

# Mid-level Illicit Drug Supply in a Small English City: Sellers' Perspectives and Experiences

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## Abstract

This article examines the experiences of eight mid-level drug suppliers operating in a small English city, through use of qualitative interviews. Building on the literature relating to social supply and drift into ‘real dealing’, we explore whether the mid-market for non-‘street’ drugs in this locale follows a continuation of these norms, or whether features that are prominent in recent explorations of UK drug distribution relating to increasingly aggressive marketing, and organised criminal gangs moving into markets in provincial towns, are present in the city’s market. Analysis encompasses suppliers’ experiences of ‘drift’ into commercial supply, pull factors for market involvement, approaches to marketing and customer service, ethical concerns in supply, and finally perceptions of market violence. We observe that the market, while retaining many features of social supply, nonetheless shows evidence of issues relating to emergent norms of altered distribution, notably market violence linked to establishing ‘lines’ in new locales.

## Keywords

drug markets, drug supply, mid-level, drift, social supply

## Introduction

British drugs policy remains dedicated to ‘swift, certain, tough’ consequences for drug possession and supply (Home Office, 2022). This stance draws on popular political narratives positioning drugs as ‘evil’, and ‘pushed’ on society by amoral actors, to justify punitive sanction (Coomber, 2006, 2010). Despite positive public attitudes towards the legalisation of some drugs (YouGov, 2018), UK drugs policy continues to justify prohibition and punitivism through rhetoric of drugs being ‘at the root of untold harm and misery across our society’, sold by ‘dangerous drug gangs’ responsible for ‘human trafficking’, and countless other ills (Home Office, 2022, p. 3).

While this may be reflective of some aspects of the drugs trade, much work has pointed to the need for in-depth research into drug markets in order to move beyond these reductive

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understandings of popular political discourse (Antonopoulos & Papanicolaou, 2010; Coomber, 2010; Salinas, 2018). While narratives of tightly controlled drug markets ruled by organised crime through violence are popular, evidence from a range of markets illustrates this is not often the case (Coomber, 2003; Salinas, 2018), even in relation to ‘street drug’ markets such as heroin (Coomber & Maher, 2006). In contrast, drug markets often feature trust relationships, reciprocity, and norms of ‘social supply’, as a wealth of literature has illustrated (Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013; Bright & Sutherland, 2017; Coomber & Turnbull, 2007; Coomber et al., 2016).

Significantly, even when looking at market levels where profits may be significant (i.e. exceeding the median salary), many actors do not belong to organised criminal groups (OCGs), use violence, or otherwise follow the stereotype of the amoral ‘drug dealer’ (Jacinto et al., 2008; Taylor & Potter, 2013). Sellers at the mid-level of diverse drug markets are noted as continuing to engage in ‘social supply’ norms, and market openness has been highlighted as a key theme in several works, where the ability of sellers to drift in and out of supply runs counter to stereotypical notions of ruthlessly controlled markets (Salinas, 2018; Taylor & Potter, 2013).

Such explorations have added significant nuance to our understanding of drug supply, and help challenge the underpinnings of normative prohibition (Coomber et al., 2016). However, in recent years research into UK drug markets has nonetheless highlighted the increasing prominence of supply norms which to some extent reflect stereotypical notions, as OCGs and urban street gangs (USGs) from cities such as London, Birmingham and Merseyside branch out to provincial towns in search of profitable, less saturated markets (Coomber & Moyle, 2018; Harding, 2020; Spicer et al., 2020). While the novelty of ‘county lines’ as a supply model is disputed (Densley et al., 2023), the suggestion that profit-driven OCGs are ‘moving into’ local drug markets potentially challenges existing market structures, and norms of social supply (McLean et al., 2019; Salinas et al., 2019).

However, the extent to which the entrance of profit-driven actors into drug markets will impact existing ‘closed’ supply (see Coomber, 2003) is unclear, and may not affect those unconnected with OCGs, particularly when selling drugs other than ‘street drugs’ (Turnock, 2021). Exploring this suggestion, this article seeks to examine perceptions of market openness, trust relationships, and experiences of market violence among eight drug suppliers operating at the mid-level of markets for non-street drugs (i.e. powder cocaine, cannabis and ‘party drugs’). These sellers were interviewed in a locale highlighted as a key site for county lines supply (in Harding, 2020): a small city of just over 100,000 people located on a main rail link from London. To understand market openness and the nature of transactions, we explored how sellers initiated their drug supply careers, including the extent to which they ‘drifted’ into commercial supply. This was followed by exploration of their perceptions of the illicit drugs market, including: ‘pull factors’ for drug supply; the role of marketing and customer service; ethical considerations in their business practice; and finally the prevalence of market-related violence.

## Background

### *‘Mid-level’ Drug Supply & Market Diversity*

Pearson and Hobbs (2001) note the difficulties with conceptualising different market ‘levels’ in relation to drug distribution. While terms such as ‘retail level’ and ‘wholesale’ are commonly used, there is blurring between these roles and market positions (Potter, 2009), which can lead to difficulties in defining our focus when discussing particular market ‘levels’, such as what constitutes ‘mid-level’ supply. Ritter (2005) highlights this lack of a shared lexicon as presenting a challenge to analysis of drug markets, noting this lack of clarity makes policy recommendations difficult. However, Coomber and Turnbull (2007) argue this lack of set definitions and ‘lexical

congruence' is largely irrelevant, as in-depth research into drug markets will inherently present a challenge to simplified models or definitions, given the diversity of drug transactions, market structures and supply norms (see also [Potter, 2009](#)). Given this lack of homogeneity, focus should instead be placed on understanding in-depth what specifically we are observing in these diverse markets, rather than over-arching definitions regarding different market structures and levels ([Coomber & Turnbull, 2007](#)).

A long-existing critique has been the failure of perspectives on illicit markets to acknowledge the importance of specific local contexts and how these shape supply ([Hobbs & Dunnighan, 2002](#); [Potter, 2009](#)). [Coomber and Turnbull \(2007\)](#) note that adolescent cannabis transactions function distinctly to typically conceived 'drug markets', and further highlight how research into rural versus urban markets cannot be simplified by conceptualising these as a single market type, given the distinct features to each. This is reinforced by [Shukla \(2016\)](#), who notes that despite the tendency for criminological focus to be on the urban, drug issues are often rural and non-metropolitan, with the background to these places (lack of other opportunities; geographic and social distance) shaping how use, supply and manufacture of drugs occurs. Broader acknowledgement of how local contexts shape market experiences is evident in explorations of middle-class towns and suburbs ([Berger et al., 2022](#); [Jacques & Wright, 2015](#)), university campuses ([Moyle & Coomber, 2019](#); [Patton, 2018](#)), or remote rural and coastal towns ([Turnock, 2021](#)) as markets with distinct features. Additionally, variations by drug type even in seemingly comparable locales ([Coomber, 2003](#)) highlight a need for in-depth understanding of particular market contexts.

