Drug Market Violence: Virtual Anarchy, Police Pressure, Predation, and Retaliation

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ABSTRACT

Drug consumption and addiction are known to increase the incidence of violent and property crimes. For this reason, governments prohibit the trade in some psychoactive substances and vigorously enforce the law. The unfortunate consequence of this governmental control is that it increases drug market violence. This article examines how drug prohibition and its enforcement affect violence among illicit drug traders. Two processes are considered: the role of virtual anarchy and police pressure in exposing illicit drug traders to predation and motivating them to retaliate. After reviewing the empirical literature bearing on these theories, this article concludes by outlining what is needed to move the field forward.

Introduction

In what is likely the most influential scholarly work of all time on the drugs/violence nexus, Goldstein (1985) suggested that one of three major links is between drug markets and violence. He labeled this connection “systemic violence”, defining it as the “traditionally aggressive patterns of interaction within the system of drug distribution and use” (p. 497). This concept served to distinguish drug market violence from two other parts of the nexus, namely the psychopharmacological and addictive effects of drugs on aggression. With the qualitative nature of drug-related violence clarified—which until the 1980s was not so clear (Brownstein, 1993)—researchers were able to study this phenomenon with a more sophisticated lens. Indeed, the highest compliment we can give Paul is that many drug researchers have “stood on his shoulders” because he recognized the crucial importance of conceptualization in scientific discovery.

Since that influential article first appeared, theory and research on systemic violence has taken two broad paths: why and to what extent (1) are illicit drug markets more violent than legal ones, and (2) does illicit drug trade result in variable amounts of violence across collectives, individuals, and situations? Though the second issue will be discussed toward this paper’s conclusion, the first is the focus herein because it is at the core of Goldstein’s original formulation of systemic violence; in his words, “violence is intrinsic to involvement with any illicit substance” (Goldstein, 1985, p. 497, emphasis added).

To be clear, the term “drug” is not technically synonymous with “illegal,” though it is commonly used that way in the everyday vernacular. Rather, a drug is a psychoactive substance consumed for recreational purposes, examples of which include everything from caffeine to cocaine (Zimring & Hawkins, 1992). The available historical and modern evidence suggests that violence springs more often from illicit than licit drug trade, and that this has more to do with the law than the chemical properties of substances (Werb et al., 2011).

One example comes from the earliest era of widespread, consequential prohibition in the United States: that of the Eighteenth Amendment. This law prohibited the sale of alcohol, although many states had already outlawed it (Jensen, 2000). The trade in beer, wine, and liquor became a blackmarket, and violence followed suit.
“During alcohol Prohibition,” for instance, “violent struggles between bootlegging gangs and hijackings of booze-laden trucks and sea vessels were notoriously frequent” (Nadelmann, 1997, p. 296). Quantitative research finds that homicide in the early twentieth century is positively correlated with the number of states outlawing alcohol (Jensen, 2000) and expenditure on enforcement of this law (Miron, 1999; but see Owens, 2011).

Today the alcohol trade is far more peaceful because it is legal (Nadelmann, 1997), but systemic violence is still a problem because other substances are outlawed. At both national and local levels, the homicide rate is positively correlated with government expenditures on drug prohibitions (Miron, 1999) and drug seizure rates (Miron, 2001). The extent of illicit drug market violence appears to be substantial. A study of murders in New York City found that almost 40 percent of the incidents was related to illicit drug market trade (Goldstein et al., 1997). And in the U.S. as a whole, there was an annual average of about 500 “narcotic drug laws” homicides from 2007 to 2011 (FBI, 2012).

