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**Title:** Understanding the ‘social supply’ and minimally commercial supply of illicit drugs

**Abstract**

The supply of illicit drugs is commonly mired in stereotype and misunderstanding. Popular tropes describing drug markets are often reliant on a range of drug, drug user, drug dealer and drug market myths that close examination undermines meaningfully. Reliance on these tropes tends towards an overly homogenous and simplified view of illicit drug markets and those that populate them and ignores meaningful levels of differentiation in both. Particularly important forms of often unacknowledged differentiation relate to those for whom profit is not the primary, or, for many, even a significant motivator – so-called social suppliers of recreational drugs and minimally commercial suppliers of drugs of dependence. This article will outline key issues of differentiation in illicit drug markets, provide critical insight into social, and minimally commercial, forms of illicit drug supply and its growth and outline the significance of this for policing and criminal justice systems.

**Keywords**: drug dealing; drug markets; cannabis; recreational drug use; social supply; minimally commercial supply; proportionality

**Introduction**

Focussed, critical, independent research of Illicit drug markets and those that populate them often reveals a far more nuanced understanding of the ways they work than does research that relies on abstract administrative data sets or traditional lens’ of drug related criminality. These latter sources tend towards overly simplified broad-brush pictures of drug market structures and operations and where harms lay (Coomber 2015; 2022). Such broad-brush depictions, often reliant on unhelpful stereotypes and the ongoing demonisation of those engaged in drug supply, evoke public fear and provide symbolic opportunities to ‘crackdown’ on those involved (Coomber et al 2019). When, in early 2018 (the then) US President Donald Trump called for the death penalty for illicit drug dealers (*BBC* 2018) he was doing so relatively safe in the knowledge that this is a population widely understood by many to be highly culpable of great harms and deserving of the ‘ultimate’ punishment. Although Trump has praised how China executes many of those found guilty of illicit drug supply (Vox 2020), in many respects he was following closer in the rhetorical footsteps of the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte - whom Trump has also praised. Extraordinarily, upon initiating his own ‘war on drugs’ in 2016, Duterte called on ordinary citizens to themselves independently identify and kill drug users and drug dealers (*The Guardian* 2016). More importantly, he also provided a criminal justice platform (both sanctioned and unsanctioned) that, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2020) has resulted in the killing of around 8,000 people thought to be connected to the trade in illicit drugs in the Philippines. Human Rights Watch (2020) has less conservatively suggested the figure for both official police and ‘sanctioned’ extra-judicial ‘executions’ to be closer to 24,000, with the number incarcerated far exceeding this (*Wall Street Journal* 2020).

It is patently not the case that most countries go about executing those perceived to be or found to be (by the criminal justice system) drug dealers in the way that Duterte has in recent years. Numerous countries however, such as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam regularly carry out state sanctioned executions for drug offences with a further 27 countries retaining the death penalty (Harm Reduction International 2021) for such offences. Death sentences however are just the tip of the judicial iceberg and in terms of sentencing (dis)proportionality, drug supply is harshly punished in a majority of countries around the world (Moyle et al. 2014; Girelli 2019; Fleetwood 2015). In practice, on a global scale, the comparative harshness of individual national punishments for drug trafficking/supply, will sit on a legal spectrum with the practice of Duterte and the Philippines sitting at one end of that spectrum and countries such as France, Denmark and the Netherlands (depending on the drug in question) sitting at the other end (ECMDDA 2017). There is little doubt however that without there being a particular view of what drug markets and drug dealers *are* that Duterte and Trump would not be able to act or advocate as they have done. Moreover, although most criminal justice systems do not reach such extremes nearly all national drug laws are borne out of a relatively common (mis)understanding of drug and drug market harms (which I will relate below). Such a position and guiding influence is encapsulated in the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, a convention that builds on earlier conventions[[1]](#footnote-1) and which the 186 signatory nations are committed to uphold.

There is not enough space in this paper to provide a detailed overview of comparative punishments for drug supply and trafficking offences around the world and whilst this would provide some detailed context, for the sake of the topics being explored here, it is more important to establish that in general, the supply of illicit drugs is widely condemned as being heinous in nature and that those involved are largely seen as a reprehensible entity with there being only nominal room for flexibility as to how they should be viewed and dealt with.

