban violence relationship cannot be confined to single-dimensional approaches but requires an integrative framework based on classical and modern theories highlighting structural, social, psychological, and cultural factor interactions.

Shaw and McKay's (1942) social disorganization theory provides crucial foundations for understanding how urban neighborhood fragility, weak social control institutions, poverty, and marginalization create fertile environments for drug use and violence. However, its limitation lies in spatial determinism assumptions, as not all marginalized neighborhood residents engage in deviant behavior

Building on this structural foundation, Merton's (1938) anomie theory emphasizes how tension from gaps between social aspirations and legitimate achievement means drives

individuals toward deviations like drug use or violence. While highlighting the phenomenon's structural aspects, this theory neglects emotional and individual dimensions explaining momentary or random violence

Complementing these structural insights, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Sutherland, 1947) focuses on imitation, modeling, and socialization mechanisms within peer networks or gangs, helping understand how drug use and violent behavior transmit through social interaction. However, this approach remains limited without integration with structural and psychological factors

From a psychological perspective, frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1962) focuses on causal relationships between frustration and aggression, making it suitable for explaining impulsive violence under drug influence or amid pressing life tensions. Nevertheless, it appears simplistic when isolated from social and economic dimensions

Expanding the analysis politically, conflict theory (Marx, 1971; Quinney, 1970) emphasizes that violence and crime reflect class struggle and inequality, where economic and political structures produce exclusion and marginalization contexts, pushing the marginalized toward illegitimate survival strategies. However, this approach neglects psychological and individual aspects

Finally, Becker's (1963) labeling theory constitutes a qualitative addition, clarifying that society not only produces deviance through structural circumstances but reproduces it through labeling and exclusion processes, whereby the "user" or "violent person" becomes a deviant identity carrier driving continued pathway adherence. This theory's limitation lies in failing to explain initial deviance beginnings before labeling occurs

These theories demonstrate that the drugs-urban violence relationship is complex and multi-layered, operating across distinct but interconnected levels:

- **Structural-Spatial Level:** Social disorganization and anomie creating environmental conditions
- **Social-Relational Level:** Social learning and labeling processes shaping behavior transmission
- **Psychological-Emotional Level:** Frustration-aggression mechanisms driving impulsive responses
- **Structural-Political Level:** Conflict dynamics generating systematic exclusion and survival strategies

Integrating these approaches within a comprehensive framework enables more holistic phenomenon understanding, where structural pressures intersect with individual emotions, interact with peer networks, and engage with labeling and exclusion processes to produce complex drug use and violence pathways. This multi-theoretical integration transcends individual theory limitations while preserving each approach's explanatory strengths, providing a robust analytical foundation for understanding the drug use-violence nexus in urban contexts.

1.5. Previous Studies

Sanders, Lankenau, and Jackson-Bloom's (2010) pioneering study examined drug use and risky behaviors among gang youth in Los Angeles, revealing the interconnected nature of substance use, violence, unsafe sexual behaviors, and weapon possession. This research's significance lies in penetrating a socially hidden youth population within the American urban context (Sanders et al., 2010).

Building on this urban violence perspective, Havnes and colleagues (2014) shifted focus to the prison context in Norway, conducting a qualitative study among prisoners undergoing opioid maintenance treatment. Their findings extended the understanding by demonstrating that drug use links to violence both directly through physiological effects and indirectly through socio-economic circumstances, while introducing the crucial moral dimension in explaining violent behaviors (Havnes et al., 2014).

Complementing these urban and institutional studies, Gadomski and colleagues (2022) explored the often-overlooked rural context in Poland, focusing on criminal offenders under supervision. Their research revealed that poverty, unemployment, and family breakdown significantly strengthen the drug-violence relationship, positioning substance use as a catalyst for violence in rural environments (Gadomski et al., 2022).

Transitioning to the Arab context, Al-Sawwaf and colleagues (2024) employed a descriptive correlational approach with 200 cannabis users across Egyptian governorates. Their findings confirmed the significant relationship between cannabis use and violence levels, notably without demographic variable influence. Despite confirming the empirical drug-violence relationship, the study's geographical and sample limitations highlighted the need for broader research (2024، وأخرون، الصواف).

