The Drugs Economy and the Prisoner Society

Introduction

The relationship between prison sociology and policy and practice has been a complex and changing one. During prison sociology's early years, from the 1940s to the 1960s, in the USA particularly, sociological knowledge was vital to the thinking of prison managers, and even politicians, about the design and governance of penal regimes (Simon 2000). In an era of rehabilitative optimism, studies of the everyday culture and social life of the prison were seen as critical tools for understanding how prisons could most positively intervene in the lives of their inhabitants. Accordingly, the founders of the discipline, such as Donald Clemmer and Gresham Sykes, were given privileged access to prisons (Simon 2000)1. Given this intimate relationship with 'the administrators', it is striking that these early and seminal studies were not narrow, administrative or directly policy-oriented, but broad, thick, descriptive accounts of the ordinary life of the prison community. Clemmer and Sykes recognised that, to understand issues such as how order was maintained within prison, and how the more debilitating characteristics of imprisonment might best be mitigated, one needed to understand features such as the inmate value system, the informal hierarchy amongst prisoners and the relationships between prisoners and officers.

Nowadays, such studies are much less common. In the US, research on prison culture has virtually disappeared, such that we have very little knowledge about the internal dynamics of everyday life in prison at the very time when incarceration is becoming a normal pathway for many sections of the population (Simon 2000). Whilst the issue of crime is 'hyper-visible' in US culture and politics, punishment itself has become almost totally invisible (Wacquant 2002). In the UK, within the prison estate, it is psychological rather than sociological knowledge that is the dominant scientific discourse. Outside it, the community of academic prison researchers is relatively small, but research such as Sparks et al's (1996) work on order and legitimacy, and Alison Liebling's studies of prison officer work (2001), suicides and self-harm (1992; ongoing), and the moral performance of prisons (2004) have made significant practical and conceptual contributions to the running of prisons. However, there is general agreement in the academic community that our knowledge of the daily tissue of prison life is dated and underdeveloped.

Not least, there is little analysis of the role of drugs within the prison community. For anyone who lives and works in the penal estate, the centrality of drugs to its inner life is more than apparent. Yet, in the academic literature, where drug use has been discussed in relation to imprisonment, the focus has tended to be on public health implications and policy initiatives (for example, Keene 1997; MacDonald, 1997; Swann and James 1998; Edgar and O'Donnell 1998; Gore et al 1999) rather than on the effects of drugs on prison culture and social relations.

The insights offered in this paper on drugs and the prison social system have developed from a broad study of prison life, which aims to revisit the concerns of the classic prison sociologies, and their method of sustained fieldwork in a single establishment. Following a two-month pilot study in spring 2002, research was conducted over ten consecutive months in HMP Wellingborough, a category C training prison for men. Full access was granted, and the prison was visited around three or four days per week, including evenings and weekends. After a three-month period of observation and informal conversation in all major areas of the prison, 70 prisoners were interviewed in significant depth about their life histories and prison life. From the very early stages of the research, drugs, particularly heroin, the main substance referred to here, were highlighted as the key motor of social dynamics. This paper outlines some of the main

findings in this area, and proposes a number of ways in which an appreciation of the role and implications of drugs in the adult male prisoner community might have implications for policy and practice2.

Heroin and prison culture

With remarkable consistency, experienced prisoners claim that it is heroin that is chiefly responsible for the erosion of a former culture of solidarity and cohesion amongst prisoners. The following quote captures general sentiments.

Smack — that's what's changed things a lot in prisons. People would never steal from people or grass each other up. Now that's just commonplace: grassing and co-operating with staff. (. . .) It's lowered general morals in the prison system. Proper heroin addicts have got no morals, y'know, they'd steal from their mum, they can't be trusted with anything. (. . .) So there's a kind of general mistrust around the place. (...) The violence levels have gone right up because of drugs. It was unusual for someone to get slashed up. There was fights (. . .) but now people are getting slashed up and set fire to just over nothing, five or ten pounds (debt). There's a lot more debt now in prison than ever before. And big debts as well. (. . .) People sell their clothes now in prison, which you never saw, for drugs, and all their belongings. People work for other people in prison for drugs now. They'll spend their life cleaning someone else's cell out for drugs, or whatever else they have to do. General moral standards have gone downhill, because of heroin. (...) it's hardened people's feelings towards their fellow prisoners. If someone's ill or poor or in a mess — a few years ago people would've gone to them and said 'here you are mate, here's some tobacco', or a phonecard, 'get yourself sorted out'. Now they say 'oh, he's a smackhead, forget him'. (So) people's good nature to other prisoners has got less and less. (. . .) Heroin culture has destroyed the humanity that was to other prisoners, that's gone now. That's why I think there's more slashings and whatever, because people don't look at each other as humans anymore, especially if they're smackheads — that's all they are: they get that label and they're finished.

