



## Research paper

## Strategies for a risky business: How drug dealers manage customers, suppliers and competitors in Italy, Slovenia and Germany



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** A growing body of literature aims to improve understanding of the operations of drug trafficking markets through conducting interviews with dealers and traffickers. Insight into how these individuals conduct business can provide evidence to inform the efforts by policy makers, law enforcement and practitioners to disrupt illicit markets. This paper aims to make a contribution to this evidence base by extending the number of European countries in which interviews have been conducted with incarcerated drug dealers and traffickers.

**Methods:** It draws on interviews with 135 men convicted of offences related to the distribution or sale of heroin or cocaine and imprisoned in Italy, Slovenia and Germany. The research was conducted as part of the Reframing Addictions Project (ALICE-RAP) funded by the European Commission. The sample was diverse. It included a range of nationalities and some individuals who were members of organised crime groups. The majority of the interviewees were dealers who sold at the retail and street level, but there were some who were importers and wholesalers.

**Findings:** Most dealers in each of the three countries reported having more than one regular supplier, and were able to respond to periods of over and under supply without losing customers. Supply arrangements varied in terms of frequency and quantities bought. Dealers engaged in repeated transactions and their relationships with customers were based on trust and reputation. Dealers aimed to sell to regular customers and to provide drugs of good quality. While dealers sought to maximise their profits by cutting drugs with cutting agents, the quality of drugs that they sold could affect their reputation and thus their profits and position in the market. Lastly, while there are some significant differences in the approach between those involved in organised crime groups and those who are not, and between street dealers and those operating at higher levels of the market, there were striking similarities in terms of the day-to-day operational concerns and modes of relationship management.

**Conclusions:** Interviewees' arrangements for securing supplies of drugs provide support to the notion that drug markets are resilient and flexible. Our findings correspond with other empirical research in relation to the centrality of trust in the practical operation of supply and sale of drugs. The research highlights some differences, but important similarities between dealers who were part of organised crime groups and those who were not; dealers all faced some common challenges and adopted some common responses to these.

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## Introduction

Researchers, policy makers and practitioners have sought to understand the business operations of drug dealers and traffickers in order to better design and target disruption efforts and reduce the harm associated with this illicit market. Stemming from the seminal work of Adler (1985), who conducted extensive fieldwork

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with wholesale dealers in Southern California, and Reuter and Haaga (1989), who investigated the organisation of high-level drug markets, a number of studies have used in-depth interviews and ethnographic methods to gain first-hand information from dealers (Dorn, Levi, & King, 2005).

Caulkins, Johnson, Taylor, and Taylor (1998), as part of a project which aimed to improve the understanding of crack selling and drug dealing careers, observed over 1500 crack sellers and distributors and interviewed over 300 crack and other drug distributors between 1989 and 1996. Another example of ethnographic research is that of Curtis and Wendel (2000), who studied drugs markets' distribution chains and organisational structures in a number of areas of New York City. Zaitch (2005) conducted ethnographic research on cocaine smuggling with Colombian drug traffickers in the Netherlands from 1996 to 2001, unveiling aspects of their business dynamics, especially in relation to violence, secrecy and trust and dealers' perception of the risks associated with cocaine smuggling. Kenney (2007) investigated the organisational structures of the Colombian cocaine trade, based on interviews with "several dozen hard-to-reach informants" in Colombia and the US as well as other primary and secondary data.

A number of studies have involved conversations with incarcerated dealers and traffickers, taking advantage of the relative ease-of-access to potential interviewees who are in prison. Mapping these chronologically, a study by Pearson and Hobbs (2001), based on 50 interviews with imprisoned drug dealers, aimed to improve understanding of the 'middle market' drug distribution in the UK. Gruter and Van de Mheen (2005) studied Rotterdam cocaine dealers, based on 38 in-depth interviews conducted in prison and in the community and Desroches (2005b) conducted interviews with 70 incarcerated drug dealers during a study on the high-level drug market in Canada, covering issues such as the use of violence, profile of the dealers and the role of trust and kinship.