In the Algerian context, Saboun and Deryouch (2018) addressed urban violence through a sociological analytical framework, linking violence manifestations in major cities to unemployment, marginalization, weak family ties, and informal economy growth. Their work established that institutional distrust deepens impunity feelings, feeding violence mechanisms (2018، و دريوش، سبعون).

Further enriching the theoretical foundation, Mohammed Ayed and Kheir Eddine Bouziane (2016) provided comprehensive theoretical treatment of youth violence in urban environments, integrating biological, psychological, social, and political factors through multiple theoretical lenses including biological theory, conflict theory, and social learning theory. However, their purely theoretical approach, while valuable, lacked empirical validation (2016، عايد وبوزيان).

Most recently, Khalidi and Ben Deridi (2025) employed an ethnographic approach to examine youth violence in Tébessa city through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Their findings revealed that symbolic, verbal, and physical violence stems from social marginalization, unemployment, and weak family control, with youth using violence as a protest mechanism against social conditions. While illuminating the local context, the study focused on description rather than analyzing violence organization dynamics (2025، خالدى و بن دريدي).

The literature review reveals consistent findings regarding the close relationship between drug use and violence across both Western contexts (Sanders et al., 2010; Havnes et al., 2014; Gadomski et al., 2022) and Arab contexts (2016، عايد و بوزيان، 2018؛ سبعون و دريوش، 2024، خالدى و بن دريدي، 2025، الصواف وأخرون).

However, contextual differences emerge in study focus: Western studies concentrated on gang youth, prisoners, and rural criminals, while Arab studies emphasized urban and youth violence within different socio-cultural contexts. Methodologically, Western studies relied more heavily on qualitative field methods, whereas some Arab studies remained closer to theoretical or descriptive analysis.

This identified research gap underscores the critical need for qualitative field studies in Arab contexts that address the drug use-violence relationship within contemporary urban settings, focusing on lived experiences and individual narratives while integrating the moral-value dimension that appeared in Western studies but remains underexplored in Arab contexts.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative-ethnographic approach focusing on current and former users alongside key informants including community activists and social/health professionals. This design captures subjective meanings and contextual dimensions inaccessible through quantitative methods (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999).

The study was conducted in Tébessa Province, eastern Algeria, selected for its urban marginalization phenomena and growing prevalence of substance use and violence, characterized by weak social control institutions and concentrated youth gathering points. Fieldwork occurred between January and August 2025, enabling capture of variations between ordinary days and high-risk weekend periods.

Purposive sampling yielded 32 participants across three categories: current users (17 participants, aged 18-38) primarily from marginalized peripheral neighborhoods; former users (9 participants, aged 25-40) mainly from central popular neighborhoods; and key informants (6 participants) with direct professional experience in studied contexts. Participants were selected based on substance type, violence involvement, and neighborhood diversity for comprehensive representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Data collection employed participant observation in cafés, squares, and substance-prevalent locations, recording events and contexts in field notebooks. Semi-structured interviews explored initiation patterns, emotional states, financing mechanisms, and social networks. Life narrative techniques tracked individual trajectories and identity transformations over time (Atkinson, 1998).

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework through open and axial coding, developing integrative thematic maps across structural-spatial, social-relational, psychological-emotional, and political-economic levels. Analysis utilized qualitative software and manual coding matrices (Allsop et al., 2022).

Ethical considerations included informed verbal consent, participant identity protection through coding, and risk prevention regarding debts or supplier disputes.

3. Results:

3.1. Descriptive Table of Participants

Category	Age Range	Gender	Neighborhood	Duration of Use	Indicators of Reported Violence History
Current User	18-38	Predominantly male (few females)	Marginalized urban peripheral neighborhoods	2-10 years	Group fights, knife attacks, violence during nightlife
Former User	25-40	Male	Central/popular and marginal neighborhoods	5-15 years	Violence related to substance funding (theft/robbery), individual assaults
Key Informant	30-50	Male and female (social/psychological specialists, community police, civil society actors)	Diverse (according to work field)	Not applicable	Confirm prevalence of assaults at drug gathering points and marginal neighborhoods

Source: Field Data, 2025

3.2. Individual Narratives of the Relationship Between Drug Use, Violence, and Property Damage

3.2.1. The Beginnings of Drug Use: From Individual Experience to Collective Normalization

Participants' narratives reveal that the beginning of their relationship with drugs often came during adolescence or early adulthood, where individual vulnerability intersects with urban contexts fraught with pressure and deprivation. Several of them mentioned that their first experience was with cannabis in peripheral neighborhood cafés, where "companionship" played a pivotal role in introducing them to the world of drug use. One of them said: "The first time I smoked was with the neighborhood boys, they were older than me, I felt I had to be like them."

