

# Profit and loss

**A new report interviews several hundred convicted drug dealers to find out just how they conduct their business.**

Sol was on a fishing trip to Holland when he met a man who was involved in drugs and gave him his first ecstasy tablet. He enjoyed the experience so much he agreed to take 2000 pills back to England in his fishing bag. On his return, through a friend of a friend who was a dealer, Sol managed to sell the drugs. He then started making the trip every two to three months. Eighteen months later he moved into the cocaine market and brought that back into the country in the same way as the ecstasy tablets.

Until he was caught, Sol was one of the estimated 70,000 dealers operating in the UK. Along with 3,000 wholesalers and 300 major importers into the country, the UK illicit drugs trade is considerable, producing a turnover of £7-8 billion a year.

Despite this, little is still known about how or why people become involved in dealing, and, once immersed in the drugs trade, how they then run their operations.

A recent Home Office study has tried to shed more light on the business end of the drugs world by asking the people who know: the drug dealers themselves. Sol is just one of 222 prolific drug dealers currently serving a prison sentence who agreed to take part in the research. He is typical in that along with three-quarters of those interviewed he became involved through a friend and didn't originally view drug dealing as a career option.

As with all businesses, researchers found the aim for most drug dealers was to try and grow their business. This depended on finding alternative suppliers and eighteen of those that were interviewed said they had multiple suppliers to ensure a solid chain of supply. The most successful

were those who were able to adapt to new circumstances and new opportunities which sometimes came in the form of chance meetings. This, researchers felt, presented one of the few opportunities to infiltrate the dealer's world by a greater use of informants by the police.

However, informants needed to establish their trustworthiness. And as

Al, an international heroin wholesaler who was interviewed in jail revealed, this wasn't necessarily a straightforward process.

Al got his job only after he was put through an "initiation" by his boss. He was told that a client of his boss owed him money and that he had to kill him, as a test of his trust and loyalty.





Photography: HO/Stringer/Getty Images

Al waited outside the home address of the man and, when he came out, fired three or four bullets into his chest. On his return, his boss congratulated him and then introduced him to the “victim”, another colleague who was a part of the business. The gun his boss had given him contained rubber bullets.

Researchers also found that most dealers who were caught merely considered themselves unlucky as they went to considerable lengths to minimise risk. They took the risk of informants very seriously, often only working with known contacts.

A small number of dealers did, however, believe the risk of arrest was increasing. One cocaine retailer described how only 20 out of 50 contacts that he had originally been involved with were still operating. He attributed this to an increase in sentence lengths causing people to leave the trade and to the police doing a better job with cracking down.

Where the interviewees were prepared to talk about their arrest, about half said they were caught by police during their usual operations, but one third of dealers were arrested while trying out a new route or methods. A number believed they had been caught because of informants. In one case a dealer was

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convinced it was his wife who was responsible for him being arrested with 100,000 ecstasy tablets and several hundred kilos of cannabis on him. He later found out that his wife had been married to two other drug dealers who also had been caught.

Incompetent dealers often contributed to their own undoing in what the researchers called complacency and their ‘soap opera’ lifestyles.

In one case, an importer of cannabis and cocaine from Europe gave his driver £300,000 to take abroad. Instead, he says, ‘the divvy decides it would be nice to lay the money on his bed and make made passionate love to his girlfriend and photograph it’. The driver’s wife, who had a £2,500 a week

cocaine habit, found out and tipped customs off about her husband’s ‘business’ trip to Belgium.

The interviewees also revealed a poor understanding of the consequences of their dealing. Of the 75 spoken to, only a third knew what sentence they would receive, if they were caught.

Dealers in prison viewed their sentence in different ways. Some talked of it as an occupational hazard.

Unfortunately, it was rare for their drugs operations to cease on arrest. It was usually carried on by a family member or someone else in the business.

Confiscation orders, however, created considerable concern among dealers. A national level distributor of heroin, cocaine and cannabis in 2004 and 2005, complained the drugs market was not the attractive career path it had once been, because of confiscation orders.

He told interviewers: “people who are arrested are losing everything that they have – even the things they acquired through honest means”.

Researchers found that dealers were not adept at judging risks which could also be exploited by law enforcers. ‘So that there are risks involved in dealing at each stage’.

They recommended the use of informants to gather information about what would make life difficult for dealers, or what they would not anticipate. Informants could also identify ways of making these difficult tasks harder.

“A key question for policy makers and law enforcement professionals in the future is how much and how quickly these difficulties change over time,” the report concluded.

The full report can be found on the Home Office website.