

Understanding drug selling in local communities

This report by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research, King's College London, presents findings from a study examining drug dealing in four English communities. It highlights the ambiguities that exist in the relationships between local drug markets, drug sellers and their 'host' communities. It also questions the effectiveness of policies based exclusively on punishing those who sell drugs. The study found that:

- The four drug markets were, to different degrees, linked with both the legal and illegal economies of the neighbourhoods in which they were situated. They had varying relationships with their communities – sometimes symbiotic, sometimes parasitic.
- Some of the neighbourhoods had a strong sense of community identity which could actually have facilitated the emergence of the drug markets.
- Many sellers were from the communities in which they sold drugs.
- The participation of young people varied across the markets, but in all, their involvement was reported to be increasing.
- Though drug sellers' activities caused widespread concern among other residents, they were also to a greater or lesser extent also bringing money and cheap goods into their neighbourhood.
- Residents' concerns about drugs focused mostly on the negative reputation that the drug market gave their area, and the violence associated with it. Fear of reprisals was a concern for residents in all of the neighbourhoods.
- Residents had mixed views on what the police should be doing. The majority felt that the police were not able to tackle the drug market by themselves, and that the wider community had a role to play.
- The researchers conclude that in addition to punishing dealers, other agencies besides the police need to be involved. Community support is needed, engendered through better understanding of the sometimes ambivalent relationships with illicit economies. Local measures are also needed to prevent young people from entering the drug market.



Background

The research for this study took place in four local communities in England. The areas were given fictitious names – Sidwell Rise, Etherington, Midson Vale and Byrne Valley. This was to avoid consolidating the areas' reputations as drug markets and to preserve the anonymity of those who took part in the research.

The four local drug markets

In all the markets, heroin and crack could be bought seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Both were sold mainly through closed markets, where buyer and seller arranged deals in advance, although in Sidwell Rise there was also some open street dealing. Most transactions were conducted by mobile phone, with exchanges taking place in public space. All the markets except Byrne Valley appeared to have a number of dealing houses (or crack houses).

Selling in Byrne Valley was conducted by small clusters of hierarchical dealing networks. These clusters were tightly controlled by local families or through other social networks. Drugs were sold by suppliers to users via runners who were not themselves users. The markets in Sidwell Rise and Etherington operated much more on free-market principles: anyone could sell as long as they followed certain rules and conventions. Midson Vale appeared to be a mix between the two, with a structured dealing-house market and a less organised street market.

The drug sellers

Interviews were carried out with 68 people who were involved in selling in the four markets. Three-quarters of them were men. Their average age at the time of interview was 31, and just under a third had lived in the areas all their lives. Many had experienced unsettled early lives: over half had lived with a foster family, in a children's home or in secure accommodation. Interviewees had typically used alcohol and illicit drugs from an early age. Many had had a disrupted education, over half being excluded from school or leaving with no educational qualifications. Nearly all had been in contact with the criminal justice system, and over two-thirds had served a prison sentence.

Interviewees had become involved in selling drugs in a variety of ways. The three most common reasons were to fund their own drug use, because of family and friendship ties, or because an established dealer had asked them to sell. The majority continued to sell because they had become reliant on the income that drug selling provided them, either to fund their own drug use or to finance their lifestyle.

The average weekly income reported by the ten 'profit dealers' – those whose motivation was entirely commercial – was £7,500. The rewards were smaller for user-dealers and runners. The latter reported average weekly earnings of £450. Over half the sample spent the majority of their earnings on personal drug use, while others spent their earnings on family, friends and luxury items, as the following quotes illustrate:

"Drugs. I spend £350 on heroin and £560 on crack a week."

"Food, clothes. I give [my] granddad £50 per day."

"I have seven brothers and a lot of nephews, I spend it on them. They don't get off their arses and do nothing. I spend it on my mum, cars, spending money, clothes – designer only – trainers, my partner and a lot of girlfriends. I've also got two boys, had two flats and I've invested in legitimate businesses as well."

Just over a third stated that they carried a weapon. The key reason was to protect themselves from being robbed by other participants in the drug market.

Young people were involved in all the drug markets, most extensively in Byrne Valley. Their roles were generally as runners or lookouts. Young people were becoming increasingly involved in the drug markets in Sidwell Rise and Etherington, but sellers were still reluctant to use them regularly. The young people interviewed did not use drugs, but were often well known to a number of professionals such as social services and the police. As two professionals explained:

"They are involved in lots of ways, hiding it and delivering mainly, helping out older brothers, uncles etc."

"There's quite a few 14 and upwards involved in selling, they all work shifts. They are doing it when they should be at school. I don't know if they're been kicked out or skipping but there's a lot of them."

