

A RAW DEAL

Drug dealing discussed with lived-experience

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About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five 'pathways to poverty', first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policy-makers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2020 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.



Acknowledgements

This study was, in large part, made possible by the contribution of charities such as Key4Life. An organisation that delivers truly life changing results by reaching out to people inside and recently leaving prison.

This paper draws from material recorded in over eight hours of interviews over two days, all with former drug-dealers in England. All participants had been previously involved in selling illicit drugs in the UK and discussed freely their experiences.

The participants were interviewed together and in groups of no more than eight. The extracts from these interviews referenced in this document were not selected to reflect any particular view or make any specific social commentary but merely, as far as is possible, to accurately reflect and give a voice to some of those willing to speak of their lived experience. Of course, many of these views may not be consistent with those of the CSJ indeed they may challenge and contradict our position at times. While every effort has been made to remain true to the actual words spoken, these are sometimes edited to allow easier reading when, for example, repetition or unfinished sentences disturb the flow of the passage. Some participants were more engaged than others and their views are often more prominent in the piece, although effort has been made to record all participants views. Real names have not been used and replacement names have been randomly selected for each section of text to ensure anonymity.

While common themes do appear in these interviews, some of which speak powerfully of the influence of various forms of social disadvantage, the experiences of those caught up in this trade are varied and more complex than this short account pertains to record or explore. Furthermore, there are examples in the extracts of the text quoted which effectively propose policy initiatives or suggest other solutions and there are even examples of statements that could be interpreted as medical advice. Nothing in this paper should be read as a policy proposal or as medical advice that ought to be accepted by the reader.

Executive summary

While the law has for many years recognised the role of rehabilitation and treatment of users and even of dealers, the powerful public interest factors that require decisive action against those convicted of commercial supply of illicit drugs has made custody a very real possibility at sentence.

If actively challenging recidivism is one of our goals, there is a need to further explore the criminogenic needs of offenders involved in supply and to better understand the attractions and, dare we say it, even the perceived advantages as well as the many disadvantages of dealing drugs. Conversely, the desperation of circumstance, pressure from others, perhaps together with the normalisation of the illicit trade in some communities, can both push and draw young people in. Poverty has made yet more powerful a common aspiration towards a version of life success, itself propagated by those that would exploit the next generation of young people to act as dispensable foot soldiers in the illicit drugs trade.

We have heard in these interviews, evidence of the effect of normalisation of dealing and for example, the impact of what many would recognise as disappointing conduct of role models or authority figures – of secondary school teachers buying from ex-pupils, of wealthy individuals, seemingly untouched by Police attention, regularly buying drugs class A drugs from young people. There is evidence in these pages of inequality in the shadows, the most vulnerable shouldering all the risk – exposed to both Police attention and, at the same time, the risk of operating in a criminal gang. These risks include kidnap, torture, extreme physical violence and sexual exploitation.

In recent times the states approach and understanding of the realities of the drug dealers experience has changed. The culpability of the street dealer, particularly in county lines activities which can often involve children, has been re-assessed. In the most serious cases, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 can afford some protection to those who are effectively compelled or exploited in certain circumstances into these illicit activities. The reality is that, for many, this protection is necessary and it is just. Others are recruited young and into a trade that has been effectively normalised in their community, perhaps in some cases, to the point where little by way of any moral deliberation takes place in the mind of the young person. Conversely, there are many that act not out of some irresistible pressure or ignorance to the consequences to the end users but through a simple choice to engage in a trade that spreads misery and can promise significant profit.

Further, our efforts to understand the drivers behind the illicit drug trade, and by so doing hopefully advance the prospect of reforming and rehabilitating those involved, must never be conflated with the acts of an apologist, unable to see the importance of personal responsibility.

chapter one

The living reality

“I was in prison with a lot of my clients. I’ve started talking to them, I’m seeing how it’s actually affecting them. I’ve always known how it affects their lives, but now they’re here, it’s like – I see pictures on their walls of their kids. So, well, I’m fucking up these people’s lives, you know what I’m saying?”