What is it about a drug market’s legal status that affects the amount of violence attached to it? In other words, what mechanisms drive this relationship? This article addresses that question by providing a novel theoretical synopsis of prior research; the reviewed literature will be largely qualitative in nature because the available quantitative evidence is remarkably thin—a limitation we return to later in the paper. What the available evidence suggests is that drug prohibition and its enforcement expose illicit drug traders to predation and impels them to retaliation (i.e., vigilantism), which happens in two broad ways. One is that by outlawing a drug market, its participants lose access to formal means of dispute resolution and thereby become attractive targets to predators and more reliant on retaliation. Second, police pressure raises the proportion of fake dealers, leads illicit drug traders to rush exchanges, and turns people into “snitches”; all of these outcomes serve to increase the prevalence of predatory and/or retaliatory acts. After presenting these theoretical connections and their empirical foundation, this article concludes by outlining what kind of research is needed most of all to move the field forward.

**Virtual Anarchy**

The most commonly cited theory of how illegality affects drug market violence revolves around the notion of access to law. By being involved in a prohibited activity, especially one that is punitively punished, a person becomes less likely to have their conflicts settled by the government (Black, 1976). Illicit drug traders live in a governmentally controlled state but are less able to call on the government for help in resolving disputes. This is what Cooney (1998) terms “virtual anarchy.”

This lawlessness can be explained as a matter of rationality. Rational choice theory holds that people decide how to act by weighing the potential costs and benefits of alternative lines of action (Bentham, 1988 [1789]; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). When victimized, illicit drug traders think through—if only subconsciously—whether the utility of pursuing formal justice is greater than that of informal responses, including everything
from violent retaliation to toleration (Jacques & Wright, 2011). Compared to traders of legal substances (e.g., alcohol), illicit drug traders are more likely to forgo formal mediation (Jacques & Wright, 2013).

The potential costs of making a police report are especially high for victimized illicit drug traders, which makes them less likely to invoke law. For criminals and law-abiding persons alike, cooperating with the formal justice system can entail the investment of time and effort, money if a lawyer is hired or work is missed, and being attacked—figuratively or physically—as a “snitch.” Yet unlike law-abiding citizens, offenders who seek out formal mediation risk having their own unlawful behavior uncovered and being punished as a result. This is often conveyed as common sense; as one dealer put it, “I mean what you gonna do? What you gonna go up to the police and say, ‘Hey man, he skeeted [defrauded] me out of an ounce?’ Hell no” (Jacques & Wright, 2013, p. 3).

There are times, however, that illicit traders call the cops (Copes et al., 2011; Jacques & Wright, 2013). For example, a methamphetamine manufacturer was robbed, reported the incident to the police, and arrested as a result (The Queen v. James William Grove, 2008). Another dealer reported a burglary to the police, but the officers were suspicious that no item was reported stolen; while at the scene, police saw drug paraphernalia and then executed a search that uncovered marijuana and led to the victim’s arrest (Ogunsakin, 2012). And a drug buyer was arrested after calling 911 to report being robbed by her dealer (The Smoking Gun, 2013). These are the kinds of costs that victimized drug traders try to avoid by not mobilizing law when victimized.

Another reason illicit drug traders choose to handle conflicts informally is that they deem the benefits of formal justice as too meager. In some cases, there are no positives to be had because there is no law on the books capable of resolving the dispute. For instance, blackmarket contracts are unenforceable through the legal system; frauds involving drugs cannot be settled in court (Reuter, 2009). Such circumstances make turning to the police or courts irrational.

With that said, being an illicit drug market participant does always not preclude victims from pursuing and benefiting from legal redress (Jacques & Wright, 2013). No matter whether a person sells or buys an illicit substance, it is a crime to attack them, break into and steal from their home, or vandalize their property. Victimized illicit drug traders can report such victimizations to the police and pursue the matter in court. For example, drug dealers who are robbed of cash and drugs can call 911 and press charges (e.g., Mohamed & Fritsvold 2010, p. 145-6). However, when the police track down such robbers there is no legal obligation to return the stolen drugs to their “rightful” owner. Thus the benefits of mobilizing police in such cases are smaller than they are in those not involving prohibited items, as they can be returned if recovered.

