

**FRONTS AND FRIENDS: SOCIAL CONTINGENCIES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF  
DRUG DEBT**

by

Allison Laing

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1999

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES  
(Sociology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

August 2020

© Allison Laing, 2020

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

Fronts and friends: Social contingencies in the management of drug debt

submitted by Allison Laing in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology

**Examining Committee:**

Dr. Lindsey Richardson, Department of Sociology

---

**Supervisor**

Dr. Emily Huddart-Kennedy, Department of Sociology

---

**Supervisory Committee Member**

## **Abstract**

Illicit drug markets and drug use have long been associated with violence and disorder, especially in marginalized communities. Previous research on governance frameworks in drug markets has focused on violence and other modes of control enacted by drug distributors and dealers. This work has thus far neglected the experiences of marginalized people who buy illicit drugs for their own consumption as well as informal debt structures that exist outside the dealer/buyer relationship. Drawing on interviews with 75 people who use drugs within a disadvantaged neighborhood in Vancouver, Canada, we explore the role of social ties and negotiation in navigating credit and debt associated with drug procurement as well as managing conflict within a drug market contingent on credit. Our findings show that people who use drugs strategically engage in non-violent tactics to mitigate harm linked to drug procurement and, to a greater extent, debt and default. These strategies involve cultivating reputation capital to build trust and strengthen the relationship between buyer and dealer, which stabilizes the drug market and discourages violent retaliation. We also uncover reciprocal arrangements within social networks that strengthen social cohesion in the community. Our findings highlight the significance of the broader risk environment of poverty, structural vulnerability, drug policy, and unintended harms arising from government systems of financial support for marginalized populations. Further research is urgently needed to explore programmatic and policy interventions to complement existing community processes and structures that could further mitigate harms associated with purchase and use of illicit drugs.

## **Lay Summary**

Buying, selling and using drugs is often associated with violence, especially within poor communities. Previous research has focused on how dealers maintain control of the drug market, but has mostly overlooked the experiences of poor people who buy drugs for their own use, as well as how they borrow and lend within friendship circles. We interviewed 75 people who use drugs within a disadvantaged neighborhood in Vancouver, Canada, exploring how people managed their debts to dealers and friends. We found that people developed strategies to avoid violence connected to buying drugs on credit. Both buyers and user/dealers endeavored to protect their reputations as trustworthy and reliable, and preferred non-violent measures, such as negotiating new payment schedules, rather than violence to respond to unpaid debts. We also found strong social bonds in the community that were strengthened through borrowing and lending between friends and neighbors.

## **Preface**

This thesis draws on research conducted at the British Columbia Centre on Substance Use and the University of British Columbia by Dr. Lindsey Richardson, Principal Investigator of *The impact of Alternative Social Assistance disbursement on drug-related harm: a randomized controlled trial*, (TASA Study).

Allison Laing was responsible for collecting the qualitative interviews, conducting and/or supervising the coding of qualitative data, conceptualizing the current study, analyzing data for the current study, and writing the manuscript.

The TASA Study obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia / Providence Health Care Research Institute, H14-02401.

TASA is a registered clinical trial at [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/study/NCT02457949) NCT-0245-7949.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Lay Summary</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1    Everyday Violence.....	3
1.2    Anomie, Reputation Capital, and Social Cooperation .....	4
<b>Chapter 2: Methods</b> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1    Study Context.....	8
2.2    Parent Study Design.....	8
2.3    Qualitative Sub-Study.....	9
2.4    Data Analysis .....	10
2.5    Sample Description.....	13
<b>Chapter 3: Results</b> .....	<b>15</b>
3.1    Managing Debt to Dealers .....	15
3.2    Managing Debt to Friends .....	25
<b>Chapter 4: Discussion</b> .....	<b>31</b>
4.1    Limitations .....	33

4.2	Conclusion .....	34
<b>References</b>	<b>.....</b>	<b>35</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1. Coding Schematic and Inter-coder Stability .....	12
Table 2. Sample Demographics (n=75) .....	14
Table 3. Characteristics & Exposures of Participants Quoted (n=23 of 75 participants) .....	17

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Social Mechanism of Reputation Capital, Buyer/Dealer Relationship, and Negotiation in Stabilizing Drug Market and Mitigating Violence .....	6
Figure 2. Social Control, Exchange, and Reputational Processes in Managing Debt .....	11

## List of Abbreviations

DTES	Downtown Eastside
PWUD	People Who Use Drugs
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
TASA:	<u>T</u> he impact on <u>A</u> lternative <u>S</u> ocial <u>A</u> ssistance Disbursement on drug-related harm (or “Cheque Day Study”)

## **Acknowledgements**

I offer deep gratitude to Dr. Lindsey Richardson for her towering intellect, infectious enthusiasm, exacting standards, and generous mentorship. Sincere thanks to faculty and staff at UBC Sociology Department, in particular, Dr. Amin Ghaziani who provided critical feedback on earlier versions of this thesis. I gratefully acknowledge the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research (MSFHR) for funding this research, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada (SSHRC) Graduate Scholarship Master's Award for supporting my studies. Special thanks to David Paterson for his humor and insight, and for agreeing to make dinner every night for two years. Most of all, I wish to thank the study participants who gave of their time and expertise.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Illicit drug use and drug markets have long been associated with violence and disorder. In popular portrayals and academic research alike, there is a persistent conception of drug sellers as predatory criminals, and people who use drugs as non-agentic subjects of drug markets characterized by gangland hierarchies, turf-wars, fraudulent practices, exploitation, distrust, fear and violence (Werb et al. 2011). Goldstein (1985) highlights the “traditionally aggressive patterns of interaction within the system of drug distribution and use” and asserts that because extra-legal contexts preclude access to formal conflict resolution, violence is “intrinsic to involvement with any illicit substance” (p. 497). Research has since confirmed the association of violence with drug use (Pierce et al. 2017) and drug markets, showing that violence is widely deployed as a tool of regulation and control to assert market dominance or deter customer misdeeds (Martínez, Rosenfeld, and Mares 2008; Richardson et al. 2015). Emerging research challenges Goldstein’s drug/violence nexus and examines variation in levels of violence within drug markets, showing that drug sellers often avoid violence because it is costly; it disrupts business, attracts attention from police, drains organizational resources, and invites retaliation from competitors and victims (Dickinson 2019; Jacques and Wright 2008; Moeller and Sandberg 2017). Instead, mid-level suppliers or closed-market dealers will often opt for non-violent modes of governance informed by non-economic, cultural, and social motives. In closed-market urban settings, violence is conceptualized as one component of a resource exchange/social control typology that describes drug market interactions ranging from monetary transaction to dominant control (Jacques and Wright 2008), as a tool of last resort (Dickinson 2019; Dwyer and Moore 2010; Moeller and Sandberg 2017), or culturally inappropriate as in social supply markets (selling MDMA in a party scene) where dealers have established relationships with their

