



Research Paper

Privileged background protects against drug charges: A long-term population-based longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

Background: We investigated the importance of indicators of parental socio-economic status (SES) for getting an official drug charge, while we controlled for self-reported drug law infractions (use of illegal drugs and/or drug trafficking) and potential variables confounding the association.

Methods: We used data from the long-term, population based longitudinal *Young in Norway Study* ($N = 2,549$). Participants were followed up over four survey-based data collections with linkages to crime registers from adolescence to adulthood. Data on drug charges were assessed based on official registers. The use of illegal substances, involvement with drug trafficking and potential covariates such as involvement with other types of crime, academic resources, and risk factors in the family, were assessed by means of self-reports.

Results: Two per cent had been charged for drug-related offences, and 37% reported drug offending. Use of cannabis was the primary infraction statistically related to a criminal charge. Having parents with 4+ years university education (14% of the sample) was associated with lower risk for being charged than having parents with no higher education ($OR\ 4.87$; 95% $CI: 1.16-20.52$) or with a short university education ($OR\ 4.76$; 1.05–21.48). The association between parental education and drug charges remained stable when controlling for self-reported drug law infractions and other potential covariates.

Conclusion: In Norway, adolescents who have parents with higher university education, may be protected from getting a drug charge, even though they report similar levels of drug law infractions as other adolescents.

Introduction

Youth who are charged for crimes disproportionately come from homes characterized by low socio-economic status (SES) and with poor academic resources (Galloway & Skardhamar, 2010; Nilsson, Bäckman, & Estrada, 2013). Youth from privileged parts of society may be shielded from police and prosecution, for example because they seldom visit areas with much police surveillance (Ratcliffe & McCullagh, 2001), because they do not buy drugs outdoors and from strangers (Nguyen & Reuter, 2012) or because they do not belong to the groups typically perceived as perpetrators of crime (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). A major issue in the role of the justice system is whether charges are perceived as fair, just, and legitimate. One source of public perception of legitimate justice is how drug offenders are handled. Are those from low SES more

often charged than those in the more privileged segments of society? The present research addresses this question.

We start out by examining whether there are differences regarding various SES indicators in charges for drug-related offenses in Norway. A possible preponderance in drug charges in low SES strata may of course result from corresponding differences in drug law infractions. However, if we observe higher rates of drug-related charges even when accounting for socio-economic differences in drug law infractions, we will explore some possible mechanisms that may account for the association between low SES and a higher risk for being charged for drug-related offenses.

First, privileged youth may avoid charges because they do not take part in other types of crime that may make them visible for the police. For example, a study of “dorm room dealers” at an elite US university revealed an invisible drug trade within closed networks, and the dealers were seldom involved in other types of crime, therefore attracting little

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attention from the police (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2012). Thus, drug dealers from privileged backgrounds may avoid involvement in other types of crime and violence, to remain invisible from the police. Therefore, socio-economic differences in drug-related charges may be accounted for by varying rates of other types of criminal involvement according to SES.

Second, one could hypothesize that dealers from privileged backgrounds master skills enabling them to avoid police attention when dealing. The dorm room dealers in the Mohamed & Fritsvold study had internalized codes of behaviour typical for their elite milieus, and applied them also in their rare interactions with the police. However, the crude measures of SES background typically used in epidemiology may not be sufficient to capture the more subtle skills needed for conducting what has been labelled “crimes of the suits” as opposed to “crimes of the streets” (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016). Such skills may indirectly be manifested in e.g. academic merit and occupational aspirations (Spencer, Charbonneau, & Glaser, 2016).

Third, youth who are easily caught by the police may lack the kind of competence described above, not due to poor socioeconomic resources *per se*, but rather due to unruly behaviours resulting from family risk factors, such as lack of attention, poor parental care, and poor parental monitoring, factors which may also be associated with low SES (Schneider, Hastings, & LaBriola, 2018). These variables may then also account for a higher level of charges among those with low SES (Spencer et al., 2016). If we observe socioeconomic differences in charges even after control for these factors, other mechanisms must be at work.