The 'mid-level' of drug markets is therefore neither homogeneous across countries, cities, temporalities or drug type, nor necessarily drawn in the same place by professionals, academics, or drug sellers themselves ([Pearson & Hobbs, 2001](#)). However, for our purposes, a useful guideline is that used by [Taylor and Potter \(2013\)](#). Their work noted how supply often disrupts the 'pyramid' model of market 'levels', with wholesale and retail supply overlapping, yet still acknowledged a general notion of levels 'above' and 'below' one another in market structure. As such, one of the simplest ways to conceptualise the market's mid-level was to focus on drug sales that exceeded £1000 per week, i.e. a 'level above' what could reasonably be termed 'social supply', and instead illustrated 'real dealing', without needing to be involved in organised distribution. Despite actors at this level often framing themselves as 'not real dealers' ([Jacinto et al., 2008](#); [Taylor & Potter, 2013](#)), this broad definition of mid-level supply nonetheless allows for effective exploration of market interactions and norms among commercial sellers making potentially sizable profits, but still operating below the level of larger OCG activity. With this distribution role seemingly the most significant when considering market openness, this definition will be drawn on to understand the contemporary British drugs market in our research locale.

### *'Drift' from 'Social Supply' to 'Real Dealing'*

When looking at the market mid-level identified by [Taylor and Potter \(2013\)](#), it is important to situate this within an understanding of 'social supply' and 'minimally commercial' supply, since 'mid-level' is conceptualised as existing a step beyond these, where profit becomes a more significant factor, even if sellers continue to supply friends, and otherwise engage in trust-based aspects of social supply norms.

The concepts of social supply, minimally commercial supply, and user-suppliers link with the notion that much drug supply is fundamentally disconnected from OCG and rigidly-enforced market structures, but occurs instead through friendship, referrals and trust connections. A wealth of literature has examined drug supply based on gift giving, reciprocity, and cementing relationships over profit motives ([Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013](#); [Bright & Sutherland, 2017](#); [Coomber,](#)

2003; Coomber & Turnbull, 2007; Moyle, 2023; Potter, 2009), with this form of supply prevalent for a variety of drugs. Social supply is seen as a means of reducing risk associated with illicit drug markets (Coomber & Turnbull, 2007; Potter, 2009) or receiving poor quality drugs from unknown sellers (Jacinto et al., 2008), though is also highlighted as having important social contexts around bonding, sharing and social capital (Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013; Scott et al., 2017).

Coomber et al. (2016) situate social supply within drug normalisation, noting that as drug use has become less deviant in certain contexts (see Aldridge et al., 2013), so supplying of drugs to friends and acquaintances has become a widespread means of access and supply. They note that drug users ‘drift’ (Matza, 1964) into social supply as a means of covering costs of personal use and accessing product more cheaply (e.g. ‘splitting’ a larger amount as a group), which in conjunction with the above noted benefits can lead to users becoming ‘minimally commercial’ suppliers (see also Coomber & Moyle, 2014; Moyle & Coomber, 2019). Taylor and Potter (2013) similarly draw on the theory of ‘drift’ to investigate how social suppliers move into ‘real dealing’, following the pull of profits and opportunities to ‘scale up’ their supply (e.g. through credit), yet still maintaining some of the associated values of social supply around trust and friendship (see also Jacinto et al., 2008).

A key finding from Taylor and Potter’s (2013) work is the degree to which drug markets, at least for cannabis and party drugs (vs. ‘street drugs’), were characterised by openness, and a lack of organised control. Relationships between mid-level dealers and their suppliers were little different than their relationships with customers as social suppliers, and most sellers had multiple options for accessing each drug they sold, without being fixed to any one distributor in terms of obligation to buy. This lack of tight control was mirrored in the relative lack of violence within the market, with only one out of 13 participants reporting using violence, and most saying there was little market-related violence in their experience, though sometimes noting they could rely on their own suppliers for support if needed (e.g. for unpaid debts).

These findings were paralleled in Salinas’ (2018) exploration of employed ‘lads’ in the North of England, who engaged in drug supply alongside their legitimate careers and lives, leading to Salinas’ description of them as the ‘unusual suspects’. The lads ‘oscillated’ freely in and out of various supply chains, and were able to run mid-level supply operations alongside their regular jobs, distinguishing their supply from the stereotypical OCG-controlled market. These works situate the mid-level supply of a range of drugs (cannabis, cocaine, ketamine, MDMA) as occurring through similar mechanisms to social supply, and with many of the same features, even when selling at a level where profit may be significant.

### *The Developing UK Drugs Market*

Linked to the importance of understanding local contexts to drug supply is the significance of how changes in patterns of consumption, supply and market structures may shape illicit drug markets in a given geographic locale (Shukla, 2016). While much work into mid-level drug supply frames it as a continuation of social supply, this assumption is challenged by suggestions that the structure of UK drug markets is changing. While to some extent focussing on different contexts (i.e. ‘street drugs’ vs. ‘party drugs’), a significant recent trend has been the transition towards the ‘county lines’ supply model, defined by the National Crime Agency (2015: 2) as a model where a group “establishes and operates a telephone number in an area outside of their normal locality in order to sell drugs directly to users at street level”. While this term is contested, with differing definitions offered (Densley et al., 2023), two relevant themes emerge from this trend which the present research looks to explore.

The first is the increasing shift towards technologically-enhanced and business-oriented approaches to drug supply, with drugs sales increasingly ‘open’, and based on calling up ‘lines’

rather than trust relationships with suppliers. Notably, [Harding \(2020\)](#) points to how county lines operate in a similar fashion to the ‘gig economy’, and an increasing amount of supply seems to be premised on access through openly shared numbers to named ‘lines’, with such services drawing on marketing strategies seen in the licit economy. This is perhaps best epitomised by the London cannabis suppliers who plastered ‘Dispenseroo’ adverts for their services on the London Underground ([Daly, 2022](#)), and as [Harding \(2020\)](#) notes, these are becoming prominent norms of selling in provincial towns as a result of the ‘county lines’ model. While phone-based drugs delivery services are by no means novel (see [Marks, 2015](#)), and technology is impacting on drug markets in a variety of ways unconnected to the evolution of ‘lines’ ([Childs et al., 2022](#); [Moyle et al., 2019](#); [van der Sanden et al., 2022](#)), the shift towards ‘open’ marketing, and organisational structures centred around services rather than individuals and trust relationships, is nonetheless an important developing theme in UK drug supply.