Dan: “Younger kids want things that the older people have, ‘cause they’re seeing it. Now kids want to drive, now kids want the big cars, they want the girls; they want that lifestyle that they’re seeing. Then you can’t really get that in a normal way, in a legit type of way. I was young when I left the country, came back in a year. But by then I couldn’t get into no schools, ‘cause I left and it was GCSE time, you know, and I got kicked out. I went back home, came back here. I had a permanent exclusion, yeah. But just, like, nothing serious, you know, just school stuff, yeah. So, got into an argument, with my dad, I got kicked out of my house and I just, sort of like, left and I said, “Fuck off,” you know, cut him out. And then from there, when I was outside, ‘cause what else, okay, is there to do, innit? I already knew about ‘countryside’, I already knew about all of that, you know. I just went and I said, “Fuck it, I might as well go right now.” Then I’ve started seeing money, I thought you know what, yeah, this is what I should’ve been doing a long time ago, like, this makes sense, but then it didn’t last long. ‘Cause in your head, at that time, you think this is going to go on forever. Then there was a big operation. In the space of six months I’ve served an undercover officer twice. So, I’ve, kind of, sorted my dad out and we’re cool, we’re, kind of, getting back on terms, you know, I got arrested and I went straight to jail. When you’re in jail that’s when you, sort of, realise that, oh no. And then Feltham’s a YOI, so everyone there is just my age, like, we’re learning nothing. Everyone wants the same things. Everyone wants to get back out there. So, there was nothing really to learn [in prison]. It’s more of a boot camp for kids, like, there’s nothing there to learn. So, I came out, if anything, I came out worse, and you’re back in, got back to what I know. And then I got arrested again then that’s when I went to prison. Now I went to [an adult prison], yeah, ‘cause that’s the adult jail, I was in prison, ‘cause that prison is in town.

“I’ve said this is a trap. That’s why they call it ‘the trap’ because it really is. That’s the real world. That’s what made me realise I had to leave it.”

“I was in prison with a lot of my clients. I’ve started talking to them, I’m seeing how it’s actually affecting them. I’ve always known how it affects their lives, but now, like, we’re in jail ourselves, on the same side, like, we’re wearing the same tracksuits, like, you know what I’m saying? Like, it, kind of, humbles you down. Whereas before on the roads, you’re just thinking, “oh, some idiot”, like, you know. But then, now they’re here, it’s like – I see

pictures on their walls of their kids. So, well, I'm fucking up these people's lives, you know what I'm saying? Then, on top of that, as well, I see grown men, like, I've got my sentence, I'm around adults, like grown arse men, 40-year-olds, 35-year-olds, like big men, and they're acting like they're my age. We're all in jail together, but I'm thinking, right, at the back of my head I'm thinking, no, man, I don't want to see myself when I talk to him. He ain't got no prospects, he just wants to come up. Obviously, he's talking about, "Yeah, yeah, get back to it," That's what I was saying two years ago when I was 15, bro. 'You're a big man, you're 40-years-old, how are you still talking like that?' You know what I'm saying? I always thought in my head I'm going to do this, and then move on, you know. But I never saw myself at 40 years still – you know what I'm saying? It's like that just made me lose interest in it. I've said this is a trap. That's why they call it 'the trap' because it really is. That's the real world. That's what made me realise I had to leave it.

"But I think it can be stopped, though, if there was some employment for youngers and more opportunities and that, if I didn't feel like I needed to resort to that, you know what I'm saying? Could've been anything. I didn't, I mean, I didn't get a chance to go to college, I didn't get a chance.

"I think me going to prison made me realise what's important, do you understand? Because, alright, with drug dealing, yeah, it all looks good and that, but there's a lot more that comes with it. Like there's a lot more headaches, you know. It's not as – it looks calm and that, it looks easy, it looks like it's going – everything's going smoothly, but it's not always like that. You've got a lot of things going through your head. Like, you're smoking a lot of drugs yourself, like, you know what I'm trying to say? You're trying to – you're awake at bum times. You haven't got a proper routine. You're getting money and whatnot, but I say, it comes with a lot of frustration."

CSJ: Do you think you were happy when you were dealing?

Dan: "No, I don't think I was. No, I don't think I was happy, still. I don't think I was happy. Stressful, yeah, that's what I'm saying, it's stressful. Police, other people, like, there's a lot of things."

Henry: "And I think with the younger generation [they don't feel] included in your community. So, then you start to create a community within your community. Like you said, you're searching for something, so, you're searching for that brother or that companionship or even a lover, whichever. So, you find this whole – you've created this other community within your community, which, we as a society, label as a gang. And then, you know, they just start to do whatever they're doing in terms of trying to survive or trying to create their own happiness within their community. But if we make them feel more included within the community, make things affordable, just like – I know it might sound silly, but even just, like, going to the cinema, going to sports clubs or youth clubs, just affordable things for them to do in their community. They might value their community, might not feel the need ... to actually ... Seek an alternative, you know, 'cause it's hard, like, for parents of broken homes, single mums, single dads or just low-income earning families to actually tell their kids ... over a six weeks period of holiday, "I can't send you to bowling son, I can't let you go to the cinema ... son, sorry." Just explain to them, "We can't do this, we can't do that." When the kid keeps hearing can't, can't, can't, like, when I was growing up I'd hear can't, can't, can't one too many times, that's it, okay, so, I'll ..."