Between them, then, heroin users and dealers violate almost every element of the prisoner code of conduct. The heroin economy, and the debt that it generates, is linked to bullying and exploitation, grassing, and stealing from cells. Heroin users are seen as manipulative and phoney, undermining general levels of trust and breaching norms about behaving without front or pretence. They are considered volatile, unpredictable and confrontational, in ways that add to the stress of everyday life. Their behaviour brings the attention of officers onto other people's activities. And their dependency, desperation, and physical degeneration are considered insulting to the collective dignity of the inmate community.

Heroin use and stigma

It is for all these reasons that heroin users in prison are stigmatised, albeit less than in previous years, when being a heroin user or dealer could result in being violently ostracised from a wing (Duke 2003)3. Users recognise this stigma, often acknowledging in private the shame that they feel about having to sell their clothes, work for other prisoners, and steal or beg from others in order to feed their consumption. 'It makes you into a worse thug than you already were', one prisoner commented, remorsefully (fieldwork notes, 2002).

However, while 'smackheads' are certainly at the bottom of the prisoner pecking order (within the mainstream community), drug use itself is tolerated (or perhaps accepted as inevitable)

provided that it does not interfere with the lives of other prisoners, or come to suggest vulnerability, immorality or lack of control. Such distinctions are partly based on views brought into prison from outside communities, where heroin dependence is associated with weakness and 'dirtiness', and where there is great distaste for the kinds of acts perpetrated by addicts.

Many prisoners will be candid about their drug consumption, but will downplay its extent and try to distance themselves from the identity attached to hardcore users: 'I smoke heroin, but I'm not a smack-head' is a common refrain. Prisoners differentiate between those drug users whose use dominates their lives, and those for whom it is an occasional and controlled pursuit. Indeed, whilst being unable to control your drug use is a mark of being unable to handle incarceration, some credibility can be gained from being able to afford heroin and knowing where to find it.4

Heroin dealing and power

It is through drug dealing, though, that significant status and power can be amassed. Prisoners repeatedly described the influence and comfort that being a drug supplier can afford:

Drugs run every prison. (...) When you've got heroin, you're up there. You're one of the men. If you've got a constant flow of heroin, your prison life can be very comfortable.

God, y'know, heroin in prison is the most powerful thing. It's the most powerful thing in prison, you can get anything done. You can get somebody stabbed, you can get somebody slashed, whatever you want with heroin.

Power? Power's drugs. Drugs is power.

Clearly, those prisoners directly dependent on drugs are most susceptible to the power that drugs bestow upon dealers. However, non-users are also affected by the ability of drug dealers to accumulate other tradable commodities such as tobacco, and pay others to settle scores. They can also be drawn into the violent politics of the drugs economy if their friends find themselves in debt.

In an environment in which personal possessions often represent status, as well as currency, prisoners whose involvement in the drugs trade allows them to build up belongings are held in high regard. One interviewee said:

/ was just admiring the way they done it, (...) They got the whole wing under control (and) they had everything (...) chocolate bars, boxes of brand new trainers and tracksuits all hangin' up.

Another aspect of the respect assigned to drug dealers relates to the 'nerve', ambition and contacts that they are assumed to have in order to be able to secure their supplies. As one prisoner reported, dealers get 'respect for getting the gear in the first place (...) They must be big people if they can get drugs into jail'. However, it is important to identify the true nature of the 'respect' that drug dealing brings. Largely, prisoners recognise that it is borne out of fear rather than genuine admiration. They also note that it is often only a temporary form of power, which resides in the drugs themselves, rather than in any aspect of character, and which therefore dissipates somewhat when the drug supply itself runs out. The term 'powder power' encapsulates what is, in fact then, a form of proxy or 'dummy respect'. It signifies both the false friendship that drug users give dealers in order to get hold of heroin, and the disrespect that dealers can show to users in the knowledge of the power they hold over them.