The second theme is recognition that drug markets in locales beyond densely populated urban centres, such as deprived coastal towns and towns in rural counties, are seeing an influx of drug sellers from urban centres who are exploiting new business opportunities ([Coomber & Moyle, 2018](#); [Harding, 2020](#); [McLean et al., 2019](#)). While often focussed on crack and heroin, even in drug markets where social supply norms predominate at the ‘retail’ level, increasing profit motives and consequent market changes have been noted as contributing to shifts in supply norms ([Densley et al., 2018](#); [Salinas et al., 2019](#)), which we noticed in how terminology around running ‘lines’ was discussed in the local, non-street drug market, leading to this focus in our research. Additionally, with some overlap in ‘party drug’ and ‘street drug’ markets (i.e. powder cocaine and crack supply intersecting) ([Harding, 2020](#)), this raises questions regarding the extent to which market diversity and openness continue to exist in cities and regions where ‘county lines’ supply is increasingly prominent for street drugs.

This leads us to our core research questions: Has the transition to such supply norms in some market spheres impacted those in market positions which may otherwise have been occupied by [Salinas’ \(2018\)](#) ‘unusual suspects’, such as powder cocaine and cannabis sellers? Does ‘drift’ into and out of supply still occur at the mid-level of the market, if profit-oriented sellers are increasingly prevalent in small cities outlying larger regional hubs, and ‘call up’ services (‘lines’) increasingly dominate as a form of access? This article examines the experiences of eight mid-level drug suppliers operating in a locale where county lines supply is becoming increasingly prominent, to understand the extent to which market openness and trust relationships persist, and the extent to which features such as open advertising and violence are carrying over to non-street drug distribution.

## Methods

Findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews with eight mid-level drug suppliers in the city under study. ‘Mid-level’ was broadly defined as those who regularly sold in excess of £1000 of drugs in any given week, but did not regularly make more than £10,000 per week. These boundaries parallel [Taylor and Potter’s \(2013\)](#) figures for this market level, and were chosen to exclude those felt to play too minimal a role in the market (i.e. purely ‘minimally commercial’ suppliers), while the upper restriction would avoid those market levels more likely to be controlled by OCG, which are less representative of the market we sought to examine. While these figures were chosen as a guideline, we looked for (self-declared) *average* weekly sales to not exclude those who were mid-level suppliers, but on a limited number of occasions made larger ‘one-off’ scores.

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience sampling of existing acquaintances of the first author, and ‘snowballing’ ([Moyle, 2014](#)) from known contacts, who asked

friends involved in mid-level supply if they would be willing to participate. The choice to rely on pre-existing contacts and snowballing to 'friends-of-friends' is reflective of difficulties researchers typically face when looking to engage those involved in illicit drug markets, which are often difficult to access at the mid and upper-levels (Pearson & Hobbs, 2001). The ability to draw on existing contacts and utilise introductions to facilitate access has been employed in prior research for this reason (Adler, 1993; Jacques & Wright, 2015; Salinas, 2018; Taylor & Potter, 2013).

This approach captured individuals involved in a diverse range of illicit drug market activities, including cannabis suppliers, party drug sellers, and individuals running drug 'lines', who might primarily sell one drug (e.g. cocaine or cannabis), but were often involved in the supply of multiple drugs. While recruitment was based on contacts made in the city, not all interviewees were permanent residents in this locale, with some based in London and other proximate locations. With the city being both a student town, and situated on a main rail link from London, this is believed to broadly represent the geographic spread of those operating at this level of the city's drugs market. The average age of the sample (early to mid-20s) reflects our sampling approach, however several participants had been supplying since they were teenagers, and could reflect on their earlier experiences.

All interviews were carried out by telephone, following guidance from our University research ethics committee. Guide questions were used, with participants invited to talk around topics and give extended answers if they wished, and unscheduled probes used at times to encourage participants to elaborate on certain points (Berg, 2001). Whilst the initial interview questions were formed around themes we perceived as likely to be important based on our review of the existing literature, our research questions themselves were developed and refined inductively over the course of our analysis of the transcript data, in line with the approach to thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Thematic analysis was employed owing to its flexibility and ability to offer a rich and detailed account of a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Campbell et al., 2021). Interview transcripts were initially read and themes developed inductively by the first author, based on both their prevalence across the data set, as well as their perceived importance. Importance was determined by the authors based on our familiarity with the dataset and our existing knowledge from our review of the literature, with reflexive thematic analysis' acknowledgement of the value of researcher subjectivity informing our approach here (Campbell et al., 2021). In the first author's case, this also reflected his subjective knowledge of the social network to which participants belonged (Salinas, 2018; Salinas et al., 2019). Themes were then refined and the dataset reanalysed following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the second author reviewing this coding and helping to further refine themes, and reanalysing the dataset prior to the assembly of findings. In assembling our findings, we have sought to offer 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the dataset, reflecting participants' answers and experiences, whilst also situating our work squarely within the interpretivist paradigm (Berg, 2001), looking beyond the 'surface' of their answers to consider the assumptions underpinning each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2019), in the context of the existing literature.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion that good thematic analysis must make transparent researcher assumptions about the nature of the data, our approach to exploring the 'realities' described in participant interviews is also relevant to highlight. Whilst the precise veracity of particular claims may be open to challenge (since the researchers could not verify these firsthand), the stories told by suppliers nonetheless tell us about the culture and perceptions of those interviewed (Fleetwood, 2014a; Morgan & Silverstone, 2023). As Morgan and Silverstone (2023: 121) in their analysis of heroin user-dealers note: "If a story is fantasy, then we will have learnt about the aspirations of the participant. If we hear about motives we will at least understand more about what is important to the participants". We similarly draw on their symbolic



interactionist approach in our construction of findings, acknowledging that “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572), and therefore believe their accounts to offer valuable insights into their lived experiences of this illicit market level. Situating analysis around the ‘voice’ of those involved in drug markets can be a valuable tool for understanding their actions, and thus understanding the illicit markets they operate within (Shukla, 2016).