Ian: "... Get it myself."

The group almost universally agreed with this position.

chapter two

The use of violence and exploitation

“... sometimes people made a statement from violence, you know. They would say ‘go in and do’. I’ve been with boys say, ‘Right, just go in, as soon as you go in, stab him’.”

The issue of violence ran through the discussion and while most had at least one experience, opinion differed significantly on how avoidable violence was. Some argued that by choosing the right clients it was possible to avoid harm. Yet this view was met with strong opposition by some. One former drug dealer, who had experience of dealing at a level beyond low level street dealing, gave an example of a confrontation and the reasoning behind it.

Gavin: “At the end of the day, it’s business, innit? – you need to make money and so, if they’re taking food out of your mouth, you’re going to – do you know what I mean? The only thing that’s changed, really, for me, over that time is that people weren’t getting killed so easy. But the violence was there, do you know what I mean? And people went in and made a statement from violence, you know. They would say go in and do – I’ve been with boys, say, “Right, I mean, just go in, we’re going to go in, just crash, as soon as you go in, stab him,” or whatever, do you know what I mean?”

“So, they understand. You ain’t going to give ‘em a bash, I mean, stab ‘em in the arm or something. Well, it sounds mad, but you’re actually thinking, alright, do him in the arm, you know, it ain’t that bad. Right, you know, it is bad, do you know what I mean?”

He gave an example of such a confrontation and how it arose.

“Yeah, I’ve robbed dealers, I suppose, where I’ve gone in and robbed dealers. I – and not just robbing ‘em just ‘cause I wanted drugs, but certain moral codes, you know what I mean? You know, so, I might see something where I think well, hold on, what? And – do you know what I mean? So, I’d come back and go out, you know, get on the sniff, driving, you know, I’d smoke a crack spliff, yeah. So, I’d go around his, buy a bit of that, buy a little 50 or something and smoke. But there was a – it was a house what I used to go through, I went down there one time, I went in there and they’re dealing. And they had a young bird – they had a young girl in there and I knew this girl was underage anyway and that’s the reason why I robbed ‘em, because well, anyway, I said, I told them, “Ah, she’s underage, she needs to go” and I took her out of the house. So, I’ve gone home, I’m not even going to smoke the spliff, you know, anyway. So, I’ve just gone, had a machete

and that, went back around there, robbed him, you know what I mean, slapped him and whatever, and that was it. And then once I've done here, I just thought, oh, fuck it, I might as well do all the other ones, do you know what I mean."

The younger members of the group explained that confrontations would often be as consequence of patches being enforced, especially in the "the countryside". However, confrontation can arise for a host of quite separate reasons, including something as simple as jealousy, or even the need for more capital to buy more stock and increase profit.

"I robbed another drug dealer 'cause that's the easy way. Everyone done it like that back in the day, because ... you can't get arrested. Do you know what I mean? What's he going to do, call the Police and say he robbed my drugs? Do you know what I mean, like? I was 15 and there's another boy my age making more than me, right? And it's in my area as well, well, our area. But then you feel like you're your own King in that area, do you know what I mean? I just didn't care."

CSJ: Was it a big deal to use violence for the first time when you were involved in drugs? Was that a big decision?

"It was just like, I was just pissed off. I'm not making that much money. I'm hearing through girls that he's making more money than me, 'cause that's how you find out, I've – well, how I always found out. Guys like to sit down and, or lie down and pillow talk, which is being in bed with a girl and talking too much and then she'll end up coming to meet me ... It was just he has more money than me, It was just the anger type of thing ..."

County lines

Many in the group expressed bewilderment and frustration at reference to county lines by at least some in the media as a recent phenomena. Many were keen to assert the point that this system has been operating for decades and some told stories of criminal gangs robbing and exploiting their own young runners to force them into debt and servitude.

Charlie: "It's like ... bump into someone, "What? Are you," you know what I'm saying, "are you selling on my street? "What?" – and then ... whoosh, do you know what I'm saying? And then, like ..."

Darren: "It depends on the individual. Because if you – personally, me, when I was drug dealing, I didn't like to get into violence, guess what, I've got money on me, I've got drugs on me. Don't want to lose my money. Don't want to lose my drugs, I may want to punch someone up. I don't want to get punched."

Charlie: "Alright, yeah, this is what I'm saying, the violence – most of the violence, like, is literally, touching on my point, most of the violence that goes on in our area – in our sort of areas, yeah, is more just, you know, gang warfare that's just been going on you know, way before you. Do you know what I mean? And that's, you know, the majority of the time, that's where the killings are coming."

