

## TRAJECTORIES TO MID- AND HIGHER-LEVEL DRUG CRIMES

*Penal Misrepresentations of Drug Dealers in Norway*

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*While the Nordic countries represent a zone of penal moderation, drug offences remain subject to harsh punishment. Based on 60 interviews with incarcerated drug dealers, we present four trajectories and turning points to the higher tiers of the illegal drug economy. The first trajectory is characterized by criminal entrepreneurship, but three other trajectories were equally evident: (1) Many drug dealers experienced poor parenting, parental substance abuse and early involvement with substance-using peers; (2) for others, marginalization processes started in adulthood, related to job loss and the breakdown of intimate relationships; (3) for some, drug dealing was interwoven with substance abuse. The findings suggest that drug control policies rest on misleading ideas about the trajectories of persons convicted of drug crimes.*

**Keywords:** drug dealers, war on drugs, drug smuggling, life-course criminology, social marginalization

*Introduction*

From 2003 to 2012, the number of drug-related cases handled by Norway's [National Criminal Investigation Service \(2012: 1\)](#) rose from approximately 20,000 cases to more than 28,000 cases per year. The number of drug crimes reported to Norway's national police increased from 12,714 cases in 1993 to 45,921 cases in 2012, representing a three-fold increase in reported drug crimes to the national police in per capita terms ([Statistics Norway 2013](#)). Drug seizures also became a major focal point of police activities. Compared with seizure levels in 1985, the police were by 2009 seizing nearly 10 times more cannabis, 25 times more heroin, 30 times more amphetamine and 60 times more cocaine ([National Police Directorate 2010: 6](#)). 'Drugs are the backbone of organized crime', the chief of the Organized Crime Unit at the Oslo Police Department said in an interview in 2011. 'Whether you like it or not [drug dealers] have adopted a professional culture. They are flexible and mobile, making police work more complex. They are characterized by a businesslike attitude' ([Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation 2011](#)). Apparently, a belated US-style war on drugs had made its way to Norway, and its antagonists were viewed as professional, proficient and formidable adversaries.

In this study, we have interviewed 60 drug dealers in Norwegian prisons. Many were categorized as professional business persons by the legal system and punished as if they were highly organized, mafia-style operatives. We identify four intertwined trajectories

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to large-scale drug dealing, described as criminal entrepreneurship, early marginalization, adult marginalization and drug addiction. We argue that there is to be a mismatch between, on the one hand, the representations of incarcerated higher-level dealers held by the general public and actors in the penal system and, on the other hand, the actual and marginalized substance users' disorganized involvement in the higher levels of the drug economy.

### *Background and legal frame*

The international system for drug control is based on a number of UN treaties, particularly the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. They were established to prevent non-medical production, supply and use of narcotic drugs. A key element has been penal control (Boister 2001), and the 'international prohibitionist regime' was developed within this context (Bewley-Taylor 2012). In Norway, Section 162 of the General Civil Penal Code was introduced in 1968 with a maximum length of imprisonment of six years for drug offences. Gradually, upper sentencing limits were raised, and by 1984, aggravated drug offences (Section 162, Subsection 3) were punishable by up to 21 years in prison.

Norway remains enmeshed in a broader, Nordic zone of penal moderation (Pratt and Eriksson 2013; Shammass 2014) in an era that has witnessed rising punitive outcomes on both sides of the Atlantic (Downes 2001; Wacquant 2009). But even though the Nordic countries remain committed to low levels of punitiveness, recent decades have witnessed increasing control specifically targeting drug distribution (Tham 2001; Lappi-Seppälä 2007). Drug sentencing lengths are an anomaly in the generally lenient Norwegian legal system. 'Norway and Sweden have very strict anti-drugs laws', Pratt (2008: 285–86) writes, noting that 'the aim of their "zero-tolerance" drug policies is to make these two countries *drug-free societies*'. The policing of drug crimes is extensive; out of 39 European jurisdictions, Norway had the fifth highest rate of detected drug offences in 2006 (Aebi *et al.* 2010: 58). Some have argued that prison sentence lengths for drug offences have been comparatively severe in the Nordic countries (Chatwin 2003; Träskman 2005).

Figure 1 presents the annual number of investigated drug offences over the last 30 years (Hauge 2013). One should particularly note the steep increase in investigations of the least serious drug offences (Section 162, Subsection 1; punishable by fines or an upper limit of two years prison) during the second half of the 1990s. The most serious crimes (Section 162, Subsections 2–3) have remained comparatively stable at around 1,000 investigated offences per year. Drug offences are the leading cause of imprisonment (30 per cent), well ahead of crimes of gain (22 per cent) and violent offences (21 per cent). In terms of the prison population, drug offenders made up nearly 30 per cent of the prison population on a single given day in 2011 (Norwegian Correctional Services 2012: 38). While milder drug infractions such as possession and use of illegal substances have been de-penalized (Hauge 2013), serious drug crimes have been met with equal or intensified penal reactions over the last decades, producing an 'ambivalent balance between repression and welfare', as Larsen and Jepsen (2002: 582) note in the case of Denmark, a point that may be equally applicable to the remaining Nordic societies.