There is another reason why victimized illicit drug traders perceive invoking the law as relatively unbeneifical: police and prosecutors are known to less vigorously pursue the apprehension and punishment of persons who victimize criminals (Klinger, 1997; Moskos, 2008; Stanko, 1981/82). Government officials are less likely to believe the stories of known criminals, instead construing their complaints as make-believe. One cop calls this
“bullshit,” an example being a “junkie who wastes my time because they got burned [ripped-off on a drug deal] and say, ‘I was robbed’” (Moskos, 2008, p. 100). Moreover, government officials feel less obliged to spend precious resources on solving and punishing crimes against criminals. As a former police officer turned criminologist explains:

> From their day-to-day contacts with victims and offenders, police officers … know … drug dealers who are robbed … Because the police mandate to regulate deviance is a mandate to protect the conventional citizenry, officers will view … victims who are criminals … as undeserving. (Klinger, 1997, p. 291)

Prosecutors behave in a similar manner; consider the following example:

> The complainants were a young, white couple. … As they parked on the street, three individuals approached them, displayed knives, took them inside a building, and robbed them of $80. … The D.A. … determined that they were an innocent young couple; the case was slated for the grand jury. About two minutes after the case was sent to the typist, the male complainant returned to the D.A. and stated that he was in the area to buy heroin. … The D.A. recalled the papers and reduced the charge to a misdemeanor. (Stanko, 1981/82, p. 36-7)

Illicit drug traders often recognize that their victimization reports are less likely to be believed by government officials and handled to the fullest extent of the law. In the words of a dealer, “[Y]ou don’t call the police into the dope game [saying] ‘He robbed me.’ They ain’t questioning you. We run from the police every day so they know what we’re at” (Jacques & Wright, 2013, p. 14). The implication of such beliefs is these offenders perceive the benefits of seeking formal justice as relatively small and therefore unlikely to be chosen.

**Virtual Anarchy, Predation and Retaliation**

The virtual anarchy that characterizes illicit drug markets increases violence among persons involved therein. In his seminal article on the drugs/violence nexus, Goldstein provided eight examples of systemic violence:

1. disputes over territory between rival drug dealers. 2. assaults and homicides committed within dealing hierarchies as a means of enforcing normative codes. 3. robberies of drug dealers and the usually violent retaliation by the dealer or his/her bosses. 4. elimination of informers. 5. punishment for selling adulterated or phony drugs. 6. punishment for failing to pay one’s debts. 7. disputes over drug paraphernalia. 8. robbery violence related to the social ecology of copping areas. (p. 497)

Similar to how Goldstein divided the whole of drug-related violence into smaller parts, Jacques and Wright (2008) sought to classify the different kinds of systemic violence. Based on the above examples, those authors suggested there are two types of drug market violence: predatory and retaliatory.

Predation is taking another actor’s possessions for reasons unrelated to social control (Cooney, 2006).[1] “[R]obberies of drug dealers” are an example (Goldstein, 1985, p. 497). Predators perceive illicit drug traders
as unlikely to mobilize the justice system or to be aided by government officials when victimized (Jacobs,
2000; St. Jean, 2007). The implication of this is that offenses against illicit drug traders are less likely to result
in arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment or another punishment. Thus, it is more rational to rob them than law-
abiding persons. As said by one robber, “That’s all I done robbed is drug dealers … they not gonna call the
police. What they gonna tell the police? He robbed me for my dope?” (Wright & Decker, 1997, p. 64; see also
Curtis & Wendel, 2007, p. 878). A different robber explained, “[The police] gonna say that, ‘Okay, this is a
drug robbery. We really don’t care that this [incident]. You shouldn’t have been out selling this bullshit’”
(Wright & Decker, 1997, p. 66).

A second sort of predation referred to by Goldstein (1985) is moving in on another seller’s turf and market
share. Typically, this manifests itself in contention over who can and cannot deal drugs on a particular street, in
a given neighborhood, or to particular customers. This is an important matter because some spots are more
lucrative or less risky than others (Jacobs, 1999). Of course, no one legally owns public space, or much less has
the exclusive right to sell illicit drugs there, but that does not stop persons from acting as though they do.
Indeed, because this issue is beyond the law, violent disputes erupt when one party—be it an individual or
organization—seeks to gain control over territory that another party claims as its sole property (Levitt &
Venkatesh, 2000).

