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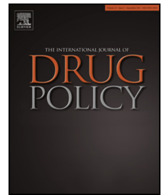

Research paper

Four barriers and a set of values that prevent violence among cannabis growers

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Cannabis markets are often described as less violent than other drug markets. Domestic cannabis cultivation markets seem to be especially non-violent. However, few studies have investigated why this might be.
Methods: Two and half years of ethnographic fieldwork among indoor cannabis growers and interviews and conversations with 52 growers in Norway.
Results: This study identified four barriers and a set of values that prevent violence among growers. (1) Violence attracts increased attention from police and enemies, which inhibits 'business as usual' and reduces profits. (2) Careful attention to profits makes growers calculate and prepare for financial losses. (3) The prospect of covering debt by producing more cannabis makes it possible to choose non-violent sanctions. (4) Tight social ties and friendships prevent violence when conflicts erupt. However, the cannabis culture of the actors and the transactions stands out as the main reason why these four barriers are more important in cannabis markets than in other drug markets.
Conclusion: This paper discusses how policymakers can benefit from the market changes that follow 'import substitution' to construct policies that prevent violence and facilitate peaceful drug markets and drug cultures.

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Introduction

The domestic cultivation of cannabis is increasingly replacing its importation and smuggling throughout the Western world (Potter, Bouchard, & Decorte, 2011; UNODC, 2012). Norway appears to be following this trend, albeit at a slower pace than other European countries (see Hammersvik, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2012, p. 458). The new trend of import substitution has generated new research questions, especially about how such changes affect market dynamics (see Decorte, 2010a). A crucial subject in cannabis policy has been how to prevent violence in cannabis markets. Despite the obvious importance of this topic, there are few studies of peaceful conflict resolution among cannabis growers. Nevertheless, many argue that cannabis markets seem to be less violent than other drug markets (Room, Fisher, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter, 2010, p. 61).

The lack of violence in cannabis markets may be due to the drug's soothing effect or the normalization of cannabis use in the general population (Coomber, 2006, p. 141). The normalization of cannabis might imply that participants in the cannabis trade are part of conventional cultures and that they espouse non-violent values. In particular, many small-scale growers may have such characteristics (Decorte, 2010a, 2010b; Potter, 2010; Hammersvik et al., 2012). The more general cultural and symbolic values in drug markets, including those related to violence, seem to be very important for the possible use of violence (Johnson, Golub, & Dulap, 2000). For example, in drug markets in 'street cultures', violence seems to be a symbolic resource for obtaining and maintaining 'respect', 'street cred' or 'street capital' (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2003; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2010). Such street cultures have been described as a response to the limited opportunities marginalized men have to express their masculinity (Bourgois, 2003). Studies from Norway have shown that street culture is an important component in the upper level of the wholesale cannabis market, as well as in the open street market. In these instances, marginalized ethnic minority men with working class backgrounds play a key role (Sandberg, 2013b, p. 1144). Violence has been reported to be a typical feature of open street markets (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011).

However, the description of cannabis markets as more peaceful than other drug markets could also be a result of an "absence of reports rather than any positive information that disputes between market participants are resolved amicably and that competition

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for territory is lacking" (Room et al., 2010, p. 61). This explanation is supported by a recent study of large-scale hash operators in Denmark in which researchers found highly violent conflicts between bikers and ethnic minority gangs (Moeller & Hesse, 2013). Nevertheless, domestic cannabis growers have not been reported to be part of these conflicts. This might indicate that many growers – and especially small-scale growers – typically operate independently in networks of friends and acquaintances (see also Decorte, 2008, 2010b; Hough et al., 2003; Potter, 2010). Of course, growers may still experience frauds and business disputes. A study of large-scale growers in the Netherlands found that disciplinary violence was common when unreliable and disloyal behaviour led to great losses (Spapens, 2011, p. 10). In this context, disloyal behaviour refers to acts that are interpreted as theft, fraud or informing police (snitching). Unreliability refers to breaches of business contracts, missed appointments or neglected work duties. The role of violence and threats in such situations is to discipline behaviour, deter further infractions and enforce deals and duties.

Drug researchers agree that violence is one of the instruments drug dealers use to regulate business agreements. However, studies offer competing views about how much violence is used in practice (Taylor & Potter, 2013, p. 396). Over the past 15 years, a growing number of drug market researchers have claimed that violence is far less common in all Western drug markets than popular stereotypes and common beliefs imply (Jacques & Wright, 2008a, p. 222; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001, p. 41; Zimring & Hawkins, 1997, pp. 138–144). Moreover, cannabis markets are often described as the most peaceful of the drug markets. Thus, rather than seeing violence as part of a working drug market, we could see it as a result of market dysfunction and instability (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001, p. 42). The normality of peace in drug markets makes it important to investigate what *prevents* violence (Jacques & Wright, 2008a).