Darren: "If you're going – if you've got a group of four to eight people and you've got another group of four to eight people in a place like, I don't know, Staffordshire and they're dealing and it's two different groups. They will be like, you know what, these lot have, kind of, taken over now. Like last week we were making £800 this week we've only

made five. These lot have – definitely have something to do with this. Either we'll take out their competition, or we come together and make some sort of agreement, I don't know. But there's never really agreements."

Charlie: "Yeah."

Edward: "Yeah, there's never agreement, there's never agreement."

chapter three

Emerging trends in supply and demand

“So, I felt like, look, a lot of these people that I was selling drugs to in University, I was just their doctor.”

James: “I can promise [your teacher] would not have had any training to deal with young people that – so, as I said, that Teachers might know about weed or might know about alcohol, but Xanax, codeine, like cocaine, Ecstasy, Ketamine.

“I can talk about Xanax today, ‘cause that was – the reason why I got kidnapped, stuff like that. But the fact is, ‘cause I was one of the only ones that was just starting I tried not to make a name for myself but people were watching. Like, “Who’s this youth? Oh, look, he’s not sharing the plug.” You know what I mean? ‘Cause I had a white geeky – sorry, I say white, it’s just a word. So, I had a geeky friend that had glasses, right, and I just say he’s white, because middleclass, right, I’m just trying to get – paint you the picture, who just went on the internet and he could be 10,000 Xanax for £2,000.

“That’s 25p [sic] a Xanax. But I didn’t finish, though. So, my clients were people that their Doctors were giving them alprazolam, okay ... I’m a drug dealer, so alprazolam, which is what Xanax is ... anti-anxiety drug. So, I felt like, look, a lot of these people that I was selling drugs to in university, I was just their Doctor, because they were getting 0.5mg, right, and then they would have to pay the £12 or whatever. They have to pay the prescription charge. With me I don’t give them a prescription charge. And I’ve got 2mg and pure Xanax Pfizer, from an American brand. So, like, she didn’t feel like she was buying drugs. She just preferred it, because she’s got anxiety issues, right, which I believe is for – a lot of the major anxieties going on is formed from the cocaine and the ketamine that young people are taking. Oh, ‘cause that’s the perfect night, because Xanax is an antianxiety drug. So, if you want the perfect cocaine high, you pop a Xanax and then you do cocaine. But ... the problem is, like, I guarantee your friend who took eight and he drank with it. If you have one – if you have 100 Xanax, right, you’re going to be off your head, but you can’t overdose. It’s impossible to overdose with Xanax. If you have five Xanax and you have one beer, you’re at high risk of overdosing and at high risk of doing something you will regret, because it completely changes the chemicals of the high. Do you know what I mean? But kids don’t know that, so, that’s what I’m saying. So, when these 11-year-olds and 13-year-olds are taking Xanax for the first time, right, no-one’s telling them, because the Teachers are too scared to talk about it. It’s a stigma, “I can’t talk about drugs,” right? But they don’t know that, “Listen, guys, I’m not saying never take – I’m – look, don’t take Xanax, it’s bad for you, right? But if you’re going to take it, you realise if you drink a beer with it, this is what’s going to happen to you, right? You realise that if you take Xanax every day

for 30 days, you're going to have worse physical withdrawals than the heroin withdrawal." And I can – that's true, if you go into any rehab centre and ask them, "What's the worst withdrawal, benzos or heroin?" they tell you benzos."

The issue of the influence of the internet, was re-explored a number of times in the groups. One exchange revealed that there was wide-spread agreement in the group that

Ben: "The dark net has doubled and that cocaine purity is higher."

CSJ: So, would you have known how to get onto the dark net?

Jack: "Yeah, yeah, I learnt that ages ago."

Ben: "Do you know – do you want to know how? Google Reddit ... the Dark Web."

Jack: "... easy."

Ben: "That's what I done ..."

Jack: "Yeah, that's it. Dark Web, they explain to you how to take your IP address off your laptop, how to, kind of, reset it all and then go back in, you go on the internet, you just type in the Dark Web onto your Reddit and that's it, you're on it, order whatever you want. I got some coke from Colombia, I've got some weed from Amsterdam, I've got pills."

The group also discussed the influence of the internet on the ease with which a person can become a dealer.

Jim: "The difference now is every man and their dog can be a drug dealer. Growing up not every man and their dog could be a drug dealer. Then if you weren't able to hold your ground, if you didn't have a name of stature, you know, that matched it what you're trying to get into, you could not drug deal. It's like you could walk down Hammersmith or see 100 people wearing Rolex watches. I can tell you now, in the 90s that couldn't happen. If you could – your name couldn't hold that item or that weight that you was trying to get rid of, you'd be sucked up, instantly."

