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'Breaking supply chains'. A commentary on the new UK Drug Strategy

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Introduction: the 'new' approach to supply control

Interventions targeting the production, distribution and sale of illicit psychoactive substances comprise a significant part of the UK Government's latest Drug Strategy, entitled *From Harm to Hope*. References are made to supply control throughout, but chapter two, 'Breaking drug supply chains', is specifically devoted to the subject. In setting out the problem(s) of drug supply, a number of current market features are presented as particularly problematic. Situated within an international context of increasing availability and rising purity of heroin and cocaine, the UK's heroin market is reported to be the largest in Europe and a lucrative target for traffickers. Domestically, Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) involved in drug supply are portrayed as increasingly adaptable and capable of diversifying their activities, with this suggested to correspond with market evolutions including the availability of synthetic substances and the use of online forums to enable supply. Resonating with a core focus that was prevalent two decades ago (see Pearson & Hobbs, 2001), these groups are also considered central to a burgeoning middle market that feeds neighbourhood retail markets. Following the substantial attention it has received over recent years, the so-called 'County Lines' phenomenon of city-based supply networks serving markets in more provincial areas is prominent, alongside the by-products of young people being exploited as runners and vulnerable adults having their homes taken over by dealers in a practice referred to as 'cuckooing'. Finally, the availability of drugs in prisons is identified, with organised criminals incorporating prison drug markets into their 'webs' and being responsible for related violence.

In response to these problems and the existence of the UK drug market more generally, the Strategy proposes an 'end-to-end' plan targeted at all levels of the supply chain. To help achieve this, an investment of £300 million is committed over three years, allowing for 'innovative interventions' to be pursued and an evidence base for 'what works best' in disrupting drug supply to be developed. This is a sizeable sum, although judging just how significant it is within the wider funding context is difficult given that the base funding level for supply control is not readily available. Police budgets, including police forces, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and Border Force, do not usually have a dedicated amount allocated to policing drug markets. The proportion of police time spent on enforcing drug laws or implementing other drug-related activity is also not routinely recorded. HM Government (2017a) cautiously estimated that the central spend on enforcement was £1.6 billion in 2014/15, which gives some indication as to how much of an extra investment in the domain of supply control has been made as part of the Strategy. Regardless of exactly how much of an injection of funding this £300 million ultimately equates to, as with comparable investments in other sectors, it would be hoped that this is spent on evidence informed interventions capable of benefitting society, rather than political gimmicks that might do more harm than good.

Seven key elements comprise this plan for 'breaking' the supply chain. The first two of 'restricting upstream flow' and 'securing the border' set their sights on the international level and the importation of drugs into the UK. The aim of 'targeting the middle market' positions this rung as critical to the success of the supply chain because of its association with wholesale supply. Focusing on the bottom of the chain, the aim of 'targeting the retail market' is suggested as being achieved through local policing and the continuation of Project ADDER, a pilot that focuses on co-ordinated enforcement activity, diversion and partnership working. There is a target of 'rolling up County Lines' through a 'flagship programme' of enforcement activities. Located outside the hierarchy of the market, there is a desire for 'going after the money' that is made from supply via greater financial investigation. The final element of the plan focuses on 'prison security', with the aim of ridding prisons of illegal drugs.

This, in a nutshell, is the Government's 'innovative supply attack plan'. In his foreword, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, states that the Strategy is different because 'the old way of doing things isn't working' (p.3). Before considering how well grounded these measures are in the available research, it is necessary to contest this assertion at the outset and point out that this 'new approach' to supply control is fundamentally the same as previous strategies. 'Drug war' rhetoric, hyperbole and styles of policing that strive for arrests, seizures and punishment have long dominated supply-oriented enforcement interventions. *From Harm to Hope* appears to continue down this path. In this commentary we will consider some of the key supply control elements of the Strategy and provide an analysis of their likely success.

