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Foreword | *Cannabis is the most prolifically used illicit drug in Australia, however, there is a gap in our understanding concerning the social interactions and friendships formed around its supply and use.*

The authors recruited cannabis users aged between 18 and 30 years throughout Australia, to explore the impact of supply routes on young users and their perceived notions of drug dealing in order to provide valuable insight into the influence that reciprocal relationships have on young people's access to cannabis.

Findings reveal that the supply of cannabis revolves around pre-existing connections and relationships formed through associates known to be able to readily source cannabis. It was found that motivations for proffering cannabis in a shared environment were related more to developing social capital than to generating financial gain. Given this, often those involved in supply do not perceive that they are breaking the law or that they are 'dealers'.

This social supply market appears to be built on trust and social interactions and, as such, presents several challenges to law enforcement. It is suggested that there would be benefit in providing targeted education campaigns to combat social supply dealing among young adults.

Chris Dawson APM

The social supply of cannabis among young people in Australia

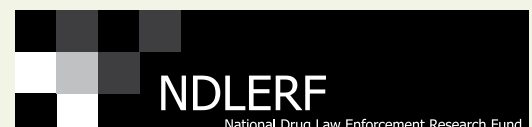
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Australian retail markets for most illicit drugs, including cannabis, are based significantly upon friendships and occur in closed settings, which have been described as 'lounge room' as opposed to 'street' dealing (Nicholas 2008). Similar observations have been made in other countries, and in the United Kingdom the term 'social supply' was coined to describe this aspect of the drug market where a supplier, not considered to be a 'drug dealer proper', brokers, facilitates or sells drugs for little or no financial gain to friends and acquaintances (Hough et al. 2003).

Background

Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit drug in Australia (AIHW 2014) and worldwide (UNODC 2014) and is responsible for the majority of illicit drug apprehensions made by Australian law enforcement (Australian Crime Commission 2014). As such, cannabis provides a good opportunity to access and study a sizeable number of both consumers and suppliers in a social supply market.

Research on social supply originated in the United Kingdom, where it has received the most attention (Coomber & Moyle 2014). According to Coomber and colleagues, much social supply that takes place between young people can be understood as part of everyday social network activities and involvement is often as much, if not more, about 'connecting' and gaining 'social capital' as it is about drug use (Coomber & Turnbull 2007; Duffy et al. 2006, 2007). There is debate about whether the term 'social supply' should be limited to non-profit making and/or to non-strangers. For example, Potter (2009) distinguished between social suppliers and other suppliers on the basis of intent or motive—using the term 'dealers' for those who were motivated by a desire for profit, while using the term 'social suppliers' for those who may make



some profit, but were driven by other factors and would probably continue to supply even if no financial gain was to be made. More recently the concept of *minimally commercial supply* has been proposed in recognition that many otherwise social supply arrangements involve some small financial gain through taxing, mark-up or economies through bulk purchase (Coomber & Moyle 2014: 160–1). An Australian study of ecstasy suppliers found that about one-third of the small-scale dealers studied made some (typically small) profit, although monetary gain did not appear to be a primary driver for their drug supply involvement (Fowler, Kinner & Krenske 2007).

While the term social supply may accurately describe a common experience for many participants in various drug markets, there is concern that it may not be specific enough to be useful in law (see NZLC 2011; Potter 2009). Further, in the United Kingdom in particular, there has been extensive consideration of whether such low-level drug offences should be dealt with in law differently to 'drug dealing proper' (Home Affairs Committee 2002; Hough et al. 2003).

Aims

The aims of the project were to: 1) provide a detailed account of the ways in which young adults gain access to cannabis in a social supply market; 2) explore the impact of supply routes on different aspects of young people's lives, including access to other drugs, contact with police, schooling, and relationships with family and friends; 3) examine the relationship between demographic characteristics and access to cannabis; 4) explain young people's notions of drug dealing and social supply and how they relate to buying patterns and behaviour; 5) examine the extent, nature and impact of the involvement of police with cases where young people have been found to be selling cannabis; and 6) outline young people's understanding of the cannabis supply legislation.

Method

The project recruited cannabis users aged between 18 and 30 years in each of the three project sites. Eighty participants were recruited in both Perth and Melbourne and 40 in Armidale, New South Wales. These sites were chosen because they provided a range of contexts, comprising a mid-sized Australian capital city, a larger capital city and a large regional centre. Participants must have used cannabis at least monthly in the three months prior to interview and/or brokered access to or sold cannabis within the six months prior to interview. They were recruited through mainstream street press, flyers, snowballing and via the project website. Participants were reimbursed \$40 for attending the face-to-face interviews, which utilised a structured questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative components and took one to two hours to complete. The questionnaire addressed: demographics, experience of cannabis and other drug use, how they access cannabis, involvement in supplying cannabis and other drugs, and police contact regarding cannabis. The questionnaire included a standardised measure of cannabis dependence, the Severity of Dependence Scale (SDS) (Gossop et al. 1992), using a previously validated cut-off for cannabis dependence (Martin et al. 2006). The longer qualitative parts of the interviews were digitally recorded for transcription and analysis. A more detailed account of the methods including the interview schedule is available (Lenton et al. NDLERF 2015).