What such a position fails to understand or acknowledge is that there is a great deal of differentiation (Coomber 2015; 2022) in drug markets – both in terms of how they operate but also in terms of who populates them. These differences fundamentally alter both how drug markets should be understood and how many of those that engage with a variety of forms of supply might be dealt with by the criminal justice system. The social supply of drugs, where non-profit oriented ‘supply’ of recreational drugs such as cannabis by friends and acquaintances is one, extremely prevalent, example. The minimally commercial supply of drugs such as heroin by ‘user-dealers’ who sell only to other already dependent users with the primary aim to reproduce their own supply is another. A third example is the (usually adolescent) individual groomed and exploited by ‘drug gangs’ who on the surface appears simply to fit the description of an archetypal criminal drug dealer but, in a new epoch of policing in many ‘advanced’ industrial democracies where consideration of vulnerability is increasingly taking centre stage, their ‘positioning’ and culpability is also being revisited (Coliandris 2015). This article will initially consider the tropes and stereotypes that make up conventional understanding of illicit drug markets and relate research that undermines such simplistic notions that ignore the way drug use and supply operates in contemporary society. This will be followed by an outline of various forms of social supply and how it is situated internationally and how it relates to the relative normalisation of drug use. I will then consider how the logic attached to acknowledging that social supply is not the same as ‘drug dealing proper’ might be extended to the minimally commercial supply of drugs of dependence by user-dealers and, finally, I will consider what these changed circumstances of drug supply might mean for the way that criminal justice systems deal with such differentiation.

**Trope and stereotype in drug market and drug dealer representations**

Without labouring the point (as it seems to me relatively proven) drug markets are generally represented in simple, fairly one-dimensional terms and such representations can even be found even in academic work that fails to be appropriately situated vis-à-vis the broader, critical literature (*see*. Coomber 2022; 2015 for discussion). One dimensionally they are usually depicted as inherently violent spaces (Reuter 2009; Coomber 2006) dealing in death and misery; are related as almost exclusively profit driven with uncaring dealers routinely using poisonous and dangerous cutting agents such as scouring powders and toxic substitutes to dilute the drugs sold and thus bent on increasing profit margins regardless of the subsequent risks to those they sell to (Cole et al 2010; Coomber 1997a,b,c; 2006) they are characterised as populated by amoral ‘evil’ individuals willing to predate upon the young and vulnerable and to use underhand approaches such as cutting recreational drugs with addictive drugs to addict them and secure them as long term clients (see Coomber 1999; 2006). Such tropes are widely ingrained and can be found in various media representations, but particularly film, television and novels over at least the last one hundred years (see e.g. Boyd 2010; Iannicelli 2001; Shapiro 2003, for illustrations and analysis). Examples are multitudinous but some worthy of an indicative mention would be *Reefer Madness* (film – 1936); *Man with the Golden Arm* (novel – 1949, and film - 1955); *The Wire* (television 2002-8); the *Pusher* trilogy (films – 1996, 2004, 2005); *Scarface* (film 1932, remake 1983); *Lucy* (film – 2014); *Top Boy* (television – 2011-2020); *New Jack City* (film – 1991) and Clockers (novel - 1992). Hundreds more could be referenced. The tropes repeat themselves and are ubiquitous. Stereotyped views of drug markets that symbiotically feed the tropes come from the police and other ‘authoritative’ sources such as the news media and academic research, but also, as we have seen above, from presidents of nations. These often rely more on assumption and presumption e.g. that markets are essentially hierarchical rather than dynamic and/or fragmented (see Dorn et al 1992; Lewis 1994; Coomber 2006; Pearson 2007; Taylor & Potter 2013) or that they are inherently violent – because, in the case of the police (or what is exposed by official data) that is what they ‘see’ or are exposed to, rather than the mostly non-violent market milieus – which they mostly do not (or cannot) ‘see’ (seeCoomber & Maher 2006 for a specific empirical example in the Australian context). News media reporting often relates police and other criminal justice information or provides human interest stories of tragic outcomes, and weakly situated and researched academic work with a focus on data rather than close observation (Hughes et al 2011 and see Coomber 2015, 2022 for a critique).

Broadly, there is little by way of acknowledging that different (drug type) markets often operate in different ways e.g., the heroin/crack cocaine market is often meaningfully distinct from the powder cocaine market or the recreational drug market, and especially the hallucinogenic drug market. There is little acknowledgement that some markets ‘barely touch’ e.g., much social supply of recreational drugs by users and those brokering access to drugs doesn’t involve accessing or becoming involved with drug dealers proper or the wider drug market (Coomber & Turnbull 2007) or that drug markets are often mostly nonviolent for a variety of important reasons (Reuter 2009; Coomber 2015). There is little acknowledgement that not all drug dealers are (in essence) much the same and shoulder the burden of blame similarly and in this way, received wisdom, trope and stereotype contribute to the broad criminal justice frameworks that, internationally, struggle to treat friend suppliers differently to what we might describe as drug dealers proper (Moyle et al 2014).