The study is conducted in Norway, a Nordic welfare state characterized by a high degree of social equality (Fritzell, Hvinden, Kautto, Kvist, & Uusitalo, 2001). Still, socioeconomic differences persist, and even seem to have increased over the past decades (Barth, Moene, & Pedersen, 2021). Moreover, a university education, or so-called “credentialization”, is documented as crucial for recruitment into at least some parts of the socioeconomic elites (Flemmen, Toft, Andersen, Hansen, & Ljunggren, 2017; Toft, 2018). Thus, in the current study, we will focus on several measures of parental socioeconomic background as well as the importance of parental education.

Norway has traditionally had an ethnically homogeneous population, and when our longitudinal study started (in 1992), only 1.4% had a background from Asian or African countries (Statistics Norway, 2020). Thus, a traditional ethnic minority background (i.e. “people of colour”) does probably not play an important role on population level in this cohort when it comes to drug charges, whereas this may later have changed, as it already seems to have done in the neighbouring country Denmark (Moeller, 2010).

Nordic countries have been classified as examples of “penal exceptionalism” with low rates of imprisonment and a humane crime policy (Pratt, 2008). However, the drug control area has been an exception. Even though there now are signs of a policy shift (Bretteville-Jensen, Williams, & Gjersing, 2020), Norway has so far been strictest among the Nordic countries regarding drug control measures (Moeller, 2019). A majority of drug charges experienced by the cohort followed in our data set took place throughout the 1990s and the first years after the turn of the century, a period when the number of investigated drug-specific crimes rapidly increased rapidly (Statistics Norway, 2017: 29).

The present study

Our primary analyses test the hypothesis that those with high socioeconomic background have lower levels of drug charges than people with lower SES. We then test whether such patterns simply reflect lower levels of self-reported illegal drug use and/or drug trafficking in some socio-economic strata. We further examine whether possible socioeconomic differences in charges can be accounted for by lower visibility among those with high SES due to lack of involvement in other types of

crime. Then we go on to examine whether socio-economic differences in charges could be accounted for by more subtle skills among those with high SES, as captured by factors such as good school results and high occupational aspirations. Finally, we examine whether other aspects of the family milieu than SES may account for potential socio-economic differences in charges, for example family break-up, poor parental care and monitoring or parental alcohol problems.

Method

Design

This research is based on the *Young in Norway Study*, where a population-based sample has been followed up by means of surveys and register data from their teens until their mid-thirties. For more details about the design of the study, see (Pedersen, Hart, Moffitt, & von Soest (2020).

Sample

The initial (T1) sample was composed of 12,287 students enrolled in 67 representative junior and senior high schools in Norway in 1992, with a response rate of 97%. Students were mainly born between 1973 and 1980. Students who still attended the same schools two years later (T2, 1994) were further followed up. Because the study was originally planned as a two-wave study, new informed consent had to be obtained at T2. Those then consenting ($n = 3844$; 91%) received questionnaires by mail at T3 (1999) and T4 (2005). Response rates among students eligible for participation were 92%, 84%, and 82% at T2, T3, and T4, respectively. At T4 we asked participants to consent to link survey data to data from official registers, to which 90% agreed. The overall participation rate of the final sample, based on all eligible students at T1 who still were at their original school at T2, was 68% at T3, 67% at T4, and 60% concerning assessment of register data. We excluded 52 participants who were younger than 12 or older than 19 years at T1, and thereby had an age not typical for this school level. The remaining sample consisted of $N = 2549$ participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study was approved by the Norwegian Data Inspectorate and the Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics (Reference no.: S-05030; project name: “Young in Norway”).

We used multiple logistic regression analysis to examine selective attrition. Conduct problems ($OR = 1.68$; 95% CI: 1.48–1.91), low parental education ($OR = 0.87$; 95% CI: 0.83–0.91), low self-reported parental care ($OR = 0.82$; 95% CI: 0.75–0.90), older age ($OR = 1.26$; 95% CI: 1.23–1.29), male gender ($OR = 1.17$; 95% CI: 1.05–1.29), and having at least one parent not born in Norway ($OR = 1.26$; 95% CI: 1.02–1.56) at T1 predicted attrition.