In the law-abiding world, a person who is victimized or otherwise involved in a grievance can call the police or
take the case to court. But for the reasons outlined in the section on virtual anarchy, illicit drug traders are less
likely to have their conflicts settled by the government. As a result, these criminals have more reason to pursue
informal justice, one form of which is vigilantism (Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Jacques, 2010; Jacques & Wright,
2008). Most of the systemic violence examples listed by Goldstein (1985, p. 497) are instances of retaliation.

Violent retaliation is beneficial in at least three ways (Topalli, Wright, & Fornango, 2002). One is it maintains
or enhances the retaliator’s reputation as someone not to be crossed; this is what some people call “respect”
(Anderson, 1999). Respect is especially important for illicit drug traders because they are more reliant on
themselves to deter would-be predators, given the government has less sway in this regard. As a dealer said,
“You mess with my product you going down … That message gets around” (Topalli, Wright, & Fornango, p.
342). A second motive of retaliation is to obtain vengeance, which the government is unlikely to obtain on the
victim’s behalf. A seller explained why he retaliated against a robber: “I was doing it cause I was angry […] Y]ou got access to a gun […] nobody can stop you” (p. 340). A third benefit of retaliation is it can be used to
steal back the stolen property or take something else of value from the victimizer. This is all the more
important for illicit drug traders because government officials are not able to return prohibited items to their
owner. In the words of a dealer who was intent on reprisal after being robbed: “What was going through my
mind is I need my shit back, either he gonna give it back or either he gonna die” (p. 344).

Illicit drug traders use violent retaliation in response to being preyed on in different ways, including not only
robbery but also fraud and sneaky thefts such as burglary (Jacques & Wright, 2008, 2011; Jacques, Allen,
Wright, 2013; Taylor, 2012; Topalli, Wright, & Fornango, 2002). For example, one dealer who was robbed of about $350 and a quarter pound of marijuana described the payback: “I was just hitting” the robber “in her face” and “stomping her ass” while saying “You taking my motherfucker shit. You ain’t gonna do that shit no more. I ain’t the bitch to play with” (Jacobs & Wright, 2006, p. 51). Another individual recounted how he responded to being defrauded: “I gave her [the defrauder] $225 worth of fucking pain […] I just smacked the shit out of her” (Jacques & Wright, 2011, p. 745). A third seller whose drugs had been stolen responded by “hit[ting the thief] … upside his motherfucking head [with a metal pipe]” (Jacobs & Wright, 2006, p. 55).

Also, some retaliatory acts are over turf. These conflicts can quickly spiral out of control as violence becomes cyclical (Jacobs & Wright, 2006; Wright, Topalli, & Jacques, forthcoming). The way this works is an initial attack is responded to with retaliation, which itself is retaliated against, and so on. The result is a cycle of violence that can produce considerable injury and death tolls. For instance, the study of New York City homicides discussed in this article’s introductory section found that “territorial dispute” was the reason for 35% of all illicit drug market murders (Goldstein et al., 1997, calculated from page 119). And Levitt and Venkatesh’s (2000) study of a drug selling gang found that “[t]he per-person likelihood of death ranges from 1 to 2 percent a month during gang wars and the transition period” (p. 783).

**Police Pressure, Predation and Retaliation**

Up to here, this article has focused on the general atmosphere of lawlessness produced by drug prohibition. Yet drug enforcement has its own unique effect on drug market violence. Studies show that police pressure can have the unintended consequence of increasing predatory and retaliatory acts among illicit drug traders (Aitken et al., 2002; Jacobs, 1999; Maher & Dixon, 1999). This works in three ways: by creating a place in the market for fake dealers; leading traders to rush exchanges; and turning people into informants, otherwise known as “snitches.”