Evidence of effectiveness

As the Strategy frames itself as informed by and contributing to research, it is worth reflecting on the specific context in which supply control evidence sits. Evaluation research on policing drugs in general and supply control interventions in particular is lacking. As a result, policy responses are built on an evidence base that is 'distressingly weak' (Babor et al., 2018, p.190). Data limitations and methodological challenges are among the reasons why there is little rigorous research on efforts to suppress drug markets. Another explanation is that drugs policing research has been poorly funded relative to drug treatment research, something arguably indicative of limited popular or official concern about the processes and impacts of enforcement (Reuter, 2017). Adding to this, Greenfield and Paoli (2017) suggest that supply control might be considered less in need of scrutiny because it typically involves the enforcement of criminal law, thereby serving to confirm social values and norms. Indeed, it is difficult to divorce supply-oriented policy from the cultural context of the so-called 'drug war', where symbolic displays of 'tough' action are politically preferable to 'cowardly' cost-benefit analyses (Collison, 1995, p.3).

The Government (2017a) acknowledged the need for more research in their evaluation of the *Drug Strategy 2010*, concluding there was insufficient evidence 'to robustly measure the overall impact of enforcement or enforcement-related activity on levels of drug use and harm, or value for money' (p.107). The Home Office (2019) guidance document that set out the terms of reference for the recent independent review of drugs included questions on evidence-based approaches to preventing drug supply, the most important evidence gaps and what further work would be needed to address them. However, answers did not appear in Dame Carol Black's (2020) report. Instead, she stressed that 'Government interventions to restrict supply have had limited success' (p.5). A recommendation was made for more research to help identify the impacts of different types of drug enforcement.

The gaps in knowledge and understanding make it difficult to develop policies that are driven by research. Relatedly, when compared to other parts of the Strategy that deal with treatment, recovery and, to a lesser extent, demand, it is also difficult to assess which evidence was used to inform the Government's plans for supply control in *From Harm to Hope*. The Strategy does not appear to align with the evidence base on drugs policing, with the scant sources cited in the supply control chapter primarily focused on describing features of 'the problem' (i.e. the market), rather than the actions taken in response. It is almost as if the identification of illicit markets and their features is considered enough to justify generic police responses, with little consideration as to what these responses actually should be. This is misguided and undermines claims of this part of the Strategy being evidence based given that, while underdeveloped, there are numerous findings from the existing research literature that relate to supply control interventions and their contribution to reducing the availability and consumption of drugs. We now turn to these findings to consider the likely success of the proposals included in the Strategy.

Can supply be cut?

The Government (2021, p.21) promises 'a relentless and uncompromising attack on every phase of the drugs supply chain'. In practice, this largely consists of enforcement interventions that aim to disrupt distribution networks and bring those involved to justice. 'Major' and 'moderate' disruptions are said to include large seizures, convicting key individuals in OCGs and targeting their finances. 'Success' in supply control is routinely measured through the outputs of enforcement activities, especially the number of arrests and volume of drugs seized. The basic logic and intended benefits of such outputs are that they will raise prices, reduce availability and thereby reduce both consumption and other drug-related harms. There is an assumption that more enforcement will result in better outcomes.

Available evidence suggests that drug law enforcement does create risks for those involved in the drug trade. Drawing on 222 interviews with high-level drug traffickers in prisons across England, the Matrix Knowledge Group (2007) found that enforcement was perceived as the foremost risk for the majority of interviewees. Costly business practices are adopted to manage risks, which results in higher prices for consumers (Caulkins & Reuter, 1998; Reuter & Kleiman, 1986). Elasticity of demand means that people who use drugs are responsive to price changes. However, in their synthesis of empirical research on the relationship between enforcement intensity and drug prices, Pollack and Reuter (2014) found that, while illegality per se may push prices above those likely to pertain in legal markets and therefore hold down drug use, there is little evidence that raising the risk of arrest, incarceration or seizure at different levels of the distribution system will raise prices - at least for established drugs such as heroin and cocaine, which are the primary focus of *From Harm to Hope*. Various case studies reinforce this. Best et al. (2001), for example, carried out an assessment of a major Metropolitan Police initiative targeting drug dealing in ten London boroughs. Interviews were conducted two weeks after the start of the crackdown operation with 174 people who currently used drugs. They reported no immediately observable impact on price, purity or availability. Internationally, Werb et al.'s (2013) audit of drug surveillance databases indicates that the availability and purity of drugs has generally increased, while the price of drugs has remained stable or declined, the precise opposite of what would be expected if supply control measures were effective as a market reduction instrument. Unfortunately, within the Strategy there is little acknowledgement of these lessons from the history of supply control efforts.