A large-scale study conducted in England in 2007 involved 222 interviews with drug dealers in prison, examining market dynamics, organisational structures and the strategic approaches developed by dealers (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). In the same year, Ruggiero and Khan (2007) published a study looking specifically at the functioning of British South Asian drug dealing networks, which included interviews with 42 offenders serving sentences for drug supply offences in the UK.

In order to understand how drug smugglers operated and what they did to reduce the risks of being caught, a US study interviewed 34 individuals serving time in federal prisons for serious drug offences (Decker & Chapman, 2008). Two years later Caulkins, Burnett, and Leslie (2009) published a study based on interviews with 110 drug dealers in UK prisons (a sub set of those interviewed in the study by Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007), with a view to gathering insights on how illegal drugs were smuggled into the country and Grundetjern and Sandberg (2012) conducted interviews with 30 female drug dealers incarcerated in Norwegian prisons.

Literature stemming from interviews with dealers and traffickers forms the basis of a growing evidence base about market dynamics, organisational structures and the approaches developed by dealers. The evidence is largely restricted to a small number of countries (the US, the UK, the Netherlands and Canada). This paper makes a contribution to this field by adding evidence from interviews with dealers incarcerated in prisons in Germany, Italy and Slovenia. The aim of the research was to explore similar issues to those examined in previous studies of incarcerated dealers and assess whether findings are replicated, or otherwise, in our samples.

## Methods and sample description

Data come from face-to-face interviews with imprisoned drug dealers in Italy, Slovenia and Germany (72 interviews in Italy, 44 in

Slovenia and 19 in Germany). Only adult males convicted of at least one drug offence related to distribution or sale of either heroin or cocaine were eligible for inclusion in the study.

## Country selection

Italy, Germany and Slovenia were selected because they represent European Member States with different internal drug markets and occupy different positions within international trafficking routes. As explained below, Italy is a point of entry, Slovenia is a transit country, and Germany is both a transit and destination market. Through a European Commission-funded research programme ('ALICE-RAP') partners were identified in these countries with the capacity and ability to conduct in-prison interviews with drug dealers.

Due to its strategic, central position in the Mediterranean Sea and its extensive coastline, the Italian Peninsula is one of the main drug gateways to Europe and a crossroad for international drug trafficking (especially via maritime routes). Large organised crime structures dominate the drug market and have well-established international links to other trafficking regions, such as South America, South-East Asia and northern Europe (EMCDDA, 2016a).

Slovenia is located on the Balkan trafficking route and the internal market relies on drugs that have been diverted into Slovenia as they are transported through by relatively small organised crime groups based in the country and in the Western Balkans (EMCDDA, 2016b).

Germany is both a transit state and final market for cocaine and heroin (Chandra, Barkell, & Steffen, 2011; Pfeiffer-Gerschel et al., 2013). Cocaine largely comes from South America, and is smuggled in via air mail or sea. Heroin originates mainly from South West Asia, most notably from Afghanistan (UNODC, 2014).

## Selecting prisons

In Italy, 72 interviews were conducted in five selected prisons in metropolitan areas characterized by high rates of drug-related crime. In Slovenia of the four prisons holding adult males, three were willing to cooperate with the study. All eligible prisoners ( $n = 70$ ) were contacted, of whom 44 agreed to participate and were interviewed. In Germany, interviews with 19 dealers were conducted in eight prisons in Bavaria and Saxony. These two states were selected due to the similarities of their prison systems and political structure.

## Limitations and generalisability of findings from a sample of imprisoned dealers

There are advantages of convenience to using a sample of imprisoned drug dealers and, as other studies have noted, findings from such populations can complement other, more typically used data sources (such as interviews with law enforcement professionals, analysis of trial transcripts and other police reports, or price and purity data from law enforcement – see Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). However, this approach may generate a skewed understanding of drug dealing if those convicted and incarcerated employ systematically different (perhaps less effective) business strategies compared to their counterparts who avoided arrest and conviction. The dealers who volunteered to participate in the interviews may have been different from those who refused to take part in the study, and the sample may be biased towards dealers who received longer sentences. Dealers who were part of organised crime groups may also be underrepresented (members of such groups may be less likely to cooperate with prison authorities and researchers).

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