

The informal economy in prison

Studying prisoner trading can offer significant insights into prison life observes **Dulcie Faure Walker**

Prisons are, by definition, coercive organisations where prisoners have limited control over their day-to-day life. In each prison, there is one shop, the 'canteen', and there are jobs available for prisoners to supplement their weekly allowance. These constitute the formal prison economy – the legitimate methods for prisoners to earn wages and purchase goods. However, the prison environment also provides informal ways of making money and obtaining prohibited items.

The informal economy, also referred to as the illicit or underground economy, permeates prisoner social relations and structures. It has interested prison ethnographers, particularly those who note its importance in the study of power, adaptation and compliance (Crewe, 2009), and in terms of portrayals of masculinity and ethnicity (Phillips, 2012). But there are few exploratory studies devoted solely to examining the informal economy at both the individual and collective levels. It can be difficult to study and generalise, as systems vary from prison to prison and change over time, in line with prison policy. In order to gauge an idea about life inside prison it is necessary to listen to the voices of prisoners and hear their perspectives, especially in regard to this particular topic; only prisoners themselves can explain its intricacies. This article is based on wider research on prison informal economies, using interviews with male prisoners who generously gave up their time to speak to me about this.

English prisons are cash-free; prisoners' money is kept in their

prison account which is made up of a combination of earnings (if they work), allowance and any funds sent in. Each week, they are allowed to spend an amount stipulated by their Incentives and Earned Privilege (IEP) level in the prison canteen, where they can purchase food and drink, phone credit and tobacco. Tobacco takes on the role of currency in coercive environments and its use for bartering in lieu of money is well known, for example, in Prisoner of War camps (Radford, 1945). Prisoners in the past have discussed tobacco as if it were money. However, some prisoners now talk of this changing due to the influx of 'legal highs': the umbrella term for the synthetic cannabinoid substances circulating throughout prison and the rest of the UK, linked with rises in violence and other problems across the prison estate (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2014).

Trading legal highs

In prison, the cost of an item depends on how difficult it is to obtain. The higher the security category, the more expensive an illicit item will be. Legal highs are low cost because of their availability; they are difficult to detect by sniffer dogs and can circulate within prison with relative ease in comparison with other drugs. The drugs likely to be used in prison are those offering a sedating effect such as certain prescription medications and cannabis, which is recognised

as helping prisoners manage their sentence and make time 'flow' (Cope, 2003). To a lesser extent heroin is also used for this effect. Prisoners who admit to smoking legal highs, namely 'Spice' (a synthetic form of cannabis), say it offers a combination of desired effects: it can clear the mind and manipulate time – 'the basic structuring dimension of prison life' (Sparks et al., 1996) – helping it pass quicker. Because it is cheap, users say that smoking Spice is a way of getting the most for their money with the least risk, as it evades detection on Mandatory Drug Tests (MDTs). Those who had previously favoured smoking cannabis regularly said they preferred to smoke Spice now

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for this reason. In addition, it is odourless and can be smoked in the presence of officers, disguised as a rolled cigarette – sometimes used to mock

officers and their authority. Cannabis produces a distinctive smell and so trading it discreetly is not as easy.

In terms of the prison informal economy, one prisoner said legal highs were 'messaging everything up' – changing the prices of other items, with prisoners trading in Spice rather than tobacco. This individual had spent the majority of his life in prison, beginning in borstals in the 1980s, with intermittent breaks of freedom in the outside world. He felt random MDTs encouraged the use of stronger drugs (heroin passes through the system quicker than cannabis) – a somewhat contested topic in recent years. Having experienced prison both before and after MDTs were introduced, he blamed them for the previous rise in heroin, and now for the prevalence of legal highs. He argued that some prisoners will use drugs to cope with *doing* their time no matter what, because normal coping mechanisms are limited in prison so they will seek other methods to relax and de-stress. He felt it to be better that the prison knew what drugs were being taken, and attempted to keep these

controlled, rather than enforcing unrealistic ideals of drug-free prisons, with draconian penalties for those found to be using. The senior management countered that, fundamentally, the general public are the tax-paying customers; it is essential for the prison service to be seen as having a zero-tolerance policy, regardless of the supposed inadvertent consequences.