Measures

Drug-related charges

Many studies in this area have utilized self-reports of criminal involvement, even though previous studies suggest that a sizeable proportion of youth with official arrest records fail to report being arrested (Kirk, 2006). Thus, we collected official register-based data from 1992 to 2014 on drug charges, including the use and possession of illegal drugs as well as more serious cases, such as unlawful import, manufacturing and dealing (Hovde Lyngstad & Skardhamar, 2011). We did not have access to data on final convictions in this data set. An interpretation of the term “charge” is “qualified suspect”, denoting persons who were alleged offenders when the investigation was completed (Pedersen & Skardhamar, 2010). A person is charged if he/she is regarded as perpetrator by the police and the prosecuting authorities, irrespective of subsequent sanctions. Thus, charges are an earlier stage of the justice system process than convictions and some criminal cases do not result in convictions (e.g. because the person has disappeared, is under

the legal age, or charges are withdrawn because the evidence ultimately was not regarded solid enough for a conviction) (see also: [Statistics Norway, 2002](#)). Moreover, each conviction is often the outcome of several charges (e.g. a combination of drug crimes, theft and violence), and therefore convictions offer less precise data on specific crimes than data on charges ([Bretteville-Jensen et al., 2020](#)). Importantly, most cases including use and possession of illegal drugs rapidly result in a penalty charge notice, and these cases are also included in the charge measure in our data.

Socio-economic background

As a measure of parental SES, national register data from Statistics Norway were used, providing information on parental education level when the respondent was 16 years old. This variable had three values: 0 (senior high school or less education, 56.3% of the sample), 1 (< 4 years college/university education, 29.4%), and 2 (\geq 4 years university education, 14.3%). Parents' occupations were coded according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88) ([Maaz, Trautwein, Gresch, Luedtke, & Watermann, 2009](#)) and then categorized into (a) manual labour occupations (30.5%), (b) lower academic and functional positions (39.1%), and (c) professional leaders and higher academic positions (30.4%). As a measure of lack of parental integration in the labour market, we assessed by self-report whether at least one parent received social welfare benefits or was unemployed at T1 or T2 (12.6%).

Self-reported use of illegal substances and dealing

At each data collection, we asked respondents about their use of cannabis as well as other illegal substances (e.g. amphetamines, cocaine and heroin) during the preceding 12 months. Response options for both items were on a six-point scale ranging from "never" to "more than 50 times". We constructed a measure of cannabis use frequency, ranging from "0 - never used cannabis" to "5 - reported use of cannabis more than 50 times the previous 12 months in at least one data wave". Because the items on cannabis use the last 12 month did not cover the whole time interval between T1 and T4 (i.e., respondents may have used cannabis at an age where we did not assess cannabis use), we additionally used an item at T4 asking whether participants had ever used cannabis to construct the measure of cannabis use frequency. A measure of frequency of use of other illegal substances was constructed in the same way. Moreover, as a measure of drug dealing, we assessed whether respondents had ever sold illegal substances (no/yes).

Self-reported crime, school grades and educational aspirations

To assess self-reported criminal behaviour at T1 and T2, we used six items (minor vandalism, major vandalism, stolen car, stolen money, burglary and fighting with a weapon) drawn from *Olweus's Scale of Antisocial Behaviour* ([Olweus, 1989](#)) and the *National Youth Longitudinal Study* ([Windle, 1990](#)) (for details, see [Pedersen & Wichström, 1995](#)). Response options were ranging from 0 ("never") to 5 ("more than 50 times"). Mean scores were computed at T1 and T2 and averaged across the two time points.

At T1 and T2, participants were asked about their school grades in Norwegian, English and mathematics. We standardized a summed score of school grades in the three subjects at each school level and reversed the score to obtain a measure of poor school grades. Thus, an increase of one unit indicates a lower level of school grades of one standard deviation. These scores were averaged across T1 and T2. Moreover we assessed by self-report skipping school on a scale from 0 ("never") to 5 ("more than 50 times") and computed a mean score across T1 and T2. As a measure of educational aspirations, we asked "If you would be offered a job now, would you rather work than continue school?" (yes/no). We contrasted those who at least once at T1 or T2 responded to rather wanting to work and thus had low educational aspirations, to the rest of the sample whose aspirations were higher.