“Real dealers” are persons who actually sell what they purport to, whereas “fake dealers” sell entirely fake or highly adulterated substances (Maher & Dixon, 1999; see also Jacques & Bernasco, 2013). For obvious reasons, real dealers earn a good reputation among customers and fake dealers suffer a bad one. Real dealers, then, are able to garner a high proportion of sales, and this pushes fake dealers out of the market altogether or limits their customer base to inexperienced, desperate, or unconnected buyers. For the very reason real dealers sell actual drugs and have the most customers, these sellers are more likely than fake dealers to be arrested and incapacitated for long stretches of time. The consequence of taking real dealers off the street is it clears the way for fake dealers to take over market share, making fraud more common. As one drug user reported about the effect of a police crackdown:

> [T]here’ve been lots of rips, people taking advantage of the situation, selling anything from plaster to pills. Like a fair few dealers aren’t around because they have been busted [arrested]. This makes it easy for the rippers to come in and sell shit. (Aitken et al., 2002, p. 196)
The inadvertent increase in fake dealers that results from police pressure is important for understanding not only predation but also vigilantism. After all, predatory acts spur retaliatory ones. In short, the result of deterring and incapacitating real dealers can be to destabilize the market and thereby increase fraud and retaliatory responses.[2]

Another way that police pressure affects predation and retaliation is by prompting illicit traders to rush their exchanges (Jacobs, 1999). Merchants and consumers know there are times when patience is a virtue. For example, a seller may want to double check that a client’s cash is not counterfeit, and a shopper may want to confirm that the merchandise is of sufficient quality. In legal markets, dealers and buyers have less reason to feel rushed when looking things over, as there is no legal risk to taking one’s time. On the other hand, illicit drug traders—especially those making exchanges in public view—are impelled to hurry because they can never be sure of who is watching and whether the police are about to arrive (Jacques & Bernasco, 2013). Although rushing an illicit exchange may reduce the odds of being caught by the police, it increases the likelihood of cons and, in turn, violent reprisal. When rushing, sellers have less time to inspect and count the cash handed over by buyers, who themselves are short on time to scrutinize whether the goods are real and of proper quantity. Seasoned members of the drug underworld take advantage of this dilemma to scam others (Jacobs, 1999). But this is not without consequence, as the virtual anarchy of illicit drug markets makes defrauded traders apt to retaliate.

Police pressure also increases retaliation by putting a target on informants’ backs; illicit drug traders may even go so far as the “elimination of informers” (Goldstein, 1985, p. 497). In the broadest sense of the term, an informant or “snitch” is any citizen who aids the formal justice system by providing information on an offense (Natapoff, 2009). From the perspective of law enforcement officials, the benefit of informant-based policing is it increases efficiency by making everything from identifying suspects to gathering evidence and making arrests less costly and time consuming. While technically any crime can be snitched on, this happens most often with drug offenses because they are relatively common, victimless, and typically involve at least two co-offenders (ibid.). The high frequency of informing in the drug underworld combined with the severe punishments received for conviction provide illicit traders with the opportunity and motivation to deter, prevent, and punish snitching through violent means (MacCoun, Kilmer & Reuter, 2003; Natapoff, 2009). Deterrence involves scarring would-be informants out of providing information; prevention involves sealing someone’s lips by killing or putting them in a vegetative state; punishment occurs after information has been delivered. A couple examples are an undercover-informant being murdered by the suppliers she was setting up for a sting (Natapoff, 2009, p. 41), and a 14 year old girl being shot to death after asking offenders to compensate her for keeping quiet (p. 42). While this is not meant to “blame the law,” the logical fact is that if drugs were not prohibited or, at least, the law was not enforced with the aid of informants, there would be no need for illicit drug traders to violently thwart and reprimand snitching.
Yet the police are more responsible for informant-related violence than necessary, as, on occasion, they engage in what are unwise or unethical practices. Police practices allow people to become known as a snitch through inference or gossip (Natapoff, 2009; Phillips, 2012; Rosenfeld, Jacobs, & Wright, 2003). Inferences may be based on eye-witness accounts of someone speaking with police. To a degree, such visible interaction is perhaps impossible to avoid, though conversations could be made more discreet by only conducting them over the phone or at the police station, for instance. Officers, however, have been accused of making their discussions public in order to disrupt criminality, despite this jeopardizing offenders’ safety. As described by one offender:

[Police] put you in the back of the car […] and they ride through your hood and everybody see you … and then … they let you out […] then everybody’s looking at you like, “what you doing in the back of the car, was you talking?” (Rosenfeld, Jacobs, & Wright, 2003, p. 304)

Such scenes, in turn, lead to widespread gossip that may wind up resulting in retaliation.

