



Research paper

Injection drug users' involvement in drug dealing in the downtown eastside of Vancouver: Social organization and systemic violence



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ABSTRACT

Background: Illicit drug markets are a key component of the risk environment surrounding injection drug use. However, relatively few studies have explored how injection drug users' (IDUs) involvement in drug dealing shapes their experiences of drug market-related harm. This exploratory qualitative study aims to understand IDUs' dealing activities and roles, as well as the perceived benefits and risks related to participation in illicit drug markets, including experiences of drug market violence.

Methods: Ten IDUs with extensive involvement in drug dealing activities were recruited from the Vancouver Injection Drug User Study (VIDUS) and participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews, which elicited discussion of experiences dealing drugs, perceived benefits and hazards related to dealing, and understandings of drug market violence.

Results: Participant's involvement in drug market activities included corporate sales, freelance or independent sales, and opportunistic sales termed "middling" as well as drug market-related hustles entailing selling bogus drugs and robbing dealers. Participants primarily dealt drugs to support their own illicit drug use, and we found that arrest and criminal justice involvement, hazards stemming from drug debts, and drug market-related violence were key risks related to dealing activities.

Conclusion: The challenges of managing personal consumption while selling drugs exacerbates the hazards associated with drug dealing. Efforts to address drug dealing among IDUs should consider both drug dependency and the material conditions that propel drug users towards dealing activities. Interventions should explore the potential of combining enhanced drug treatment programs with low threshold employment and alternative income generation opportunities.

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Introduction

Contemporary research perspectives emphasize how social-structural forces shape the character of local illicit drug markets and associated harms, and conceptualize drug market activities as representing a key aspect of the risk environment surrounding injection drug use (Fitzgerald, 2009; Rhodes, Singer, Bourgois, Friedman, & Strathdee, 2005; Ritter, 2006). Within this ecological view, drug markets consist of the social and physical contexts where drug distribution activities occur, and are shaped by forces within the physical, social, political, and economic environments – which operate at both the micro- and macro-level (Rhodes et al.,

2005). Conceptualizing illicit drug markets through the risk environment framework highlights that local markets are influenced by “dynamic interactions between users' behaviour, drug market characteristics, police activity, [drug] treatment and harm reduction services, and the local community/neighbourhood area” (Ritter, 2006). Each individual drug market is characterized by a particular configuration of drugs sold, social organization of dealing activities, local cultural norms among drug users and drug dealers, as well as specific law enforcement responses deployed (Curtis & Wendel, 2007). The specific social-structural forces which shape local drug markets, also influence the potential for numerous forms of drug market-related harm including the risk of arrest or incarceration, as well as varying types of violence which are common to illicit drug markets (Coomber & Maher, 2006; Curtis & Wendel, 2007).

Violence is a key driver of drug market-related harm (Erickson, 2001), and multiple forms of violence are common within unregulated drug markets (Goldstein, 1985). Goldstein's typology of drug market violence differentiates between *psycho-pharmacological*

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violence (driven by the pharmacological properties of the drugs consumed), *economic-compulsive* violence (occurring in the pursuit of money for drugs) and *systemic* violence (which exists due to the unregulated nature of drug markets and lack of legitimate dispute resolution mechanisms) (Curtis & Wendel, 2007; Erickson, 2001; Goldstein, 1985). There is growing consensus that the majority of drug-related violence is systemic in nature (Erickson, 2001), arising from various circumstances within unregulated markets including: enforcing normative codes within dealing organizations; collecting drug debts; punishing informers; as well as confrontational interactions with the police. While there have been some efforts to understand the potential for systemic violence in relation to different types of drug markets and key features of specific markets (Coomber & Maher, 2006; Curtis & Wendel, 2007), systemic violence has remained relatively under-examined since the articulation of Goldstein's framework (Curtis & Wendel, 2007).

Previous ethnographic research has illustrated how social and economic processes drive violence within drug markets (Bourgois, 1995; Maher, 1997). While cultural norms among drug users perpetuate the expectation that violence will be used to regulate drug markets (Bourgois, 1995), previous work has drawn on intersecting concepts of symbolic and everyday violence to describe how broader historical, social, and economic processes shape street-based drug scenes (Bourgois, Prince, & Moss, 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). "Everyday" violence refers to how the pervasiveness of social suffering among marginalized social groups is often rendered invisible due to its ubiquity (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence refers to the mechanisms through which social inequality is naturalized (Bourgois et al., 2004), and Bourgois has built upon this notion suggesting that the everyday violence pervading the lives of drug users functions to obscure the role social and political-economic forces play in shaping the production of violence within drug scenes. Bourgois also extended the concept of symbolic violence to encompass a broader range of processes that may legitimize violent acts (Bourgois et al., 2004). For example, within drug scenes violence is constructed as normative and a pragmatic mechanism for resolving disputes and asserting status or prestige (Bourgois et al., 2004). This ethnographic work has also illustrated the gendered nature of violence within drug scenes, and how patriarchal cultural scripts define gender relations and serve to legitimize violence against women (Bourgois et al., 2004).