The project was approved by human research ethics committees at both Curtin University (HR 172/2011) and the University of New England (HE12-155).

Results

Demographics

The average age of the sample was 22 years (interquartile range=20–25 years) and 71 percent were male. There were no significant demographic differences between study sites in terms of age and

gender. The majority of the sample (60%) described an Australian or New Zealand ethnicity, followed by northwest European (27%). Only one percent identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. The participants were generally well educated for their age, with 61 percent of the sample having completed a tertiary qualification. Some 55 percent cited employment as their main income source, 26 percent pension or allowances, 12 percent family and only 4 percent said the sale of drugs was their main income stream. Some 54 percent lived in rental accommodation and 32 percent in their parents' home.

Cannabis use

Forty percent of those sampled were daily cannabis users and 41 percent were using more frequently than weekly, but not daily. The most commonly reported form of cannabis used was indoor-cultivated hydroponic 'hydro' (72%), followed by outdoor-cultivated 'bush' (63%), with only nine percent reporting compressed or purified hashish 'hash or resin' use as most common. Overall, results showed cannabis to be an important and embedded aspect of the lives of most of these participants. Participants reported using cannabis primarily to relax or have fun, yet 62 percent of the sample scored as cannabis-dependent on the SDS. Participants spent on average \$50 per week on cannabis for personal use, for an average of 5 grams of cannabis. The main source of funding for their cannabis was wages (61%) or benefits (16%) with only six percent nominating the sale of cannabis as their main source of funding for their own personal use.

Obtaining cannabis

For the purpose of the study, scoring or obtaining cannabis was defined as an occasion where participants purchased it, grew it or were given it, and it became their property. This practice was differentiated from simply sharing cannabis with someone at a social gathering (eg someone 'shouting' them a cone or sharing a joint). Overall,

participants obtained their cannabis from a median of three different people.

A group of mates and us chipped in, 50 bucks each or whatever and we got—this is only a couple of weeks ago, we got—I think we got half an ounce this time and... Well my friend has—he knows the people, I don't really deal in the buying side of things, but he knows the people, so he says how much we want to get, asks for the money and we just give it to him. [A25, male, 20 yrs]

Among all the people they get their cannabis from, the most frequently reported response was 'a friend gets it from a seller' (brokered) (70%), followed closely by 'a friend who sells' (58%) and 'direct from a seller or grower' (58%). To clarify, for the purpose of the study, 'a friend who sells' implied that the person from whom cannabis was obtained was primarily considered a 'friend' rather than a 'supplier', whereas 'direct from a seller or grower' implied that the relationship was primarily for the purpose of supply. When asked how they *most commonly* obtained their cannabis, this was 'direct from a seller or grower' (35%), 'from a friend who sells' (31%) and 'a friend gets it from a seller' (21%). Although participants often described their main cannabis supplier as 'a friend', roughly three-fifths reported this relationship was a friendship first, and two-fifths reported it was actually a supply relationship first. Less than one-quarter of the sample (18%) described their relationship with their main supplier as 'strictly business'.

Friendship came first, yeah. I've known him since I started high school, which would have been year 8, so 2008 and, yeah, the year he started dealing on the regular in 2011 so I'd known him for all that time and he always gave me good-sized bags and that, so I just bought and made him my main dealer because he's actually really nice and reliable. [P81, male, 18 yrs]

I met him through a friend of mine. I met him for the purposes of buying dope, but we've actually become good friends

outside of our business relationship. Yeah, because at first it was just a business kind of thing. You just go in, buy your dope, and get out. But we have a lot of stuff in common outside of smoking pot, like favourite movies, favourite music or favourite video games. It became more of an actual friendship than a business relationship. [P07, female, 23 yrs]

Participants reported obtaining cannabis from their main supplier for a median of one year. The participants' qualitative accounts of what happened the last time they scored or obtained cannabis provided rich descriptions of the relationship and the process of obtaining cannabis for these young users. Overall, transactions that occurred with *friends* tended to be a lot more informal and often occurred in relaxed social settings, whereas transactions that occurred with *dealers* tended to be 'strictly business', although it was common for even these transactions to be described as 'friendly'. Descriptions of transactions where friends sold cannabis often focused on the informal, social nature of the transaction. It was very common for participants to 'hang out' afterwards, sometimes for several hours, to watch movies, play video games or stay for dinner. Descriptions of transactions frequently involved cannabis use in conjunction with supply. A key explicit or implicit aspect of many of the transcripts describing obtaining cannabis was the high degree of trust between those obtaining and those supplying cannabis, who were typically known to each other.