Sometimes the initial source of gossip is police, and this can have violent consequences as well. An example comes from Los Angeles, where “police lied to a gang member and told him that […] a specific individual] was informing on him. This misrepresentation led not to a confession but to […] the supposed informant’s] murder” (Natapoff, 2009, p. 112). Furthermore, officers have been accused of maintaining informants’ cooperation by warning them—implicitly or explicitly—that ceasing assistance will have negative consequence. As recounted by an offender, “you start informing then you got to keep informing cause if you stop they [the police] … gonna talk to person that you told on and then they gonna wind up killing you” (p. 304). The above cases show that while informant-based policing may benefit the justice system, its execution can increase executions.

Drug prohibition is not always strictly enforced, which is important because it offers a glance into how police pressure singularly affects predation and retaliation. The situation in the Netherlands is a case in point. There, it is technically illegal to sell cannabis but some municipal governments tolerate dealing by so-called “coffeeshops” if they obey a set of rules, such as not selling to minors; and while it is illegal to sell hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, persons are not arrested or prosecuted if found with small quantities intended for personal use (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). Persons familiar with the Dutch drug scene have suggested that the relative absence of law enforcement has the effect of reducing violence among illicit traders (Zaitch, 2002). As Leuw (1991) explains:

The relative tolerance of hard-drug use in the Netherlands offers a probable explanation for low levels of violence. The police are not especially interested in small-time street dealers. Police practices, such as undercover purchases or pressuring junkies to serve as police informers, are normally not employed at the retail level of the hard-drug market. Consequently, the paranoia and retaliation so characteristic of drug scenes elsewhere exist to a moderate degree only. (p. 240)
This example shows that what matters to understanding drug market violence is not simply the law on the books but also how the law is enforced.

**Moving the Field Forward**

As reviewed above, the empirical evidence suggests that illicit drug traders have less access to formal means of dispute settlement and, therefore, are attractive targets for predators and more reliant on violent retaliation. Prior research also shows that police pressure increases predation and retaliation among illicit drug traders by increasing the proportion of fake dealers, pushing them to rush trades, and motivating them to deter, prevent, and punish snitching. In these ways, drug prohibition and its enforcement have the inadvertent effect of fostering violent crime.

While those findings are very suggestive, they are only that. Of course no study is full proof, but some are better than others—depending on the task at hand. Whereas qualitative research is good for conceptual and theoretical development, quantitative research is better for giving a sense of scale and significance. The theories outlined above are largely, though not entirely, the product of qualitative inquiries. The best way to move the field forward at this point is to test—in a quantitative sense—the various explanations of systemic violence.

**The Need for Tests Using Direct Measures**

One way that quantitative studies differ is the exactness of their measurements. Obviously direct measures are better than proxies. This is relevant to the topic at hand because no published study, to the authors’ knowledge, has directly measured the theoretically relevant variables examined in this article. Thus, the best way to move the field forward will be to surmount this limitation of prior work.