Previous studies indicate that participation in drug dealing is common among injection drug users (IDUs) (DeBeck et al., 2007; Sherman & Latkin, 2002) and is associated with intense patterns of drug use and high frequency injecting (Kerr et al., 2008; Sherman & Latkin, 2002). While IDUs who deal drugs are characterized by elevated risk for varying forms of drug-related harm including HIV infection and overdose (Friedman et al., 1998; Sherman & Latkin, 2002), existing research also suggests that IDUs occupy dangerous drug scene roles that place them at increased risk of arrest and incarceration (Kerr et al., 2008). However, there is a need for qualitative research exploring the lived experience of injectors who engage in drug dealing activities, and knowledge regarding how IDUs understand and experience drug market-related violence. Understanding the lived experience of IDUs engaged in dealing and cultural norms in the drug market may provide important insight regarding motivations for participating in dealing. This knowledge is crucial to informing the development of targeted interventions and policy responses to address drug dealing, as well as identifying the shortcomings and limitations of existing approaches.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood is characterized by a high concentration of drug market activity and approximately 5000 IDUs reside in the DTES (Wood & Kerr, 2006).

The large drug market operating in the DTES features high levels of street-based drug sales, and drugs sold include powder cocaine (cocaine salt), crack or "rock" (cocaine base), heroin, crystal methamphetamine, and a range of diverted pharmaceutical drugs (i.e., benzodiazepines and opioids including dilaudid and morphine) (Urban Health Research Initiative, 2009). In the past decade, the DTES drug market has been the focus of a number of policing initiatives that have attempted to disrupt dealing activities (Small, Kerr, Charette, Schechter & Spittal, 2006; Wood et al., 2003). However, there is a lack of research describing the social organization of the DTES drug market, and how IDUs engage with this market beyond buying drugs for personal consumption (Heed, 2005). Therefore, we sought to qualitatively explore the experiences of IDUs who have sold drugs within the DTES drug market to better understand their engagement with the local drug market. We conducted a small series of qualitative interviews with IDUs who had extensive involvement in dealing within the DTES drug market in order to develop a contextualized and detailed understanding of their participation in dealing. We also sought to document IDUs' reasons for engaging in dealing, and their perspectives regarding the associated benefits and hazards. An additional objective was to examine how individual's participation in dealing activities may shift over time (and in relation to ongoing illicit drug use) by viewing the evolution of dealing activities as a dealing "career". Finally, we sought to explore IDUs' perspectives regarding drug market violence and understand how the potential for violence varies in relation to specific drug market activities.

Methods

This exploratory qualitative study of IDUs' participation in drug dealing activities was conducted as part of an ongoing ethnographic investigation of the risk environment surrounding injection drug use in the DTES. This longitudinal investigation has utilized a range of ethnographic and qualitative methods in connection with large epidemiological cohort studies of drug users to examine the influence of social and structural forces in the production of drug-related harm (Fast, Small, Wood, & Kerr, 2009; Small, Rhodes, Wood, & Kerr, 2007; Small, Fast, Krusi, Wood, & Kerr, 2009). Information and knowledge derived from our previous ethnographic work informed the objectives of the current study, the development of the interview guide used to explore experiences of dealing, our recruitment and sampling decisions, as well as the analysis of data generated through interviews. Our previous fieldwork suggested that participation in drug dealing may play an influential role shaping drug use careers among local IDUs, and propel individuals along trajectories characterized by increased potential for drug-market related harm including experiences of violence. Therefore, we conducted the current qualitative study to explore a broad range of dealing activities in an in-depth manner, to generate insights that could be further investigated through future ethnographic and epidemiological research. In this way, the current study is exploratory and is intended to inform subsequent investigation of drug market related experiences based within this research program.

We conducted a series of 10 in-depth qualitative interviews with IDUs recruited from the Vancouver Injection Drug Users Study (VIDUS), a prospective cohort study composed of over 1000 HIV-negative injection drug users (Kerr et al., 2008). Undertaking this research within a large cohort study provided unique opportunities to explore IDUs drug-dealing activities and experiences by facilitating access to research participants who had recent experience dealing drugs, as

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