customers (Taylor and Potter 2013). This research has focused not on the violence and why it occurs, but why it does *not*. However, while scholars have investigated why “even the most volatile drug markets are peaceful most of the time” (Jacques and Wright 2008, p.223), they have thus far focused solely on debt related directly to drug procurement with scant attention paid to informal credit structures and exchanges within social networks adjacent to drug markets, potentially overlooking non-economic mechanisms outside the dealer/buyer relationship that may influence conditions that lead to violence. Additionally, within the literature that looks at drug-market dynamics from the perspective of dealers and mid-level suppliers, the experiences of socio-economically marginalized people who buy illicit drugs for their own consumption are relatively understudied, as are the mechanisms of social support and sanction that encourage culturally appropriate behavior within drug-user groups that lead to or alleviate violence.

To address these gaps, we interviewed people within an inner-city neighborhood in Vancouver, Canada to explore the following questions: what does debt mean to people who use drugs (PWUD), and how do social networks shape strategies to address drug debt and associated harms including exposure to violence? Our sample comprised socio-economically marginalized PWUD who received government assistance, and included those who engaged in dealing drugs for survival income within their neighborhood. Our objective is to further develop the concept of “reputation capital” (Brockman 1996) by describing the processes by which people who buy and use drugs structure their drug-related business and credit arrangements. By developing the mechanisms underlying reputation capital, we challenge assumptions that violence is inevitable in drug transactions and that a dominant illicit economy – such as a thriving drug trade – within a context marked by social exclusion necessarily erases normative social regulation.

## 1.1 Everyday Violence

Socioeconomic inequalities in health and mortality have been extensively documented (Link and Phelan 1995). In marginalized neighborhoods, such as the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver Canada, the health harms associated with poverty are amplified for PWUD, resulting in higher rates of premature mortality (Sordo et al. 2017), chronic physical conditions (Degenhardt et al. 2014), homelessness (Linton et al. 2013), mental health issues (Palepu et al. 2013) and higher levels of unemployment and financial instability (Richardson, Wood, and Kerr 2013).

Previous epidemiological and public health research in the neighborhood has applied a risk environment framework to promote an understanding of harm as “a matter of contingent causation” (Rhodes 2009, p. 193) and to demonstrate the role of risk environments in producing drug-related harms, including exposure to violence (Boyd et al. 2018; Jaffe et al. 2018; Richardson et al. 2015). Risk environments are a product of social situations and physical spaces exogenous to the individual in which PWUD navigate drug-related behavior. They operate at micro-, meso-, and macro-level and include physical (spaces where drugs are bought), economic (poverty, high cost of drugs), social (stigma, racism, gender inequality) and political (drug and social policy; enforcement) factors that shape harm (Rhodes 2009). Prohibition-based drug policy, institutional detachment, law enforcement, socioeconomic marginalization, and structural barriers to employment for PWUD allow for the existence of an illicit drug market where vulnerable people are compelled to manage their substance use disorders, mental health, and finances in the absence of adequate legal income streams and institutional supports (Werb et al. 2011).

However, while acknowledging the heightened risk and experience of violence in the lives of people who use drugs in the DTES (Boyd et al. 2018; Richardson et al. 2015; Small et al. 2013), we argue that important mechanisms related to violence have been overlooked. Due to the intensity of the risk environment in which they live, we postulate that PWUD strategically engage in tactics to avoid or mitigate violence linked to drug purchase, and to a greater extent, drug-related debt. These strategies involve reputational processes that strengthen the relationship between lender and borrower, and in turn facilitate the stability of the drug market.

## **1.2 Anomie, Reputation Capital, and Social Cooperation**

Popular and academic perceptions linking drugs to violence and chaos are rooted in notions of drug use as a deviant behavior. Sociological theories such as strain, social control, and institutional anomie couple drug use with social exclusion and detachment from socially ascribed goals, conventional social controls, and institutions (Merton 1938). Substance use and attendant criminal behavior are viewed as symptomatic of a degradation of social regulation and normative social integration (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). However, in light of structural barriers to material and social resources required to pursue conventional, socially-ascribed goals within marginalized communities, we argue that the identity and reputational processes undertaken by PWUD as well as their adherence to clear rules that govern drug transactions and borrowing behavior point to the existence of strong social integration.