Many prisoners therefore take exception to drug dealing not only because it leads to forms of exploitation, and undermines notions of equality, but also because it allows otherwise 'ordinary' prisoners to climb the social hierarchy and boost their social image. Such complaints often have racial overtones, as well as connotations about masculine prowess. Thus, there is some disdain about the rising social power of Asian prisoners, who have traditionally been a relatively weak grouping, but whose involvement in the drugs economy is transforming their collective status: 'They're not powerful people, they're like matchsticks!', exclaimed one prisoner, 'but they have power, through the drugs they bring in'.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that prisoners can simply ascend the pecking order through the provision of drugs. A prisoner who without heroin is weak is unlikely to be able to hang onto his stock. In this respect, it is necessary either to already have some degree of physical or social clout, some other source of status, or to make smart alliances with powerful prisoners, in order to be able to operate as a dealer. Drugs alone are unlikely to enable a very weak member of the inmate community to become very powerful.

The opposite trajectory is more likely, as a result of drug use. Another reason why heroin is begrudged, particularly by experienced prisoners, is that it has corroded traditional sources of status and distinction among prisoners (such as age, physical strength, staunchness and offence):

You can still be an armed robber, but if you're a smackhead as well then the two don't go, do they? (...)You'll get comments like, 'he used to be top brethren, but he's a smackhead now.' (...) You've got a weakness. And if people know you've got a weakness, it can be exploited. (People) can buy your loyalty because of your weakness. (...) You're not staunch no more, because people can buy you.

There is no hierarchy no more. Whoever brings in the most drugs is the hierarchy now.

If you can get drugs in, you're somebody, in prison. (...) You can be the biggest rapist on earth. But as long as you're bringing smack in, it doesn't matter what you've done.

Someone may be physically strong, they may be strong willed, they may be a bit of a bully, but because they're on the brown, people will frown upon them.

Heroin means you can have a 23 year old selling to a grown man, who's licking their arse.

Heroin's presence on a wing also shifts the terms on which prisoners associate with each other. Drug users are not really loyal to each other, nor do they trust each other, but they are 'loyal to each other's company' (Lamer and Tefferteller 1964: 14): they will associate with each other pragmatically in order to acquire and consume heroin. Former affiliations are often, therefore, abandoned. As one prisoner summarised, then, this has altered the conditions of social interaction:

You can have a senior heavy armed robber type who'll be hangin' around with a house burglar, simply because they both take smack, whereas in the old days you wouldn't get that: people were drawn to each, other because of what they were in for.

Overall, then, heroin's impact on prisoner power and social relations is complex. In some respects, it distorts and supplants traditional relationships. In other ways, it amplifies existing

inequalities and expands the conventional hierarchy, making some vulnerable prisoners all the more indebted, ostracised and stigmatised, and increasing the power available to certain prisoners whose position in the prisoner world allows them to command the drugs trade.

Motivations for drug use and drug dealing

Accumulating goods, services and status while in prison are some of the main motivations for dealing. Prison drug dealers are often dealers outside too, and many claim that continuing is a means of offsetting the material deprivations of incarceration, and living a life that corresponds, at least a little, to their lifestyle outside. Suppliers also take pride in 'beating the system', as one former dealer highlighted:

I got my victories by selling drugs. (...) They paid me £77 a week. If I wasn't working they paid me £3 a week. I lived well above that. I could have what I wanted. (...) When a screw came in my pad and saw it overflowing with food and tobacco and just everything, that was good enough for me.

The appeal of heroin consumption is generally discussed in terms of sanctuary, diversion and relief: 'it brings the walls down', 'it's like being wrapped up in cotton wool', 'every single weight on your shoulders just seems to disappear'. However, it is important to note the different patterns of drug use inside and outside prison. Not least, many prisoners report that they use heroin only when in prison. Furthermore, they appear to manage their consumption quite consciously — reducing it in the months before release to ensure that they do not risk adding days to their sentences, or leave with a taste for heroin.