### *Limitations and Ethics*

Given our sample size was comparatively small ( $n = 8$ ) and participants linked to the same broad social network (i.e. the first author’s), there is the potential for bias in the sample, which limits the generalisability of findings (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004; Taylor & Potter, 2013). This reflects the difficulties of accessing participants in illicit drug markets, though given prior publications on illicit markets have engaged similarly small, or only marginally larger samples (e.g. Kraska et al., 2010; Taylor & Potter, 2013; Turnock, 2020) and still offered valuable insight, it is believed our sample is sufficient to contribute to knowledge. Significantly, while findings are not ‘generalisable’, our approach allows for greater depth of insight regarding how this loosely-connected sample operated in this specific small city’s drug market outlying London. Additionally, by researching friends and cultural acquaintances, but without the researcher being a true ‘insider’ (i.e. not being involved in drug supply himself), our research parallels Taylor and Potter’s (2013), where it was noted that pre-existing understandings could enhance reliability of findings. With the second author, who was unconnected from this social network, checking the coding and analysis, it is believed any limitations from the semi-insider nature of this work have been minimised.

A final limitation is that, owing to the reliance on existing contacts, every participant was male. While men are likely more prevalent at this level of drug supply, it is clear that an entirely male sample is not representative of the experiences of all actors in the city’s drug markets, and women’s experiences of supply may differ greatly to those explored (Fleetwood, 2014b; Grundetjern & Miller, 2019; Harding, 2020). Nonetheless, we believe this work still offers meaningful contribution to our understanding of young men’s market participation, as with prior works which drew on a single-gender sample (e.g. Salinas, 2018).

Ethics approval was granted by the University of Lincoln’s research ethics committee in March 2022. All names and identifying information have been anonymised, with pseudonyms used. All participants were cautioned that while there would be no disclosure to police or other agencies for activities relating specifically to drug supply, we would still need to refer admissions of violent and sexual offences, or offences involving children. While this may miss some of the realities present in contemporary drug markets (see Harding, 2020), this was a necessary component to the project’s approval, and does not invalidate the detailed answers participants offered regarding their market experiences more broadly. Additionally, following guidance from our University, this article does not include specific reference to the race, ethnicity or nationality of participants.

## **Findings**

### *Transitions into Selling: Friendship, Opportunity and Drift*

Paralleling the social supply literature, almost all our participants began their drug selling careers through being friends with someone already involved in supply. This often arose from participants being recreational drug users who in the course of accessing drugs either became friends with those involved in supply, or whose drug-using peers graduated into mid-level supply themselves, and who participants then started to ‘help out’. Participants frequently started out in a relatively

casual supply role, which was generally described in terms of ‘helping out’ or being involved ‘occasionally’. Upon gaining familiarity with supply through this involvement, participants then began to take on more responsibility, leading to their own involvement in mid-level supply:

‘I began supplying when I started helping my friend out with their business, then I become more involved from doing the occasional drop and saw the potential for money to be made, so I started running my own line by myself.’ (Max, multi-drug seller)

‘My friend started selling drugs and then I ended up helping and getting quite involved, doing a lot of runs for the big amounts. And then once I saw how profitable it was I started getting into it on my own.’ (Sam, multi-drug seller)

Notably, among those like Max who identified themselves as running lines, their introduction to mid-level supply paralleled the experiences of the more conventional ‘closed’ market sellers regarding friendship-based introductions and subsequent opportunity. This illustrates how commonly market entry was dictated by friendship connections and drift, regardless of drugs sold or the structure of one’s particular business. Every participant transitioned into mid-level supply through familiarity with those already more involved, who either gave them the opportunity to work for them, or facilitated their wholesale access.

The element of *opportunity* was further prominent in several participants’ transitions into greater market involvement. Cannabis supplier Tim noted he was a smoker and social supplier who moved into commercial supply after starting university, and ‘*learning of the high demand from fellow students, and I had contacts within my home city for sourcing it*’. Already knowing suppliers as a user-dealer, it was the transition to the university environment and realising there was a large market he could capitalise on that led to Tim’s graduating into commercial supply. This links to [Moyle and Coomber’s \(2019\)](#) identification of the university ‘risk environment’ for drug supply, where individuals drift into supply based on the opportunity and cultural norms this environment presents. They note how demand in the university environment and economies of scale can lead to students becoming suppliers as a means of covering their own use, and getting ‘cheap nights out’. Once students became known as suppliers, the ‘demand pull increase’ ([Werse & Müller, 2016](#)) of being recognised as a seller then leads to greater involvement in supply.

Tim, tapping into this demand and opportunity, progressed beyond the social supply of [Moyle and Coomber’s \(2019\)](#) sample, and through these mechanisms set himself up as a mid-level supplier regularly selling over £1000 worth a week. Despite starting his selling career as a student, Tim saw the potential profits afforded by his connections and the university environment, and had been running his business for six years at the time of interview, illustrating how an opportunity often linked to minimally commercial supply that students drift both in and out of ([Moyle & Coomber, 2019](#); [Søgaard & Bræmer, 2023](#)) led in Tim’s case to a stable illicit career.

Opportunity regarding other drugs similarly often came down to a fairly simple set of circumstances that the participant realised they could capitalise on. Dan, who began selling cocaine and other ‘party drugs’ (MDMA, ketamine, amphetamine) at 17, noted he initially began ‘*selling a little cocaine to fund my [personal use]*’, however moved into ‘real dealing’ rapidly, because ‘*I was one of the few people that could drive so it escalated extremely quickly*’. With few peers in his age cohort having a car or able to drive, Dan had an opportunity to ‘scale up’ his supply simply because he could travel easily, and ‘drop off’ at various locations. With party drugs often distributed based on ‘call outs’, simply being able to undertake deliveries was a significant factor in Dan’s scaling up from minimally commercial supply, to taking in “*around £8000 a week*” at his selling peak. As with opportunity in the licit economy, the human capital Dan brought to the illicit



market – in the form of his ability to drive – made him an attractive candidate for the role of drug delivery, which led to his subsequent substantial market involvement.

An interesting example of opportunity was the identification of the Covid-19 lockdowns as prompting one participant's graduation into commercial supply. John, despite already having friends involved in drug supply, highlighted how the lockdowns had a significant impact on his involvement with the market: "*Not to blame it on Covid but I saw an opportunity... because of the lack of responsibilities*". With people restricted to their homes, and drugs presenting an escape from the boredom and lack of autonomy, John noted the opportunity that not being required to go into work presented for moving into drug supply (see Ayres & Ancrum, 2020). He consequently reached out to friends already involved in supply, and asked if he could work with them. While this was also likely a strategy for managing the negative disruption of lockdowns, particularly financial precarity (Bancroft et al., 2022), the way this specific event had a lasting influence on John's illicit career, to the point he was now running a cannabis line, speaks to the impact of opportunity in participants' transitions into supply.

