

Study suggests psychedelic drugs could reduce criminal behavior

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Credit: University of Alabama at Birmingham

Classic psychedelics such as psilocybin (often called magic mushrooms), LSD and mescaline (found in peyote) are associated with a decreased likelihood of antisocial criminal behavior, according to new research from investigators at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The findings, published online Sept. 24 by the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, suggest that treatments making use of classic psychedelics like psilocybin could well hold promise in reducing criminal behavior.

"These findings, coupled with both older and emerging bodies of evidence, make a case that classic psychedelics may provide enduring benefits for criminal justice populations," said Peter Hendricks, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Health Behavior, in the UAB School of Public Health. "They certainly suggest that clinical research with classic psychedelics in [forensic settings](#) should be considered."

The current study used data obtained by the [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), which is administered by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. Hendricks says the study demonstrates that having ever used a classic psychedelic and, to some degree, having ever used psilocybin specifically, are associated with a decreased likelihood of larceny/theft and other property crimes, as well as a decreased likelihood of assault and other violent crimes.

Hendricks' team looked at the relationships between classic psychedelic use and criminal behavior among over 480,000 U.S. adult respondents from the past 13 years of the annual survey. Survey respondents were asked about past use of a number of classic psychedelics including

ayahuasca (a traditional spiritual medicine among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin), dimethyltryptamine, LSD, mescaline, peyote or San Pedro (mescaline-containing cacti used for centuries in traditional indigenous rituals), and psilocybin mushrooms.

Having ever used a classic psychedelic was associated with a 27 percent decrease in the odds of committing larceny/theft, a 12 percent decrease in the odds of committing assault, a 22 percent decrease in the odds of arrest for a property crime, and an 18 percent decrease in the odds of arrest for a violent crime in the past year. Illicit use of other substances, in contrast, was largely associated with an increased likelihood of criminal behavior at or above the trend level.

"These findings are consistent with a growing body of research suggesting classic psychedelics confer enduring psychological and prosocial benefits," Hendricks said. "Classic psychedelics can produce primary mystical experiences—also known as primary religious experiences or peak experiences—and have been used for millennia across cultures with therapeutic intention."

Hendricks says these findings contribute to a compelling rationale for the initiation of [clinical research](#) with classic psychedelics, including [psilocybin](#), in forensic settings.

"The development of innovative and effective interventions to prevent criminal behavior is an obvious priority," he said. "Our findings suggest the protective effects of classic psychedelic use are attributable to genuine reductions in antisocial [behavior](#) rather than reflecting improved evasion of arrest. Simply put, the positive effects associated with classic psychedelic use appear to be reliable. Given the costs of [criminal behavior](#), the potential represented by this treatment paradigm is significant."

More information: Peter S Hendricks et al. The relationships of classic psychedelic use with criminal behavior in the United States adult population, *Journal of Psychopharmacology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0269881117735685](https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881117735685)

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