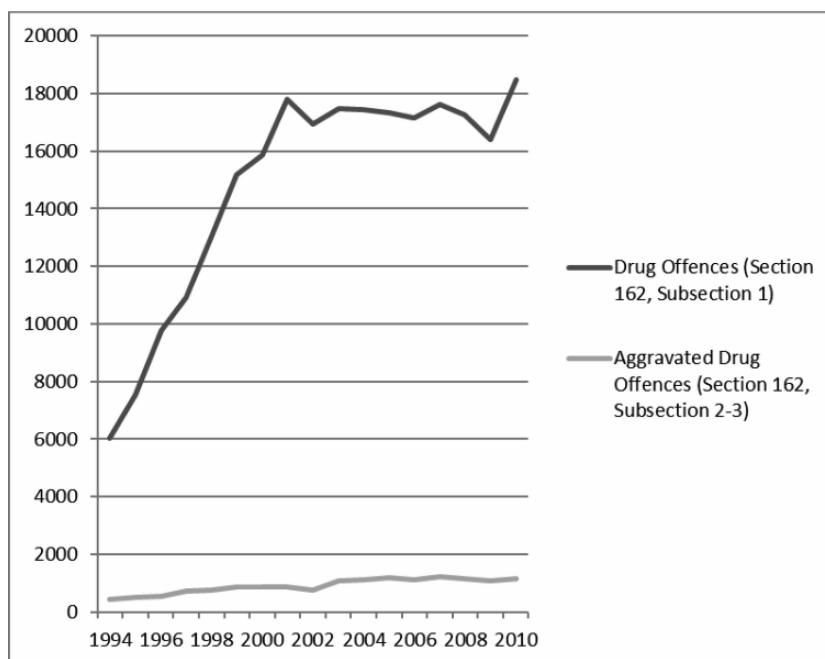


FIG. 1 Investigated drug offences in Norway (General Civil Penal Code Section 162, Subsections 1–3), 1994–2010

### *Drug dealers and traffickers*

Previous research on mid- and high-level actors in the drug economy has suggested several typologies of how distributors organize and operate. [Dorn et al. \(1992\)](#) distinguished between *trading charities* (ideologically committed distributors), *mutual societies* (reciprocating user-dealers), *sideliners* (licit enterprises with an illegal side business), *criminal diversifiers* (illicit entrepreneurs entering the drug market), *opportunistic irregulars* (short-term, spontaneous and co-incidental dealers) and *retail specialists* (stable, hierarchical entities with a division of labour and ‘managerial structure’). Focusing on traffickers, [Dorn et al. \(2005: 35\)](#) later distinguished between politico-military, business criminals and adventurers. They argue that the latter include more marginalized groups that are also more vulnerable to disruption and judicial action. [Natarajan and Belanger \(1998\)](#) distinguished between freelancers, family businesses, communal businesses and corporations. [Curtis and Wendel \(2000\)](#) constructed a similar typology of heroin distributors in New York, but compressed their schema into three categories: freelance distributors, ‘socially bonded businesses’ and corporate-style distributors.

In a literature review, [Desroches \(2007\)](#) argued that large-scale drug dealers and traffickers have been represented as either small, independent entrepreneurs, or as part of large, hierarchical, mafia-style syndicates. The latter, however, are less commonly portrayed in scholarly work. Research shows that even large quantities of drugs are often handled by loosely structured, semi-independent actors ([Reuter and Haaga 1989](#); [Dorn et al. 1992](#); [Adler 1993](#); [Zaitch 2002](#)). However, as reflected by the typologies above, studies of large-scale dealing and trafficking have emphasized rational,

entrepreneurial modes of organization. Moreover, drug dealing and trafficking has been regarded as a combination of individual preferences and responses to opportunities in a market.

Producing typologies has been a central concern to scholars of drug distribution, but scant attention has been paid to teasing out the sociobiographical properties of drug distributors (Dorn *et al.* 2005). A concern with dissecting the life stories of drug dealers has played a stronger role in research on street-level sales. Such studies have typically emphasized the importance of marginalization and exclusion in shaping offenders' lives (Buceri 2007). As Coomber (2006: 145) points out, drug dealing is sometimes the 'outcome of a marginalized and relatively oppressed existence', and what he describes as 'pusher myths' have the effect of 'ignor[ing] the role of poverty and other structural influences that help *produce* involvement in crime, and by extension, in drug dealing'. Studies from both the United States (Bourgois 2002; Hoffer 2006; Venkatesh 2006; 2008) and the Nordic countries (Lalander 2004; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011) reveal how street-level drug dealing can be understood as a response to socio-economic marginalization. This perspective has been little represented in research on upper-level dealing and trafficking, except shorter statements often linked to the situation in poor drug-producing countries (Decker and Chapman 2008: 97, see also Desroches 2005). In this paper, we will demonstrate that a more thorough perspective of marginalization also is crucial to understand more highly placed actors in the Western drug economy.

Dorn *et al.* (2005: 38) argue that future research needs to explore the reasons drug dealers and traffickers get involved in the trade, e.g., lack of alternative opportunities, perception of superior rewards, appetite for/tolerance of risk. Among the methods they suggest are biographical research with individuals. Following this call, we explore the trajectories of incarcerated drug dealers and smugglers in Norway.

### *Trajectories, transitions and turning points*

Pioneering work by Sampson and Laub (1993; 2005) on the so-called life-course view of development of crime provides a theoretical framework for our study, and their key concepts include trajectories, transitions and turning points. A *trajectory* is defined as 'a pathway or a line of development over the life span, such as work life, marriage, parenthood, self-esteem, or criminal behavior' (Sampson and Laub 1993: 8). Trajectories refer to long-term patterns of behaviour, and they are marked by a sequence of *transitions*, such as a first job or first marriage. *Turning points* are events that shift trajectories towards lesser or greater propensity to engage in crime. The turning point represents 'an alteration or deflection in a long-term pathway or trajectory that was initiated at an earlier point in time' (Sampson and Laub 2005: 16).

Carlsson (2012: 4) argues that even if it is not obvious that certain events in individuals' lives are important in themselves, and even if individuals themselves provide 'strangely trivial reasons' for why they desist from crime, a turning point 'can be a useful construct for interpreting, analyzing and understanding changes'. We agree and, rather than exploring desistance from criminal offending as is common in the research literature, we explore trajectories and turning points that *lead to* drug distribution and subsequent incarceration.

### Method

The present study is based on interviews with 60 incarcerated drug dealers. Interviews were carried out in six prisons in southern, eastern and western Norway. The sampling criterion was involvement in drug dealing and trafficking. All research participants had experience with drug distribution, covering a broad spectrum of drug offences, from lower-level cannabis dealing to higher-level smuggling of dozens of kilos of cocaine or heroin. Sample characteristics are presented in [Table 1](#). Research participants were selected by asking prison wardens to let us into wings, allowing us to ask who would be interested in participating, or prison officials would post notices on our behalf outlining the research project.