Parental and family characteristics

We monitored whether the respondents had not lived with both biological parents (30.3%), as an indicator of likely family break-up. Parental care was measured using the care subscale of the Parental Bonding Instrument ([Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979](#)) at both T1 and T2. Here respondents should respond to statements like "They have been affectionate to me" on a scale from 1 "Totally agree" to 4 "Totally disagree". Average scores across the two time points were computed. Parental monitoring was measured by a six-item scale, where participants should respond to statements like "My parents usually know where I am and what I do in the weekends" on a scale from 1 "Not true at all" to 6 "Totally true" ([Wichström, 2000](#)). Mean scores averaged across T1 and T2. We also collected information about heavy episodic parental intoxication reported by the participants at T1 and T2, with the question: "Have you ever seen your parents drunk"? Response alternatives were on a scale from 1 "Never" to 5 "Several times a week". This measure was taken as an indicator of possible alcohol problems ([Rossow, Felix, Keating, & McCambridge, 2016](#)).

Demographic variables

To account for potential confounding effects of demographic variables, we assessed age, gender, and whether at least one of the parents were not born in Norway, as an indicator of ethnic minority status.

Statistical analyses

We used *t*-tests and χ^2 statistics to provide an initial overview over the study variables. More detailed analyses were then conducted by using logistic regression analyses with drug-related charges (no/yes) as the dependent variable. In a baseline model, we examined how indicators of parental socioeconomic status (i.e., parental education and parental occupation) were associated with drug-related charges while controlling for gender and age. In a next model, we additionally controlled for self-reported illicit drug use and dealing. Next, self-reported crime was included. Then, school grades, skipping school and aspirations for future occupation were included as covariates. In a final model, we included family risk factors (family break-up, parental care, parental monitoring, and parents' alcohol intoxication). As such, the analyses combined provide information about how parental socioeconomic factors were associated with drug charges over and above the actual self-reported drug law infractions and other covariates. In regression analyses, the sample was weighted to adjust estimates for variables at T1 that significantly predicted drop-out (i.e., conduct problems, parental education, parental care, age, gender, and immigrant background). Weights were computed by the inverse probability weighting method and parameters were estimated by maximizing a weighted log-likelihood function. Sandwich estimators were used to compute standard errors. Highest number of missingness was observed for parental occupation (6.1% missing values), ethnic minority status (6.0%), not living with both parents (3.3%) and educational aspirations (1.3%). For all other study variables, the proportion of missing values was less than 1%. Full information maximum likelihood estimation was used to handle missing data.

Results

In this sample, 2.0% ($n = 52$) had been charged for a drug-related offence. Thirty-six per cent of all respondents reported use of cannabis at some time in their lives. Most use was low-frequent, reflecting previous studies showing that Norway traditionally has been situated at the lower end of cannabis prevalence rates in Europe ([EMCDDA, 2012](#)). Ten per cent had used other illegal substances, while 5% reported having sold illegal substances. In all, 37% ($n = 934$) reported any kind of drug law infraction, and almost all those who had used other substances than cannabis or had sold drugs, had also used cannabis. As depicted in [Table 1](#), there was a significant association between level of parental education and the risk for a charge, with a lower risk for those with

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for respondents with drug charges and no drug charges.