Three lines of research have come closest to doing so. One group of studies show that a large portion of murders involve illicit drug traders (Goldstein et al., 1997), and that they have remarkably high death rates compared to persons of a similar demographic makeup (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Reuter, MacCoun, & Murphy, 1990). The second and third set of studies—reviewed in this article’s introduction—demonstrate that alcohol prohibition and, more generally, government expenditures on drug prohibition (Miron, 1999) as well as drug seizure rates (Miron, 2001) are positively correlated with homicide rates (Dills, Miron, & Summers, 2010; Jensen, 2000; Miron, 1999, 2001; but see Owens, 2011). All of these studies are limited in that they do not directly measure formal mediation, the proportion of fake dealers, the swiftness of sales, the scale of informant-based policing, predatory victimization, or violent retaliation. Whether, for instance, the aforementioned high homicide rates are the direct result of predation or retaliation is unclear. And while the above body of work suggests that violence is more common among illicit drug traders, whether this is affected by their unwillingness to mobilize police, the ratio of fake to real dealers, rushing exchanges, or snitching is unknown because these variables are unmeasured and thus unavailable for analysis.
It is possible that the prevalence and seriousness of drug market violence has nothing to do with law and its enforcement. Without direct measures, the answers will remain speculative. At a minimum, future quantitative research should directly measure and test for the significance of relationships between the variables mentioned above. A more exacting approach would be to address the full range of questions raised by those theories, some of which are listed below. To be clear, the comparison group for many of the following questions should be sellers and buyers operating in legal drug markets.

**Virtual Anarchy, Predation and Retaliation**

Regarding virtual anarchy, are illicit drug traders less likely to mobilize law when victimized? Does this rate result from victims’ calculations about this reaction’s utility? When illicit drug traders seek formal mediation are their victimizers less likely to be apprehended or severely punished? If so, is this because police and prosecutors are less likely to believe or pursue justice for criminals?

Pertaining to predation, are illicit drug traders more likely to be stolen from? Do thieves (e.g., robbers, defrauders, burglars) perceive them as less likely to mobilize law when victimized? Does such a perception lead predators to more frequently target illicit drug traders? And in response to predation, are illicit drug traders more apt to violently retaliate? Do they place greater weight on informally-obtained retribution, deterrence, and resource recovery? Does perceiving formal settlement and retaliation as having less and more utility, respectively, explain how they handle victimizations?

**Police Pressure, Predation and Retaliation**

Prohibition causes virtual anarchy, but police pressure is a matter of drug law enforcement. Statistically, does more vigorous policing—measured, for instance, by the number of patrolling officers or arrests—lead traders of prohibited substances to conduct their business in a quicker manner? Are sales done in a speedier manner more likely to result in an unfair exchange? If so, does the number of retaliatory acts concomitantly increase or is vigilantism proportionately deterred by the relatively vigorous policing?

Related to the above, does more vigorous policing deter and incapacitate real dealers at a greater rate than fake ones? When real dealers exit the market—by choice or incapacitation—at what rate are they replaced by real dealers versus fake ones? How do these processes affect the frequency of fraudulent trades and retaliatory acts?

Finally, what proportion of drug market violence is attributable to informant-based policing? Does using more informants result in more retaliatory violence? Does using snitches to lock away more illicit drug traders ultimately produce less violence in the entire community and thereby justify the means? Are some ways of handling informants—such as conversing with them in public—more dangerous for informants?
From Questions to Answers

It is unknown why the above questions have been left largely, if not entirely, unanswered by quantitative research. The most likely reason is that no official, publicly available data exist on the matter. Clearly, moving the field forward will require researchers to put on their proverbial white coats and get dirty by systematically collecting data from drug traders (sellers and users), predators (e.g., robbers), police, and prosecutors.

What would such studies look like? Two practical approaches will be specified here, though they are certainly not the only options. One is to survey illicit drug traders and licit drug traders, such as liquor store purveyors and patrons. If drug law and enforcement does in fact affect violence, then more violence and less formal mediation should be found among illegal than legal drug traders. A second strategy is to analyze within-person variation, which is possible because some persons buy or sell both illegal and legal drugs (e.g., bartenders who deal cocaine). Researchers could survey these persons about their respective victimization and conflict management experiences in both markets; if prohibition and its enforcement increase systemic violence, then any given individual should experience more harm in the course of making illicit than licit trades. Furthermore, individuals could be surveyed about changes over time. For instance, if they noticed a change in police pressure, it would also be possible to determine whether that change affected violence tied to the number of fake dealers, swiftness of sales, or informant-based policing.