Here emerges the mechanism of collective normalization: drug use is not an isolated individual act but an experience that occurs within peer circles, as part of proving identity and belonging. This aligns with what social learning theories propose, which view deviant behaviors as acquired through imitation and observation within reference groups.

In contrast, others narrate that their entry into pregabalin use ("Sarookh") and Indian cannabis ("Zatla") occurred through the black market spread in almost all neighborhoods and public squares, while cocaine or crystal meth and ecstasy use was associated with nighttime parties. Here it becomes clear that place functions as a mediating factor between the individual and the substance: cafés, stations, and nighttime parties are not merely neutral spaces, but social-spatial structures that facilitate immersion in drug use.

The narratives of heroin and Suboxone users were distinguished by being linked to the search for "escape from pain" or attempts to control chronic anxiety, reflecting a false emotional-therapeutic dimension of the experience.

3.2.2. Evolution of Use Patterns: From Occasions to Daily Routine

Most narratives agree that drug use began as an occasional experience linked to curiosity or special occasions, but quickly transformed into a daily practice integrated into routine. One of them says: "At first I would smoke on occasions... after two years my day would start with a joint and end with two pregabalin pills."

This evolution reflects the transition from recreational use to functional use, where the substance becomes a condition for being able to face urban life or engage in confrontations. Some participants described how they came to "need" a dose before leaving home or before confronting their adversaries, transforming drug use into an urban adaptation mechanism to socio-economic pressures (unemployment, vulnerability, lack of prospects...).

3.2.3. Narrated Links Between Drug Use and Violence

When connecting experience to violence, three contradictory narrative patterns emerged that reveal the complexity of the relationship:

- **Violence as a side effect of drug use:** A number of participants acknowledged that they become more impulsive under the influence of drugs, where any minor friction turns into sudden violence. Example: "After I took a Rivotril pill, someone bumped into me by accident, so I beat him severely."
- **The drug doesn't cause violence, but creates the climate:** Other narratives confirm that the substance is not the direct factor, but rather the social environment (popular neighborhood gatherings, crowded places, noisy occasions) is what ignites the spark. "Hashish makes me quiet, but when the gathering is in a neighborhood full of problems, any word understood out of context turns into problems."
- **The substance changes the brain and reduces control:** A third category directly linked the substance to behavioral changes, considering that the drug increases euphoria and reduces emotional control. "Cocaine makes me a king, I don't accept humiliation."

This variation reflects that the relationship is not deterministic-linear, but conditional on the social environment, type of substance, and personal characteristics of the user.

These contradictions deepen when we find that some users see the drug as a means of calming, while others see it as a driver of anger. "Indian cannabis 'Zatla' makes me laugh" versus "hallucinogenic pills make me quick to ignite." These differences reveal that the experience with the substance is reformulated subjectively and socially, as it is not purely pharmaceutical effect but is read through cultural and personal lenses.

3.2.4. Comparative Examples: Before and After Drug Use

Participants relied heavily on the "before/after" duality to express transformations. One of them said: "Before Rivotril I would run away from problems, after it I started looking for them." In contrast, another sees that violence was already part of his personality and that drug use only increased revealing that.

This reflects what labeling theory proposes: drug use may not necessarily create new behavior, but it amplifies existing deviant identities and reproduces them.

The relationship between drug use and violence is not linear or one-dimensional, but is distributed across multiple pathways:

- Drug use that generates direct impulsivity and decreased emotional control.
- Drug use that functions as a **facilitator** for social contexts that produce violence (companionship, neighborhood, occasions).
- Drug use that is reinterpreted as a means of escape, but ends up escalating aggressive situations.