Opportunity was therefore significant in participants' drift into greater involvement in supply across the sample, even if experienced in different ways by different individuals. This is in line with prior literature, where the extending of credit by one's supplier (Jacinto et al., 2008; Taylor & Potter, 2013), or the opportunity presented by having a particular contact or travelling to a particular locale (Salinas, 2018), had an impact on individuals' drug selling careers. This reinforces the suggestion that individuals 'drift' into supply even at this significantly commercial level of market involvement, and highlights a persisting market openness in the city.

### *Pull Factors for Market Involvement*

Beyond association with friends involved in supply and transitions linked to this, we were interested in what positive factors participants identified as drawing them to selling. Drug supply comes with a variety of risks, the most obvious being their illegality and risk of imprisonment, in addition to the possibility of violence associated with operating in an illicit market (Harding, 2020; Irwin-Rogers, 2019). Given such negatives, the positives which participants felt they gained from supply was an area we sought to understand.

One of the more common answers related to being able to use drugs for free if one was involved in selling them. As noted above, Dan initially began selling cocaine to cover his own use before scaling up his supply activities, and the ability to use drugs 'for free' was repeated by most of the sample as a positive to the trade:

'I can smoke for free up until the point where I don't want to smoke anymore... obviously money is a massive positive: if you start scaling up then your income will increase by so much.' (Sam, multi-drug seller)

This finding reflects the fact that most participants started out selling to cover the costs of their own use and make a small profit, paralleling findings from the literature (e.g. Moyle & Coomber, 2019; Taylor & Potter, 2013). Despite selling a variety of drugs ('*Weed, Ketamine, Cocaine, MDMA, 2CB, Speed*'), Sam cited making enough to cover his own cannabis use as one of the main positives to supply, before he began to scale things up and make a '*high level profit*'. Drift into commercial supply thus correlated initially with the personal motivation of covering one's own use and getting extra cash, seen among social suppliers, even in cases where individuals ended up involved in quite substantial supply (i.e. over £1000 per week profit).

However, the notion that being able to '*smoke for free*' was a key pull factor is worth viewing critically, as a possible attempt to minimise the degree of involvement participants now had in the

market. This is seen in [Jacinto et al.'s \(2008\)](#) finding of ecstasy sellers representing themselves as 'not real dealers' even when involved in fairly substantial supply (see also [Taylor & Potter, 2013](#)). Citing the ability to smoke as much as he wanted for free, while likely an honest statement on the initial positives to 'minimally commercial supply', might therefore also be an attempt by Sam to downplay how significant profit motives – noted after – actually were at his level of the market, distancing himself from the negatives attached to the construct of the profit-driven 'drug dealer' (see [Coomber, 2010](#)). Nonetheless, given the prevalence of narratives regarding 'free drugs', it is clear these motivations from the social supply literature were relevant to our sample's transition into mid-level selling.

Despite some attempts to minimise the significance of profit ('*Money was never a big interest for myself, but I guess it's a bonus*', Max), this was noted by most participants as a key positive, and several cited the monetary benefits that accrued from being involved in supply at this level, and the things this enabled them to buy, and status that came with this. Nonetheless, there were other draws which came alongside the profitability of supply, which illustrate the importance of social aspects, and the social capital that selling drugs could help one accrue:

'it's handy for my friends who can just get what they want to off me.' (Max, multi-drug seller)

By getting involved in his friend's business and subsequently setting up his own 'line', Max could not only cover his own use, but also sort drugs for friends. The social capital one can accrue from facilitating drug access for peers has been identified in relation to social supply for cannabis ([Belackova & Vaccaro, 2013](#); [Moyle, 2023](#); [Scott et al., 2017](#)), party drugs ([Bright & Sutherland, 2017](#); [Moore, 2005](#)) and even steroids ([van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2017](#)), yet even among those selling drugs at a clearly commercial level, the importance of this social capital remained evident in Max's response. Similarly, Josh highlighted the benefits to social capital that came with cocaine supply, but cautioned that there could also be negative connotations to this:

'You're the guy with the coke so everyone wants to be near you, everyone likes the attention... [but] it can also be a negative because you don't know who's actually genuine and likes you and who's using you'.

Despite the issue of not knowing who was really a friend, Josh highlighted not only the popularity that came with supply, but also the status that being '*the guy with the coke*' could have beyond this. Highlighting the fact that '*everyone is scared of you*' as affording him a lot of leeway in how he acted, Josh encapsulates the notion of 'dealer fame' ([Jacques & Wright, 2015](#); [Søgaard & Bræmer, 2023](#); [Werse & Müller, 2016](#)), and how one's social standing and reputation may be enhanced through being a known drug supplier. This 'dealer fame' can be linked in Josh's case to a social status akin to that of the 'hardman', where masculine capital may be acquired by working-class men through a reputation for being able to deliver violence ([Ellis, 2015](#); [Jump, 2021](#); [Winlow, 2001](#)). Being a coke supplier of whom '*everyone is scared*' similarly facilitates a reputation which comes with a degree of 'masculine credibility'.

This can be linked to [Hall's \(2012\)](#) notion of 'special liberty', where risk of harm against others to 'get things done' in the corporate world, following the competitive logic of business, is justified by actors through the needs of progress and the market. [Hall \(2012\)](#) expands this notion from the corporate boardroom to illicit markets, where the threat of violence may be excused and justified as legitimising the market status of the drug seller, under the prevailing paradigm of the demands of neoliberal individualism. As [Ayres and Treadwell \(2023\)](#) note, illicit drug markets may provide an opportunity for hardmen to 'get ahead' and create a reputation for themselves, with the air of credibility when threatening violence seen as an essential aspect to the business, and their actions

thus justified by the demands of the market. The ‘special liberty’ afforded to hardmen within these markets, and associated social status and masculine credibility, may therefore have an appeal for certain market entrants. While most participants distanced themselves from notions of ‘hardness’ rooted in the threat of violence, for Josh, as the only participant who explicitly mentioned gang membership, this social capital was a positive to drug supply. Social capital could therefore manifest in various ways (linked to e.g. background; class; drug type; social environment), though was clearly a ‘pull’ for involvement in supply.