We used semi-structured life story interviews ([Bertaux 1981](#)) and interviews covered a time span from childhood to present-day. Interviews lasted between 1.5–2.5 hours and were carried out by a team of five researchers, including the authors of this article. Four of five interviewers were men, and the female researcher conducted all interviews with female participants (see [Grundetjern and Sandberg 2012](#) for the particulars on the female drug dealers). Interviewers were trained sociologists with previous experience in qualitative interviewing with hard-to-reach populations. We followed a general interview guide developed in advance, but interviewers were free to explore themes that emerged in the course of interviews. Trajectories and turning points identified below are based on statements that emerged spontaneously, largely by participants' own volition. We adopted the stance that 'you *do not* explicitly ask the interview participant about turning points' ([Carlsson 2012](#): 2), and responses were therefore less dependent upon the researcher's preconceived analytic notions.

TABLE 1 *Sample characteristics (gender, age, type of drug distributed, hierarchical classification, primary drug use)*

	<i>N</i> = 60	Percentage
Gender		
Male	32	53%
Female	28	47%
Age		
Minimum	20 years	–
Maximum	50 years	–
Median	36 years	–
Type of drug distributed		
Amphetamine	23	38.3%
Cannabis	15	25.0%
Heroin	14	23.3%
Cocaine	4	6.7%
Ecstasy	2	3.3%
Other	2	3.3%
Hierarchical classification		
Low	7	11.7%
Middle	39	65.0%
High	14	23.3%
Primary drug use		
Amphetamine	32	53.3%
Opiate	16	26.7%
Cannabis	9	15.0%
Cocaine	2	3.3%
Other	1	1.7%

Past research on drug markets has had trouble delimiting the boundaries between drug economy actors. Researchers have variously focused on quantities, perceived seriousness of drug offences or earnings to hierarchically categorize dealers. Desroches (2007: 828) viewed ‘higher-level’ drug traffickers as persons who sell ‘large quantities’ of drugs; May and Hough (2001: 138) understand ‘low-level police enforcement’ as concentrated on the physical locale of the street. While such definitions may have an intuitive appeal, clearly, notions of ‘street-level drug markets’ or ‘large quantities’ are contestable. Defining the elusive ‘middle market’ becomes even more problematic. After trying to carve out a conceptualization of the middle-level drug market, Pearson and Hobbs (2001: 17) conclude that there is ‘no one place called the “middle” and contend that ‘in one sense’ drug economy actors are ‘all “in the middle.”’

Norway’s Penal Code Section 162 states that the severity of drug offences is based on (1) kind of substance, (2) quantities and (3) ‘character of the violation’. In practice, the combination of quantity and type of drug seems to be prioritized in sentencing, a tendency found in other societies as well (Green *et al.* 1994; Harper *et al.* 2000). We categorized sample members using guidelines from the Norwegian Director General of Public Prosecution. The penal code distinguishes between three different levels of involvement in the drug economy. Table 2 shows the governing guidelines for drug prosecution in Norway. For example, an offender who recounted having sold less than one kilo of cannabis at one point in his youth and smuggled more than 750 g of heroin later in life would be classified as a ‘high-level heroin dealer’. Offenders were categorized according to their (admitted) highest level of involvement in the drug economy over the life course. While applying official guidelines may seem like a passive acceptance of governing agendas, it is warranted when the topic is the nature of punishment directed towards drug offenders.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded in HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative data processing programme. When analysing interviews, themes were first coded broadly pertaining to possible trajectories to drug dealing. Codes were established according to predefined research interests, including (1) family of origin and school experiences, (2) partners and children, (3) conventional life and careers, (4) pathways to crime, (5) substance use, (6) drug dealing operations and (7) pathways out of crime. After this initial coding, we coded statements consistent with the four trajectories that make up the results of the current analysis. This style of coding is consistent with general standards of qualitative research analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2008). All three authors participated in data coding and analysis, and the four trajectories we have highlighted are those that appeared most important to us during analysis. Less fine-grained

TABLE 2 *Hierarchical ordering of drug economy actors based on guidelines from the Norwegian Director General of Public Prosecution (Riksadvokaten) for conviction according to Norway’s triple-tier ‘drug section’ (Penal Code Section 162)*

Substance	Lower level	Mid level	High level
Heroin	<15 g	≥15 g	≥750 g
Cocaine	<50 g	≥50 g	≥3 kilos
Amphetamine	<50 g	≥50 g	≥3 kilos
Cannabis	<1 kilo	≥1 kilo	≥80 kilos
Ecstasy	<350 tablets	≥350 tablets	≥15,000 tablets



analyses could include fewer trajectories; conversely, more fine-grained analyses could include increasingly detailed trajectories. Data on sentence lengths were not systematically gathered from prison authorities as this might raise issues of anonymity, but interviewees were prompted to speak about their sentence length and type.

A common criticism of prison interviews is that participants are not in close proximity to the events they are recounting and that they can be influenced by the institutional setting (Wright and Decker 1994). It has been argued rightly that prison populations more frequently the subject of research scrutiny than other offender populations; more open to contest is the claim that inmates provide less valuable insights into offending behaviour (Jacques and Wright 2010). Copes and Hochstetler (2010) reject such criticism by arguing that interviews within and outside the prison context generally present similar challenges and dilemmas but that prison interviews carry additional advantages; e.g., incarcerated offenders are more likely than active offenders to be motivated to respond and they have more time to reflect and respond to researchers.

In this study, we were interested in the characteristics of incarcerated drug dealers. We sampled from a prison population because we wanted to study those most directly affected by illegal drug policy and legislation. Detailed information provided by interviewees on their role in the drug economy may of course still be questioned. One might, e.g., expect prisoners to downplay their role in crime in order to present a 'moral self' (Presser 2004: 82–3). A more specific problem for the analysis in this study is the inherent problem of establishing longitudinal trajectories on the basis of cross-sectional data. For instance, interviewees may have linked drug offending to disruptive events in order to organize them as proper narratives or life stories (see e.g., McAdams 1993; Riessman 2008).