The evidence base does demonstrate that supply control activities can contribute to the disruption of drug markets at all levels. The effects of enforcement efforts can be substantial, as suggested in studies of the Australian 'heroin shortage' (Degenhardt et al., 2005), precursor chemical regulations (McKetin et al., 2011), and the decline in US cocaine use (Caulkins et al., 2015). But, as the response to Covid lockdowns have recently demonstrated (Aldridge et al., 2021), drug markets have proven to be extremely resilient and can adapt to significant or even unprecedented disruptions. This means that the impact of even the most 'effective' interventions tends to be marginal and short-lived, which is at odds with the core premise of the Strategy's framing of drug supply chains as capable of being 'broken' by the enforcement action that it proposes.

At one end of the supply chain, Mazerolle et al.'s (2007) systematic review of drug law enforcement evaluations found little support for interdiction and crop eradication strategies. At the other end, crackdown operations at the street-level were largely ineffective at dealing with supply but appeared to have more success addressing associated crime problems. Some studies suggest that crackdowns can be effective under certain circumstances. Proactive policing approaches that combine a problem-oriented, geographical targeting with efforts to create and maintain partnerships have the most potential to sustain reductions in drug markets and related harms (see also Mazerolle et al., 2020). But if such nuance translates to how drug market operations are practically undertaken in the UK over the coming years, it will not be because of any explicit mention of it within the Strategy. Notably, Mazerolle et al.'s (2007) review also suggests that diversionary interventions targeted at people who use drugs offers promise, something which is recognised, albeit arguably too briefly, within the Strategy specifically when discussing Project ADDER.

Enforcement activities targeting those who operate at the 'middle market' level are understudied. This is surprising given the tremendous effort and expense pumped into investigating and incarcerating 'high value' (HM Government, 2021, p.28) wholesale suppliers, who are considered vital to the functioning of the supply chain. Owing to the lack of research, it is not possible to ascertain the returns on this investment. What can be safely assumed, however, is that arresting a drug dealer operating at this and other levels is likely to have far less benefits (e.g. incapacitation, deterrence) than arresting perpetrators of acquisitive or violent crimes, due to the market context in which drugs are bought and sold (Kleiman & Smith, 1990). In short, people who supply drugs are replaceable and will move up and across the chain as vacancies arise. In keeping with the general tone struck about supply control in the Drug Strategy, police and policy makers do not appear to be perturbed. Babor et al. (2018, p.189) note that it is at this level that the evidence is least relevant because enforcement is undertaken 'out of a sense of what is just', or retribution, rather than a commitment to supply control or broader public health goals.

As is often the case with political documents, the new Drug Strategy contains numerous examples of unoriginal, unspecific and unachievable aims, with supply control measures arguably the greatest recipient of overblown rhetoric. Research evidence suggests that the Government will not succeed in 'securing the border' with 'a ring of steel to stop drugs entering the UK' (p.7). Nor will they 'drive drugs out from our cities, towns, and villages' (p.6). No one seriously claims that criminal law and enforcement activities can control the domestic or transnational supply of drugs in this way. The very notion of 'supply control' is therefore something of a misnomer in that it implies that the state has the power to exert a significant influence over the trade in illegal drugs. This is not to say that supply-side interventions have no effect on drug markets. Following the proposals set out in *From Harm to Hope*, it is likely that more enforcement resources and 'opportunities to incentivise the whole policing system to focus on drugs' (p.29), will result in an increase in upstream seizures and disruptions against activities of organised criminals. It is also possible that retail enforcement coupled with diversion will have short-term impacts on market conditions and drug-related harms in local communities. But the implementation of a Strategy that serves up more of the same is unlikely to lead to sustainable reductions in drug availability or use.