### *Marketing and Customer Service*

Coomber (2003, 2006) notes the false tendency for drug suppliers to be portrayed as ruthless, calculating and exploitative of users, when in reality many drug markets feature norms of ‘freebies’, credit, and customer service practices. Indeed, Coomber highlights that customer satisfaction is integrated into the business practices of many suppliers, particularly in ‘closed’ markets where repeat business is important, and maintaining customers and enhancing trust relationships significant. With contemporary drug markets also increasingly integrating marketing practices paralleling those used by companies in the licit economy (Gibbs, 2023; Harding, 2020), especially with the rise of the ‘ring and bring’ phone service model of supply (Salinas, 2023), we asked participants about both marketing strategies, and the importance of customer service in their work.

John discussed how marketing, freebies and recommendations were all significant aspects to running a cannabis line, in order to both retain a regular customer base, and recruit new customers:

‘It was a regular customer base but it was open to anyone that needed weed or anything related with weed such as edibles or syrups. Anyone that was already a customer of mine that had a friend wanting weed all they had to do is tell me who they were and to add my number... The person that brings a new customer would get a 0.5g free weed as a token of appreciation. Every person buying weed from me would know this. Any issues that my customers may have had such as didn’t like the strain they got would be swapped with something more to their liking.’

Tim, as a fellow cannabis seller, but who operated a more traditional ‘closed’ supply model, similarly noted the degree to which customer service was important to a successful business. With 6 years’ experience, Tim had a good degree of knowledge regarding the market, and compared his business model to that of licit enterprises:

‘[I have a] regular and consistent customer base. Some customers have come to me [for] many years. There are many customer service aspects if you want your business to thrive. Product quality and your own reliability are extremely important, just as with any other business.’

Ensuring customers were satisfied with the product they received, and being reliable, were therefore core aspects to both sellers’ business practices, with ‘freebies’ highlighted by John as a means of cementing customer relationships, and helping to grow his business. These strongly parallel business ideals from the licit economy, reinforcing the notion that the drug economy follows the same logic as any other business when it comes to marketing and customer retention strategies (Barton, 2011; Harding, 2020). Customer service and rewarding loyalty as a means of securing market share, and thus profit, was seen as a far better approach than less customer-focussed strategies, which might be more profitable short-term (e.g. ‘ripping off’ customers), but were less viable longer-term.

For party drugs, Dan and Max similarly noted the importance of maintaining their customer base, and the need to provide customers with a high level of service. In Dan's case, he delivered this service by operating during hours when drugs could be difficult to acquire in the city, cementing his reputation for reliability:

'Most customers were regular... customer service was I was the only person that would deliver any time of day or night' (Dan, party drug seller)

While 24 hour delivery may be the norm in larger urban locales such as London, in a small city where others might limit their supply to set hours (Harding, 2020; Salinas, 2018), Dan could distinguish himself by providing this service. This notion of unique selling points (USPs) again parallels marketing practices seen in the licit economy, and Max similarly identified an area of service which he felt was his USP:

'One thing that I always make sure to do is overweigh my product instead of underselling so that my customers don't feel cheated and always come back again.' (Max, multi-drug seller)

The over-weighing of product to ensure customers always got more than they paid for fits with the use of 'freebies' identified by Coomber (2003), reinforcing how marketing (via reputation) intersects with customer retention and trust-building practice. However, this practice is interesting to examine, since another participant, Josh, noted that in his experience this was rare in the cocaine market, especially when delivering to parties:

'It's always the same people but you see a lot of new faces come around. Customer service isn't great surrounding coke, they give 0.4 instead of your half because everyone is scared of you, and no one has scales at a party and they're always off their face and don't double check.'

Josh's perception that under-weighing is common counters Max's claim that customer service is crucial, suggesting it is not always a focus of suppliers at this market level. Indeed, despite distancing himself from the practice through impersonal phrasing, Josh's quote in context seems to be an admission that he personally engaged in this, suggesting there were examples of poor customer service even within our sample.

This finding intersects with what Jacques et al. (2014) refer to as the rational choice to 'rip-off' customers in drug supply. While much supply is grounded in customer service, Jacques et al. (2014) found their sample would weigh whether to 'rip off' individuals based on circumstances such as whether they were unlikely to be repeat business, were perceived as uninformed about market rates, or were unlikely to retaliate. Josh's suggestion that cocaine sellers at parties are more comfortable with 'ripping off' customers correlates with these findings, given the prevalence of 'new faces' and pre-existing intoxication of customers he mentions. Korf et al. (2008) in their international comparative study also note that 'party drug sellers' tend to have higher rates of violence than either cannabis or street drug sellers, suggesting Josh's highlighting of the threat of violence (the fact that everyone is scared of him) may also be relevant to this practice.

However, it is notable that Josh was the only participant who made explicit reference to gang involvement, in comparison to others' references to working for 'friends'. Whether this points to any material difference, or was simply a difference in terminology, given the term 'gang' is so contested (Pitts, 2008, 2011), makes it difficult to infer whether this contributed to Josh's less customer-oriented approach. However, from our sample, Josh was the only one who did not emphasise customer service, and none of the other party drug suppliers discussed engaging in such negative practices in their own businesses. On the other hand, the fact that Max took conscious

effort to manage his reputation by over-weighting product speaks to the fact that such practices appear prevalent enough for party drug sellers and customers to be aware of them, potentially pointing to some market variation, with some transactions being less customer-oriented than others.

*Ethical Considerations & Harm Minimisation.* The notion of a ‘moral code’ among drug dealers, including such notions as not selling to children, has been observed in the prior literature (Ayres & Ancrum, 2023; Broadhurt et al., 2005). Reflecting this, almost every participant noted there were cases where they would not sell to a potential customer out of concerns of ethical impropriety, again countering the stereotype of the amoral, profit-oriented ‘drug pusher’ (Coomber, 2006, 2010). Even Josh, despite being comfortable ‘ripping off’ customers, noted that he ‘*wouldn’t [knowingly] sell to someone below the age of 16*’, and would only sell to customers ‘*as long as they are safe and reasonable*’, implying he would not sell to an individual he believed would harm themselves. That our least customer-oriented participant noted there were limits to where he would feel comfortable supplying evidences Coomber’s (2006) assertion that representations of drug suppliers as ruthless ‘pushers’ misses the reality of much supply, and the varied practices sellers employ.