Still, while there is no way to secure the absolute validity of self-reported data, we have several reasons to trust their relative accuracy: First, interviewees reported a number of crimes for which they had not been convicted. Second, interviewees frequently described incidents more incriminating for their moral image than drug dealing, including serious violent offences. Finally, while the dominant stories in the data set revolved around semi-accidental involvement in the drug economy, some interviewees told us about continuous large-scale engagement in drug dealing.

Below, we describe the four trajectories and key turning points we identified in data. Each trajectory is illustrated first a case study before moving on to more analytical remarks.

#### *Paul: criminal entrepreneurship*

None of Paul's family members were involved in crime or illegal drug use, but at the age of 14, he and a friend started selling small amounts of hashish to his schoolmates. He described the startling feeling of having large sums of money at his disposal. In the beginning, their operation amounted to 'no more than a one, maybe two thousand [NOK] turnaround every week. But the wheels were rolling, and I realized that there was a lot of money to be made'. Gradually, they built up a small drug dealing enterprise, recruiting other boys to sell for them. Later, they realized that the big money lay in smuggling, and by the age of 16, they had completed their first smuggling trip. Paul described how they got drunk at a party and decided to give it a try:

Paul: It started by taking a taxi back to my home to fetch my passport. Then to the airport, each of us with a ticket to Denmark. Straight to Christiania,<sup>1</sup> pissed off our heads, argued it down to a good price. Over to the hotel and smoked a fat one, with a taxi back to the airport. Back to Oslo the same evening. Then we just had to stroll through customs and Bob's your uncle.

Interviewer: And you were 16 years old?

Paul: 16 and 17, yes. And then we realized we could do it lots of times. Being 16–17 and sitting on six-figure sums without having to worry about shit. In any case, the years pass and it keeps snowballing and the amounts get bigger and you get more creative. Yeah, you lose some of your inhibitions with money. Then a million isn't that fucking much.

The experience of making money, growing self-reliant in early adolescence and the thrills and ease of his first smuggling trip were important turning points in Paul's criminal career. He was fascinated by the 'sneaky thrills' (Katz 1988) of crime and was captivated by the voluntary risk-taking and edgework involved (Lyng 1990, see also Fenwick and Hayward 2000). Such experiences, in addition to the satisfaction derived from earning large amounts of money at an early age, were decisive for his trajectory into the higher levels of the illegal drug economy.

By his mid-20s, Paul had become a mid-level cannabis smuggler. He hired people to smuggle on his behalf, but he also smuggled a great deal himself. He described three main routes. One consisted of picking up hashish in Spain and bringing it back on commercial flights, rarely amounting to more than three to five kilos of high-quality product. The second and more commonly used route was via Denmark, on the ferry between Oslo and Copenhagen. The third route, which came to be Paul's most profitable, was via an acquaintance who worked as a truck driver. At first, Paul concentrated on hashish, but seeing the profit potential in branching out, he started smuggling amphetamine powder, ecstasy and Rohypnol.

He was eventually sentenced to six years in prison. He believed his incarceration was a natural outcome when 'you go after the big money, when you have no limits'. Criminal enterprise had been profitable to Paul, and he boasted about the large sums he had earned. Like many other drug dealers, Paul considered himself a businessman who happened to be trading in a product that was illegal. Rational pricing and risk strategies were employed to minimize costs and maximize profits. But he also noted the attraction and excitement deriving from criminal activity. 'I think of myself as an adrenaline junkie. I need the excitement', he said. Parallel to findings by Dorn *et al.* (1992), Paul seemed to have moved from being a spontaneous, loosely organized 'opportunistic irregular' in his adolescence to becoming a more stable 'retail specialist' in his later 20s. Most importantly, Paul's involvement in the drug economy seemed to be motivated by the very real possibility of earning large sums of money.

### *Criminal entrepreneurship*

Purposeful, rational weighing of costs and benefits characterized Paul's trajectory to high-level drug dealing. Other dealers had similar stories. A mid-level cannabis and cocaine dealer described several rational strategies to solidify her relationship with a fixed customer base.

<sup>1</sup> Freetown Christiania is a neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark, renowned for open consumption and sale of cannabis.



I've never been dependent on anyone else. I've had one rule and that is: I don't cheat. If you want customers to return you have to offer them high quality. The same thing goes for a store that sells electrical [appliances], for example. You have to offer quality goods for the customers to return. Otherwise they'll just find another supplier. And then you won't be making any money.

She maintained a fixed number of customers and a long-term planning horizon. This was simultaneously a strategy for avoiding arrest: A large number of infrequent customers would result in her name being thrown around on the street more often, resulting in greater probability of police detection.

Another dealer described the higher-level segment of the cocaine trade in a language laced with business terminology: There was a 'long production line' from source to consumer, and 'marketing' tools like 'taster samples' to showcase product quality were used for 'advertising'. Business school vocabularies are frequently employed by drug dealers (Dwyer and Moore 2010), and business-oriented rationales were the driving force in this trajectory to high-level dealing. Profit-seeking individuals not concerned with the legality of their business explore markets generating a high income in relatively rational ways (Zaitch 2002; Desroches 2005; Decker and Chapman 2008).

The lure of extraordinary profits can exert a strong force on would-be drug entrepreneurs. One said that 'money had *definitely* become the most important thing' in his life. Promising to pay far more than could be accumulated in the wage labour economy, drug dealers often report that the promise of easy money and extravagant lifestyles was what motivated them to enter and stay in the drug economy. 'I started selling cocaine, and very quickly I made *a lot* of money doing it', a high-level cocaine dealer said. 'I would make 30,000 [NOK] a week by myself after all expenses had been paid'. To some drug dealers, it was the combination of earning potential and being their own boss that attracted them to the drug economy and later solidified their position within it. A mid-level amphetamine dealer remarked, 'It's all about being in charge on your own'. The combination of high incomes and self-employment was attractive.