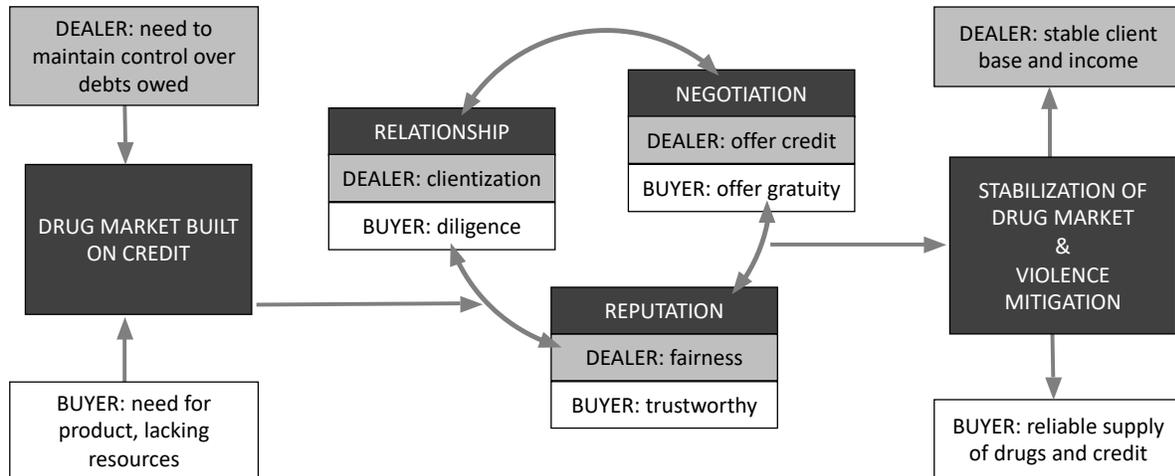
The formation of identities through interaction with others within a given context (Goffman 1959), including *personal identity*, perception of one's values, standards, and goals; and *social identity*, perception of specific social role, are germane to understanding the behavior of people who participate in illicit drug markets. As a component of identity formation, people who buy and sell drugs also engage in reputational processes to manage the impression others

have of them (Goffman 1959). Building or maintaining a desirable reputation involves *costly signaling* (Smith and Bird 2003), a bio-evolutionary term used by economists that is defined as demonstrating favorable yet unobservable traits through performative gestures that come at some personal cost. Costly signaling may involve a performance of strength (sanctioning other's transgressions) or influence (behaving in a generous, even altruistic manner). Within the study context, PWUD often obtain drugs on credit from a dealer to be repaid when the borrower receives income, often in the form of a monthly income assistance (IA) check, a practice referred to as "fronting" or "cuffing". In order to garner favorable treatment from a dealer, a buyer may signal their favorable characteristics through a demonstration of trustworthiness, compliance, and reliability, such as seeking out lender to repay or offering a gratuity. Conversely, in order to secure a loyal client base, a dealer may signal that they possess desirable traits such as trust, integrity, and fairness (Jackson 2008) through clientization practices such as extending credit or accepting delayed payment from customers (Dwyer and Moore 2010).

Understanding how the expression and repayment of trust operates as a social signaling mechanism and influences competitive and cooperative behavior (King-Casas 2005) is relevant to understanding the borrowing and lending behavior of PWUD. Normally confined to corporate management scholarship, the term *reputation capital* refers to the intangible asset of trust and is a means of measuring competence, integrity and value of a company (Brockman 1996). Cultural theorists have similarly argued that, the absence of economic capital, moral worth has evolved into a form of symbolic capital that constrains or encourages economic choices and draws clear distinctions between deserving and undeserving (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 2000; Sherman 2006). We extend this work by arguing that reputation capital describes the mechanism by which trust relationships in drug markets are built, how lender/dealers signal trustworthiness and integrity

and select competent business prospects, how borrower/buyers signal reliability, and how friends govern loans and reciprocal arrangements within social networks.

**Figure 1. Social Mechanism of Reputation Capital, Buyer/Dealer Relationship, and Negotiation in Stabilizing Drug Market and Mitigating Violence**



To explore themes of reputation capital and the role of social ties in procuring drugs on credit and securing informal loans, we focus on the experiences of people who buy and use drugs within a marginalized community in Vancouver, Canada. We highlight descriptions of interactions with dealers, friends, and neighbors within the community, and include the perspective of marginalized PWUD who simultaneously engaged in street-level dealing for survival income and purchased illicit drugs for their own use. We advance prior research that has investigated the role of relationships and negotiation in managing conflict in the drug market through an examination of the reputational processes and signaling that build trust for marginalized PWUD. We show that PWUD mobilize reputation capital to form social identity and strengthen relationships as a strategy to avoid or mitigate violence linked to drug

transactions. Through this exploration, we identify key mechanisms that exacerbate or attenuate the production of violence in marginalized communities.

## **Chapter 2: Methods**

### **2.1 Study Context**

The DTES is an inner-city community in Vancouver Canada that is known for its concentration of socio-economic marginalization, homelessness, substance use, overdose, mental illness, and violence (Boyd et al. 2018; Culhane 2003; Jaffe et al. 2018; Richardson et al. 2015, 2013; Small et al. 2013). Although characterized by an open drug market and visible poverty, the DTES is also known for innovative harm reduction policy and social activism (Lupick 2017). Despite its unique socio-historical identity, Vancouver typifies an inner-city risk environment that engenders exposure to drug-related harm: socio-economic marginalization, historic and ongoing colonial practices, health and educational inequities, structural barriers to legal income streams, prohibition-based drug policy and enforcement (Duneier 2016; Friedman et al. 2004; Rowe et al. 2015; Shaw et al. 2007), which allow us to examine broader issues of drug market regulation and attendant harms.

### **2.2 Parent Study Design**

We use qualitative interviews gathered as a component of the TASA “Cheque Day Study” (The impact on Alternative Social Assistance disbursement on drug-related harm) described in detail elsewhere (Richardson et al. 2016). Conducted between November 2015 and December 2018, TASA is a mixed methods experimental study involving an exploratory, parallel group, unblinded randomized controlled trial (RCT) to test whether changing the timing and frequency of income assistance payment schedules is effective in reducing drug-related harm around government check issue. We recruited 194 people who use illicit substances (i.e. excluding alcohol and cannabis), were in receipt of provincial IA benefits, and who reported increased drug use around government check issue. Eligible participants were randomly

allocated to receive IA on synchronized monthly government schedule (control group), monthly desynchronized schedule (“staggered” experimental group), or on semi-monthly split and desynchronized schedule (“split and staggered” experimental group) for a 6-month period. Participants completed interviewer-administered questionnaires every two weeks after enrollment for the duration of the study to assess impacts of alternative disbursement schedules on monthly patterns of drug use and associated harms. We aimed to recruit a diverse sample into the parent RCT through chain referral sampling, outreach, and advertisements in medical and community spaces throughout the neighborhood (Heckathorn 2002).