Therefore, drug-related violence manifests as a result of complex interaction between: the substance (its pharmaceutical effect), the social-spatial context, economic-urban pressures, and the individual characteristics of the user.

3.3. Socio-Spatial Structures as Incubators of Violence

3.3.1. Neighborhoods: Central versus Peripheral

Narratives reveal that violence takes different forms depending on the nature of the neighborhood. In central neighborhoods crowded with markets and pedestrians, violence often becomes sudden and incidental, resulting from direct friction. One participant stated: "In crowded places, if you're a cocaine user for example, any small push turns into a punch."

As for marginal neighborhoods, where security is weak and social control institutions are absent, patterns of collective violence emerge that escalate from simple individual problems into widespread confrontations. One participant summarized the situation: "In the popular neighborhood there's no police, we're the ones who rule... and small problems grow and become battles." This illustrates that the spatial structure itself acts as an accelerator, creating different conditions for producing violence: crowded spaces generate spontaneous fights, while security marginalization in the peripheries generates collective and organized violence.

3.3.2. Hot Spots

Strong references were repeatedly made to marginal neighborhoods and crime hotspots as spaces saturated with violence. Often, drug use sessions begin with laughter and entertainment, but they transform into confrontation arenas due to trivial details. One participant told us: "In our neighborhood, any look of contempt or belittlement can turn into war" In crime hotspots, these emerged as arenas where drug use meets self-assertion, where verbal challenges develop into physical violence.

These spaces are not neutral: they are continuous production centers for conflicts, where drug use, spatial pressure, and masculine interactions related to "prestige" and "dignity" converge.

3.3.3. Times: Night and Weekends

Time itself appears as a stimulating context. Participants confirmed that nighttime, especially weekends and parties, represents the peak of escalation possibilities. Evening sessions accompanied by cocaine or ecstasy turn into sparks of fights, as one described:

"Thursday night is problem time... everyone uses drugs and drinks alcohol, and any word is misunderstood"

Therefore, it can be said that urban time (night/holidays) doubles the likelihood of social control breakdown and increased violence intensity.

3.3.4. Social Networks: Peers, Dealers, Informal Protection

The role of companionship was repeated in all narratives. The presence of confrontation-prone companions makes violence almost inevitable: "For the sake of my neighborhood and my friends first, blood will flow in rivers." Conversely, intervention by "neighborhood elders" sometimes stops escalation, revealing an informal organizational role within neighborhoods. Dealers also emerged as a key node in these networks, causing disputes over debts or control over selling and distribution areas. Here it appears that violence is not only individual, but network-based, linked to power balances and informal trade.

3.4. Property Assault as an Extension of Violence

3.4.1. Financing Patterns through Property

Drug use financing often passes through petty thefts or pickpocketing in crowded markets, where distraction and crowding facilitate the process: "In crowded streets with many pedestrians, pickpocketing and theft operations increase to finance drug expenses and other needs." In peripheral neighborhoods, it sometimes extends to robbing homes or small shops, taking advantage of weak surveillance.

3.4.2. Debt Cases and Related Violence

Multiple accounts revealed that drug debts directly open pathways to violence. One expressed: "Failure to pay dues or debts owed by users will turn into beatings and problems and develop until they become war between two neighborhoods."

These disputes often turn into physical violence or threats with bladed weapons, reflecting that economic violence is intertwined with the informal market.

3.4.3. Informal Market and Violence

Integration into small-scale selling networks doubles violence opportunities, whether due to disputes over influence zones or selling adulterated materials. One said: "One time we sold poor quality Subutex, the customer came back with a gang, and it became a big problem."

Violence associated with drug use cannot be understood as an isolated individual act. Rather, it is the product of complex interaction between:

- **Spatial structures (crowded central ↔ marginalized peripheral)**
- **Times (night, holidays) as fragile periods**
- **Hot spaces (cafés, squares, playgrounds, crime hotspots, and parties)**
- **Social networks (companionship, dealers, informal protection)**

Property assault is not merely economic deviance, but a direct extension of violence, whether as a financing mechanism for substances or as a tool for settling informal market disputes.