The entrepreneurial trajectory to the illegal drug economy was two-fold. Sometimes, as in the case of Paul, potential dealers and smugglers entered the drug economy through a combination of greed and business-like motivation. More commonly, however, early socialization into the economy made drug dealing appear more 'rational' than a legal career. The practical rationality in heavily marginalized segments of the population has previously been captured by the concept street capital (Sandberg 2008a; 2008b). One dealer said that at the age of 10, his father had told him who to contact if he wanted to smuggle large quantities of drugs. Another noted,

Nobody in my family ever worked. Nobody paid taxes. Everyone made a living dealing drugs or committing other types of crime. It all became very *normal* for me. I've watched my [step-]father get up and go to work – by walking over to the couch and selling hashish. That's been his job. It's like some other kid watching his dad go to work at the local corner store. It became so ordinary. Drug dealing was a *natural* thing for me to start with.

These dealers used this street capital, or competence and knowledge they had acquired through socialization in families involved in the illegal drug economy, to earn money. In this way, the criminal-entrepreneurial trajectory remained interwoven with trajectories characterized by socio-economic exclusion and marginalization.

*Adam: early marginalization*

Adam's trajectory to mid- and high-level drug dealing was linked to behavioural and emotional problems in early childhood. 'I was *hyperactive*', Adam said. '[I had] a lot of energy'. School authorities reacted to his antisocial behaviour by segregating him from other children. 'In elementary school I had a classroom to myself. I wasn't allowed to spend recess with the other kids because I was so unsettled, and people were afraid of me', he said. Psychological distress went undiagnosed and untreated, and Adam held this to be an important reason for what would follow later in his life.

Adam was frequently embroiled in fights, but his parents lacked the resources to find an appropriate solution to his problems. State psychiatric services subjected him to testing, and after a while, child protective services took him into custody. At one point, he was transferred to a closed psychiatric facility. He recounted how, as a 13-year-old, he was 'beaten up' by seven staffers at the institution, describing the episode as a 'turning point' in what would become an extensive criminal career:

That's where it all started for me. Seven adults jumping me, *lying* on top of me for hours. [Afterwards] I was taken into a narrow room with three windows and a long table. I received a mattress and I ate my meals in there and they let me use the toilet – that's all I was allowed to do. The experience did something with my head. In recent times I've discovered that it was a turning point.

After this episode, violence became easier to accept and humiliation more important to avoid. Moreover, while in the closed ward, his social network expanded to include a boy his own age who smoked cannabis and used amphetamines. They began taking drugs together. Escaping from the institution they ended up committing an unsuccessful violent robbery, seriously injuring two persons. By the age of 15, he had received his first conviction and was set on a course of increasingly serious delinquency.

Adam's aggression and proclivity for violence led to his recruitment into the drug economy. 'I was into *violence*. That was my drug, the thing I got a rush out of', he said. After turning 18, child protective services released him from their charge, and he began to look for work to earn money. '[I asked myself], "OK, what do I know how to do? Well, I know how fight. Who do I look up? Well, I can get into one of the gangs."' Work as an enforcer came his way from the motorcycle gangs who seemed to take a liking to this brash, hard-hitting young man. 'They welcomed me. So I started selling drugs for them', he recounted. This contact was the key turning point in his involvement in drug crime.

At the time of our interview, Adam had reached his mid-30s, achieved 15 prior convictions and spent around 12 years in prison. He was serving a six-year sentence for smuggling five kilos of amphetamine from Sweden to Norway. He had accumulated extensive experience with transporting and dealing drugs at the mid- and higher levels. His way was shaped by violent dispositions developed at an early age, combined with experiences of humiliation and social exclusion in childhood and early adolescence.

*Family, school and early juvenile delinquency*

In our data, the most important indicators of early socio-economic marginalization were: (1) parental substance use, violence, abuse or family disruption and (2) early problematic experiences in the school environment, including restlessness, attention

deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning failure. Combined these experiences formed their trajectories to drug crime. They developed ‘cumulative disadvantage’, whereby bonds and social control, including employability, were gradually undermined (Sampson and Laub 2005: 15).

A mid-level cocaine dealer described growing up in an environment where illegal drug use was common. ‘I grew up with a mother who was an addict’, she said. ‘She used to inject. And I had a grandmother who was a “pill-popper” – I guess she’d take around five “roofies” [Rohypnol] a day at a minimum. So I grew up with it’. Similarly, a mid-level amphetamine dealer in her mid-30s described how parental and peer environments in early childhood were pivotal for her early experiences with illegal drugs and drug dealing.

I had a father who was in [a criminal gang] who worked on debt-collecting through intimidation and selling drugs. My parents’ friends were very much in the gang. So the path was laid for me from when I was very little. I grew up in a small place, and when you’re 11, 12, 13 years old, you hang out with older kids. I started taking drugs when I was 11 years old, sniffing gasoline, smoking hashish.

The combination of parental criminal involvement, parental substance use and peer delinquency shaped his early trajectory into drug dealing. A growing body of research demonstrates intergenerational transmission of broader offending behaviour (Farrington *et al.* 2009; van de Rakt *et al.* 2009). Low parental monitoring and parental substance use have also been found to significantly increase young persons’ involvement in drug dealing (Little and Steinberg 2006). Our data point in the same direction, and some of our interviewees learned the skills necessary for drug dealing via family members.

In this way, lack of parental care and maltreatment were typical in drug dealers’ life stories. Still, dislocation from family or placement in community homes via child protective services were often described as turning points, producing new social networks that fuelled the interviewees’ criminal careers. A cocaine smuggler described how she was removed from her family home:

I was a child protective services kid. You get a little affected by the others who are there. We came up with a plan to escape. We were going to piss off the adults, get into some trouble. It was fun, I remember! And that’s how it went down for a long time, because I just kept meeting more young people from really messed up environments where the parents were either drug addicts or dead.