Kevin: "Yeah."

Jim: "You'd have a team that would come to your house, because never mind the Police, you'd have just a team from the roads, they'd be gone."

Roy: "Everyone's got a Rolex now."

chapter four

Education

“I was like, ‘Wow, you actually – you just want me to get my education so much ... you’ll let me ... come in late on a Monday’. Little things like that, that ... made me finish”.

The group discussed their views on school and were asked to express their feelings about their experience in education.

James: “I got kicked out of school, ‘cause I was very energetic, I guess you could say class clownish and, yeah, ended up being kicked out. So, then I went to a PRU, Pupil Referral Unit. It’s just putting criminals with criminals. Then you come friends and then you’re the leaders of the school. It’s not the Teachers ... because ... the Teachers ... don’t know how to handle you.”

John: [in response] “I will just disagree, ‘cause I – when I was sent in a PRU, I just couldn’t handle being in a classroom with 30 children, yeah. And no – the Teacher didn’t recognise me or notice me and then I went into a classroom with four students and two Teachers ... and for once in my life I was listened to. Do you know what I mean? So, on Mondays they said, “Come in at 10:30 ‘cause you can’t wake up early.” And I was like, “Wow, you actually – you just want me to get my education so much ... you’ll let me ... come in late on a Monday.”

“Little things like that, that ... made me finish”.

The group discussed the value of education and quickly its relevance was questioned, with some suggesting education was “just a piece of paper”. Although most disagreed with this, there was a strong feeling that the word education could often be applied only to College and or University. Many felt that a wider meaning of education, such as training courses and programmes run by charities, had greater relevance and even impact on their lives.

Sam: “... if we’re talking, like, college, school, university, I feel like them three are, kind of – I don’t know, it’s just If we’re talking about what’s helping us, from where we’re coming, it is a case just, like all them type of charities, they’re the ones that I see that have actually helped people, if you’re actually putting education into people.”

Some in the group were clear that just getting into an education environment or work was not necessarily a movement away from either drug use or the temptation, or invitation to deal drugs.

Ed: "My Manager, on my first day, I sold him a gram of MDMA, right, and that's my first job, okay? When I was 18, I saw my old Secondary School Teacher doing cocaine in a party, right? I would end up selling my old Secondary School Teacher coke. My first day of university, in class someone came up to me and said, "Bro, I know you've got that, can I get some coke?" Right? So, it's like even if I take the step and go to education, everyone's doing it in university, everyone's doing it there."

chapter five

Reflections on past conduct

“Most of them, like, when I was selling crack and heroin, most of them were homeless. All of their money went to me.”

The group differed significantly on the issue of the morality of selling drugs to the poorest in society and in particular the homeless.

Harry: “I personally wouldn’t sell to people that I could see were poverty stricken, because what can you really do for me? I wouldn’t sell to somebody homeless, ‘cause, guess what? You probably don’t have credit to phone me, you’re probably going to bring coins, like, you’re not going to come consistently. I don’t know how often I’m going to see you. There’s no point me even engaging in conversation, that’s wasting time, time is money. So, then – you know what I’m saying?”

Ian: “Depends on what you’re dealing, though. I’ve sold to many homeless people, many. Most of them, like, when I was selling crack and heroin, most of them were homeless. All of their money went to me. They were bringing me ... 20ps ... they were bringing ... me pound coins. No, because I had my family to feed. That was the only problem that I was selfish them days. I only looked at it that I’ve got [family] and I’m the man of this house. I’m paying for this stuff. I’m doing all of this stuff. So, I don’t care about half of these guys that were homeless, because half of them, that are homeless, they used to do what I was doing. They just started taking their own supply and that’s what’s happened to them. And at the time that’s the way – now, obviously, when I think back to it, I regret doing all of that. I harmed how many people’s life? God knows where they are now, to this day, do you know what I mean? But back then, no, I didn’t think nothing like that. I saw the money I was getting from it, which was a lot of money and I was happy from it. The only thing that annoyed me is that I had a bag full of coins all day, that was it.”

“If you’ve got a trap,¹ I just think it’d be good to have a couple of girls around there. Yeah, gets ‘em all – bad boys are coming around to get spent – yeah.”

1 Drug dealing premises

The group were asked about the role of women in drug dealing. The broad consensus was that women do sometimes deal but, in their experience, they are rarely front-line dealers. Often women are engaged in either driving roles or in sex work. Most of the group were very clear that they recognised this as sexual exploitation of drug users.