Everything has a price

Classic prison sociology recognised that the informal economy exists to mitigate the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958), alleviating prisoners' deprivation and allowing them to obtain goods and services prohibited by the prison authorities. Where personal belongings are tightly controlled and restricted, there is always something to trade. As one prisoner told me, 'everything has a price in here'. If not a physical object, this could be a service, such as carrying out a favour. Those with skills, such as barbers, spoke of how they could exchange their service for something else they needed.

As for physical objects, mobile phones are perhaps the most expensive item traded in prison, because of the risk – if caught the penalty is harsh. Although mobile phones may be purchased to organise illicit deals or other illegal behaviour, this is not the only reason for their use. The cost of phone credit in prison is high, and, unless the prison has in-cell telephones, there are often long queues for prison phones during association hours. Prisoners claim that mobile phones can be purchased or borrowed in order to maintain contact with loved ones. Having a mobile phone also means that prisoners are contactable (prison phones cannot receive incoming calls).

Trading day

Canteen day, when prisoners can purchase tobacco, phone credit, snacks and drinks, is only once a week, but there are usually informal prisoner-run shops set up in a couple of cells on each wing – an example of how prisoners manage within this limitation. Depending on the

size of the wing, there are usually two or three, run by a small trusted group, who stock up items and sell at marginally inflated prices. They also loan items, at high interest. Paying back double – the 'double bubble' in prison vernacular – is the rule of borrowing. With the inflated rates imposed by shopkeepers, and the double bubble with fellow prisoners, it can be easy to fall into a spiral of increasing debt. Debt in prison is portrayed as a bigger problem than ever before, linked to the dominance of Spice. When inquiring about debt in one prison, I was told to focus on Friday – canteen day. It was when debts were collected and punishments inflicted, hence the epithet, 'black eye Friday', used by both prisoners and staff. It was also when most thefts took place.

Debt and debtors

Debtors are generally not trusted, and thought likely to steal from others. Prisoners also found it unfair that officers were preoccupied with debtors – arranging cell or wing moves, or even transfers between prisons. They said the way the prison dealt with people in debt did nothing to discourage borrowing. However, debt can also be inherited either from the previous cell occupant or an associate. Someone who has fallen into debt may not have necessarily brought it upon himself.

Even those who denied any involvement with the illicit goods trade said they saw the appeal: the money to be made is in stark contrast to the wages for legitimate work. There are limited opportunities to earn a decent wage legitimately in prison. Although prisoners usually have money sent in from family and friends outside, this is not always the case. One interviewee said he knew someone who 'dealt to survive'. He had provided the income for his family, who were now struggling financially as a result of his incarceration.

However, money is not the only motive behind trading. Setting up a shop or participating in a supply network is one way to keep occupied and utilise skills mentally and physically. It offers those involved a

sense of purpose and possibly a reputation within the prisoner community. Taking on a role and feeling in control can counteract the assault on an individual's identity that imprisonment entails. Some prisoners spoke of continuing to trade goods as a way of maintaining their character, others spoke of the thrill of illicit dealing. It is also a form of resistance against the establishment. As stated by one prisoner, 'they hate the system, so by beating it they feel they've got one over on it.'

The informal economy mitigates the various pains of imprisonment – both material and psychological. It is complex, dynamic and changing, comprised of a web of conditions, obligations and consequences. Prisoners have always traded, but it is *what* is in demand and *why* which is of interest. This article offers a brief account of the current situation and the causal mechanisms between the effects of imprisonment and prisoner trade. Exploring the informal economy further would reveal much about the current climate of prison life and the different modes of adaptation, coping and resistance. ■

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