In contrast, many prisoners whose offences are addiction-related use prison as an opportunity to get clean. For them, the experience of imprisonment is of a different nature from other prisoners. Firstly, they are more likely to talk of having 'real friends' in prison than other prisoners, who generally regard prison 'associates' as much less trustworthy and sincere than their 'proper friends' outside, and consider it reckless to put faith in people met in the artificial context of incarceration. In contrast, ex-addicts see their prison identities as 'real' and reliable and their outside selves as inauthentic, and project this view onto others:
/'// be able to trust (other prisoners) in a jail scenario, but otherwise, I don't know, they could get out of jail and change totally. I know that I would. I change when I get out. It's not as if I come in prison and put a mask on. I come in prison and I revert to me. This is the real me. Outside, I'm totally false (...) It's a chemical lifestyle I lead outside. My whole character changes.

Secondly, because of their experiences as addicts outside prison, some prisoners find confinement a relatively less painful phenomenon than freedom. Often, they describe imprisonment as an 'opportunity', or a 'relief' from the chaos, misery and immorality of their lives outside. The kinds of degradations documented by prison sociologists in the past, for example, the deprivation of power and control, are considered less arduous than those that accompany addiction on the streets, as this interviewee describes:

(Outside) I don't have control of my life, heroin has a control over my life. I hand the reins to heroin (...). It's in prison that I can find I'm able to control my life more. . .and I'm happy, I'm happier. (...) How can a prison have power over you when you're in no rush to go beyond the boundaries of the gates. Cos I'm not. If I was to go out there, I would end up in a bigger state (of addiction) than I've ever been in.

For this cohort, then, prison provides a respite from drugs (rather than vice versa): a chance to improve their physical and psychological health, and the state of their personal relationships.

Interventions and further research

The practical and policy implications of these findings are by no means self-evident, and academic sociologists are not always the best people to assess them. A number of suggestions and notes of caution can nonetheless be offered.

First, as is clear to most practitioners, interventions need to be institutional as well as individual, and they need to be well-planned and balanced. If prisoners use drugs to relieve stress and boredom, and to escape temporarily from reality, then decent, constructive regimes are likely in themselves to reduce demand. At the same time, however, open regimes may increase supply by allowing drugs to more easily enter and circulate. Likewise, if prison wages are higher, this may increase demand for drugs by making more currency available for prisoners tempted to consume. However, there may be less motivation for suppliers if there is less need to substitute canteen food for poor quality meals, and if there are alternative, legitimate ways of establishing status within the prison community.

Establishments do have some scope to shift the terms on which status is assigned. Certainly, prisoners suggest that the kudos attached to violence is greater in some prisons than others, and those changes in modes of control and in officer culture have reduced it across the prison system as a whole. Decreasing the status of drug dealing might be more complex. If prison staff raise the stakes or revel too openly in their successes in combating drugs, this might make dealers, who tend to hold relatively anti-authority attitudes, all the more determined. Officers might also be careful not to appear to legitimise or enhance the status of drug dealers by acknowledging their power, even if only through the banter that can be part of the game between security staff and suspected dealers.

Similarly, since powerful prisoners are often involved in drug networks, there are dangers in mobilising them in order to control wings. That is, giving privileged wing-jobs and perks to influential prisoners, in return for them 'keeping the wing quiet', may be very imprudent. Even if a wing run along these lines appears calm, it may actually be the case that drugs are rife, but that a loose (and illegitimate) order is being maintained through collusion between officers and drug dealers who are keen to protect their markets by preventing overt and excessive disorder. There are also dangers to be aware of in taking advantage of the lack of trust and loyalty that heroin
engenders, and that exists between heroin users in prison. Prison sociologists have long noted that some level of solidarity is beneficial not just for prisoners, in terms of helping them to alleviate the pains of imprisonment, but also for prison administrators, who might otherwise face a much more unruly, discontented and self-interested prisoner population (Sykes 1958). It may be tempting for prison administrators to promote a culture of informing in order to eradicate heroin, and therefore promote greater harmony and safety within the prisoner community. However, this may itself undermine levels of trust and solidarity between prisoners, in ways that create an equally damaging and isolating environment. Moreover, prisoners may be very reluctant to grass on drug dealers, not only because this may be highly dangerous for them, but also because it can be self-incriminating, especially in a prison where admissions of drug use are dealt with in highly punitive ways.