Jack: "Sexual exploitation, there's – that's what I would see."

Ken: "Yeah, yeah."

Jack: "I'd see sexual exploitation. That's all I would see with women being in there, to be honest with you. Unless they are really – well, and women these days as well, I mean, my – in my time, I'm going to go by my time, that would've been sexual exploitation."

Lenny: "Yeah, 'cause there's a lot of prostitutes that – most prostitutes take drugs – take these drugs that we're selling. So ..."

Harry: "And that's how they're supply – that's why they're funding their habit, as well, so it's ..."

Jack: "If you've got a trap man, I just think it'd be good to have a couple of girls around there. Yeah, gets 'em all – bad boys are coming around to get spent – yeah, do you know what I mean?"

chapter six

Detection and the law

Detection

Ben: "So, I wanted to be like Del Boy. I realised they weren't getting arrested, they weren't getting nicked. All these drug, crack and heroin houses, they were getting raided, but these squat parties, there people were having fun doing drugs and selling drugs."

CSJ: How much risk do you feel, in these environments, dealing drugs in those circumstances?

Ben: "What, in the squat raves? Oh, zero."

CSJ: So, do you reckon the Police could do more?

Roy: "I think the Police are – you see right now, yeah, you will get arrested, like, everyone. But the younger generation they just think ..."

Jim: "Every generation thinks they're smarter than the last."

Bob: "Tunnel vision, so, they don't see everything else but when you do – like, no-one lasts for that long. You won't – you will get arrested. They might be slow, but when they catch up, innit? That's – they will."

Jim: "It's like they say, you got to be lucky every day. The Police only has to be lucky once. And at the end of the day, they're the biggest gang over here, ain't it? So, you know, they've got resources everywhere. But the thing is I don't – I'm not even trying to make it, you know – like, it's just their problem. Every institution has its problems, doesn't it?"

CSJ: Some people say we should legalise cannabis.

Jim: "Everyone's going to be delighted, but, I mean, you're still going to [have] problem's there."

Adam: "All you'd do then is you'd take the profit from the streets to the government. I mean, I don't know, it will be some kind of taxing on it. But then Amsterdam works perfectly fine, doesn't it? So..."

Jim: "Yeah, right."

Barry: "And, you know Canada."

Adam: "And, you know, and those certain states in America ..."

Richard: "No, legalising weed's a good thing, but I don't think it's going to stop county lines, innit? It's – but it needs to be legalised anyway. I'd love to buy weed from Boots."

CSJ: What's your likely reaction if [cannabis is legalised]?

Jim: "Well the violence thing, it's like it's unnecessary, because what people forget is there is enough for everybody, like, and your clientele won't die. You get me? Your clientele, it won't die, because maybe Boots won't have one on Tuesday and on Tuesday everyone needs you. So, what you do is you need to either match that price or do better than that price. And there is no competition, because if you block competition out of your mind ..."

Richard: "You're just getting Man United, it's just, yeah."

Jim: "... then, exactly, it's abundance mindset over a competition mindset"

Richard: "There's some people that – yeah, it's true, 'cause there's some people even that I know, yeah, who have got the business mentality that go out there just to make their money and come back. They want everything to run smoothly."

Jim: "Yeah."

Richard: "Then you've got the hotheads they want to go out there and prove a point."

Jim: "It's like Domino's and Pizza Hut, innit? So, what would you prefer? Like the quality of the product. Then we know that on Wednesdays Pizza Hut does a two for one special deal, you know what I'm saying? And if Boots has got rules, you haven't."

CSJ: "Right, so, legalise weed, it's done and then a week later, how are you feeling about that if you're a weed dealer in London?"

Rob: "They're just going to start selling crack or heroin. Other ways, kind of ..."

Richard: "Exactly, but it's not. It's about the decriminalising, or seeing it as a health issue, right? So, for example, decriminalise cannabis does not mean we sell it. It means that, okay, the users are now not being arrested, but we're now tackling the dealers."

chapter seven

Change

“You see counselling, therapy, that sort of stuff, it impresses me when I see younger people doing this and doing all this sort of talking stuff, because I personally, wouldn’t have”.

Pete: “Prisons are warehouses, you know, you just count them as warehouses. No-one’s learning nothing, no-one’s doing shit, mate, do you know what I mean? That’s the problem. And then the staff hate each other, you know, it’s crazy, man. Prison therapy. No, that’s what helped me, well, I promise you. You see counselling, therapy, that sort of stuff. It impresses me when I see younger people doing this and doing all this sort of talking stuff, because I personally, wouldn’t have, I wouldn’t have been in there – see, I would not be there today having been their age. Prison went in reverse when they started to bring in the privatised prisons, because people – the normal prison staff got upset that, you know, prisons were being overtaken. They stopped doing whatever they was doing. What for? Where they would do – where there will be active – they’ll be more active in trying to – that they’ve got some kind of rehabilitation or trying to prepare them or trying to educate. They suddenly lost a lot of control, but that is because they didn’t want to be influenced. It was like their little process, do you see what I’m saying? Which then, by the time they’ve, you know, blinked too hard, you’ve just lost control of the prison system.”