### **2.3 Qualitative Sub-Study**

A nested, parallel qualitative evaluation provided the data used in the current analysis. Using maximum variation sampling to allow for a range of experiences and perspectives, we recruited 75 participants into the qualitative sub-study (Suri 2011). Between November 2015 and March 2018, we conducted 121 interviews. Prior to data collection, we obtained written informed consent. Participants were compensated \$30 for full interviews and \$15 for brief intervention feasibility assessments. Both parent and qualitative sub-study received ethical approval from the University of British Columbia/Providence Health Care Research Ethics Board.

The qualitative study aimed to capture experiences transitioning to and receiving IA on an altered schedule, financial management strategies, drug use patterns, and exposure to violence, among other topics. To explore patterns of drug debt we asked: *Do you ever take on debts to obtain drugs? Under what circumstances? How do you repay your debts? Have you experienced negative consequences related to drug debt?* Interviews lasted between 15 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and uploaded into NVivo.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

For the current study, we conducted exploratory analyses of debt strategies undertaken by borrowers and lenders to mitigate debt-related violence. We performed initial coding based on interview topic guides and extracted descriptions of financial management, social interaction, and violence to examine patterns of drug debt and the impact of social ties on navigating debt. Our primary outcome variable was debt of any description: borrowing, lending, owing, collecting, bartering, trading, working off, punishing, or forgiving debt. In our second round of coding, we used codes deductively informed by theories of anomie to identify guiding principles (Merton 1938; Messner and Rosenfeld 1997), typologies of drug-related violence (Goldstein 1985), and resource exchange/social control to understand drug market violence and modes of control (Jacques and Wright 2008). We also built on previously identified modes of mutual or unidirectional exchange (Gouldner 1960) within drug markets, including trade, sales, barter, service, gift, predation and theft (Dwyer and Moore 2010; Moeller and Sandberg 2017).

To understand how debt reverberated in peoples' lives, what it meant to owe different types of lenders, and measures taken to manage debts, we collected descriptions of social control linked to drug debt, including forcing, pressuring, or encouraging behavior. From this, we developed a typology of social control (see Figure 2) enacted by lenders and borrowers describing coercive, assertive, cooperative, collective arrangements, and opting out. To grasp social norms governing credit transactions across various circumstances, we captured two kinds of exchange, economic (business transaction) and social exchange (involving social ties), which existed across two systems of credit: informal (friends, neighbors) and illegal (dealers).



ideal opportunity to identify underlying meanings and mechanisms of drug debt.

To address concerns about reproducibility and ascertain the intersubjective stability of our coding schematic, we conducted reliability tests (Campbell et al. 2013). We selected a representative sample of our interview transcripts that comprised approximately 10% of the data subset, demarcated units of text to be coded, and trained an independent coder on our thematic framework, analytic approach, and the specific context in which the study took place. The independent coder then analyzed the sample text using the coding schematic (outlined in Table 1), yielding above 82% interrater reliability for all domains, confirming the stability of our coding schematic (Banerjee et al. 1999).

**Table 1. Coding Schematic and Inter-coder Stability**

Code	Description	Stability
Ethos	This theme incorporates expressions of guiding principles, norms, values, both personal and reflecting the broader social context. Includes reputational processes (signaling trustworthiness, rejecting unfair treatment); debt avoidance (self-sufficiency); valuing community (cooperation, gifts, accountability, solidarity); and aversion to violence (negotiating repayment terms, complying with penalties for default, debt forgiveness).	.82
Exchange	This theme encompasses descriptions of drug transactions and distinguishes between a purely economic exchange and one that has embedded social elements. Includes trade, bartering of goods, exchange of service, employment arrangements, reciprocity, toleration, and gifts.	.89
Social Control	This theme includes descriptions of compelling, pressuring, or encouraging desirable behavior and punishing undesirable behavior. Mechanisms of social control include violent force, threats, coercion, extortion, credit denial, obligation, loyalty, and intentional default.	.87
Violence	This theme captures descriptions of violence related to drug debt, use, or purchase. Includes physical violence as payment in lieu of money, punishment, deterrent, and non-physical violence such as threats, degradation, and symbolic violence.	1.00

## 2.5 Sample Description

The qualitative study sample (described in Table 2) was composed of 33 (44%) self-identified women and 42 (56%) self-identified men. Twenty-seven (36%) self-identified as Indigenous, 45 (60%) as white, and three (4%) as Asian. The median age was 46, with an interquartile range of 41–52 years old. In order to derive time-updated variables including income generation activity and housing status, we linked each qualitative interview with the participant's most proximal quantitative survey. At the time of interview, 21 participants (28%) were homeless (outdoors, shelter, recovery, hospital, couch-surfing) and 13 participants (17%) self-reported engagement in street-level drug dealing. We looked at illicit drug use (including opioid, stimulant and sedatives; excluding cannabis and alcohol), anchored at baseline patterns to allow for potential lagged impacts from drug debt. We found that 35% were using daily or almost daily (defined as using  $\geq 10$  days in 2 weeks prior to baseline), 45% used occasionally or moderately (between one and nine days), and 20% reported no use of illicit drugs.

We now turn to our results. We start by describing measures to navigate credit related to drug procurement. We identify three approaches to managing debt to dealers – cooperative, coercive, and assertive negotiation – and describe how avoidance of violence can expose participants to financial, social or reputational harm. We then explore how debt was operationalized within social networks and identify two mechanisms that facilitated socially-contingent credit: collective negotiation and opting out.