However, in the same way that the official language about bullying has built upon, and been absorbed into prisoner discourse, it is not implausible that a campaign against prison drug dealing could harness the antipathy felt by many prisoners about the presence of drugs within the system.

Given the stigma attached to drug use, compared to the more ambivalent status of dealing, it may be easier to tackle drug demand than supply. This requires a degree of understanding about the attractions and contexts of drug-taking. Prison staff need to recognise the ambivalence about heroin consumption felt not only by non-users, but also by users themselves, who are often full of shame about selling their clothes or getting family members to fund their habits. They may be unlikely to express this to officers, or want to discuss with them the intensity with which they may desire heroin when it is available. Again, this will be the case all the more if prisoners feel that drug use is dealt with only punitively or dismissively, rather than with some level of sympathy and support. It is also worth staff being aware that, although heroin users in prison may appear to be collectively powerful, as individuals they are often isolated, with few proper friendships. Labels that simply deride and condemn them may increase their vulnerability, and push them further towards narcotic means of coping.

Staff should also be conscious that there exist different patterns of demand and behaviour amongst prisoners in relation to heroin. If drugs are consumed in prison as a way of easing the pains of confinement, then there are certain times during a sentence when this temptation is likely to be greatest: at its beginning, and in its middle-phases, when the prisoner is most isolated from the outside world, and most psychologically dependent on forms of support within the prison. For recovering addicts, who often desist entirely while in prison, stability, support and resettlement are critical. Constructive activity may be seized upon with relish; prison friends and peers - often in similar positions - can be excellent sources of mutual support. It is unhelpful if officers believe (as prisoners sometimes - and often wrongly - think that they do) that 'druggies are druggies' or 'junkies never change', when these may actually be the prisoners most receptive to rehabilitation. Equally, it may be unwise to encourage prisoners to present themselves only as helpless victims if this risks undermining their sense of agency and self-esteem.5

Conclusion

These are, then, highly complex interventions. Many would require further, more focused research. What should be clear is the importance of seeing the prison as a social system of interlocking components, and acknowledging the presence of drugs in each of them. Drug strategies should not be left only to drug specialists, CARAT teams, and Voluntary Testing Units.6 They should be part of the culture of an establishment.

Finally, it is worth repeating that tackling drugs in prison is not just a question of dealing with issues around addiction. There are implications for the entire social fabric of the prisoner community, and thus for the general health of the prison. Where a prison is unsafe, lacking in trust and chaotic, there are consequences for the general well-being of prisoners that are also likely to impact upon their attitudes after release, not only towards drugs, but also towards themselves, their families, and society at large.

Ben Crewe

References

1. Some US states employed sociologists as well as psychologists and social workers in their prisons (Wacquant 2002).
2. The role of drugs in young offender institutions and women's prisons may be very different.
3. 'In the old days if you knew somebody who had smack, you'd go and have a chat with them, quietly, on the side. [And say] "Make sure nobody else gets it. You will take it. Nobody else will. You alone will take it. You won't knock any of that stuff out. If you go knocking it out, we'll knock you out"'.
4 As one prisoner commented: It is [stigmatised], yeah. But it's also, it's also a status symbol to them. Somebody that can be 'seen to be running about, and eventually get the prize, i.e. a bag of smack [...] they'll come out and walk about the wing, scratching their nose, 'yeah, I'm a gangster man, I can afford smack, and I know where to get it'.
5 Promoting helplessness as the key means to gain support or escape sanctions is also dangerous because it encourages prisoners who do not have drug problems to present themselves as if they do (see also Shewan and Davies 2000). A small number of interviewees reported that they had claimed, on entry into prison, to have drug abuse issues, because they believed that providing the prison with 'something to address' made it more likely that they could appear 'corrected', and therefore worthy of parole and other benefits.
6 Drug policies also need to make sense to prisoners and be implemented with consistency and transparency. There is considerable cynicism about 'targeted' drug testing, the sanctions attached to cannabis consumption, and the importance of MDTs as a performance target. This does have implications for the legitimacy of the prison regime.