	No drug charge (n = 2497)		Drug charge (n = 52)		p	Total (n = 2549)	
<i>Socioeconomic background in adolescence</i>							
<i>Parental education (n,%)</i>							
No higher education	1391	56.0%	37	71.2%		1428	56.3%
Higher education - 4 years or less	733	29.5%	13	25.0%		746	29.4%
> 4 years higher education	360	14.5%	2	3.8%	.04	362	14.3%
<i>Parental occupation (n,%)</i>							
Manual labour occupations	711	30.3%	19	39.6%		730	30.5%
Lower academic and functionary positions	916	39.0%	20	41.7%		936	39.1%
Professional leaders and higher academic positions	719	30.6%	9	18.8%	.17	728	30.4%
Father or mother on social welfare/unemployed (n,%)	312	12.6%	7	13.5%	.85	319	12.6%
<i>Illicit drug use and dealing</i>							
<i>Cannabis use (n,%)</i>							
Never used cannabis	1636	65.5%	0	0.0%		1636	64.2%
Used cannabis once a year	458	18.3%	6	11.5%		464	18.2%
Used cannabis up to 5 times a year	193	7.7%	2	3.8%		195	7.7%
Used cannabis up to 10 times a year	77	3.1%	7	13.5%		84	3.3%
Used cannabis up to 50 times a year	72	2.9%	13	25.0%		85	3.3%
Used cannabis more than 50 times a year	61	2.4%	24	46.2%	<.0001	85	3.3%
<i>Use of other illicit drugs (n,%)</i>							
Never used other illicit drugs	2285	91.5%	13	25.0%		2298	90.2%
Used other illicit drugs once a year	131	5.2%	17	32.7%		148	5.8%
Used other illicit drugs up to 5 times a year	42	1.7%	8	15.4%		50	2.0%
Used other illicit drugs up to 10 times a year	20	0.8%	4	7.7%		24	0.9%
Used other illicit drugs up to 50 times a year	13	0.5%	8	15.4%		21	0.8%
Used other illicit drugs more than 50 times a year	6	0.2%	2	3.8%	<.0001	8	0.3%
<i>Drug dealing (n,%)</i>							
Never dealt drugs	2397	96.2%	27	54.0%		2424	95.4%
Dealt drugs at least once in lifetime	94	3.8%	23	46.0%	<.0001	117	4.6%
<i>Criminal involvement</i>							
Self-reported crime (mean, sd)	1.05	0.15	1.31	0.51	<.0001	1.05	0.94
<i>Cultural capital</i>							
School grades	-0.02	.93	0.59	1.02	<.0001	0.00	1.00
Skipped school	2.09	1.15	2.79	1.22	<.0001	2.11	1.15
Aspirations future occupation	1707	70.9%	27	54%	<.01	1734	70.6%
<i>Parental characteristics</i>							
Did not grow up with both biological parents (n,%)	719	29.8%	28	53.8%	<.0001	747	30.3%
Parental care (mean, sd)	3.16	0.47	2.91	0.44	<.0001	3.15	0.47
Parental monitoring (mean, sd)	4.89	0.80	4.29	0.93	<.0001	4.88	0.81
Parents intoxicated (mean, sd)	0.69	0.82	1.20	1.16	<.0001	0.70	0.84
<i>Demographics</i>							
Male gender (n,%)	1093	43.8%	37	71.2%	<.0001	1130	44.3%
Age (mean, sd)	15.12	1.65	14.40	1.40	<.01	15.11	1.65
At least one parent not born in Norway (n,%)	145	6.2%	2	4.0%	.53	147	6.1%

the highest parental education. Of those charged, only 4% came from this group. Moreover, only 19% of those who had parents that were professional leaders or worked in higher academic positions reported drug charges. However, the association between high parental education and low numbers of charges for drug related crimes was not significant ($p = .17$). Moreover, there was no significant association to having parents who were on social welfare or unemployed. Table 1 also shows the association of self-reported use of cannabis, use of other illicit drugs, and self-reports of selling drugs with drug charges with a strong positive association with drug charges for all variables ($p < .001$). Among those who had been charged, 46% reported having sold drugs, whereas only 4% among those who had not been charged with any drug offence had sold drugs. There were also associations between drug charges and self-reported crime, all indicators of academic resources, as well as all family risk factors. However, immigrant background was not related to drug related charges.

A potential explanation of the association between low parental education and increased risk of drug charges is that adolescents with low parental education may eventually develop a pattern of more frequent drug use across age or keep the habit over a longer time-span than other adolescents, which could increase their risk of being charged for drug related offences. We therefore conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with parental education as a between subjects factor and cannabis use at all four time points as the outcome. The results showed that the parental education \times time interaction effect was not significant ($p = .20$), thereby indicating no significant differences in how cannabis use developed in the three groups of parental education. Likewise, when including other illicit drugs as outcome, no significant differences in drug use development between parental education groups were observed ($p = .50$).

Table 2 shows the association of drug use and dealing with parental educational background. The percentage having used cannabis was higher among those with higher parental education. There were no dif-

Table 2
Illicit drug use and dealing according to parental education.