Table 2. Sample Demographics (n=75)

	N (%)
<b>Age</b>	
Mean=45.6, Min=25, Max=60, Median=46, IQR=41-52	
20 – 39	15 (20%)
40 – 49	34 (45%)
50+	26 (35%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Indigenous	27 (36%)
White	45 (60%)
Asian	3 (4%)
<b>Self-identified Gender</b>	
Women <sup>†</sup>	33 (44%)
Men <sup>^</sup>	42 (56%)
<b>Housing</b>	
Stable housing	54 (72%)
Shelter	5 (7%)
Recovery	5 (7%)
Street homeless <sup>*</sup>	11 (15%)
<b>Income Generation</b>	
Dealing	13 (17%)
Sex work	9 (12%)
Theft	2 (3%)
Employment	10 (13%)
Binning, vending, panhandling, selling cigarettes	21 (28%)
Volunteer stipends <sup>Ω</sup>	7 (9%)
No income generation	26 (35%)
<b>Drug use at first interview</b>	
Opioid use ≥ 10 days in past 2 weeks	8 (11%)
Stimulant use ≥ 10 days in past 2 weeks	12 (16%)
Poly drug use ≥ 10 days in past 2 weeks <sup>‡</sup>	6 (8%)
Moderate use ≥ 5 and ≤ 9 days in past 2 weeks	13 (17%)
Occasional use ≥ 4 days in past 2 weeks	21 (28%)
No hard drug use (may report alcohol or cannabis)	15 (20%)

<sup>†</sup> includes 2 trans women

<sup>^</sup> includes 1 trans man

<sup>\*</sup> includes sleeping outdoors, couch surfing, living in tent city

<sup>Ω</sup> defined as performing a discrete task for a small honorarium, usually \$3- \$10

<sup>‡</sup> opioid and stimulant used concurrently

NOTE: percentages rounded to nearest whole number, some totals exceed 100%

## **Chapter 3: Results**

### **3.1 Managing Debt to Dealers**

In the DTES neighborhood, the necessity of procuring drugs in the absence of steady income streams has created a drug market built on credit, which is contingent on dealers maintaining control over debts owed. Despite prevalent accounts of historical or vicarious exposure to violence and generalized fear of retaliation for unpaid debt, we found that negotiation, not violence, was most often deployed within the dealer/borrower relationship to address credit arrangements and maintain the stability of the drug market. We define negotiation as intentional discussions between lender and borrower to procure drugs on credit or refinance an existing debt. This involved negotiating incremental payments, penalties and late fees, bartering valuable items, services, or favors in lieu of money, working off debt, typically in higher risk or menial positions within the drug trade (such as holding drugs or keeping lookout), or forgiving debt (Moeller and Sandberg 2017). Refinancing negotiations were instigated by both lender/dealer and borrower/buyer and ranged in nature from cooperative and symbiotic to coercive and extortionary, but precluded outright force. However, the social acceptability of dealers using violence to punish borrower misdeeds, ensure repayment, and deter predation from customers, rivals and suppliers was crucial in bolstering the effectiveness of negotiation in resolving outstanding debts. Within this environment, maintaining good standing with dealers by initiating refinancing negotiations was an effective strategy for PWUD to mitigate risk of violence and maintain a reliable supply of drugs. However, negotiation was also a highly effective tool of social control wielded by dealers, even when initiated by and directly benefiting the borrower. By engaging in negotiation, dealers not only ensured full repayment, but by

combining or replacing a monetary debt with a debt of gratitude and obligation, they retained a loyal client base and secured a stable income stream for themselves in future.

### **3.1.1 Cooperative Negotiation: “So, yeah, I guess I better go talk to that guy.”**

Much of the time, negotiation was jointly beneficial. Negotiation depended on the stability of the relationship between dealer and buyer, as well as a sound reputation as a reliable person with whom to conduct business. Borrowers demonstrated trustworthiness through intentional actions that signaled adherence to the credit contract, and lenders engaged in clientization practices such as extending credit or adjusting repayment terms to accommodate borrowers’ circumstances. For both parties, demonstrating capacity to negotiate and comply with a credit agreement was key to building and maintaining reputation capital.

That the system depended on accrual and deployment of reputation capital was abundantly clear to our participants, many of whom identified reputation as central to accessing drugs and staying safe. Ethan<sup>1</sup>, a 42-year-old Indigenous man who engaged in dealing spoke about how his reputation was constraining his economic activities:

I have the tendency to be very violent myself so I don’t worry too much about what other people could bring to me ‘cause I’ll bring it back to them and they know that. A lot of people know that and I’m not somebody to fuck with, yeah [...but] right now I’m pretty humble, [...] I’m trying to put out that next phase of like I’m trustworthy, I’m a decent guy, I’m a good guy, please pull me onto your side, please cuff me some dope, please, you know, give me the best price and all this stuff.

This participant had built reputation capital as someone not easily victimized, but he was recognizing that being known as “a decent guy” would enable him to negotiate access to drugs on credit. Negotiation involved ongoing social processes of identity formation, accrual of

---

<sup>1</sup> Participant names have been changed to protect privacy.  
For characteristics and exposures linked to each participant quoted herein, please refer to Table 3.

**Table 3. Characteristics & Exposures of Participants Quoted (n=23 of 75 participants)**

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Ethnicity	Age	Housing <sup>†</sup>	Income source*	Borrowing patterns
Johnny	Man	Indigenous	45	SRO	Employment	Fronts, IOUs
Liam	Man	White	47	SRO	Dealing, Vending	Fronts, Reciprocity
Bea	Woman	Indigenous	38	Street	Dealing, Sex Work	Fronts, Reciprocity
Noah	Man	White	42	SRO	Volunteering	Fronts, IOUs, Reciprocity
Oliver	Man	White	46	Street	Dealing, Binning	Fronts
Elijah	Man	Indigenous	47	Street	Dealing, Binning	Fronts, IOUs, Reciprocity
Lucas	Man	White	38	Street	Vending	Fronts
Lucy	Woman	White	38	SRO	–	Fronts
Madeline	Trans woman	White	56	SRO	–	Fronts, IOUs, Reciprocity
Mason	Man	White	44	Street	Dealing	Fronts
Logan	Man	Indigenous	45	Shelter	Dealing, Vending	Fronts
Ethan	Man	Indigenous	42	Street	Dealing, Binning	Fronts, Reciprocity
Hazel	Woman	Indigenous	40	SRO	Vending	Fronts, Reciprocity
Jacob	Man	White	38	Recovery	Theft	Fronts, IOUs
Owen	Man	White	40	SRO	Employment	Fronts, Reciprocity
Henry	Man	White	55	SRO	–	Payday loan, Reciprocity
Wyatt	Man	White	48	SRO	Panhandling	Debt avoidant
Ruby	Trans woman	Indigenous	34	SRO	–	Debt avoidant
Isaac	Man	White	41	SRO	Vending	Fronts
Sebastian	Man	White	34	Street	Dealing	Fronts, Reciprocity
Miles	Man	Indigenous	54	SRO	Employment	Reciprocity
Levy	Man	White	34	Recovery	–	Debt avoidant
Xavier	Man	Indigenous	25	SRO	Theft	Fronts, Reciprocity

<sup>†</sup> Housing collected at proximal survey.

