



Research Paper

Police crackdowns, structural violence and impact on the well-being of street cannabis users in a Nigerian city

Ediomo-Ubong Nelson

Centre for Research and Information on Substance Abuse, 10 Okon Essien Close, P. O. Box 4230, University of Uyo Post Office, Uyo, Nigeria



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cannabis
Crackdowns
Well-being
Structural violence
Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Background: There is abundant literature on the impact of law enforcement on cannabis markets, but scant literature on the effects of law enforcement on cannabis users. This study undertook a qualitative exploration of police crackdowns as a form of structural violence and examined their impact on the well-being of street cannabis users in a Nigerian city.

Methods: The study was qualitative and descriptive. It was carried out in Uyo, southern Nigeria. Ninety-seven (97) frequent cannabis users (78 males and 19 females) took part. They were aged between 21 and 34 years and recruited from 11 cannabis hot-points in the city. Data were collected through in-depth, individual interviews, conducted over six-months. Data analysis was thematic and data-driven, involving identifying themes, assigning codes, revising codes and verification by independent qualitative methodology experts.

Results: Police crackdowns are commonly experienced by street cannabis users. These do not reduce cannabis use, but displace cannabis markets. Crackdowns are associated with police brutality, confiscation of funds, drugs and belongings, stigma and discrimination, arrest and incarceration, which impacts negatively on the health, livelihoods and well-being of cannabis users. Cannabis users try to escape arrest by running from police, disposing of cannabis, disguising themselves and, when caught, bribing officers to secure release.

Conclusion: Crackdowns constitute a form of structural violence in the everyday life of cannabis users, and have negative effects on their health and social and economic well-being. Cannabis use should be decriminalized de facto and arrested users directed to treatment and skills training programmes. Treatment and social services for users should be expanded and legal aid interventions should be mounted to support users in addressing discriminatory practices and human rights violations.

Introduction

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in West Africa (UNODC, 2013). The region qualifies as the ‘epicentre of cannabis use’, with an estimated prevalence of 12.4% among the adult population compared to the African average of 7.5% (UNODC, 2013). The possession and use of cannabis is legally prohibited in all countries of the region that are signatories to the 1961 single convention; the treaty which provides the major legal framework for international prohibition of cannabis (Wodak, Reineman, & Cohen, 2002). Cannabis accounts for the largest number of drug-related arrests in West Africa (INCB, 2013), with most arrests being for possession of small quantities for personal use.

Studies show that prohibition does not reduce cannabis use (Fergusson, Nicola, & Horwood, 2003; Korf, 2002; Reinerman, 2009; Reinerman, Cohen & Kaal, 2004), but produces social harms such as stigma, arrest and criminal record, disruption of relationships, loss of

employment and housing, and the dispersion of cannabis markets and related violence (Asmussen, 2008; Lenton, 1999; van den Brink, 2008; Wodak, Reineman & Cohen, 2002).

The enforcement of prohibition has been identified as a structural mechanism perpetuating harms and suffering among drug users (Rhodes, 2002). Law enforcement contributes to structural violence, defined as ‘indirect violence built into repressive social orders creating enormous differences between potential and actual human self-realization’ (Galtung, 1975, p. 173). It is an avoidable impairment of human life, which lowers the individual’s ability to meet his or her needs below what would otherwise be possible (Galtung, 1990, cited in Ho, 2007), and when fundamental needs are unmet, structural violence becomes violation of human rights (Ho, 2007). Structural violence is violation mediated and maintained by extant social structures and manifests in unequal power that produces unequal life chances. It is omnipresent because it is exercised from innumerable points (Foucault, 1980).

Policing practices mediate and exacerbate other forms of structural

E-mail address: degreatnelson@yahoo.com.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.01.012>

Received 7 September 2017; Received in revised form 28 November 2017; Accepted 9 January 2018

0955-3959/© 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

violence against drug users, which includes racism, discrimination, and socio-economic and gender inequalities (Bourgois, 1998; Bourgois, Prince, & Moss, 2004). Acting in conjunction, these forces constitute the relations, processes and conditions that embody and produce everyday violence in the lives of marginalized groups such as drug users. Structural violence is perpetrated by state institutions (e.g. criminal justice systems) and socio-cultural and material arrangements (Bulhan, 1985), leading to higher rates of mortality, morbidity and incarceration among vulnerable populations (James et al., 2003), such as drug users.

Structural violence becomes invisible through internalization and translates into a set of effects described as ‘oppression illness’, a stress disorder which results from ‘being the object of widespread and enduring social discrimination, degradation, structural violence and abusive derision’ (Singer, 2004, p. 17). Oppression illness, manifesting as acceptance of negative social stereotypes, self-blame, diminished self-efficacy, fatalism and low risk avoidance, have been reported in studies of policing practices (Rhodes et al., 2006; Sarang, Rhodes, Sheon, & Page, 2010). Structural violence constrains human agency and fosters unequal opportunity for the marginalized (Farmer, 1996). However, the over-determinism of structural approaches makes it necessary to ‘capture the dynamism of agency-structure transformations, in which environments constrain as well as enable agency, and are thus also produced and reproduced by participants’ practices’ (Rhodes et al., 2012, p. 210).

Studies of policing as structuration of violence have focused on drug injection. Policing interferes with the utilization of needle and syringe exchange services, discourages possession of injecting equipment and facilitates sharing of equipment and other high risk practices which increase the risk of HIV infection among drug injectors (Aitken, Moore, Higgs, Kelsall, & Kerger, 2002; Cooper, Moore, Gruskin, & Krieger, 2005; Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter, & Spittal, 2006). The bulk of theoretically informed studies are those which explore policing as a structural mechanism, producing violence and suffering among homeless and street-based heroin injectors (Bourgois, 1998; Rhodes et al., 2012). But little is known about policing as structural violence against cannabis users, especially in non-western societies such as West Africa, where recreational cannabis use is the primary target of law enforcement.