	No higher parental education (n = 1428)		Higher parental education 4 years or less (n = 746)		Higher parental education More than 4 years (n = 362)		p	Total (n = 2549)	
<i>Cannabis use (n,%)</i>									
Never used cannabis	985	69.0%	454	60.9%	186	51.4%		1625	64.1%
Used cannabis once a year	244	17.1%	143	19.2%	77	21.3%		464	18.3%
Used cannabis up to 5 times a year	77	5.4%	67	9.0%	50	13.8%		194	7.6%
Used cannabis up to 10 times a year	38	2.7%	21	2.8%	24	6.6%		83	3.3%
Used cannabis up to 50 times a year	34	2.4%	40	5.4%	11	3.0%		85	3.4%
Used cannabis more than 50 times a year	50	3.5%	21	2.8%	14	3.9%	<0.001	85	3.4%
<i>Use of other illicit drugs (n,%)</i>									
Never used other illicit drugs	1297	90.8%	664	89.0%	326	90.1%		2287	90.2%
Used other illicit drugs once a year	73	5.1%	52	7.0%	22	6.1%		147	5.8%
Used other illicit drugs up to 5 times a year	24	1.7%	14	1.9%	11	3.0%		49	1.9%
Used other illicit drugs up to 10 times a year	16	1.1%	7	0.9%	1	0.3%		24	0.9%
Used other illicit drugs up to 50 times a year	13	0.9%	7	0.9%	1	0.3%		21	0.8%
Used other illicit drugs more than 50 times a year	5	0.4%	2	0.3%	1	0.3%	.459	8	0.3%
<i>Drug dealing (n,%)</i>									
Never dealt drugs	1355	95.2%	711	95.7%	345	95.3%		2411	95.4%
Dealt drugs at least once in lifetime	68	4.8%	32	4.3%	17	4.7%	.882	117	4.6%

Table 3
Logistic regression analyses with drug charges (yes/no) as dependent variable (N = 2549).

	Baseline Model		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
<i>Parental education</i>										
More than 4 years of higher education	(reference)		(reference)		(reference)		(reference)		(reference)	
No higher education	4.87*	1.16–20.52	7.14**	1.68–30.30	5.39*	1.22–23.92	4.78*	1.05–21.64	5.99*	1.34–26.68
Higher education - 4 years or less	4.76*	1.05–21.48	6.10*	1.33–28.03	4.82*	1.05–22.05	4.73*	1.02–21.87	6.44*	1.42–29.21
<i>Confounders</i>										
Male gender	3.40**	1.68–6.89	2.21	1.00–4.90	1.72	0.77–3.83	1.83	0.75–4.47	1.86	0.78–4.43
Age	0.75**	0.62–0.90	0.84	0.66–1.06	0.84	0.66–1.08	0.77	0.57–1.05	0.73*	0.55–0.95
Frequency of cannabis use			2.67***	2.13–3.35	2.73***	2.17–3.45	2.76***	2.17–3.50	2.91***	2.27–3.73
Frequency of use of other illicit drugs			1.19	0.90–1.56	1.06	0.78–1.44	1.04	0.77–1.40	0.98	0.72–1.35
Lifetime dealing of drugs			1.12	0.53–2.37	0.90	0.39–2.08	0.77	0.33–1.81	0.82	0.34–1.98
Self-reported crime					3.24*	1.20–8.78	2.77*	1.02–7.52	2.61	0.87–7.80
Low school grades							1.87**	1.20–2.93	1.85**	1.17–2.92
Skipped school							1.17	0.81–1.69	1.17	0.81–1.70
Aspirations future occupation							1.40	0.59–3.29	1.36	0.56–3.33
Did not grow up with both biological parents									1.27	0.56–2.89
Parental care									0.61	0.27–1.37
Parental monitoring									1.53	0.90–2.62
Parents intoxicated									1.54	0.99–2.42

Note. OR = Odds ratio, 95% CI = 95% confidence interval of OR, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. OR estimates of confounders cannot be interpreted as a “total effect”, according to the directed acyclic graphs framework. For a detailed discussion of the interpretation of confounder coefficients, (see: Westreich & Greenland, 2013).

ferences according to parental education regarding use of other illicit drugs or drug dealing. The same pattern was revealed regarding parental occupation and cannabis use (not reported), where those participants with parents from the highest-ranked occupations had higher levels of cannabis use than other participants ($p = .004$), while no significant differences were revealed regarding use of other illegal drugs or dealing.