She had lived in three state institutions while waiting to be relocated to foster care. But as her teenage years passed, no families were interested in taking her into their home. School progression was disrupted by learning difficulties and continuous relocation to different institutions. She further described delinquent acts that grew progressively more serious in the absence of parental control and ‘being allowed to do almost anything you want when you spend the whole day sitting in an institution with the same people’. Crimes such as drug dealing can be seen as shaped by exposure to parental criminal involvement (Farrington *et al.* 2001) or peer-group delinquency (Matsueda and Anderson 1998). In our data, relocation to child protective services facilities was often the link between the former and the latter.

Sometimes, the path from juvenile delinquency to higher-level drug dealing networks was remarkably short. A mid-level heroin dealer described how, in his early teens, he had been transferred to a community home after his mother committed suicide. He started smoking cannabis and taking pills with a friend. He was then recruited by a

group of older boys in the community home, as they grew aware of his auto theft skills. Finally, like Adam, he was introduced to a motorcycle gang. It was terrifying at first, but after a while ‘it was fun, because they accepted me’, he said. Being part of a motorcycle gang that distributed drugs provided him with a sense of community, self-respect and income.

Young people with experiences of parental substance use, family disruption and socio-economic exclusion are more easily recruited to such drug dealing networks. Transfer to institutions like community homes or prisons are turning points in this development. ADHD symptoms and disorders of conduct and emotion are also important risk factors for offending behaviour (Mordre *et al.* 2011; Gudjonsson *et al.* 2012). The ‘multiple marginality’ (Vigil 2002) many of the participants had experienced in childhood and early adolescence led them in ‘search of respect’ (Bourgois 2002), which, for our participants, ended in the drug economy. With humiliating experiences from a variety of society’s conventional institutions, they were both pushed and drawn towards the illegal drug economy.

#### *Martin: adult marginalization*

Unlike many mid- and high-level dealers in this study, Martin had lived a conventional working class life until his late 20s. Looking back on his youth, the worst acts of delinquency he could remember were some school truancy. In his spare time, he would engage in one of his passions, fixing up cars and motorbikes after school with friends. Since jobs were scarce, his restlessness found a meaningful outlet in military service. ‘I found there was a lot of life experience to be had there’, he said. His conventional adolescence was reminiscent of experiences shared by many working class youths growing up in Norway at the time. A turning point occurred in his late 20s when his partner left him:

We had a kid together. She moved out, sold the apartment. My days started growing monotonous. I couldn’t just sit around moping at home by myself. I had to think of something to do. I called up some friends from my childhood.

He contacted old friends and discovered that many now were eager partygoers, who had turned to binge drinking and amphetamine use. Meanwhile, he had been leading a dull existence at the bottom of the wage labour economy. Influenced by his new friends, he began using small amounts of amphetamines for partying, but as time went by his drug consumption increased. He also came into contact with a man who shared his passion for cars. They hit it off, fixing up cars together. Gradually, Martin learned that his new friend was able to pursue this passion by smuggling cannabis. As his commitment to conventional marital and working life slipped away, Martin found himself working closely in the cannabis trade with this friend. They found small roads in rural eastern Norway where they could smuggle cannabis across the border from Sweden.

When interviewed, Martin was in prison for smuggling several hundred kilos of cannabis. His story illustrates several of the trajectories to mid- and high-level dealing presented in this paper. To engage in trafficking was entrepreneurship, taking advantage of opportunities and a market to finance an expensive hobby. At the same time, his increasing use of amphetamines played a crucial part. But it is also difficult to

understand Martin's pathway to smuggling without seeing the importance of his cultural and social departure from conventional working class life, starting with the break-up with his partner. For some, processes of marginalization starting late in life played a crucial role on their way to mid- and high-level dealing. However, most people who experience such marginalization do not start dealing drugs. Another turning point was usually, as in Martin's case, the introduction to new networks, providing an opportunity to start dealing.

### *The breakdown of adult social bonds*

In much the same way as early marginalization, transitions and turning points in adulthood shape pathways into the drug economy. Our findings here closely echo previous research in life-course criminology (Sampson and Laub 1993; 2005). The most important turning points in adulthood were job loss and failed spousal relations. The more basic trajectories of those who initiated drug dealing in adulthood were lack of educational credentials, accumulation of debt, welfare state dependency. The result was a gradual disorganization of personal life. In the midst of such disorganization, research participants reported coming into contact with an opportunity to engage in drug crime. This trajectory contains within it the category of 'adventurers' described by Dorn *et al.* (2005: iv) who are willing to take relatively high risks 'because they may feel they have little alternative...or they may experience a sense of excitement yet do not fully understand the risks being run'.

A weak attachment to the legal labour market was a particularly important aspect of this long-term trajectory. A mid-level amphetamine dealer described how he had worked mainly temporary menial jobs.

I've had a couple of cleaning jobs. I've worked in a sausage factory. A three-month temporary position in a warehouse. Since I've never had a driver's license, I've never been able to drive a garbage truck, you know, so I've always been the guy on the back of the truck who helps out.

His working life was characterized by brief and occasional involvement in the labour market, usually involving menial labour at the lower rungs of the service sector, with income derived from a mix of job earnings, social welfare receipts and later, burglary and drug sales.

For many persons in this study, criminal careers in adulthood were initiated via trajectories characterized by weak attachment to the job market and marital instability. This may be a result of selection bias, i.e., the unobserved characteristics of individuals (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), but persons with a high propensity to crime seem to have lower crime rates when married (Sampson and Laub 2005: 18). Many interviewees spoke about diagnoses such as ADHD (see also Kaye and Darke 2012), or a thrill-seeking tendency and impaired self-control (Burt and Simons 2013). Several spoke of 'kicks' when managing to handle large operations and the sensual attraction of 'rapidly escalating' dealing. There is much to indicate that personality factors play a role in this picture—some simply enjoy the thrills associated with mid- and high-level dealing. Cultural criminology has emphasized that this is an important aspects in all kinds of crime (Ferrell *et al.* 2008). However, such escalation—moving from conventional life to large-scale drug operations—frequently hinged on moments where their personal life

cascaded out of control. An amphetamine dealer described how she enjoyed working, but worked ‘all too long hours’. She told us how this destabilized her life.