Nick: “You know what, as well? I was just thinking, going back to that, I think discipline in youngsters coming up, so you don’t discipline ‘em. The counselling, the psychology, so you’ve got kids now with mental health issues more so than ever before. When we was growing up we never knew about no mental health issues when I was growing up, and now, it’s got – it seems like they have. And that probably – the skunk, weed, or things like that will deteriorate the brain ‘cause it’s still growing and they’re smoking it younger, but at the same time, you need to be counselling them or whatever, from a young age.”

Neal: “The only thing they talk about is punishment. An alternative would be like, you know, the systems must – they got community orders in terms of, you know a community order for education, for points, do you see what I’m saying? So you have to attend such and such college, where you’re going to do this and this course, which is going to give you this qualification by the time – and if you don’t attend after the two years, then we’ll recall you and put you in prison, blah, blah. Like an alternative in terms of not just building a cupboard, or painting, you know, an actual alternative that will help to improve.”

Many reflected on the importance of family and of role models. One group explored the experience of feeling that they’d missed out on parts of life through dealing and custody.

James: “Going to prison, while I was in prison, you’re just calm boom, boom. When you come home you realise how much you’ve missed and what you’ve missed out on, you know what I’m saying? But in that time, if I had a normal job, like, alright, ‘cause before

I went to jail, like, I've got family members that are my age, like my cousin, for example, and he's, well, he's always stayed at home, gone to college, gone to uni, and he's had a little job. He was working in McDonald's. I laughed at him. I remember I was trying to get him to come with me and 'cause he was someone that I trusted, you know what I'm saying? Someone I could at least do things with and whatnot. Then he – well, thankfully, he didn't listen to me before. Then I went to jail and in that amount of time, while I'm in jail he's doing his things, he's got his licence, he's got his car, boom. I've come home and the amount of time I might've had more fun than him, but my time was a lot shorter. He's had a – his fun lasted, like, he's just ..."

Cam: "Carried on."

James: "And even, and little things like going to jail, you realise little things, like, right, just waking up in a house with your family, just that by itself, do you get me? Forget having money or whatnot, forget about all of that bullshit, just waking up around your family – around – you know what I'm trying to say? You can't do that for so long, you realise ... you know what I'm saying?"

Cam: "Yeah, I do bruv, yeah."

James: "... you know what I mean, right? There's things are important than you realise, to your personal self, personally. Like, me personally, I realised right, it's not worth it, innit? So, go in jail, all that time and I'm seeing people losing their lives and I'm seeing big men talking like they've lost their souls, like, talking like that, around back on exactly what you said, around back on that, it doesn't make – are you stupid or something, bro?"

chapter eight

Observations

The participants that chose to contribute to this short paper did so without compensation or reward and they gave their time in the hope that they could provide a helpful voice in the debate around the drugs trade and its associated harms. We are grateful for their frank and helpful contributions, many of which involved a great deal of self-reflection but also an enthusiastic hope for a more promising future for themselves, their families and their community.

The accounts given offer just some insight into the realities of life as a drug dealer and while no firm conclusions can safely be drawn from such an event, strong themes emerge. Perhaps most striking of all was the consistency of accounts that participants gave when asked about why they went into dealing drugs and what it was that kept them there. This consistency in their response, from men in their 20's to their 50's alike, was made yet more pronounced by the clear suggestion that these consistencies survive at a time of real change to the illicit drugs market.

Certainly, we are seeing clear signs of an altered drugs market, both in terms of the availability and popularity of product sold but also the means of distribution and sale. Recently reported² data reveals that *"28.6 per cent of recreational drug users in England ordered narcotics via encrypted browsers on the internet last year"*, more than double that recorded just five years ago. Evidently, the illicit market is now, at least in part, shaped by clear opportunities to supply drugs through digital transactions, using the dark web to acquire drugs. This web-based solution is often successfully partnered with a very low tech means of delivery, using the conventional post. One participant told us,

"I can show anyone [how] to get on the dark web in three minutes. Yeah, so easy, before you needed to connect, you needed to go out – now, it is changing, right? So, if you go to festivals, if you go to a festival ten years ago, right, you would've mainly seen young black boys from part of the area selling drugs.

