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Conventional vs. Online Drug Distribution Networks

Abstract: Chapter 3 presents a comparison between conventional drug distribution networks and those which are facilitated on the dark net. Various aspects of conventional drug distribution networks are analysed, including inefficiencies, product adulteration and systemic violence. Online distribution networks, by contrast, are associated with high levels of efficiency, improved product quality and minimal violence. The various relationships that form online between drug suppliers, retailers and consumers are also analysed.

Over the past two decades, researchers have made significant gains in conceptualising the ways in which illicit drug distribution networks operate and are structured. Gone are the days when the global drugs trade was believed to be dominated by pyramid-shaped criminal bureaucracies of the style portrayed in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1972 classic, *The Godfather*. In fact, much contemporary research (Heber 2009, Malm and Bichler 2011, Bright and Delaney 2013) suggests quite the opposite: that illicit drug distribution is often carried out by decentralised groups, and that the involvement of rigidly hierarchical criminal organisations is relatively rare. Rather, criminal associations between individuals and groups adapt constantly to changing conditions, with relationships forming and dissolving according to emerging risks and opportunities. Even the dreaded narco ‘cartels’ of Central and South America have been revealed as far more fragmented (though no less deadly) than was once commonly thought (Kenney 2007, Benson and Decker 2010). From the dusty streets of Bogota to the urban ghettos of Europe, the idea of the monolithic ‘evil empire’ of organised crime appears increasingly inaccurate. Researchers are now documenting a mass of evolving and competing groups whose dynamism and ephemeral nature makes them particularly challenging subjects for research. This chapter explores the general characteristics associated with these illicit drug distribution groups before comparing them with new modes of distribution being facilitated online.

Social network analysis (SNA) is an increasingly popular tool amongst researchers seeking to map the various groups and individuals involved with illicit drug distribution. SNA conceptualises each participant in the distribution process as an individual node operating within a broader network. Each network necessarily includes both drug producers and consumers who are usually connected through an array of intermediary nodes, such as traffickers, wholesalers and street dealers. The networks themselves may be relatively small and simple, comprising only a few individual nodes. An example of this would be a small-time cannabis dealer who shares home-grown produce only with close friends and associates. Alternatively, networks may be large and complex; they may involve many thousands of individuals and loose syndicates which operate alongside more discrete organised crime groups such as gangs and mafias (Natarajan 2006, Malm and Bichler 2011, Ritter, Bright et al. 2012). Regardless of the size, complexity and transience of any drug distributing operation, the network model may be adapted to reflect the overall organisation and relationships between each of the participating nodes. Networks can reflect an almost limitless variety of configurations – from