I love working. Because I really want to be on that side, the right side [of the law]. But I’ve got a tendency to work too much and then I have trouble saying no. For a while I quit amphetamines. All I had was my job. But then I get exhausted from work, and then I know how when you take a little amphetamine I work two jobs at the same time.

She described how amphetamines were instrumental in increasing work effort. A mid-level heroin dealer who had started up a carpentry business by himself described how he was ‘not good enough at regulating [work hours] to take care of myself’ and he ‘worked [his] marriage to death’. Gradually, his personal life escalated into a pattern of drug use, job loss and the loss of his spouse until, finally, he was willing to take risks in the drug economy. A mid-level amphetamine dealer similarly described how working long hours in bars and restaurants facilitated excessive use of alcohol and drugs:

There was a lot of partying [going on]. I had a partner and things were going all right. 5–6 years with a partner. Then I came home after smoking a joint with my pals. “You’ve been smoking hashish again?” – “Yeah,” [I said]. “Aren’t you going to grow up, become an adult?” [she said]. I wasn’t going to grow up. What the fuck, [I remember thinking], I’m not going to quit smoking hashish. So I just sacrificed my woman. It was the most stupid decision I’ve made in my life.

The most important events and processes in adult life leading to drug dealing and smuggling seem to be the breakdown of intimate and work-related social bonds, resulting in reduced social control, lack of supervision and lack of structured routine activities (Sampson and Laub 2005: 18). The findings echo previous studies suggesting that unemployment plays a role in motivating crime (Raphael and Winter-Ebmer 2001; Edmark 2005). In much the same way as for early marginalization, processes of socio-economic marginalization starting later in life are pivotal to understanding trajectories to mid- and higher-level dealing. In both instances, new networks offering a possibility of drug dealing are important turning points.

### *Tommy: drug addiction*

Tommy had been taken care of by child protective services from his early teens. He started using alcohol when he was 11 years old, cannabis at 13 and amphetamine at an orphanage when he was 14. Gradually, he started dealing to his friends, his network of customers expanded and, by his late teens, Tommy had become a mid-level amphetamine and ecstasy dealer in a small town near Oslo. Moving into the house culture of the 1990s, he started trading in ecstasy. He gained a foothold as a drug retailer at the house clubs in Oslo. Drug dealing helped him attain social status and financed his escalating use of drugs. When he was 18, he first tried heroin: ‘It didn’t work too well the first time, but gradually it felt better and better. Then, for two weeks straight I used it every day. Suddenly I was hooked’.

Three years passed before he began injecting. At this point, he realized that he was no longer able to coordinate drug transactions on the same scale as before, which would have required the balancing act between buying on credit from higher-place wholesalers and fronting sales to lower-level customers—in addition to feeding his own growing heroin habit.



Heroin addiction became a serious problem. ‘I couldn’t control my use’, he said. Heroin was also a gateway into further drug dealing. He injected heroin 3–5 times a day. Hunting for his next fix meant spending time on the open heroin scene in Oslo, and he came to know this scene in detail: which mid-level dealers could supply high-quality heroin, which of the addicts who were willing to pay the right price for quality stuff. Seeing an opportunity to finance his own habit, he transitioned into the life of a street-level heroin dealer, never purchasing more heroin on credit than he could pass on in a couple of hours. Tommy did not want to go back to trading in larger quantities. ‘I didn’t want to tempt fate. It could get real ugly if you screw things up for others’, he said. ‘A friend of mine got shot in the knee’. He avoided larger transactions. Still, following prosecution standards, his dealing remained on a scale classifiable as mid-level. He was frequently arrested, and he had been in and out of prison for many years.

When we interviewed Tommy, he was in his early 30s. He was pale, soft-spoken and with missing teeth in his upper gums. Throughout his career, growing addiction to illegal drugs was interwoven with selling them—sometimes at a higher level, more frequently at lower level. Many street-level dealers move in and out of the categories of lower- and mid-level dealing, as defined by the authorities. The amount of drugs they were dealing hinged on possibilities and needs rather than on a particular dealing strategy (see also [Hoffer 2006](#)). If they were caught in one of their larger operations, punishment could be severe. In addition, low-level dealers could be charged and prosecuted as mid-level dealers if the police combined quantities sold over a period of time rather than prosecuting single transactions.

#### *Substance use and drug dealing intertwined*

Previous studies reveal that many lower-level drug dealers first develop substance problems and then drift into drug dealing ([Mieczkowski 1986](#); [Murphy et al. 1990](#)). Studies of heroin and amphetamine users suggest that between one-half and two-thirds also have drug dealing experiences ([Bretteville-Jensen and Sutton 1996](#); [Morgan and Joe 1996](#)). When a person’s friends and acquaintances are drug users or dealers, they are more likely to start selling drugs.

Our data, as well as previous studies from Norway ([Bødal 1982](#); [Ødegård 2008](#)), suggest that this trajectory also exists for mid- and higher-level actors. Most of the drug dealers we interviewed had serious substance abuse problems. Offenders with drug dependence problems probably make more mistakes and are more susceptible to arrest. Financing drug consumption is costly, and drug dealing provides a steady source of drugs for personal consumption. Heavy substance use may also interfere with the ability to hold down steady wage employment. Several mid- and high-level drug dealers in this study bore visible traces of an addict lifestyle, e.g., poor dental health, needle marks and scars. A female dealer said: ‘In summer, it’s embarrassing for me to wear a t-shirt and I avoid it. I’ll just carry my purse in a way so that nobody sees [the needle marks]’. The physical stigma of extensive drug use made drug dealing one of the few sources of income available. The visible and stigmatized ‘junkie look’ drew attention from police, potential employers and the general public. Moreover, even for drug users without this visible stigma, drug use comes with extensive social networks of drug suppliers, and exclusion and isolation from social networks with links to the legal economy.