Assessing a customer’s capability of using safely and not harming themselves was highlighted by several participants, including those who did not initially note having a strong ‘ethical code’. Max, for example, initially stated “*I don’t necessarily have any major views, as long as they are over the age of 16 I’m fine selling to them*”, but as the conversation developed, began to acknowledge he had been approached by potential customers suffering from mental health difficulties and other specific needs, which led to some introspection. In these cases, Max stated it was only appropriate to sell to them “*as long as they are able to make the conscious safe decisions*”. These concerns were seen even more explicitly in Sam’s answer:

‘Where other people have messaged about an addiction of a friend, that’s something we have to think about, so we don’t cross any lines.’ (Sam, multi-drug seller)

While Jacques et al.’s (2014) sellers would ‘rip off’ perceived ‘addicts’ in their street-level supply, within our sample problematic substance use was treated instead as a concern, and a reason to potentially not make a sale, or be more cautious when doing so. In part this is mediated by drug type, with our sample mostly selling cannabis or party drugs, where market dynamics might be expected to be different to ‘street dealing’. Nonetheless, the fact that our sample routinely noted they would be concerned about harming individuals whose drug use they knew to be problematic illustrates the prevalence of ethical concerns surrounding the propriety of supply.

However, this ethical consciousness did not always mean refusing supply, as this decision would have to be weighed against the possible harms of not supplying an individual who might otherwise source drugs elsewhere:

‘If I knew the person knew other places to get it, I would sell to them, as at least I knew my stuff was safer than potentially meeting someone else.’ (Dan, party-drug seller)

Dan’s comment highlights how an ethical code might not prohibit selling to vulnerable individuals, since allowing them to buy drugs of unknown quality elsewhere could potentially be more harmful than supplying them directly, a fact underpinning academic discussions of safe supply (e.g. Ivsins et al., 2020). While this could be seen as an attempt to neutralise culpability in profiting in such cases, the fact that Dan discussed this as a problematic example suggests he was somewhat ethically conscious. Indeed, with Dan discussing having experienced cocaine addiction

himself, his concerns appeared to be a genuine effort to minimise harms, ensuring at-risk customers were buying from someone who tested his drugs, and had lived experience of addiction. On the other hand, the fact that Dan was still happy to profit through selling to those in a position he knew from experience made them vulnerable should also be viewed critically, as arguably forming a selective disavowal of harm. Through acknowledging his actions were harmful, but highlighting the act of not selling as potentially more harmful, Dan could justify making the sale, and thus profit. As such, despite appearing ethically conscious, participants may have been engaging in ‘techniques of neutralisation’ (Sykes & Matza, 1957) in order to justify their actions, making the extent to which they were truly ethically conscious arguably unclear.

Indeed, while such aspects to supply were often phrased in terms of ethical propriety, Sam noted there was an interplay between this and the increased risk that could come with supplying vulnerable people, particularly in the case of younger teenagers:

‘On top of selling to a minor which ethically in my mind is just worse, you also have the risk of them being more likely to back you out if they get caught by the police as they have less loyalties and get much more scared and don’t know what to do.’

Being cautious about selling to vulnerable groups such as youths under 16 therefore took into account practical considerations regarding law enforcement and risk mitigation, as well as ethical propriety. Judgements were therefore often a blend of situational ethics with the practicalities of running an illicit business. The extent to which customer-focussed ethics were truly a ‘carry over’ from social supply norms, versus risk mitigation strategies, might therefore be disputed.

Notably, on the topic of drug checking, while several suppliers noted they engaged in such practices, which for certain drugs may be done with easily available testing kits (see Taylor et al., 2020), or else through personal ‘sampling’ of wholesale product, only a minority noted this was explicitly for harm minimisation purposes. John instead noted that much drug ‘checking’ was focussed on marketing and customer retention, since having a reputation for good quality drugs is important. Harm reduction and good business practice therefore tended to overlap, with profit motives difficult to separate from consumer-oriented (thus customer retaining) activities.

### *Perceptions of Market Violence*

The final and arguably most significant topic to address is market risk, and perceptions of market-related violence. Violence is broadly linked to a lack of alternative means of dispute resolution in illicit markets, though may be exacerbated or mitigated by various factors, including drug type, geographic locale, culture, technology, prevailing drugs policy and social policy (Coomber, 2003; Curtis & Wendel, 2007; Hobbs, 1995; Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Jacques & Wright, 2011). Despite violence being a focus in media reporting, however, research has disputed its prominence in the experiences of many market participants.

Coomber and Maher (2006), investigating Sydney’s heroin market, document how a large proportion of street-level buyers and sellers rarely experienced violence, with the vast majority of interactions being non-conflictual. While their sample suggested violence did occur at the market’s upper levels, where organised crime was more prominent, not only did most at the lower level rarely experience this, but they perceived the market as relatively open, lacking tight control. Likewise, in Salinas’ (2018) sample of mid-level drug suppliers in a working class UK town, most never experienced or used violence, while Taylor and Potter (2013) identify only a single participant who used violence in the course of their business practice.

While such works illustrate that violence is not routine for many market participants, contemporary works on UK drug markets have focussed on its increasing visibility. Harding (2020)



and Irwin-Rogers (2019) document trends towards greater violence under the county lines supply model, where USG set up hubs and lines in outlying towns. These works highlight how youths' pursuit of profit and status through tapping into lucrative new markets leads to rivalries being resolved through violence, with its prevalence exacerbated by social media posting (Irwin-Rogers, 2019). While these explorations are typically associated with street drug supply, Harding's (2020) sample often engaged in cocaine delivery to parties, similar to our own sample. With profit-driven actors diversifying into new drug markets and locales (Densley et al., 2018, 2023; Salinas et al., 2019), we asked participants for their perceptions of violence and risk in their own market experiences.

Our first takeaway was that only three participants noted violence as a significant concern, with most suggesting imprisonment, or even *'my mum being disappointed in me'* (Max), were greater worries. While the majority did not note exposure to market-related violence – with the only exceptions being Josh, Sam and John – this was still a significant proportion of the overall sample, owing to its small size. While the fact that most of the sample did not experience violence supports the notion it is not an everyday reality for many market actors (Coomber & Maher, 2006; Salinas, 2018), the experiences which did occur may nonetheless challenge notions of markets as mostly grounded in trust relationships and reciprocity (Treadwell et al., 2020).

Josh, our sole participant who explicitly discussed gang affiliation, remarked that *'violence is a big factor'* in the cocaine market, in the form of both *'gang violence'* and *'robbing'*. As noted above, Josh's experiences were less trust-based than our other party drug suppliers', and Josh's positioning himself as dangerous likely linked to his experiences in a more violent market space, despite him primarily delivering to parties as Dan and Max did. Josh's market experience appeared more hostile than most of the sample's, and summarising his perception of the cocaine trade, he stated *'[it] can ruin people's lives and I've seen it ruin them'*.