3.5. Emotional States During/After Drug Use

3.5.1. Low-Control Impulsivity

Several narratives highlighted that drug use, especially with stimulants such as cocaine, crystal meth, and Rivotril, produces excessive energy without the ability to control it. Many participants indicated that any simple situation could turn into an immediate violent reaction.

One participant said: "I was calm before using, but when I take Rivotril, any small word makes my hand move faster than my mind."

This shows that the drug does not create violence from nothing, but rather raises the level of impulsivity and lowers thinking inhibitions, making aggressive action almost an automatic choice.

3.5.2. Anxiety and Threat Misperception

Conversely, with some pills or sedatives (Rivotril, pregabalin, zatla), participants describe entering a state of internal tension and excessive anxiety that makes them read social cues in a distorted way.

As one said: "Once I was sitting in the neighborhood after taking two pregabalin pills and smoking a zatla cigarette, I felt someone was laughing at me, I attacked him before thinking."

These accounts reveal that drug use not only generates impulse, but changes the way everyday situations are interpreted, so that a look or smile becomes a direct threat requiring a violent response.

3.5.3. Narrative Contradictions: Calm versus Ignition

Interestingly, the narratives were not uniform. Some users, especially with cannabis, described themselves as becoming calmer and less involved in violence: "Hashish makes me laugh and forget problems."

But others said the complete opposite: "After hashish I get anxious about anything, even a simple word ignites me."

This contradiction reveals that the same substance can produce contradictory effects, depending on personality, previous experiences, or the social context in which it is consumed. This means that violence is not an "inevitable" result of the substance, but rather the result of interaction between the substance, the individual, and the social space.

3.5.3. Reshaping the Emotional Threshold

What clearly emerges is that drug use does not only affect momentary mood, but reshapes the emotional threshold from which the user interprets situations.

Many participants talked about their transformation from "tolerance and ignoring" to "quick and retaliatory reaction": "Before, I would tolerate and walk away, after using, I have no patience, I can't give up my rights."

Thus, passing anger or small anxiety becomes capable of directly transforming into violence, as if drug use changes the emotional response system from within.

The narratives reveal that drug use reshapes individuals' emotional response apparatus:

- Sometimes through sudden impulsivity (stimulants)
- Sometimes through anxiety and threat misperception (psychoactive substances)
- Sometimes through contradictory experiences between calm and ignition (cannabis)

This shows that the relationship between drugs and violence is not purely chemical nor linear, but is a complex and variable relationship, conditioned by personality, context, and the nature of the drug substance.

3.6. The Intersection Between Coercive Economy, Life Pressures, and Violence

3.6.1. Substance Financing: From Petty Theft to Debt Conflicts

The narratives reveal that most participants began with "simple" attempts to provide the price of the substance, such as selling personal belongings or stealing items from home, but this quickly developed into aggressive activities outside the house: pickpocketing in markets, robbing passersby or small shops.

One explained before entering prison: "I used to steal from home at first, then I started selling anything I had... then I had nothing left, I started snatching wallets or mobile phones in the street."

Additionally, unpaid debts were among the most prominent sources of violence, as one participant narrated: "They lent me drugs (ecstasy), I couldn't pay them back... they came at night and beat me in front of people."

Thus, coercive financing of drug use becomes a direct catalyst for violent confrontations.

3.6.2. Unemployment Pressures and Urban Fragility

Other stories linked long-term unemployment and lack of opportunities in peripheral neighborhoods with immersion in drugs as a means to "kill time" or "forget reality."

One said: "I have no job, sitting all day in the neighborhood. Drugs became a way to forget the painful reality we live in."

These pressures did not only produce drug use, but made violence a form of venting or releasing daily pressure. As another expressed: "When you have no future, any small word ignites you. And drugs make you release all your anger."

Thus, drug use and violence appear to intertwine as survival strategies within a suffocating urban environment.

3.6.3. Violence as an Economic Tool

Some participants admitted that violence was not only impulsive, but used practically as a means of financing.

One said about the reason for entering prison: "I used to stop someone in the alley, threaten him with a knife, take his money or phone, and this was to finance drugs."

This means that violence becomes an economic function integrated into the lives of some users, not just a side effect of drug use.