‘Rolling up’ County Lines

While most elements of the Strategy align with familiar attempts to ‘mirror’ the various levels of the supposedly hierarchical drug market structure in pursuit of disruption (Dorn et al., 1992), the targeting of County Lines drug supply renders it somewhat distinct from prior strategies. County Lines was mentioned relatively briefly in the previous Strategy (HM Government, 2017b) but has now been elevated as a core focus. There is no lack of rhetoric denouncing the ‘gangs’ involved or the threat they pose to vulnerable people. But what is absent is an adequate explanation of why this apparent ‘phenomenon’ has occurred. It treats County Lines as something ‘new’, the extent to which is debatable (Spicer, 2021a; Windle et al., 2020). Yet even if its novelty was to be accepted, the Strategy fails to recognise that its emergence has occurred within the context of existing supply control strategies and the political economic conditions of the past decade (Spicer, 2021b). Instead, it is simply put down as being driven by a growth in drug supply. This has inevitable consequences for informing the responses.

The actions proposed to ‘roll up’ County Lines ultimately equate to pursuing a suite of enforcement activities more vigorously. Justification for this approach is given by outlining the successes achieved so far:

> ‘We are already delivering real impact. In the past two years our County Lines Programme has closed down more than 1,500 deal lines, made over 7,400 arrests, seized over £4 million in cash as well as significant quantities of drugs, and safeguarded more than 4,000 vulnerable people.’ (p.22)

On the face of it, this is a highly successful list of achievements, yet scrutinising this ‘impact’ suggests a different story. The closing of deal lines, for example, is bedevilled by inaccurate measurement. As recognised by the source cited as providing evidence of this reduction (NCLCC, 2021), much of this was due to inactive lines being removed from the list compiled by the National County Lines Coordination Centre and broader changes in reporting by police forces. Of course, within the messy world of drug supply, where the use of deal lines is fluid, with them regularly changing hands and being ‘franchised’ (Søgaard et al., 2019; Spicer, 2019), such quantitative precision begins to look even further abstracted from reality. Regarding the arrests made, while the quantity is significant their ‘quality’ may be somewhat different than expected. As documented by Coomber et al. (2019), while much is often made about apprehending ‘gang leaders’ as part of County Lines police operations, many of the arrests ensnare the ‘low hanging fruit’, often in the form of local user-dealers. This can then cause vacuums that are potentially filled by further ‘out of town’ dealers, paradoxically accelerating the control of County Lines over local markets. When it comes to the seizure of over £4 million, this begins to look like a rather small dent in overall finances when considered in light of the NCA’s (2018) suggestion that a single line can make over £800,000 profit each year and estimates that the annual UK market for heroin and crack is worth £5.1 billion (Black, 2020). Finally, ‘safeguarded’ is an ambiguous term. Recognising that exploitation occurs within drug markets and seeking to protect those experiencing it is a welcome

aim (Mclean et al., 2019). But for young people involved in County Lines, research is demonstrating the complexity of being provided or accepting 'victim' status (Marshall, 2022). For adults who have been 'cuckooed', safeguarding can also often mean little more than a random visit from a police officer or inadvertent amplification of the situation (Spicer, 2021c).

Away from the minutiae of these claimed successes, another feature stands out regarding the responses to County Lines, which is the aim of targeting the most harmful lines. This is a noteworthy inclusion given that it is arguably consistent with applying harm reduction principles to the policing of retail drug markets (Bacon, 2016; Kammersgaard, 2019; Stevens, 2013). Ethnographic fieldwork with officers engaging with this process suggests that for it to be successful in pushing the market towards less harmful manifestations, a number of practical challenges will need to be navigated (Spicer, 2021a). These include developing a coherent framework for how 'harm' is conceptualised and establishing a suitable process that enables the harms associated with different groups to be accurately assessed.