**The *social* supply of illicit drugs**

Prior to 2000, research in the US (Murphy et al. 1990; Blum et al. (1972) and in the UK (Dorn et al (1992) had related how many of those engaged in various forms of recreational (or experimental) drug supply simply didn’t fit the picture of the stereotype drug dealers around which drug laws were effectively constructed. Some were enthusiastic advocates of the positive aspects of the mind-altering drugs they sold with profit a nominal motivator (Blum et al 1972), others were (otherwise) law-abiding middle-class recreational cocaine users who would ‘broker’ access for/to others they knew for nominal gain (Murphy et al 1990); whilst Dorn et al (1992: 10-11) related cannabis sharing and supply among what they called *Trading Charities* (similar to Blum et al’s ideologically rather than profit motivated suppliers) and *Mutual Societies* – friendship, or acquaintance based networks of users who support each other and sell or exchange drugs amongst themselves in a reciprocal fashion and where ‘every user is potentially a supplier, and everyone is expected to help out everyone else’.

In research on large cohorts of adolescents in the UK in the early 1990s (Parker and Measham 1994; Parker et al 1998) it had been shown that the supply of recreational drugs among young people was extensively from, and between, friends and acquaintances and was neither predatory nor commercially motivated. Supply (and use) was intrinsically bound up with the cultural mores of the groups they were involved with. Unlike the specific and particular pockets of supply reported in the earlier research the Parker et al study pointed towards the unprecedented growth in *recreational* non-problem adolescent drug use occurring in the UK and elsewhere in Europe and its consequences. This growth, they opined was towards a *normalisation* of drug use whereby more young people would be drug users than not and that such use was becoming increasingly culturally accepted (Measham et al 1994; Parker et al 1998). Whilst some specifics of the normalisation thesis and the extent to which it has manifested have been the subject of ongoing critiques and revision (e.g. see Pennay & Measham 2016; Measham & Shiner 2009) what is clear is that, in relative terms, cannabis and other recreational drug use is now relatively more accepted in many parts of Europe, North America and Australasia than at any time in the last 100 years. In Coomber et al (2017) it was argued that the *social supply* of recreational drugs was ‘the other side of the coin’ of the normalisation of drug use and that higher levels of use and general acceptability has meant that the social supply of drugs has also grown to unprecedented degrees as a consequence within the groups for which its use has become normalised. Importantly, much research on social supply (Duffy et al 2008; Werse & Bernard 2016) has commonly reported that many social suppliers, as well many of those they supply to, do not consider themselves/them to be ‘drug dealers’.

In the same way that the UK’s Police Foundation Report (2000) had critiqued the arrest and prosecution of visible, dependent, ‘street’ located heroin user-dealers that they suggested were not ‘dealers proper’ and whose arrest would not disrupt the drugs trade, the early 2000s also saw concerns raised in parliament about the arrest and prosecution of the newly labelled social suppliers of cannabis and other recreational drugs. In 2003, after looking at the small-scale cultivation of cannabis for personal use and use with friends, Hough et al., argued that such practice should be considered under the rubric of possession rather than dealing/supply and stressed that any policy which opted to believe (or suggest) that there was a clear distinction between users and sellers was problematic. Setting out to clearly characterize social supply for the first time Hough et al defined it as ‘…the non-commercial (or non-profitmaking) distribution of cannabis to non-strangers’ (p.36). Following research on the supply of cannabis among young people in three rural and three urban areas in England, Duffy et al (2008) and Coomber and Turnbull (2007) found that almost all supply of cannabis – the single most commonly used recreational drug in that research - was via friends and acquaintances and that few young people ever came into contact with the ‘drug market proper’. It was further suggested that young people’s supply of cannabis, more than any other form of supply, demonstrated both the difference between social supply as an activity meaningfully distinct to drug dealing proper and also how the law was being inappropriately applied when it punished social suppliers with the same force it applied to commercial dealers. In essence, research (e.g., Murphy et al 1994; Coomber & Turnbull 2007/Duffy et al 2008; Potter 2009; Belackova & Vaccaro 2013; Taylor & Potter 2013; Chatwin & Potter 2014; Lenton et al 2016; Hathaway et al 2018; Moxon & Waters 2018; Coomber et al 2018; Wilkins et al 2018; Moyle & Coomber 2019; Bennett et al 2019; McLean et al 2018; Turnock 2021) has consistently found (and continues to do so in multiple jurisdictions) that:

* The social supply of recreational drugs to friends and acquaintances for little or no reward was the predominant form of supply in many social groupings/across age groups but especially among young people
* That the social supply of drugs involves activities such as acting as a ‘go-between’/brokering; acting as the person who’s turn it was to source the drugs (e.g. for a special event like a festival, a party or music event); the sharing of e.g. cannabis grown at home for personal use
* Often involved members of a group ‘chipping’ in/contributing to raise money to buy the drugs in bulk for the group and the person that sources them uses this money to do so
* Those that would be considered social suppliers are often given a little extra of the drugs sourced or permitted to make a small ‘mark-up’ to cover the risk and work (‘sorting’) involved
* That, by way of emphasis on the ‘social’ in social supply, that the kudos perceived to be gained from being a contributor to the group/known others in this way was often a motivating factor for those sourcing or supplying
* That many of those involved in social supply did not understand themselves as ‘dealers proper’ – more that sourcing and enabling supply of recreational drugs to their friends and acquaintances for little or no profit was closer to an extension of the practice of the use of the drugs.
* Social suppliers are commonly also not perceived as dealers proper by those they supply to but often seen as simply helping out or ‘sorting’ out those they supply to
* Given that recreational drug use far outstrips problem drug use social supply is far more prevalent than other forms of ‘drug supply’

As a form of supply, social supply has also been found to be prevalent beyond the recreational mood-altering sphere such as in the supply of illicit Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs (PIED) in body-building gyms in regions where this has been looked at (UK – Coomber et al 2015; Hanley-Santos et al 2017; Turnock 2021; Salinas at al 2019; Belgium and the Netherlands - van de Ven & Mulrooney 2017; Australia – Coomber-Moore 2017; Coomber-Moore et al 2022); in the supply of various forms of prescription medication such as Ritalin (US - Murphy et al 2018) and diazepam, e.g. Valium (Australia – Hulme et al 2019) as well drugs used purposefully as cognitive enhancers that are increasingly popular in some e.g. university settings (UK - Vagwala et al 2017) and thus demonstrating how trust, altruism and cultural normalisation combine in myriad drug use and supply arenas and circumstances. In Coomber et al (2018) it was reported that both the recognition of, and accommodation of social supply was present (in various forms, and to varying degrees) in the eleven different nations reviewed. There is little reason to believe that social supply is not an intrinsic aspect of illicit recreational drug supply globally.

**The *Minimally Commercial* Supply of Illicit Drugs**

In Coomber and Moyle (2014) it was argued that social suppliers are not the only group that could be considered as unhelpfully and unreasonably grouped under the catch-all umbrella of drug supply and suffering the consequences of this in regard to the criminal justice system. It was argued that if drug dealers proper are to be defined (as per the UK Sentencing Guidelines (2012) and in accordance with the critique by the Police Foundation 2000) as: higher level operators such as importers and wholesalers; as motivated by profit and commercial gain; as predatory in their behaviour and as such measured in terms of the broad harms they caused and the importance of their culpability in such harms, then there was another group – dependent ‘user-dealers’ - who, like social suppliers, could reasonably be said to not have comparable levels of culpability in regard to supply.

Thus, dependent heroin and/or crack cocaine users, that sell, in non-predatory fashion, to other already dependent users; who often do so in preference to committing other *more* harmful crimes (as they see it – *see* Moyle & Coomber 2016) to either others or themselves (robbery; prostitution; shoplifting); who make little, if any profit from their drug supply beyond ensuring their own supply; who operate at the lowest level of what might be euphemistically called (but sometimes literally is) ‘street supply’ are, arguably not the suppliers that policing and other parts of the criminal justice system should be focussing on (Police Foundation 2000; Release 2009). Moreover, if they are also understood as vulnerable individuals rather than simply heinous criminals, then help/’treatment’ through harm reduction policing (see Bacon and Spicer 2022; Coomber 2022) rather than prison could be argued to be the more appropriate and proportionate (Moyle et al 2016) response. Unfortunately, however, such individuals are also the most visible and the most accessible (to police) and represent the ‘low hanging fruit’ when it comes to police crackdown operations designed to demonstrate and signify that ‘something is being done’ about drug markets and drug supply (Coomber et al 2019). Questionable undercover operations are commonly employed to target both minimally commercial suppliers and to entrap even those that would not normally – without being lured into it – act as suppliers (see Woods 2016; Murphy & Anderson 2018; Coomber et al 2022). As we shall see below, this conceptual shift was not argued in a theoretical vacuum but was both cognisant of, and a product of, how burgeoning notions of vulnerability were starting to impact on traditional understandings of victim and perpetrator and how these were starting to come to bear on the role of the police and the criminal justice system in their dealing with it.