3.6.4. Entanglement with the Informal Market

Involvement in the informal drug market created recurring sources of violence, whether due to disputes with customers or competition over sales areas.

One said: "I was selling pregabalin and ecstasy to young people in the neighborhood. Once I brought poor quality stuff, and they attacked me."

Another added: "Dealers compete for customers, and you might get beaten or beat others for a drug selling point that belongs to a certain group."

These testimonies show that the informal market is not just an economic space, but a permanent arena for violent struggle over influence and resources.

The narratives highlight that violence is not only understood as a result of emotional states resulting from drug use, but as part of a coercive socio-economic structure:

- Theft and coercive financing of substances
- Debt disputes with dealers
- Venting anger resulting from unemployment and urban fragility
- Integration into the informal market with its competition and conflicts

Thus, violence transforms from a momentary explosion into a strategic tool within the drug economy, rooted in daily life conditions and socio-spatial pressures.

4. Discussion

4.1. Discussion of the Theoretical Framework for the Integrative Approach

The analysis of drug use and urban violence through the proposed theoretical framework demonstrates that unidimensional approaches are insufficient for understanding this phenomenon's dynamics. The connection between substance use, momentary impulsiveness, and spontaneous violence directly resonates with frustration-aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1962), where daily frustrations combined with drugs' physiological effects generate unplanned aggression. However, restricting analysis to this psychological explanation isolates the phenomenon from crucial socio-economic contexts that the integrative framework addresses (Dollard et al., 1939; Berkowitz, 1962).

Building on this psychological foundation, the results reveal violence patterns linked to financing substances through theft or assaults, intersecting with Merton's anomie theory (1938), where inability to achieve social goals through legitimate means leads to illegal alternatives. Yet anomie alone cannot explain why some individuals engage in violence while others under identical structural conditions do not, necessitating incorporation of social learning theory (Sutherland, 1947; Bandura, 1977) to understand peer networks' role in institutionalizing violent behavior (Merton, 1938; Sutherland, 1947; Bandura, 1977).

Expanding this analysis spatially, certain urban spaces (popular cafés, public squares) emerge as violence "hot spots," harmonizing with Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory (1942), which highlights how weakened family and institutional bonds create fertile ground for delinquency. This spatial understanding gains depth through Becker's (1963) labeling theory, where social stigma transforms transient acts into permanent deviant pathways, with "users" acquiring stigmatized identities that push them toward violence networks rather than away from them (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Becker, 1963).

From a broader structural-political lens, the connection between violence, poverty, and urban marginalization reflects conflict theory (Quinney, 1970; Marx, 1971), viewing violence not as individual dysfunction but as reflection of productive structures generating systematic exclusion, compelling marginalized youth toward "illegitimate" survival strategies. This perspective aligns with Saboun and Driouch's (2018) findings on Algerian urban violence, where marginalization and institutional distrust structurally fuel violence (Quinney, 1970; Marx, 1971; Saboun & Driouch, 2018).

The integration of these theoretical approaches into a comprehensive framework enables deeper understanding: violence emerges not from substance use per se, but from complex pathways where individual emotions (frustration and impulsiveness), structural pressures (poverty and anomie), social networks (learning and imitation), and symbolic processes (stigma and exclusion) interweave dynamically.

Consequently, the proposed theoretical framework provides a multi-level analytical lens that explains field results while positioning them in direct extension of classical and contemporary sociological and psychological literature, transcending the limitations of single-theory explanations to offer a more nuanced understanding of the drug use-violence nexus in urban contexts.

4.2. Discussion of Results in Light of Previous Studies

This study's results reveal that the drug use-urban violence relationship manifests through complex, non-linear pathways including spontaneous violence, functional violence, and collective-spatial violence. This finding resonates with Becker's (1963) classical proposition that deviance emerges through social construction via interactions and stigma rather than inherent act characteristics. Participants' narratives demonstrate that violence stems not solely from drugs' physiological effects, but from social interactions within specific spaces where power dynamics and deviant identity reproduction occur within subgroups (Becker, 1963).