SRO = “single room occupancy” (room in residential hotel). Street= unsheltered homeless

\*Income source in addition to receiving government benefits, listed in order of frequency, collected at proximal survey to interview.

Binning= collecting redeemable containers such as bottles and cans, salvaging scrap metal

Vending= selling discarded items such as clothes, electronics, household goods

Theft= selling stolen goods

Panhandling= asking passers-by for money

Sex Work= exchanging sex for money, drugs, goods or services

Employment= working for wages, paid in cash or cheque

Volunteering= working short shift for honorarium, usually \$3- \$10 in cash

reputation capital, and cultivation of the relationship between borrower and lender. For a credit agreement to be taken seriously, there needed to be sufficient social pressure to compel either value-based or fear-based trustworthiness. Madeline, a 56-year-old trans woman, declared that she was compelled by gratitude to repay: “not because of fears of reprisal... I don’t entertain such fears. It’s just because he/they/she/they were, you know, nice enough to do that.” Logan, a 45-year-old Indigenous man, cited “just feeling guilty”, and Isaac, a 41-year-old white man, was motivated by duty born of fear:

[T]hat’s what we agreed on and I always pay my dues. That’s one thing, you’ve got to pay. [Owing] the government [for unpaid tickets] is one thing, but a pusher, it’s another. They’re not going to come over and break your legs, whereas the pusher will.

As these examples show, personal identity and the perceived generosity, fairness, brutality, or righteousness of the lender strengthened the borrower’s obligation to uphold the contract.

Across the diverse characterizations of borrowers’ motivations to repay as agreed, trust and trustworthiness was identified by both lenders and borrowers as critical to the viability of credit or re-financing agreements. This trust manifested on an individual and institutional level: trust in the borrower to repay, the dealer to be fair, and in informal credit structures as mechanisms of drug market stability. Done well, credit or refinancing negotiations involved proactive communication and demonstration of good faith by the borrower and carried mutual benefit: full repayment of debt, continued access to drugs, maintenance of the economic relationship, and avoidance of reputational harm and violence.

Johnny, a 45-year-old Indigenous man, described how he had carefully cultivated trust with his dealer: “I just pay him back when I get money from [working] or my [IA] check or whoever. He just goes (spit sound) ‘cause he keeps [the drugs for sale] in his mouth, spitballs. ‘Pay me later’. He knows he can trust me.” That a solid relationship was commonly the

foundation for credit was confirmed by Henry, a 55-year-old white man who had engaged in dealing in the past: “[Credit]’s not too much of a problem, especially if you’re buying off the same dealer all the time. He’ll cuff you anyway, right, till you get your check.”

However, even the most solid of buyer/dealer relationships required careful maintenance. When her IA check was delayed, Bea, a 38-year-old Indigenous woman proactively sought out her dealer to discuss repayment:

Friends were understanding, but a dealer is different, right? It’s business. They have bills to pay too, right?. [...] It’s like, “Okay, we have an understanding [...] this is where I stand, and I don’t cuss at you. I’m just laying down the line, understanding bills need to be paid.” So when [getting our check] didn’t happen on time, he was upset but nobody got hurt. [...] We paid down, gave him a bit of money, like what we could, right? And then we said, “Okay, well, when the cheque does come, you guys are the first that we’re going to come and see.

As these examples show, cultivating reputation capital and a trust relationship with a dealer was highly effective in granting access to credit, facilitating repayment, and removing the necessity for retributive violence. Even in instances where a borrower had missed a payment, a high-cost signal of compliance and trustworthiness would re-establish a sound relationship with a dealer. Ethan, a PWUD who engaged in street-level dealing, described a customer’s exemplary behavior after defaulting on his loan:

Somebody that I’m gonna remember too, that he does keep his word when he owes you. You know he fucked up and he didn’t do it when he said he was going to, but he did, as soon as he got his mid-month on Monday he came to me, he made sure I was there [...], he gave me the full \$10 bucks and gave me an extra \$10, so I mean, that was pretty cool.

Time and again, participants explicitly or indirectly recognized the value of accrued reputation capital; dealers valued trustworthy customers and borrowers valued signals of trust from dealers. Oliver, a 46-year-old white man described the interaction with his dealer when a delayed IA check forced him to request an extension:

[H]e wasn't worried about it anyways. He just likes to rant at me sometimes. [...] More threats, not in a bad way, but in a good way, which is more harassing. [...] He just razz me up. He knows I am good for it. I always cuff up and every time I cuff him, he goes 'how much do you want?' [...] He cuffs for nobody, man. Not one person he'll cuff for, but he'll cuff for me.

This participant was proud of the leniency his reputation afforded him, and recognized the “razzing” from his dealer as an expression of willingness to accept delayed payment based on the strength of their relationship. In response, Oliver diligently paid his debt when his check cleared later that day.

Such demonstrations of proactivity, compliance, flexibility, and good faith allowed both borrowers and lenders to maintain their reputation as trustworthy parties with whom to do business and revealed the effectiveness of cooperative negotiation and reputation capital as mechanisms of social control in maintaining credit structures vital to the stability of the local drug economy.