Conclusion: what remains unsaid

Having critically discussed some of the key supply control components of *From Harm to Hope*, we will conclude by noting three conspicuous absences. First, the Government fails to acknowledge, let alone adequately address, the potential unintended consequences of supply control, such as health harms related to variable drug purity (Harris et al., 2015), violence related to drug market disruption (Aitken et al., 2002), and the negative impact of involvement with the criminal justice system (Pager, 2003). The last of these might be mitigated, to some extent, through the diversion, treatment and recovery strands of Project ADDER. Regarding violence, there is an assumption in the Drug Strategy that bearing down across the supply chain will result in a reduction in violence and homicide. While often exaggerated, 'systemic violence' is an inevitable feature of 'virtually anarchic' illegal markets (Jacques & Allen, 2015). A significant concern, however, is that drug law enforcement can actually amplify this. In their systematic review, Werb et al. (2011) found that intensified enforcement interventions were associated with an *increase* in drug market violence, with causal mechanisms including the destabilisation of markets. Not recognising that supply control interventions can exacerbate some of the very issues they are designed to deal with could, paradoxically, lead to the actions promoted in *From Harm to Hope* increasing rather than reducing these harms.

The second omission is the role of inequality. Examples of 'totemic toughness' (Stevens, 2011) are visible throughout the Strategy and particularly in relation to drug supply. These include 'vile' County Lines gangs and drug dealers who 'blight' neighbourhoods. Central to Stevens' (2011) observations of the deployment of totemic toughness within the policy making process is how it is favoured ahead of measures aimed at addressing inequality, so that it becomes 'silently silenced' (Mathiesen, 2004). The Drug Strategy has no shortage of examples of wanting to crack down on those involved in supply that are represented as being a threat to society. What is silenced, however, are attempts to recognise or resolve the structural conditions that can lead to the entrenchment of drug markets in

communities and the entrenchment of people in these markets. The irony of this is laid bare with the Strategy presented as being part of the Government's so-called 'levelling up' agenda. Drug markets and those that populate them are presented as holding neighbourhoods back from their full potential, with it assumed that tougher enforcement will allow for these areas to improve. But the Strategy ignores that these markets and their harms flourish in conditions of deprivation and social exclusion. In this sense the Government appears to be putting the cart before the horse, placing its attention on the symptoms of inequality, rather than addressing inequality as a root cause itself.

Finally, it is worth noting the basic point that prohibition provides the conditions for illicit drug markets to exist in their current forms and vast scale. The Government continues to ignore this inescapable truth and refuses to engage in meaningful debates about drug policy reform at the legislative level. Evidence is available from other jurisdictions that have introduced alternative regulatory frameworks (Decorte et al., 2020; Kilmer et al., 2021; Seddon & Floodgate, 2020). Within the UK, various organisations have put forward increasingly sophisticated proposals, including how to regulate stimulants and prioritise social justice in legal cannabis markets (Garius & Ali, 2022; Rolles et al., 2020). While it is perhaps prudent to avoid presenting legalisation as a panacea, an ideological exclusion of certain regulatory levers that can be pulled to influence what Seddon (2020, p.327) refers to as the *'exchangespace'* renders the Strategy's approach to supply control myopic.

There are some promising elements in *From Harm to Hope*. But given that the tired, uninspired supply control measures it promotes are unlikely to achieve meaningful outcomes in reducing drug-related harms, combined with an unwillingness to consider alternative measures that could have a transformative effect, it is difficult to be too optimistic. There are likely to be a host of arrests, seizures and other outputs held up as evidence of a winning Strategy over the coming years. With the lack of an appropriate and clear evaluation framework, this leaves the door suitably open for 'success' to be claimed (Pardo, 2020). But for the Government to get drug supply under control, it will likely need to start thinking outside of the box and fundamentally reconfigure the rules by which the drug game is currently played. What 'hope' there is for this step change in the immediate future and what 'harm' will continue to be perpetuated in the meantime remains to be seen.

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