Oh, just through friends, I suppose. Through someone that you know. No one wants to turn up to some dero's house and have to deal with someone that they don't know, don't feel comfortable with and don't know the background of. Especially because it is illegal. Nobody wants to expose themselves to risk, or an amount of risk they don't understand—a level of risk they're not aware of. [A26, male, 26 yrs]. Usually just through friends. I have a lot of friends who buy it in large quantities

and then sell it because it means that they get money and they also get to help us out, and it's more trustworthy that way... I just know that a lot of dealers in general can be a bit dodgy, they can rip you off, they can give you bad product, or product that's not what they say it is, so when you're buying from your friends you kind of have that trust going. [P68, female, 18 yrs]

Almost all participants reported that cannabis was either 'very easy' (56%) or 'easy' (36%) to obtain. The median amount obtained in a typical transaction was 3.5 grams (ie one-eighth of an ounce) and the median amount paid per transaction was \$50 (interquartile range=\$12.50–\$75). These are typical amounts for what is commonly referred to as a '50 bag'. No significant differences were found between the main way participants obtained their cannabis and key variables, including demographic characteristics, access to other drugs or history of having been apprehended by police.

Supplying cannabis

Participants were asked a range of questions related to their involvement in the supply of cannabis, which included giving, brokering, swapping or selling. For the purpose of the study, selling was defined as exchanging cannabis for goods or money. Brokering was defined as buying cannabis for others without making a profit. Giving was defined as supplying cannabis to another person, where it ceased to become their property and became the recipient's property.

Almost the entire sample (94%) reported supplying cannabis at some point in their lifetime, whether through giving, brokering, swapping or selling. The median age at which participants reported first supplying cannabis was 17 years old (interquartile range=16–18 years). Reported reasons for starting to supply cannabis included 'to help friends who couldn't obtain it themselves' (71%), 'to cover some or all of their own use' (23%), 'to make money' (13%) or 'to get a better deal (bulk buying)' (6%).

[I was] in the position to and didn't see any problem with it. If I had some they wanted it and I didn't, it made sense! Intention is to help out a friend who wouldn't be able to get it otherwise.
[M55, female, 20 yrs]

Those who currently supplied cannabis said they did so 'only to friends/family' (55%) or to 'friends/family and their friends' (32%), and a smaller proportion reported that they supplied to 'friends/family and their friends and occasionally to strangers' (8%). Only four percent reported that their current involvement in supply would be best described as 'I supply to anyone willing to buy, including strangers'. Among current suppliers, 57 percent said 'I supply for the same price as originally purchased' (brokering), some 21 percent said 'I give cannabis away—I never broker or sell' and some said they sold for profit that 'covers their own use' (12%) or 'a little bit extra' (6%). Only three percent reported that their current involvement in supply could be best described as 'I supply cannabis for profit that covers my use plus significant profit'.

It makes it a lot easier to be able to smoke cannabis because you're able to have that little bit extra to buy and not have to dig into your own money. It's just sort of a self-working cycle, it's just a circle that goes around. So you buy lots, you sell a bit, you've got some left over and then you buy lots, you sell a bit, you've got some left over and then you don't have to buy it yourself and you don't have to waste your own money.
[A13, male, 18 yrs]

Some 83 percent of those who reported that they had ever supplied cannabis had also done so in the past six months and 64 percent had done so in the past month. Recent suppliers reported supplying for a median of two years. The median number of people to whom participants reported currently supplying cannabis was four (interquartile range=3–8 people). The most commonly reported way that recent suppliers said transactions were arranged was 'people phone me and I arrange to meet them' (71%), followed by 'people

come to my house' (56%) and then 'people phone me and I drop at their house' (41%). Also common was 'acting as an intermediary' (39%).

Qualitative data indicated that the majority (78%) of participants who had supplied cannabis in the past six months did not identify as drug dealers, while some (20%) did consider themselves to be dealers and others were uncertain (3%). Responses to this question were often interesting. Some were taken aback by the seeming accusation that they were drug dealers. Others said they had never previously reflected on their status. In terms of defining their own supply activities, some participants did not consider themselves dealers because they supplied only to friends, did not consider cannabis to be a drug and/or did not supply regularly. Of those that did view themselves as dealers, the most common reason for doing so was that they dealt 'drugs' by definition or considered that making a profit meant they were dealers.

