

Tainted hope by a continuation of harms?



Black Box response to the UK Government's 10-year drug strategy

On 6th December 2021, the UK Government released a 10-year drug strategy plan; *From harm to hope: A 10-year drugs plan to cut crime and save lives.* The strategy pledges three main aims: to tackle drug supply chains, invest in drug treatment and recovery services for problematic drug users, and to deter recreational users. This response presents a critical analysis of the strategy.

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1 - Breaking drug supply chains

Continuation of the War on Drugs.

The strategy outlines an extensive list of propositions of methods that will be used for disrupting drug supply chains. Whilst this may appeal to an authoritarian populist perspective, evidence-based scepticism will also stand on the inaccuracy that increased investment into tough enforcement will effectively reduce related harms within, and caused by, illicit drug markets. Promises of being tough on drug-related crime is not a novel governmental pledge. But rather, investments into cracking down on drug supply reflects principles of the enduring War on Drugs; a longstanding strategy which has ample evidence of failure in its intentions, with Coyne and Hall (2017) stating that the War on Drugs 'is not only ineffective, but counterproductive at achieving the goals of policy makers'.

Problematic measures of success.

The strategy purports progression in tackling drug supply by the Government's County Lines Program closing down more than 1,500 deal lines. It also proposes that by the end of 2024/25 law enforcement will have closed over 2,000 more. This measure of success is problematic. Measuring a "rolled up" or "closed" deal line by arrests or mobile phone interferences can be criticised by the ease of reappointing

network roles to other members and of setting up new mobile phone connections by using multiple pay-as-you-go sim cards storing customer contact details.

Illicit drug markets are highly resilient to external pressures and are much faster in adapting to external pressures than policy making is at reacting to these adaptations. This has been evidenced throughout the Covid-19 pandemic where County Lines networks have evaded lockdown restrictions to continue in the supply of class A drugs and the exploitation of vulnerable people (Brewster et al, 2021). Indeed, whilst ‘Covid-19 restrictions have had an impact on the ability of organisations to safeguard those exploited for purposes of [County Lines]’ (ibid: 19), preliminary research has presented that relevant adaptations in illicit drug markets has resulted in the pandemic having a limited effect on illicit drug supply business efficiency (EMCDDA, 2021; Release, 2021).

So, measuring the success of tackling drug supply simply by numbers of rolled up lines, and propositions of increasing these figures, may not have significant influences on reducing the harms within, and caused by, illicit drug markets, beyond political measures of success.

Inaccurate rhetoric.

What is prominent in this strategy is the adherence to a binary mentality of distinct polarising categories of victims and perpetrators in illicit drug markets. Specifically within the County Lines framework, and based on factors such as age and roles within networks. Whilst such a distinct rhetoric would be a simpler context for policy making, research has presented this as an idealised and inaccurate perspective of drug networks (Spicer, 2020). Rather, victimisation and perpetration within illicit drug markets are overlapping, blurred phenomena.

Policies developed against the backdrop of inaccurate perspectives and rhetoric are likely to result in insufficient problem responses. **Small shifts towards the safeguarding of those victimised through County Lines can be evidenced and, while progressively welfare-based, the investments into cracking down on drug supply and extensions of the failed War on Drugs, once again fails to recognise the complex needs and subjective experiences of those victimised through illicit drug supply.**

2 - Delivering a world-class treatment and recovery system

Progression in harm reduction and public health approaches.

The strategy proposes the adoption of a public health approach to problematic drug use and intends on investing funding into harm reduction and treatment policy responses. Following a record-breaking rise in drug related deaths, since the 2010 Conservative Government’s drive for abstinence-focused drug services (Floodgate, 2017), Dame Carol Black’s (2021) commission highlighted the current failures of drug services. The report outlined the requirement of a multi-strategy response - controlled by a central government leadership - funding services for evidence-based harm reduction and treatment services, employment, housing and mental health. This public health approach, incorporating external influencers of problematic drug use, can gain recognition as progressive proposed advances in drug policy.

Caution in practice.

Whilst some of these pledges of service responses to problematic drug users do present progression in harm reduction and treatment, caution must be taken in the implementation of such policies in practice. Specifically, drawing attention to measures of success and evaluation processes.

3 – Achieve a generational shift in demand for drugs

The strategy affirms what abundant research has been presenting - that there are structural inequalities in those who are affected by illicit drug markets and drug policy. The Strategy's response is to target recreational adult drug users with a tough consequences scheme.

Focus on moral failing as a scapegoat.

In discussing the use of incarceration in the contemporary Britain political context, Bell (2013) references the use of scapegoating by Governmental policies, of those identified as criminal, by focusing on their moral failings and consequently diverting attention away from socio-economic problems left unaddressed by Governmental bodies that exacerbate such criminality. This concept is also reflected in discussions by Spicer (2020) who outlined how County Lines discourse plays a role in 'diverting attention away from the social conditions that drive these market harms'.

The strategy states that with an aim to reduce the violence and harms within supply chains, it will sanction recreational drug users who turn a blind eye to the violence and exploitation accompanying the supply of their drugs. **However, disappointingly, the strategy provides no interventions for addressing the socio-economic and structural inequalities that encourage violence and exploitation to flourish.**

Deterrence does not work.

As part of their tough consequences scheme, the strategy outlines several deterrent methods aiming to reduce recreational drug use and demand. For example, the strategy plans to use contact details found in the seized phones of dealers' to send deterrent messages to drug users, specifically adults and students in further and higher education. Further, the strategy reports that a subsequent White Paper will be published outlining tougher sanctions to deter people from recreational drug use. This includes curfews and the removal of passports and driving licences.

Quite simply, previous research findings suggest that these methods will not work as ample evidence has presented that deterrent methods for drug use are ineffective (Leipold, 2002). Specifically, it is inaccurate for the strategy to suggest that deterrent methods for drug use will have an impact on the violence and exploitation involved in drug supply. As such, investments into deterrent schemes can be seen as misaligned in tackling the harms within, and caused by, illicit drug markets.

Conclusion

In summary, the 10-year drug strategy brings conflicting expectations of progression in drug policy. Dame Carol Black's review has resulted in some movement towards a public health approach regarding problematic drug use and investments in drug harm reduction and treatment. However, this slight shift is undermined by the persistent

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continuation of the principles of the failed War on Drugs and scapegoating tactics of disproportionate socio-economic conditions, as well as the inaccurate rhetoric on, and understanding of, illicit drug markets.

For many disadvantaged and marginalised people in society, involvement in illicit drug markets is often one of survival, providing the opportunity to meet basic needs; needs that are not supported by current Government policy. **The strategy provides no interventions for tackling the root-causes of drug supply, meaning that these policies continue to provide a social environment that exacerbates illicit drug market harms and exploitation.**

As a result, the intended **hope** of this strategy is likely to be tainted by the continued significant **harms** within, and caused by, illicit drug markets.

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