In a previous study, I found that peaceful negotiations and sanctions were effective means for restoring financial losses and justice (Hammersvik, 2014). The present paper goes into greater depth regarding the economic and cultural mechanisms that prevent violence. I examine three conflicts in which disloyal or unreliable behaviour led to large financial losses without triggering violence. My aim is to determine why some growers avoid violence in conflict situations that are commonly described as triggering violence. Possible policy implications of the findings are discussed briefly at the end of the article.

Method

The data for this report come from two studies of cannabis markets in Norway, namely two and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork and an interview-based study (for details see Hammersvik et al., 2012). The 'gatekeeper' who provided access in the fieldwork was a research participant from one of my previous projects. We first met in 2004 through a friend of a friend and we have stayed in contact. Originally, he was a large-scale cannabis importer, but he has not been involved in smuggling and distribution since the late 1990s. He has never been involved in cannabis cultivation.

The research participants were recruited for the field study through snowball sampling. The convenience sample consisted of 32 growers living in the south-east of Norway and working at 23 grow sites. Four of the sites cultivated 100–350 plants and they can be categorized as large-scale grow operations (for the definition of size and information about cannabis prices, see Hammersvik et al., 2012, p. 459). Two grow sites were mid-sized (60–100 plants) and 17 were small (1–20 plants). Eleven workers operated the four large grow sites, two growers operated each of the mid-sized sites and single growers ran the small sites.

Access and gathering of observations followed the logic of convenience. I observed what the research participants allowed me to observe. This is common in the 'exploratory approach' in ethnographic fieldwork with well-hidden populations (Stebbins, 2001). Some growers let me observe their grow sites only once or twice, whereas those who trusted me the most allowed me to hang around with them for months and even years. That made it possible to observe complete production and distribution cycles several times and to meet costumers, dealers and smugglers. The fieldwork also included socializing with participants at gyms, their friends' places, in bars and cafés and at concerts. Despite the trusting relationships I developed, I was not allowed to use a tape recorder. The growers feared that the tapes could be confiscated by the police. It is not uncommon that ethnographers avoid using tape recorder (Sandberg & Copes, 2014). Hence, I wrote field notes and transcribed conversations on the same day or the day after they occurred.

The interview study was an extensive investigation of cannabis users ($N = 100$) that was conducted by two of my colleagues in Norway from 2006 to 2010 (for details, see Sandberg & Pedersen, 2010; Sandberg, 2013a, 2013b). Participants were recruited through the researchers' networks, students at the Universities of Oslo and Bergen, cannabis interest organizations and an Internet advertisement. The participants came from all over Norway, they were mostly ethnic Norwegians and 20 of them had cultivated cannabis. The interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three hours. They were semi-structured and addressed the topics of drug use and dealing careers, but were quite flexible in thematic focus. After transcribing the interviews I coded them into 134 codes using the qualitative data processing program NVIVO. The most important codes and nodes for this article were "cannabis cultivation", "drug purchase", "sales", "conflicts", "other crimes" and the aggregated code "cannabis culture", which consisted of the codes "rituals", "symbols" and "narratives".

All participants cultivated their plants indoors, as the Norwegian climate makes outdoor cultivation very difficult. All of the growers were men between 23 and 45 years of age. Some of them were highly educated, with good jobs; others were manual workers and a few were living on social benefits. None of the participants had experienced or heard of violence among growers. However, some of them knew of violence between cannabis dealers and smugglers. The growers were mainly involved in networks that distributed cannabis, but some of them had contact with networks that distributed other types of drugs and committed diverse types of crimes. However, even these operators claimed to be more closely associated with the cannabis culture than with violent street cultures.

During my two years of fieldwork, I witnessed eight serious conflicts that involved financial losses between 100,000 NOK and 1.5 million NOK (€12,000/$16,000–€180,000/$241,000). I observed in addition about 20 smaller conflicts. Seven of the participants in the interview study did also report on severe conflicts that did not lead to violence. My data thus include 15 serious conflicts and around 20 less serious conflicts. None of them resulted in violence. I decided to investigate how these conflicts were solved. Initially, the interviews and field notes were coded for themes pertaining to sources of conflicts, conflict development and sanctioning. Next, all statements and field notes were examined for consistency with the four identified reasons for avoiding violence that gradually emerged from the data. This approach to coding is consistent with standards of qualitative research techniques and grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

I have selected three of the eight observed conflicts to illustrate the findings. Presenting three cases in depth allows me to provide 'thicker descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) than would be possible when presenting multiple cases. The selection on cases was

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