**Vulnerability, vulnerabilities, policing and the criminal justice system**

Vulnerable populations are not new but their recognition in terms of the law and the extent to which they should (or need not) be supported by the police and the criminal justice system is a burgeoning conceptual and practical area of concern (Bartkowiak-Théron & Asquith 2019). Whilst the slow burn of police involvement in those vulnerable to domestic violence (from relative disinterest historically to one of increasingly explicit adoption of responsibility, support, and intervention more recently) is one example of the invisible vulnerable becoming visible (Williams & Walklate 2020; Walklate 2008; Bartkowiak-Théron & Asquith 2012; Bosworth et al 2016). Another case, or series of cases in the North of England involving vulnerable children is perhaps more indicative of, and relevant to, drug supply and some of those complexly engaged in it such as user-dealers and young, groomed exploited and abused, sellers that at first sight appear to fit the traditional dealer stereotype.

The child exploitation ‘sex scandals’ involving Northern English towns such as Rotherham and Rochdale[[2]](#footnote-2) involved the grooming of, and/or the violent forcing of, thousands of young, vulnerable ‘at risk’ (mostly) girls and young women into ongoing sexually exploitive and abusive relations over decades from the late 1980s (Jay 2014). Whilst the varying circumstances that produced and facilitated such exploitation and abuse were bad enough one of the key enablers for many years was the way that these vulnerable young girls, many of whom reported their abuse to the police and other safeguarding authorities on numerous occasions, were routinely ignored by these authorities. In part, it was concluded, this was due to how they were perceived with attributions of being less than deserving or worthy of support (i.e. predominately from working class or ‘troubled’ backgrounds and/or ‘care’ homes) or, in typical ‘blame the victim’ fashion, also as less trustworthy in their reports. In the enquiries and reviews that covered these scandals and their aftermath (Jay Report 2014; Casey Report 2015; IICSA 2015 on) the police and other safeguarding authorities were roundly castigated for having failed those vulnerable young people, having inappropriate institutional cultures and, by the then (in 2014) Home Secretary for a basic ‘dereliction of duty’ and of institutional failure.

This was a sea-change moment in British policing (Bosworth et al 2016) so when a new supply approach to heroin and crack cocaine (County Lines) emerged where the grooming/recruitment and then exploitation and abuse of young vulnerable children was explicit in its practice it was clear that the UK the police and the wider criminal justice system could no longer ignore the exploitation and vulnerabilities which unpinned the involvement for many of them and treat, as they had done historically, the young people involved as simply criminals (Coliandris 2015; Coomber & Moyle 2018; Windle et al 2020).

County Lines supply takes the form where a range of wholesalers based in major cities or ‘hubs’ (some being independent sellers, some being ‘gangs’, some are organised crime groups) with access to importer/wholesale levels of heroin and crack. Such groups have expanded their *direct* selling retail activity from the traditional model where retail sales were made geographically close to the home base, to, tentacle like, many other smaller locations in parts of the country (Coomber & Moyle 2018; Andell & Pitts 2018; Harding 2020). Early County Lines sellers would ‘commute’ by train or car to towns and areas within an hour or so from the hub and either return at the end of day or establish short and longer stay accommodation (for themselves and others from the same ‘gang’ or associated group) at the site from which to run their operations (Coomber and Moyle 2012; Coomber 2015). As the model grew however so did the use of other personnel. What is different about this new approach – beyond the outreach approach to selling – is the extensive use of thousands of vulnerable young people (predominately ages 14-17, and male) who have been variably, either ‘groomed’, enticed, inspired, or, through forms of debt bondage or other pressures, forced to become involved in the supply of heroin and crack cocaine (Harding 2020, 2022; Thompson 2019).