In Table 3, we report logistic regression analyses with drug-related charges (no/yes) as dependent variable. In the Baseline Model, we included parental educational background, controlling only for age and gender. Low- and mid-level parental education was related to an almost fivefold increased odds for drug-related charges as compared to those with high level parental education (i.e. 4+ years). In Model 1, we additionally controlled for frequency of drug use and drug dealing. The results show that the association between parental education and drug charges remained statistically significant. In Model 2, self-reported crime was included in the model; in Model 3, several indicators of par-

ticipants’ academic resources were included. In Model 4, a number of family risk factors were finally added. The magnitude of the associations between parental education and drug charges was not reduced from the Baseline Model to the final Model 4.

We did not conduct similar regression analyses to those in Table 3 with parental unemployment as main independent variable, because the initial crude association between parental unemployment and drug charges was not significant (see Table 1). However, because parental occupation showed close to significant associations to drug charges, we replicated all analyses in Table 3 with parental occupation as key SES indicator. In these analyses, being offspring of parents who were professional leaders or held higher academic positions was defined as reference group. When controlling for drug use and dealing (Model 1), respondents with a parental background from manual labour occupations showed to be at larger risk for being charged for drug-related offenses than the reference group (Model 1, OR = 2.99,

95% CI 1.11–8.09). However, those, with parents from lower academic and functional positions were not significantly different from the reference category (OR = 2.14, 95% CI 0.82–5.61). Results remained largely unchanged when controlling for all covariates (Model 4), with a significantly higher risk of drug charges for those with manual labour occupational background (OR = 3.04, 95% CI 1.01–9.14), but no significantly higher risk for respondents with parents from lower academic and functional positions (OR = 2.32, 95% CI 0.87–6.22).

Discussion

Drawing on a population-based longitudinal study, we show how those with parents from the educational elite (14% of the sample) had a lower risk than those who had parents with mid- and low-level education for getting a drug charge, even when the illegal behaviours in question (use of illegal substances and drug dealing) were controlled for. There were not significant differences in charges between those with parents with mid- and low-level education. Also, parental unemployment and occupation did not predict level of drug charges. Thus, in Norway the important divide seems to go between those with parents with from the educational elite and others, where the first group may be protected from drug charges even though they may report similar levels of drug law infractions as other adolescents. Previous research suggest that so-called cultural capital, manifested in a parental higher university education, may contribute to the feeling of “being at home” in the school system (Flemmen et al., 2017:1293). Our findings suggest that formal parental credentials may even play a role in encounters with the police and law enforcement.

Based on our data, we were not able to account for details in mechanisms behind this association. However, we could rule out some possibilities: Whereas a study of privileged dealers in USA revealed that they did not take part in other types of crime than dealing, to avoid police attention (Mohamed & Fritsvold, 2012), this was not a likely mechanism in our study. The inclusion of self-reported crime in our models (e.g. theft, burglary, fighting with a weapon) did not reduce the socioeconomic differences in drug law enforcement. We also hypothesized that dealers from privileged backgrounds could draw on codes of behaviour normative in such milieus (Flemmen, Jarness, & Rosenlund, 2018) and thus might be shielded from police interventions. There is no simple way to measure such skills. However, we tested a variety of indicators of academic resources such as high school grades, not skipping school and high occupational aspirations. Including these variables did not reduce the protective impact of parental education. Neither did the inclusion of indicators of family psychosocial risk factors.