With *'robbing'* highlighted by Josh as a risk in the cocaine market, it is notable that John's perception of this when running a cannabis line was not linked to rival gangs, but came from setting up in a new town, where:

*'[You have to] worry about keeping your safe houses or stash houses a secret, **safe from locals in the area...** You have to constantly keep changing the meeting spots so that you're not predictable, you have to make sure you don't meet too many people at once.'* [emphasis added]

The threat of *'locals'* who might seize the opportunity to rob out-of-towners if they discovered the location of their stash houses is indicative of the tensions created by trends towards markets based on lines branching out from *'hub'* cities. As small town users and suppliers come into proximity with sellers from nearby urban centres, this creates risk, and necessitates greater caution from both sides, to avoid being *'robbed'*.

Treadwell et al. (2020), exploring intra-criminal drug robberies, note that *'taxing'* of stash houses/grow houses has historically been a relatively infrequent phenomenon in the UK, and consequently under-examined. They contrast norms of *'taxing'* among British criminal groups with the *'stick up'* robberies of US drug markets (e.g. Contreras, 2012), noting that in the UK it is generally established criminals engaging in targeted robberies of less-established drug suppliers, which often do not lead to retaliation. This suggests John's experiences with *'locals'* may have been a result of his being *'taxed'* by professional criminals whose reputation he was unaware of, and does not necessarily indicate a normalisation of robbing in UK drug markets akin to that seen in the US. However, the fact that robbing was highlighted by two participants (25%) remains relevant to understanding the city's mid-level market, even if carried out by the historic criminal population against new market entrants, rather than the newcomers directly *'bringing violence'*.

Finally, while offering limited replies to this question, Sam made clear that his experiences with violence came as a result of a breakdown in the relationship with his former associates: *'Sometimes people want you dead and can turn on you at any point'*. Sam did not wish to elaborate, potentially owing to the pre-interview warning that disclosure of serious violence would necessitate the researcher's reporting it, however it is clear that threats to his life mark Sam's market participation as distinct from literature noting a paucity of market-related violence. With Sam having started out weighing drugs for friends, before doing *'runs for the big amounts'* and finally setting up his own line, his experience perhaps most closely mirrors that identified by [Harding \(2020\)](#), despite his never mentioning 'gang' membership explicitly. His experiences therefore potentially indicate a greater prevalence of violence associated with these supply norms than for those involved in more 'closed' distribution.

Violence therefore appeared to be linked with market type and position, though was not routinely experienced across the sample. While our small sample size does not allow for generalisations, it is clear that participants were mostly able to avoid serious violence even when operating in parallel markets to USGs. However, violence was experienced by a portion of the sample who came from this background, meaning discussions of violence coming to smaller markets as a result of changes to supply norms cannot be simply dismissed.

## Discussion and Conclusion

While our research engaged only a small number of drug sellers, our findings build on and support prior works into the mid-level of illicit drug markets and transitions into 'real dealing' that demonstrate the maintenance of 'social supply' norms at commercial market levels ([Salinas, 2018](#); [Taylor & Potter, 2013](#)). Despite interviewing several participants involved in running 'lines' (i.e. supply based on open marketing of a phone number for drugs, with sellers 'branching out' to the city from London), along with more traditional 'closed' market sellers based in the locale, it is clear that the themes of 'drift' from a casual supply role, into involvement at more profitable levels of drug markets, still largely follow the patterns identified by [Taylor and Potter \(2013\)](#) and others ([Coomber et al., 2016](#); [Søgaard & Bræmer, 2023](#)). Across our sample, whether 'closed market' cannabis suppliers, party drug sellers, or line runners, all participants showed signs of 'drifting' into 'real dealing', with a seeming relative openness continuing to exist for those transitioning into the market, challenging notions of drug markets as rigidly controlled by OCGs, at least at the mid-level.

Despite the prevalence of 'lines' as a supply model growing in the city ([Harding, 2020](#)), for those outside of the street drug market (e.g. cannabis line operators; party drug delivery operators), we largely noted the persistence of customer-focussed activities associated with 'closed markets' and 'social supply' ([Coomber, 2003](#); [Coomber & Turnbull, 2007](#)), existing alongside emergent marketing and business strategies ([Harding, 2020](#)). While adapting to market innovations, therefore, our sample largely maintained the trust-based approach to sales documented in much prior literature ([Jacinto et al., 2008](#); [Potter, 2009](#); [Taylor & Potter, 2013](#)). While Josh's discussions of cocaine sales at parties indicates some practices which go against these norms, supply premised on less customer-focussed approaches appeared to be quite contextual, and other sellers who followed the same party-distribution model did not engage in 'ripping off' customers. While our findings largely challenge the stereotype of amoral 'drug pushers' discussed by [Coomber \(2006\)](#), therefore, it is relevant to note there were instances where profit did appear to override social supply norms. Significantly, despite our documenting numerous customer-oriented practices, these were difficult to separate from the benefits they brought to business, and in instances which posed a challenge to this, such as the supply of persons with problematic substance use disorders, sellers did seem to engage in some techniques of neutralisation to disavow harms.

While our exploration of market risk and violence noted some specific tensions in relation to line operators, most notably in relation to robbing by ‘locals’ when establishing supply routes in a new locale, a majority of the sample had never experienced violence, and did not perceive it as a serious issue. This parallels Turnock’s (2021) suggestion that even in regions where profit-driven actors are emerging as prominent market entrants, those operating in existing ‘closed’ drug markets, particularly for non-‘street drugs’, may not experience any measurable impact, or increase in risk, with these essentially being disconnected market spaces. With only those engaged in cocaine supply or stating they ran lines noting violence as a market feature, our work largely reaffirms research suggesting drug market violence is not a common experience for many below the upper market levels (Coomber & Maher, 2006; Taylor & Potter, 2013). However, it still highlights how, within certain specific contexts such as setting up a line in a new town, there may be an increased likelihood of conflict occurring, supporting some of the literature on this side of the argument (e.g. Harding, 2020).

This research contributes to knowledge of the developing UK drugs market, particularly for non-‘street’ drugs. By interviewing both ‘closed’ suppliers, and those operating lines and following ‘open’ norms of distribution, we have been able to assess the impacts of shifting market norms, while still situating these in the contexts of the social supply literature, and drift into ‘real dealing’. The market mid-level is complex, and experiences vary, however our research indicates that despite social supply norms largely persisting at this level, there does appear to be reason for concern that violence is occurring at the intersections of emergent markets.

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