These young people will commonly be sent on a train, or couriered to a satellite destination and be variously tasked with, and directly involved with, the selling of drugs in that location. In 2019 the UK’s National Crime Agency (NCA) reported that every police force in the UK was now subject to County Lines ingress and that approximately 2,000 such ‘lines’ were in operation. The policing and criminal justice response to this scenario has been mixed. The new ‘policing vulnerabilities’ context means that the police and the courts cannot simply treat these ‘vulnerable but criminal’ young people simply as criminals but at the same time the justice system is greatly challenged by existing processes and, at times, rather than arresting the young people concerned and processing them through the criminal justice system as drug dealers they have simply been ‘put back on train to return to where they came from’ (personal communication with British Transport Police and a County Lines Coordination Centre data analyst) in recognition that processing them normally through the criminal justice system was itself highly problematic. Whilst there have been legislative attempts to deal with the issue (e.g. process vulnerable young people and other exploited people connected to County Lines drug markets through the UK’s 2015 Modern Slavery Act) and the introduction of new police training through initiatives such as the Vulnerability and Violent Crime Programme (VVCP) run by the UK’s College of Policing to date there has been limited success. Moreover, to date few people within the police and the criminal justice system concerned with drug supply have managed to join the dots between social supply and young people, vulnerable, dependent user dealers and the newer phenomenon of County Lines connected individuals that are recognised to not be as culpable. However, whilst this latter category causes the criminal justice some genuine definitional and operational challenges the former categories of social supply and dependent user-dealers (where it is clear little profit is made) can be dealt with much more easily and in ways proportionate to their nominal culpability. As stated by Moyle et al (2013) for these two groups there is no need to use a metaphorical sledgehammer (conventional trafficking/supply laws) to crush a walnut.

**Conclusion**

Through explicit reference to drug market and drug supplier differentiation this article has taken a critical view of conventional drug market and drug dealer representations and the criminal justice responses they too commonly evoke. It is suggested that the typical and overly homogenous view of them as essentially as similar and to be commensurate, for the most part, with the common tropes and stereotypes found in popular media depictions is both incorrect and unhelpful in that it justifies a legislative framework which is itself both too narrow and overly punitive.

It is argued with reference to social supply and to non-commercially orientated dependent user-dealer supply that neither group resembles a drug-dealer proper and should not be processed through the normative ‘drug supply’/trafficking legal frameworks of various countries. In Moyle et al (2013) it is argued that separate offences for minimally commercial supply should be created so that this distinction can be writ large both in law but also in the consciousness of the criminal justice system and the broader population. Without a separate legal framework which would have lesser punishments than those codified in laws designed to counter commercially oriented supply social suppliers and user-dealers will always be subject to whim, discretion, and misconception of sentencing frameworks and sentencing personnel that are based on more serious forms of criminality as has been found by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA 2017) across Europe, by Bull et al (2021) in Australia and by Moyle et al (2013) in the UK.

There is a ‘golden-thread’ that runs through this article – that drug markets are complex and nuanced and that they are populated by ‘suppliers’ of different types that in their own ways are vulnerable and/or less culpable than the type of supplier the laws of most countries were constructed to control and punish. Yes, even with social supply, as with minimally commercial user-dealer supply there are ‘grey areas’ (Potter 2009; Chatwin & Potter 2013) where some will be more commercially orientated than others but it is better to not have a too simple over-arching framework which creates more harm than it is meant to. Otherwise law-abiding schoolchildren who share drugs, facilitate access to drugs or take their turn in accessing drugs for their group are vulnerable mainly to a potentially over-zealous criminal justice framework that equates ‘drugs as bad’ and drug suppliers as worse and criminalising those that transcend the narrow framework rather than managing them in a proportionate manner. User-dealers are vulnerable by dint of being dependent drug users (many of whom will have trauma laden pasts) in need of support but for whom prison is too often the outcome. County Lines connected young people were commonly vulnerable (e.g. in care homes; excluded from school) prior to their involvement and protection and support for such individuals needs to start earlier. It is important that this vulnerability is recognised and that the ‘system’ tries to support rather than punish wherever possible. It is also important that others within the drug market that could be treated differently are also extended that benefit. For that to happen however representations of, and understanding of, drug markets and those populations that supply within them need to move beyond the trope and stereotypes that enable overly narrow policing and sentencing frameworks to apply to them with little consequence. Separate, less punitive laws dealing with minimally commercial supply would go some way to achieving this.

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1. The earlier conventions – the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances – are both influenced by a reliance on sensationalised, weakly evidenced and fear invoking rhetoric about drug harms that have since been critiqued widely. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. But not exclusively so. As reviews continued it emerged that more and more locations across the UK were subject to similar atrocities. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)