Previous research has focused on how factors such as ethnic minority status and low SES may increase the risk of being charged for drug related offences (Beckett, Nyrop, & Pflingst, 2006; Kakade et al., 2012; Stevens, 2011). Our findings suggest that, in the Norwegian context, it is a minority from the rather small elites of society that may be protected from drug law enforcement. The reason why ethnic minority status is not an issue may be that there are few with such a background in the cohorts studied here. However, there were also no differences in charges between those with parents with mid- and low educational levels. Neither did those with parents who had been unemployed or had got welfare receipts have an increased risk for charges. Thus, the important divide in this cohort in Norway (born in the 1970s) does not seem to go between those at the bottom of the SES scale and/or with a socially marginalized and/or an ethnic minority background and the rest. Rather, it goes between the small minority with parents from the elites and the majority.

One plausible hypothesis for the reduced rate of charges in this group, which we were not able to test by means of our data, may be that youth from the most privileged parts of society may be shielded from police and prosecution because they seldom visit areas with much police surveillance (Ratcliffe & McCullagh, 2001). They may also live in neighbourhoods where drug-related activities are less visible to the police

(Geller & Fagan, 2010). Moreover, their drug transactions may not take in place in public and include strangers, but rather indoors and in more shielded contexts (Nguyen & Reuter, 2012). However, one should note that neighbourhoods of the most privileged may not be those with lowest prevalence of illicit drug use. Data from Oslo, the capital of Norway, indicate that heavy alcohol use and use of illegal substance use among young people is more prevalent in the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the city (Pedersen & Bakken, 2016). Policing and order maintenance strategies may also disparately affect groups with different social backgrounds, and privileged people may not be caught or even not charged if they are, because the police may expect them to have greater resources to counter charges (Gau & Brunson, 2010). More research is warranted on the character of drug policing in the Nordic contexts. One could for instance map the locations of the drug-related stop-and-search practices (Hughes, Barratt, Ferris, Maier, & Winstock, 2018), and explore whether areas of the privileged typically are shielded from such practices.

There has been increasing criticism of the drug policy regime in many countries, suggesting over-policing and high incarceration rates for vulnerable segments, resulting in growing stigma as well as social problems in these groups (Babor, Caulkins, & Fischer, 2018; Khenti, 2014; Motz et al., 2020; Stevens, 2011). Participants in our study were born in the 1970s, and the bulk of their charges came in the 1990s when participants were in their late teens and early 20 s. Arguably, in the Norwegian context, there has been a tendency towards milder penal reactions at least for use and possession of drugs over the past couple of decades (Lovdata, 2021) as well as a reduction in the volume of such reactions over the same time span. However, in 2020, there were still almost 10,000 drug-related convictions, which makes this one of the more prevalent types of crime in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2021).

Thus, the main finding that people from privileged segments may be involved with the use of illegal substances and even drug dealing, but still may have lower risk for drug charges, may be of importance in designing a new drug policy. The finding may be particular relevant in the Nordic welfare state context, where crime policy has been embedded in long-existing cultures of equality, with small acceptance for selective law enforcement (Pratt, 2008).

Strengths and limitations

Strengths of the study include the relatively large sized population-based sample, the long-term nature of the study, and the utilization of surveys as well as register data. However, there are also limitations. First, even with a rather large sample, a major limitation is the small number of participants charged for drug-related offences. As a result, confidence intervals of our estimates were large, thereby limiting the precision of the estimated differences in charges according to SES. Second, we were unable to distinguish between drug charges of differing severity. Additionally, our data provided only information about charges for drug-related offences while convictions were not assessed. Future studies are therefore needed to provide information about whether we will find the same social gradients in convictions as were found for charges. Third, we did not have data regarding locations where the drug-related crimes had taken place, and could not test whether those with low SES were more often charged because they were arrested in areas with more police surveillance. Fourth, we would also have benefited from even more detailed data on the socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants, not least measures capturing the relative importance of cultural and economic assets among parents (Flemmen et al., 2017; Toft, 2018). Finally, even with favourable response rates, we know that drug charges and low SES is related to attrition. Thus, our findings may not be representative of the most marginalized segments of drug users.

Conclusion

Young people in Norway who are involved in drug offenses and who have parents with a higher university education are charged less fre-

quently than others. Studies suggest that individuals' normative evaluation of the fairness of the police and the court system impact their decisions to comply with laws (Huq, Jackson, & Trinkner, 2017). Thus, the drug policy reform work in Norway should take into the consideration the findings reported here, to maintain legitimacy.

Declarations of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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