### **3.1.2 Coercive Negotiation: “I pay them back twice. Double what I borrowed.”**

Negotiation was not always cooperative, however. When borrowers reneged on a credit agreement and made little effort to address it, we encounter a second mechanism of social control and exchange: extortion. We found that absent cooperative negotiation, dealers would often deploy coercive negotiation tactics to compel repayment. Participants described dealers issuing threats of physical harm, inflicting reputational damage, denying credit, or imposing a “tax” (i.e. a monetary penalty or seizure of disproportionately valuable item in lieu of payment). Consequences escalated as time passed or misdeeds accumulated; initial transgressions were punished with reputational and financial harm and subsequent misdeeds risked physical consequences. However, we found that punishment, although harsh, rarely involved outright violence, as in Isaac’s description of his dealer responding to a customer defaulting on a loan:

And the next day [the borrower] said that he'll pay him off and he never paid him. [He said,] 'Ah, it's only \$10 bucks.' [...] Really. Now you're gonna say that? You're on your own, motherfucker. [The dealer] went at his room, 'You got my \$10 bucks?' He's like 'No no no'. [The dealer] walk out. 'No, it's *only \$10 bucks*.' 'You should have never say that buddy,' and he [...] give him a good push, [...] 'Your TV right there, pick it up, in my room.' Done.

In order to safeguard his reputation as someone who will extend credit but expects to be taken seriously, the dealer publicly demonstrated his dominant position by seizing the television of a defaulting borrower. The borrower's overt resistance could have invited retaliatory violence, but here, serious physical harm was averted through assertive signaling from the dealer, extortion, and reputational damage.

Confronted with similarly undesirable consequences for default, most borrowers agreed to terms demanded by the dealer to forestall violence, protect the relationship, and secure future access to drugs. Hazel, a 40-year-old Indigenous woman described the usurious interest charged after several late payments: "Yeah, I pay... I pay double. Yeah, it's really expensive to make them wait." Liam, a 47-year-old white man reported that he was expected to work off outstanding debt: "I had to do stuff for him. I watch his door for him sometimes. [...] kind of like security for his door." Despite flagrantly unbalanced terms, most participants viewed such coercive negotiation in a positive light as it erased both financial debt and the social affront inherent in breaking an agreement, granted an opportunity to recoup lost reputation capital, enabled future dealings, and eased the threat of violence. Mason, a 44-year-old white man who had missed payments to his supplier, begrudgingly paid an extortionate penalty to protect himself from reputational and physical harm: "I didn't even actually owe any money, really. [...] But, you know, I paid the money anyway [...] just to keep the peace, right? Like pay whatever and just be done. [...] Like we'll just settle it and I just won't deal with that part anymore." These

experiences highlight the perception that if a borrower breaks trust and does not pay as agreed, it is fair and reasonable for a dealer to exact a sizable tax, charge double, confiscate valuables, demand service, or enact another sort of punishment to erase the transgression.

Among the most common retributive responses to default on drug debt was the discontinuation of sales or credit until trust was regained. Isaac recounted being relegated to cash-only sales after multiple defaults, hinting at the inconvenience and stigma resulting from his damaged credit: “Well I got the money and I went to knock but nobody answered. I should have wait[ed] but I went and spent some cash and, ow. He didn’t front me after. I had to pay fuckin’ cash.” The decision to deny credit to an unreliable borrower, although it caused reputational, financial, and social harm, was similar to other mechanisms of social control enacted by dealers; as with clientization practices, cooperative negotiation, and coercion, credit denial protected the continued efficacy of the drug market and was a key mechanism to reduce violence. When asked how they responded when customers didn’t pay for drugs they had obtained on credit, three participants who engaged street-level dealing reported accepting the loss but refusing further interaction. Elijah, a 47-year old Indigenous man, was explicit in his desire to avoid enacting violence: “Yeah, I really, really want to hurt them, but it’s not me. I just don’t bother with them no more.” This aversion to violence was echoed by Miles, a 41-year-old Indigenous man:

There sure are a lot of people that owe me money. I don’t even go around collecting it even because it’s just a waste of time. I might as well just write it off because it’s not going to happen anyway. I got to the point where I started being smart and I just said no more, that’s it. [...] If you fuck up and then I give you another chance and then you fuck up again, well, shame on me. I’m not going to put myself in that position.

Despite losing revenue and customers, these participants recognized the cost of using violence (i.e. “collecting”) on their personal and social identity. Denial of credit or discontinuation of sales was an expression of social control enacted by the dealer – albeit one with a jointly

detrimental outcome – but that, critically, also avoided violence. Ultimately, the dealer decided who to trust: whether they would cooperate, negotiate, coerce, deny, discontinue, tax, demand service, or collect debts using threats of violence. The cumulative result of these strategies was that dealers maintained control of the drug market while mitigating violent retribution for default.

### **3.1.3 Assertive Negotiation: “You’re a fuckin’ drug dealer. There is no principle.”**

Borrowers also enacted social control in the form of intentional or strategic default. Participants described withholding payment as a repudiation of a lender’s unethical business practices (for example, selling substandard or counterfeit product). They also described rejecting overbearing negotiation tactics or unreasonable threats of violence which precluded negotiation. In some instances where a borrower was blocked from negotiating even extortionary terms, they attempted to reverse the erasure of their agency by intentionally defaulting on the loan, despite the risk of violence. When a collector attempted to strongarm repayment for an old debt, Johnny cited unreasonable behavior as justification for refusing to honor the debt: “I bought dope off him like more than 6, 8 months ago, and it was, it wasn’t any good, it was shitty dope. That’s probably why I don’t want to pay him. And he is such a loser and threatened me with ‘It’s out of my hands now.’ Whatever that means.” This participant, who diligently paid his regular dealer, refused to pay a bully who had transgressed normative expectations of fairness by selling substandard product, allowing the debt to expire, rejecting overtures to refinance, threatening violence before imposing a financial or social punishment, and negating the value of reputation capital.