This provided numerous opportunities for a career as a drug dealer, but as drug use progressed, fewer opportunities for alternative forms of employments.

Conceptualizing drug addiction as a trajectory to mid- and high-level drug dealing highlights how dealing becomes a way of earning money necessitated by heavy substance use. According to one mid-level dealer, selling drugs had been a way of ‘financing own [heroin] use, and to get a little pocket money’. When craving heroin ‘you’d do almost anything, when you wake up in the morning and you’re sick and you don’t have any money’, he said. Another mid-level dealer similarly described smuggling and selling amphetamine first and foremost as a way of financing his drug habit. He explained how he would travel to Sweden to buy amphetamine, exploiting the price differences between Norway and its neighbouring country. ‘I haven’t been looking to make money, just so long as I get my needs covered, then I’m happy’, he said. Some had also become involved in large-scale drug operations to honour drug-related debt emerging from extensive use.

Street-level dealers are typically portrayed as struggling with substance use problems (Mieczkowski 1986; Murphy *et al.* 1990; Hoffer 2006). Our study suggests that this also holds true for many higher-placed actors. Moreover, many of them played minor roles in drug dealing operations and did not earn a lot of money from it. They could nevertheless end up handling relatively large quantities of illegal drugs, and prison sentences typically reflected this fact. In a study of traffickers imprisoned in Ecuador, Fleetwood (2011) found that mules often carry greater quantities than ‘professional’ traffickers, arguing that ‘sentence guidelines premised on weight will punish mules disproportionately’. This seems to hold true for the Nordic context as well.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

Many mid- and high-level dealers are drawn into the drug trade because of the large profits to be made, and some drug dealers in this study developed complex strategies to maximize income and avoid arrest. These are the ‘business criminals’ described by Dorn *et al.* (2005). This study still suggest that trajectories into drug dealing characterized by social marginalization, including poor parental monitoring and parental substance abuse, were more important trajectories to trafficking careers, at least for those who ended up in prison. This trajectory, similar to what Dorn *et al.* (2005: 38) described as ‘adventurers’, consisted of amateurish, and perhaps more importantly, heavily marginalized individuals. Turning points in early adolescence often included placement in community homes and involvement with juvenile gangs. In adulthood, the dissolution of intimate ties and other social bonds were typical turning points, combined with the introduction to drug dealing networks.<sup>2</sup>

Marginalized populations are more easily captured and imprisoned ‘due to inexperience, bravado/overconfidence, risk-taking, exposure, betray’ (Dorn *et al.* 2005: 36). Illustratively, mid- and high-level drug dealers in this study typically exhibited characteristics such as low educational attainment, problematic family backgrounds, lack of attachment to the work force, poverty and substance abuse problems. Powerful

<sup>2</sup> Offending probably contributed to the creation of such disruptive events as well, and causation goes both ways, making it difficult to determine the proper ordering of factors. Data from this study nevertheless indicate that turning points and drug dealer trajectories are closely interrelated.

marginalization processes have played an integral role in shaping the dealers' long-term trajectories to drug crime. Much the same picture was uncovered in the early 1980s in a study of Norway's first 350 drug dealer convictions by Section 162 of the Penal Code (Bødal 1982). The trajectories suggested in this study thus seem to have characterized incarcerated drug dealers since the advent of the present 'prohibitionist regime' (Bewley-Taylor 2012) in the mid-1960s. Today, Norway's prisons are filled with drug offenders with the same problematic life courses as other categories of offenders (Fazel and Danesh 2002; Pettit and Western 2004). What sets the persons incarcerated for drug crimes apart from the general prison population is that they are held on incomparably longer sentences.

More than 20 years ago Dorn and colleagues stated that 'the practical merits of long prison sentences for drug trafficking have not been established. Their preventive value has not been established. They are expensive to administer' (Dorn *et al.* 1992: 198). 'Why then have such penalties?' they asked, and the question is still highly relevant. Increasingly, there is talk of reorienting the international 'war on drugs' away from penalization and prohibition and towards decriminalization, legalization and rehabilitation. Clearly, a shift in the 'war on drugs' remains fraught with uncertainty, and the future of drug control is by no means clear. But as the international drug control consensus grows increasingly 'fractured' (Bewley-Taylor 2012), attempts to demonstrate how social marginalization processes are wedded to criminal-entrepreneurial elements in the drug economy may provide the basis for a rational reworking of drug policy that seriously considers the multiplicity of paths that lead to drug crime. In light of the above findings, there are good reasons to rethink the excessively punitive approach to so-called mid- and higher-level drug offences.

Past studies have shown that processes of social and economic marginalization are pivotal to understanding recruitment to the lower-level illegal drug economy (Bourgois 2002; Lalander 2004; Coomber 2006; Hoffer 2006; Bucerius 2007; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011). Research on the mid- and higher levels of the drug economy has questioned the degree of organizational coherence in drug dealing operations, and it has to a large extent been focused on findings derived from organizational sociology (see e.g., Dorn *et al.* 1992; 2005; Desroches 2005; Decker and Chapman 2008; but see Fleetwood 2011). We believe that further research into the role of social and economic marginalization is important also for the higher reaches of the illegal drug economy.

Further research based on findings from this exploratory study could take two directions: First, examining the sociobiographical properties of non-incarcerated drug offenders to assess the degree to which professional, hierarchically organized distributors with fewer elements of social marginalization in their life story may be evading arrest, imprisonment and the seemingly inevitable sweep of the penal dragnet; second, enlisting the aid of registry-based 'big data' to track the life courses of persons convicted of drug crimes across a number of domains, extracting data on parental socio-economic class membership, educational attainment, unemployment and welfare benefits to understand the pathways into drug crime.

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