"Now, you can't get away from every single culture, every single area. They're all selling pills and coke because now they all know that you can make money from it and they know it's successful. Before, you had to really know a guy to get drugs, do you know what I mean? Now, I can buy 10,000 Xanax in one order, one shipment on my own and all I need is one-month paycheque."

2 A study by the VRU in City Hall, reported in the Evening Standard [found at: www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/how-buying-drugs-on-dark-web-is-fuelling-violent-crime-a4358016.html]

Of course, the fluid and changeable nature of the global drugs market is widely acknowledged. The use of digital platforms has only accelerated this and, arguably, diversified the products available. These changes have not replaced the conventional street dealing activities or the county lines operations that have been running for decades, they may even have fuelled recent up-turns in street-dealing related violence, but these conversations seem to confirm the steady emergence of new norms in the human dynamic to this trade.

This shift has not gone unobserved. Today, social media platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, have contributed to a material change in the way drugs are bought and sold, and even marketed. Chemsex drugs are promoted on dating sites and this is regarded by some as a normal part of the dating scene. Steroids are openly promoted and sold on Instagram, Dr Channa Jayasena, clinical senior lecturer at Imperial College London, was recently quoted as saying that steroid availability on social media was now “out of control”.³ A recent report found that ¼ of young people have seen drugs, including cocaine and heroin, advertised on social media.⁴ We have heard accounts, in these interviews, of students relying on an illicit supply of benzodiazepines to self-medicate. Our conversations with ex-dealers also very briefly explored ‘Cali’, said to be a much purer form of cocaine, relative to street deals, and reportedly⁵ it has been marketed on the dark web as ‘fair trade’ and sold for £100 a gram⁶ to the wealthier and, no doubt the end-user feels, more ‘conscientious’ client. This ‘woke coke’ is emblematic of a determined and emboldened drugs market willing and evidently capable of reaching out to new markets and retaining old ones.

However, through all this market disruption and trend evolution, there seems to be evidence in these interviews of ever-present constants – those very human needs and wants which underlie and motivate this offending. Predominantly, the group was a collection of young men with a stated drive and desire to fit in, to have money and property, or perhaps even to find a partner. One can see how these drivers are easily exploited and manipulated by criminal gangs but equally, can be seen as levers for change. Yet, while we repeatedly heard of a desire to be happier, wealthier or more connected we also heard many in the groups speak of one conventional route to these goals – namely education or school – as if it was something for others, as being ‘just a piece of paper’ or even, some felt, a repressive environment. Despite this, as we also heard that there was some feeling in the groups that just the determination to reach-out had itself inspired commitment in the student. Although work was discussed, very often this related to a handful of desirable opportunities.

These words are not an attempt to portray the dealer as victim, many in this trade know exactly what the harm is and make a moral choice, driven by profit and deterred by little. Nothing in this paper seeks to excuse or defeat the position that the dealer holds some very real and personal responsibility for the impact they clearly have. Indeed, some in these interviews have spoken of dealing to homeless people, unquestioningly taking

3 The Times, 6 January 2020, [Found at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sale-of-steroids-out-of-control-on-instagram-5373kwb5g]

4 The Telegraph [Found at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/07/call-new-law-quarter-youths-have-seen-drugs-including-cocaine/]

5 Evening Standard, [found at: www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/how-london-developed-a-woke-coke-problem-ethical-cocaine-a4343001.html]

6 By comparison some estimates put the value of ‘regular’ cocaine at £40 per gram.

payment from desperate people with a fist-full of change for drugs. The dealer will always own these acts and, in large part, the consequences. Equally, we must acknowledge that deterrence through detection and punishment through the enforcement of the law is an integral part of mitigating the harm this trade causes, sadly, not every person is ready to change their behaviour.

However, these limited qualitative case studies perhaps go some way to remind us that there is often also genuine self-reflection and real unhappiness in the dealers life and the men, young and old, we interviewed left that life for good reason. A great many made these life-defining decisions to enter the illicit trade before they were even teenagers, thereafter, engaged in what one participant referred to as 'a community within your community'.

We heard of wants and needs we might all relate to and even empathise with – for belonging and connection with family, partners and friends, for financial prosperity and for security. In circumstances where these drivers exist within communities of men and women where drug use and dealing is normalised, and even elevated as something a very young person is encouraged to aspire to, there is an argument for re-assessing our response.

In any event, beyond the consideration of the shifting sands of the market in the 21st century, there are also these common and unchanging constants of human need. There is clearly merit in yet further engagement with individuals and groups involved in the illicit drugs trade to explore the possibility of guiding these needs and wants in a different direction.



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