Beyond the Direct Effects of Prohibition and Its Enforcement

In addition to considering the causal mechanisms focused on throughout this paper, future quantitative studies would benefit from controlling for other factors that have been drawn on to explain drug market violence. As noted in the introduction, this article explores why illegal drug markets may harbor more violence than legal ones, but another body of work examines variation within the illicit drug trade. The latter considers three interrelated questions: Why are some illicit drug markets more violent than others? Why are some illicit traders more involved in more violence? And why are some blackmarket interactions more likely to turn violent?

This research is worthy of a review all to itself, but, by way of illustration, a few of the theories and findings are worth mentioning. Zimring and Hawkins (1997), for one, suggest that in communities disposed to violence, the addition of an illicit drug market will substantially increase violent crime therein, but that this does not happen in relatively peaceful communities (see, e.g., Jacques & Wright, 2013; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Lum, 2011; Ousey & Lee, 2002, 2004). Brownstein, Grimmins, and Spunt (2000) argue that the amount of violence associated with an illicit drug market decreases as it becomes more stable, meaning more organized and involving more internal interaction. In their review of systemic crime, MacCoun, Kilmer, & Reuter, (2003) outline a number of factors that increase drug market violence, including the age of participants, the drugs’ value and propensity to result in psychopharmacological crime, and whether the dealers and customers are residents of where they make trades (see, e.g., Felson & Bonkiewicz, 2013; Ousey & Lee, 2007). The method and place of sales matter too; Curtis and Wendel (2007) show that compared to street and indoor markets, delivery markets are relatively free of violence. And scholars focusing on the situation- or case-level of
analysis have uncovered evidence that the relationship between disputants, weapons presence, and intoxication affect whether violent retaliation occurs (Jacques & Wright, 2011; Meeson & Morselli, 2012; Phillips, 2003; Taylor, 2012).

One reason it will be important to measure and analyze factors such as those above is they may not operate entirely independently from but rather cause, interact with, and be affected by prohibition, its enforcement, police mobilization, the proportion of fake dealers, the swiftness of sales, snitching, predation, and retaliation. For instance, some illicit drug traders may do business at private places because they perceive this to insulate them from police pressure, which, in turn, may reduce their likelihood of being robbed and facing the choice of whether to fight back.

**Conclusion**

Drug law and its enforcement are not all bad, as they are meant to curb the negative effects of drug use. When under the influence of some substances, persons are more likely to fight, rob, rape, and commit other crimes (see, e.g., Felson et al., 2008; Goldstein, 1985). And addiction can motivate people to support their habit by stealing (see, e.g., Ball, Shaffer, & Nurco, 1983; Goldstein, 1985). These relationships between drugs and crime provide governments with justifiable reasons to outlaw the trade in criminogenic substances.

Yet law comes with costs, one of which is an increase in drug market violence. Prohibiting drugs, it seems, places illicit traders in a virtual anarchy that exposes them to predation and stimulates retaliation. Moreover, their fear of apprehension and formal punishment can lead them to attack potential or actual informants as well as to rush exchanges, which results in more frequent fraud and violent payback; the same effect also springs from arresting real dealers because that may inadvertently increase the proportion of fake dealers.

It remains an open question whether the payoffs of prohibition and its enforcement outweigh their costs (but see Kleiman, Caulkins, & Hawken, 2011; Nadelmann, 1997). Part of the answer has to do with calculating such things as expended tax dollars and the health costs of drug use and addiction. Another part has to do with figuring out whether current government drug control strategies do more to decrease or increase drug-related violence. In other words, does drug law reduce psychopharmacological and economic compulsive violence to such an extent as to offset the increase in systemic violence? The answer is not beyond our reach; arriving at it will require using direct measures to test the above explanations of why “violence is intrinsic to involvement with any illicit substance” (Goldstein, 1985, p. 497).

**References**


**Notes**

[1] To be clear, predators and drug traders are not mutually exclusive categories. Any given person can be both. A dealer may rob a customer, for instance.