Building on this social construction perspective, the second pathway—functional violence for substance financing—reflects Sanders and colleagues' (2010) findings among Los Angeles gang youth, where substance use intersects with precarious economic conditions, driving individuals toward utilitarian violence practices. Violence thus transcends momentary impulsiveness, becoming an economic survival mechanism for financing drug consumption, supporting our findings on how violent behavior perpetuates substance use cycles (Sanders et al., 2010).

Expanding this analysis spatially, the third pathway—collective-spatial violence—connects with Gadomski and colleagues' (2022) demonstration that socio-spatial factors like poverty and marginalization centrally fuel the substance use-violence relationship, even in rural contexts. This supports our conclusion that specific spaces (popular cafés, public squares, school surroundings) transform into violence hot spots, where acts acquire collective characteristics and reproduce through social-spatial networks providing violence legitimacy (Gadomski et al., 2022).

Complementing these structural insights, Havnes and colleagues' (2014) findings confirm the moral dimension's persistence in explaining substance-related violence, where Norwegian prisoners linked violence to subjective concepts of guilt and act justification beyond mere substance effects. This moral-value dimension enriches our results, where

participants justify violence as legitimate reaction or self-protection in perceived hostile environments (Havnes et al., 2014).

Within the local literature context, our results converge with Saboun and Driouch's (2018) conclusions about Algerian urban violence, attributing the phenomenon to unemployment, poverty, and marginalization—identical factors we identified among users. However, our study provides qualitative advancement by focusing on substance use overlap with these factors rather than limiting analysis to general urban violence phenomena (سبعون و دريوش، 2018).

Similarly, Ayed and Bouziane's (2016) conclusion about adopting integrative approaches to explain violence finds practical translation in our linking of individual emotion, economic pressures, spatial environment, and social networks (عايد وبوزيان، 2016).

Our results also align with Khalidi and Ben Deridi's (2025) Tebessa findings, highlighting youth employment of violence as social and economic rejection expression mechanisms. However, our study deepens this proposition by demonstrating how substance use becomes a catalyst transforming "protest violence" into organized collective-spatial violence (خالدي و بن دريدي، 2025).

Finally, Al-Sawaf and colleagues' (2024) revelation of positive correlation between cannabis use and violence levels reinforces our combined statistical and qualitative results, though without explaining violence form variations. Our study's value lies in demonstrating that violence involves qualitative pathway differences based on substance, context, and networks rather than mere quantitative aggression increases (الصواف وآخرون، 2024).

Based on previous studies comparison, our study contributes to filling a dual knowledge gap:

Explanatory Gap: Integrating individual dimensions (impulsiveness), economic factors (substance financing), spatial elements (hot spots), and network aspects (subgroups) into a complex explanatory framework that transcends single-factor explanations.

Contextual Gap: Highlighting how these pathways manifest in Arab/Algerian urban spaces, addressing the absence in Western literature that predominantly focused on gangs or European and American rural contexts, thereby providing culturally-situated understanding of the drug use-violence nexus.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the relationship between drug use and urban violence is not a linear or unidimensional relationship, but rather the result of the interweaving of multi-level factors. Individual narratives showed that substance use reshapes the emotional threshold of actors, generating impulsive states or misjudgment of daily situations, leading to sudden violence. The results also highlighted that economic pressures and urban fragility do not merely prepare the ground for substance use, but push violence to become a functional tool for securing substances or settling disputes within the informal market. Conversely, some exceptions showed that substance use may remain a withdrawal practice unrelated to violence, confirming the conditional and complex nature of this relationship.

Social-spatial structures, from marginalized neighborhoods and popular cafés to public squares, alongside high-risk times such as weekend nights, represent multiplying spaces for escalation probabilities, especially when they intersect with peer and dealer networks and the

absence of formal social control mechanisms. All of this reveals that the phenomenon can only be understood through an integrative approach that takes into account the interaction of structural-spatial structures, individual emotional states, and socio-economic networks.

This conclusion confirms the need to transcend reductive readings that reduce the phenomenon to a single cause, and work instead on building multi-level interventions: preventive programs targeting youth in marginalized neighborhoods, initiatives to support economic alternatives, and strengthening the presence of social and cultural control institutions. Thus, this study contributes to enriching the scientific understanding of the phenomenon and opens the field for future research that is deeper and more detailed about the complex interactions between substance use and urban violence.

6. References

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