I see dealing as kind of your main thing. Like if you're a dealer you're always on call; you're not always on call but you've pretty much always got to answer your phone and buy larger amounts. You either grow it yourself or you know—you're higher up in the chain and you'd have a lot of profit. That would be your main motive I see as a dealer is to make money. [M71, male, 22 yrs]

Participants who had supplied cannabis in the past month said the median amount of cannabis supplied in a typical week was 3 grams (interquartile range=1–7 g) and the median amount that cannabis was sold for in a typical week was \$45 (interquartile range=\$19–\$100). The majority of people who brokered or sold did not report that they were chiefly concerned with making a profit. Many participants who brokered for others did not charge an additional amount over and above the cost price. Similarly, many who sold cannabis would sell it at market value, and some even gave their friends a good deal to their own disadvantage.

Police contact

Some 26 percent of the sample reported that they had on at least one occasion been found in possession of cannabis by the police. The median number of times this had occurred was once (range=1–6 times). Only 17 percent of those who were found in possession of cannabis by the police reported that they were 'charged with a possession offence' the last time they were apprehended. Some 54 percent reported that being apprehended by police 'made no difference' to their life, whereas 46 percent reported a negative impact on their life (in relation to employment, relationships, travel, etc.). Only 13 percent reported an actual change or reduction in their cannabis use as a result of being apprehended by police. Only one participant reported that they had ever been arrested for supplying cannabis.

Understanding of cannabis law

Although most people who engaged in supply did not consider themselves to be 'a dealer', most understood that their activities would be regarded as such in law. Almost the entire sample reported that they carry cannabis on their person, although the amounts were well under the deemed supply limits for cannabis under the law in their respective jurisdiction: Western Australia (100 g), Victoria (250 g) and New South Wales (300 g). There was no evidence that participants were unwittingly putting themselves at risk of a deemed supply charge. The median amounts of cannabis participants thought would attract a deemed supply charge were well below the specified deeming amounts.

Conclusions and implications

The overwhelming experience of the cannabis market by most participants in this study, whether they were involved in obtaining or supplying cannabis, could be captured by the broad notion of social supply. The findings have implications for the policing of social supply drug markets, public education of participants in the social supply market, and how social supply offences are dealt with in law.

The findings reinforce the view that social supply markets possess a number of attributes that make them a challenge for drug law enforcement. Participants described a closed market, characterised by high levels of trust among consumers and suppliers already known to each other at the level of adjacent pairs or small group networks, typically selling in private. Deals made in public places were usually the result of prearranged buys. Indeed, the social supply markets described by participants in this study look to be less harmful than more open, street-based drug markets. This raises questions about whether increasing detection of participants in social supply markets should be a major focus of policing efforts.

Although most people who engaged in supply understood that their activities would be regarded as such in law, most did not consider themselves to be 'a dealer' and many had ways of thinking about their own cannabis supply activities that reinforced their belief that they were not 'true dealers'. Although most, when posed the question, acknowledged that what they were doing did constitute cannabis supply in legal terms, many did not seem to engage with the fact that they were potentially exposing themselves to a serious criminal charge. They did not consider themselves to be 'dealers' because they often saw their cannabis supply as 'helping out friends', often in reciprocal relationships, and mostly involving no or minimal profit.

There may be some benefit in considering a potentially targeted public education campaign about how even low-level social supply is considered and dealt with in law.

In other countries there has been consideration given as to whether, and how, low-level supply offences should be dealt with in law, however, as noted above, there have been problems identified in using 'social supply' as a legal term. Given that there appeared to be few differences between participants in this study who were engaged in cannabis consumption and those engaged in cannabis supply, and noting the high level of dependence

in this sample, there may be some merit in considering expanding current Australian drug diversion options—which typically include drug information and a brief intervention—beyond simple possession offences to include low-level supply of cannabis and perhaps other drugs. While what constitutes low-level supply would need to be defined and legislative change may be needed to allow the diversion schemes to apply to even this level of supply offences, the operational detail of how the schemes would deal with such offences would likely be primarily a regulatory rather than a legislative matter.

There is not scope here to consider in detail how this might work in practice; however, aspects of how diversion for drug possession offences currently operates in all states and territories would provide some possible way forward: 1) if one or more Australian jurisdictions were to implement diversion for low-level supply offences, this could be done through regulation, rather than legislative change; 2) the intervention could include information on drugs and the law, especially the consequences of a further supply charge, along with assessment of dependence and targeted intervention for those individuals assessed as needing it; 3) limiting the diversion option to those charged with their first or second low-level supply offence, consistent with the possession scheme operating in the jurisdiction, would seem appropriate; 4) specifying weight limits on eligibility for diversion for supply could provide a working legal definition of low-level supply for the purpose of diversion; and 5) any such program should be subject to evaluation to determine its viability and effectiveness in terms of the individuals apprehended, the workability from a policing point of view, the effects on other stakeholders, such as the drug treatment agencies, and the views of the wider community.

If there is interest in pursuing this option in one or more Australian jurisdictions, an advisory group could be formed to consider the merits and costs of such an idea, and a discussion document could

be commissioned to scope how such a proposal could work in practice.

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