Existing studies of law enforcement against cannabis use include those which examine its effects on rates of cannabis use (Williams, 2004; Ziedenberg & Colburn, 2005), and cannabis markets (Asmussen, 2008; Kleiman, 1989; Caulkins & Pacula, 2006; Moeller, 2009; Wilkins & Sweetsur, 2006). Research on the effects of law enforcement on cannabis users show the disproportionality of sanction for cannabis-related offences on immigrants (Beckett, Nyrop, Pfingst, & Bowen, 2005; Golub, Johnson, & Dunlap, 2006; King & Mauer, 2006; Moeller 2010; Pearson, 2007), and restrictive deterrence which produces risk-sensitivity and modification of use practices (Erickson, van der Maas, & Harthaway, 2013). Attempt has scarcely been made to understand policing of cannabis users as an expression of structural violence which has a negative impact on their well-being. Such studies are lacking in West Africa, where cannabis is a commonly used drug and enforcement is the hallmark of state response to drugs.

This study attempts to develop an understanding of police crackdowns on street cannabis users as structuration of violence. It also shows the effects of such violations on the well-being of users. As used in this study, the term ‘well-being’ refers to the condition of physical, psychological, social and economic wellness (Iguchi et al., 2002), while ‘police crackdowns’ refer to routine raids on cannabis hot-points by law enforcement officers to disrupt drug-related activities and arrest dealers and users. Drawing on cannabis users’ accounts of their experiences and responses to police crackdowns, the study explores how policing structures violence into the everyday life of cannabis users, exacerbating discrimination and suffering. It also shows that cannabis users are not passive victims of structural violations but human agents who adopt different, though often ineffective, strategies to manoeuvre the

structural forces affecting their lives. This highlights the reciprocity of agency-structure interactions, whereby structure constrains as well as enables agency (Giddens, 1984). The findings will expand understanding of the social cost of prohibition and inform policies on cannabis.

Context

Use of psychoactive drugs in Nigeria has a long history (Obot, 2004). Epidemiological data emerging after independence indicated an increase in the use of cannabis, among other drugs (Asuni, 1964; Borroffka, 1966; Lambo, 1965) and since then surveys have shown increases in cannabis use across the country (Anumonye, 1980; Adelekan, Abiodun, Imouokhome-Obayan, Oni, & Ogunremi, 1993; Morakinjo & Odejide, 2003). Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Nigeria, with a lifetime prevalence of 6.6% in the adult population (Adamson et al., 2015). It is used by 36.2% of people entering treatment for drug dependence (NENDU, 2015). Ex-servicemen returning from Asia after the second World War are credited with introducing the drug to Nigeria (Borroffka, 1966), but historical accounts point to the cultivation and distribution of cannabis along the West African coast by Sierra Leoneans as far back as the 1920s (Akyeampong, 2005).

The cannabis plant grows easily in Nigeria’s tropical climate (Obot, 2004). By the 1960s cultivation had increased and cannabis was being exported to western countries, resulting in increased seizures and arrest of traffickers at home and abroad (Obot, 2004). In terms of domestic consumption, cannabis went from being the habit of a small group of urban labourers in the late 1950s to becoming part of the cultural mainstream, used across social status and gender (Klein, 1999). In 2011, the UNODC (2012) estimated that the prevalence of cannabis use among 15–64 years old in Nigeria stood at 14.8%, the highest in Africa and fifth in the world.

Regular cannabis use is associated with an increased risk of dependence (Hall, Degenhardt, & Patton, 2008) and cannabis is one of the major drugs misused by people seeking treatment for drug dependence in Nigeria (NENDU, 2015). Asuni and Pela (1986) describe the emotional syndrome associated with cannabis use, especially among adolescents and young people. This behaviour leads to poor academic performance and drop-out from school. Cannabis is also a contributory factor in automobile accidents (Asuni & Pela, 1986), and is implicated in many cases of psychosis reported in hospitals (Asuni & Pela, 1986; Borroffka, 1966), although the association between cannabis and psychotic illness is tenuous (MacLeod & Hickman, 2010). Regular cannabis use is associated with inability to maintain a job or establish continuous relationships with others, especially family members (Asuni & Pela, 1986). Cannabis use is also implicated in criminal activities, armed robberies and violence (Odejide, 2006).

Concerns about the health and social harms of cannabis use underlie the preference for repressive drug policies in Nigeria, and law enforcement operations mostly target the cultivation and distribution of cannabis. Law enforcement is driven by concerns over state power and not by knowledge of cannabis problems (Klantschnig, 2016). Prohibition is enforced in order to meet international obligations, and to secure access to foreign aid and other development assistance. Success is measured by seizures and arrests, instead of reduction in the availability and use of drugs. The notion of a ‘drug menace’ is commonly touted and law enforcement activities are given wide publicity. Drug control has cannabis use as its main target, and cannabis, heroin and cocaine are classified as equally dangerous drugs in Nigerian law schedules (Klein, 2001).

Nigeria’s drug legislations have contained some of the most severe sanctions imposed on cannabis trafficking and use (Obot, 2004). The current drug law is almost a verbatim duplication of the 1988 UN Convention, covering every aspect of drug trafficking and related offences (Kavanagh, 2013). The principles of these laws are based on

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7512092>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7512092>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)