

Top boys: Getting high on their own supply

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Background and aims

- Literature on heroin user-dealers as small time subsistence dealers (Moyle and Coomber 2015, 2016, Small et al 2013)
- Studies of organised crime suggest middle market and higher level dealers are rarely heroin users (Pearson and Hobbs 2001, Desroches 2007)
- Some studies of heroin use suggest that heroin users can occupy higher positions in the drug economy (e.g. Taylor 1993, Lallander 2002)

- What roles do participants discuss playing in the drugs economy?
- How do heroin users understand their role in users and dealers?
 - What motivates heroin users to sell drugs?
 - What challenges to heroin users face when they deal?
 - How do they succeed and fail?

Methods

- Stage 1: 51 interviews with heroin users – 23 of these featured accounts of drug dealing
- Stage 2: 8 interviews with users known to deal
- Contacts with drugs workers enabled sampling. Hopefully more interviews to follow...
- 31 participants – all men unfortunately – all white except for 1
- Narrative analysis

User-dealers can be defined as ‘users first and dealers second who primarily supply to support their own drug use’ (Coomber, 2006 p.141).

- Freelance

- *I used to, years ago but just to cover my own habit, nothing major, I used to sell half of it, keep my own habit going, it was £20 a day, then (money) to spend on fags and things. Happy days. (Bernie)*

- Middling

- *I was the link in there, ‘Craig’ had a the transport, he also had twenty quid, and ‘Katy’... she could get twenty quid as well (Tom)*

- Corporate

- Other participants have described ‘corporate’ roles where their house has been used as a premises for the sale of drugs.
- Some participants worked as runners
- In both of the South Wales locations where fieldwork took place ‘London blacks’ and ‘scousers’ reportedly set up heroin and crack dealing operations in the local areas.

'Absolutely smashing it' (Mo)

- Freelance

- *'it's changed now, no one wants amphetamine, they want crack and smack, he went oh alright then, we'll swap round... boom, half a bar of each, four and a half ounces (125 grams) each, go on and sell them'* (Jonny)

- Middling

- *'They called me over and asked me if I could get something for them, which like I put them in contact with people, and I ended up literally from making two phone calls making about eleven hundred pound'* (Jamie)

- Corporate

- Corporate rolls at this level typically involved managing 'crack houses' on behalf of a dealer. They were paid well and consumed the profit
- Other 'corporate' rolls included working as security for bigger dealers and running errands as a driver

'A bit of luxury' (Harry)

- *'Couple of cars, y'know, go shopping every day, buy clothes every day'.*
- *'I had a raging habit that I could control and I was making money as well'. (Ben)*
- *We use to have a shift pattern... but it never used to work... one of us used to man the phone... one of use would sleep, and then you'd fit your partying in, but it never use to really work like that, it was always just partying constantly twenty-four seven (Tony)*
- *'I put my daughter through uni and I paid my other daughter's mortgage and things, and I just spend on them really' (Paul)*
- *I'd say well, tell me where I'm gonna get all this from, and I'd pull out my pocket, maybe two grand from one pocket, and a big bag of mixed, drugs in the other pocket, and I'd be like, where am I going to get this from, at my age, and a car, and everything else I've got, and without helping my mum pay the mortgage and without doing this and other things were going on as well, erm, how else could I possibly do this?' (Jonny)*

'The more I was making, the more I was smoking, right' (Harry)

- They always get chaotic do you know what I mean... If someone says that they don't... They are lying... Just losing things, losing ounces and stuff. (Paul)*
- I did it [supplying cannabis], I'd say for about a year, if that, if that, six months, basically it just went out the window... well basically when I was smoking the gear, I'd just switch into a different zone, I just didn't want nothing to do with all that crap, didn't have time to go driving around here dropping off here, dropping off there, so it just stopped like that (Mo)*
- [W]e never went anywhere for more than a week because of how much gear that you would have to take. And this was the other thing, these were the considerations that we had, you know, that even though we had money and freedom, we were still shackled. So we were never completely free. (Callum)*
- The longest I lasted was two or three days. That never, ever fucking worked out... the whole fucking Scarface thing and all of that, and I tried and tried. I would have loved to do that (Callum)*

Conclusion

- Some (tentative) suggestion that persistent heroin users occupy a variety of rolls in the drugs economy
 - Interesting that this phenomenon is found in studies of drug use, but not in studies of organised crime?
- Some (tentative) suggestion that heroin markets in UK provincial settings due to 'county lines phenomenon'
- 'User-dealer' definition needs expansion, or a new term needed for users who deal and party or make profit
- Participants wanted the things everyone else had
- Inherent difficulty to having what everyone else has as a heroin user
- Inherent difficulty to controlling use of heroin when selling drugs
- Inherent difficulty to maintaining drug dealing operations when a heroin user
- Tension between need for control and wish for abandon through partying
- Narratives show a wish to differentiate themselves above other heroin users