The markets and their 'host' communities

The relationships between local drug markets and their 'host' communities were sometimes ambiguous and complex. The differences and social distance between buyers and sellers of drugs varied, depending on a number of factors. Some drug markets were closely linked with the legal and illegal economies of their local neighbourhoods. In Byrne Valley and previously in Sidwell Rise they were run by cohesive groups with local family ties and extensive local networks of friends. But elsewhere the markets were populated by entrepreneurial 'sole traders' with few ties to the area. In Sidwell Rise the local dealers were being replaced by more criminal outsiders.

The research found that there were at least two sorts of precondition for a drug market to become established in a community. On the one hand, fragmented neighbourhoods like Midson Vale, with highly depleted social capital, could through inertia or neglect provide a suitable setting for a market. Equally, though, some highly deprived but cohesive neighbourhoods might also provide fertile soil for the development of markets that suit – up to a point at least – the needs of some members of the community. By the very nature of their networks, closely-knit communities in deprived areas may have some of the preconditions needed for markets to develop.

The costs and benefits of local drug markets

A retail drug market that only brought benefits to a local community would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine. But it would also be a failure of imagination to think of such markets as being only socially destructive and economically damaging. The complexity of the relationships of some – mainly deprived – communities with their illicit economies needs to be recognised. Some members of some communities benefit from having a local illicit economy. The market for stolen goods stimulated by this economy can help people living in extreme poverty.

Across the four areas studied almost half (31) of the sellers interviewed accepted stolen goods as payment for drugs. The clear implication was that there was a market – probably a local market – for stolen goods. The sellers were also supplementing incomes or giving money to family and friends. Where sellers had fewer friends or family in the area and their ties were weaker, they contributed far less to the local economy or to others living there.

In Byrne Valley drug sellers also exercised – or claimed to exercise – a degree of control over other forms of criminality, such as car crime and burglary. It was likely that the motivation for this was driven by sellers' desire to protect their own interests, rather than an altruistic wish to protect 'their' community. If other criminal activity attracted police attention, sellers would find it far more difficult to sell drugs. One of the perverse 'benefits' of hosting a drug market seemed to be that in some communities local residents were 'protected' from other criminal activity.

The views of residents

As with any area, the opinions of local residents about their communities were mixed. Despite problems of poverty, crime and drug dealing, over half of those sampled from Sidwell Rise and Etherington described their local areas as either 'very or fairly good' places to live. In Midson Vale and Byrne Valley residents were far less positive. Under half in each area described their neighbourhoods favourably. The following quotes are illustrative:

"Drugs cause [the] decay of the area, with the crime, prostitution and street robbery. The potential to commit crime increases. [It has] stigmatised the area."

"I just get on with everyone, I know everyone, I have a sense of belonging, I've never been anywhere else."

Residents also cited growing violence, the presence of drug users and the damage that this did to their area's reputation as sources of concern. Views on what needed to be done in each area were mixed. Over a quarter of respondents simply stated that there needed to be more of a police presence on their streets, but ten per cent of respondents felt the police were doing all they could and almost three-quarters felt that tackling markets and drug sellers should not be left to the police alone. A number of residents also highlighted that they too should take an active role in reducing the harms drug markets cause.

Constraints on taking action

Where drug markets are deeply embedded in neighbourhoods, the challenge is to find ways to encourage local communities to 'disembed' them. The pressures discouraging communities from tackling problems associated with drug markets can be intense. In trying to develop communities' capacity to take action against drug markets, it is important to appreciate the limited or constrained choices open to many residents. The study found that the constraints on residents' capacity for action were associated with:

- the use of violence in drug markets;
- the limited legitimate opportunities open to many residents, especially young people;
- the impact of family or peer pressure on young people.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that while arresting and punishing dealers is an essential part of the strategic response to local drug markets, other agencies besides the police have an important part to play. Community support is needed. To engender this, the ambivalent relationships that some communities have with their illicit economies need to be better understood. Preventing young people from entering a drug market, either as sellers or runners, needs to be tackled at local level and needs to involve professionals whom young people trust and are able to communicate with. Different sorts of market will demand different sorts of response, and if those who tackle local drug markets misunderstand and oversimplify the way in which they work, the risk of failure will be high.

About the project

The study examined the relationship between street-level sellers and the local communities in which they sold drugs, in four areas of England. In all, 68 drug sellers, 124 professionals and 800 local residents were interviewed. Data from these interviews were supplemented by published statistics. All fieldwork was carried out during 2003/04.

For further information

The full report, **Understanding drug selling in communities: Insider or outsider trading?** by Tiggey May, Martin Duffy, Bradley Few and Mike Hough, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Drug and Alcohol series (ISBN 1 85935 417 3, price £14.95). You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk (ISBN 1 85935 418 1).

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