The impulse to defy a lender who refused to negotiate was echoed in Ethan prioritizing repaying friends before the dealer who had threatened him with violence:

I spent approximately \$100 of my \$200 in, um, paying off money that I owed to mostly illicit drugs to friends like that. [...] Almost, if they're saying, 'I'll harm [you] if you don't pay me back.... It's actually the opposite, you know, I'm *not* paying back people [who] could get me hurt.

As these examples illustrate, borrowers used default to communicate to those who would enact violence that negotiation, not punishment, was the more effective tool to ensure repayment.

Default was also deployed strategically by borrowers to opt out or limit amount of debt incurred by dissuading lenders from “giv[ing] you even more rope to hang yourself” (Madeline). By capping debt at manageable levels through intentional default or delayed payment, borrowers avoided “debt trouble” and attendant reputational and social harms and were able to better control finances and drug use. Lucy, a 38-year-old white woman reflected on the importance of maintaining control:

I usually keep it to a minimum like \$10 bucks new, \$20 bucks and it's only if I know that I have money the next day or something. [...] There's people that owe, like thousands. [...] I'm not even allowed to borrow that much, I don't know. [Laughing] Like I limit myself too, you know, 'cause I don't want, I don't like to be the person who's asking for things.

For Lucy, owing too much for too long carried risk of financial precarity and being perceived as irresponsible and dependent.

Others were strategic in forgoing credit in an effort to control their use. Levy, a 34-year-old white man who had been in recovery for a few months asserted:

I don't want to develop or cultivate another relationship with a dealer to the point where I can get cuffs again. Don't want them. Don't need them. Yeah. I just don't want... you have to build a relationship with a dealer before they're going to cuff you dope. They have to know you. I don't want to invest that time into meeting a new drug dealer and building a relationship so I can get cuffs. No thanks. I'm good.

This stance was mirrored by Ruby, a 34-year old trans woman, in her rejection of socially contingent credit structures that would afford her drugs on credit: “First of all, I don't know any

dealer well enough that they would trust me and everything. I don't get to know anybody anyways because I don't want to [...] be able to have the option. [...] If dealers give me their numbers, I always just delete them because I don't want to allow myself to have easy access." In order to control drug use, protect sobriety, or maintain safety, these participants intentionally opted out of relationship-based negotiation and the social element inherent in many buyer/dealer relationships. By forgoing social connection with dealers, they disqualified themselves from accumulating debt, limited their drug purchases, and protected themselves from coercive negotiation. In these instances, borrowers avoided developing – or intentionally sabotaged – their reputation capital as a mechanism of self-protection. Having a negative or no reputation proved an effective barrier to readily acquiring drugs or incurring unmanageable debt.

### **3.2 Managing Debt to Friends**

Thus far, we have explored the tactics employed by PWUD in navigating debt owed to dealers. A second context for debt incurred by participants were informal "IOUs" within social networks. Unsurprisingly, we found similar rules governing borrowing behavior within friendship circles: negotiation, relationship, and trust were inherent within social network-based exchanges such as borrowing money from a neighbor or sharing drugs with a friend. People overwhelmingly took debt to friends – of money, favors, or drugs – extremely seriously, despite the relatively lower risk of physical violence arising from default. Many expressed a compulsion to protect their reputation as an "honorable" person and to prevent disruption within the social group. As with credit arrangements with their dealers, many participants were careful to demonstrate gratitude, generosity, and a prioritization of relationship through unequivocal signaling of trustworthiness. When asked if there was a fee for borrowing money within his social network, Noah, a 42-year-old white man laughed and said: "No, but I give them anyway.

[...] just because I wanted to, you know. I just said, 'I'll give you five bucks,' you know. That's fine. But no, they would have done it anyway. My friends, for sure, you know, we always help each other out." Within friendship circles, despite credit not being contingent on paying interest, a costly signal of gratitude strengthened the borrower's reputation and the social cohesion of the group.

Even within nascent social networks, participants were eager to demonstrate appreciation. When asked how long his recent IA check had lasted, Jacob, a 38-year-old white man who had been in recovery for just over a month responded: "You know what? That check was gone the second I had it 'cause I still owed people in the recovery house money from when I was using. I was borrowing off them, so I paid everybody back." In allocating his entire check to repaying friends, Jacob prioritized building his reputation as trustworthy and unselfish .

Within established social groups, normative rules governing behavior were sometimes tailored to specific situations, but likewise prioritized displays of altruism and loyalty as guiding values. Owen, a 40-year-old white man, recounted how income was shared unstintingly within his social group: "What happens with my friends, [...] how they operate is anytime they get money, [...] like, hey, sweet \$200, and just blow the whole \$200 on us on drugs and booze and just ... spend it all, down to nothing, right down to nothing." Within intimate social networks, such flagrant demonstrations of generosity were critical to maintaining a sound reputation, avoiding social harm, and strengthening social cohesion. Here, cultural norms have produced a form of capital that functions similarly to other forms of symbolic capital, separating out deserving from undeserving and creating social boundaries that were regulated within the community. Thus, reputation capital can be used to assess an individual's worth and is traded for social, even economic, capital.

### 3.2.1 Collective Negotiation: “You drunk me now and I’ll drunk you later”

Intertwined with costly signals of generosity and trustworthiness, reciprocity was a highly valued mechanism of exchange within social networks. Reciprocal exchange involved money, drugs, gifts, favors, and demonstration of effort or caring. For PWUD, the rules around sharing and reciprocity were especially clear and immutable. While it was apparent that leniency would be applied to particular circumstances, many participants expressed an expectation of balance over time. When his IA check was delayed, Xavier, a 25-year-old Indigenous man summarized how he and his partner managed: “We both use different... different drugs or whatever. We manage to pay for each other’s, I guess. Balance it out.”

Within close social groups, many participants recounted financial management strategies that involved pooling resources within the group. Noah described one such arrangement with his friend: “We try to decide a bit, like what’s the best thing to do, you know, like food-wise, dope-wise and all that. Because we always help each other. [...] Even if I have no money, if he got food, he’s going to cook me something or come to my house, so I do the same for him. You know, we’re like brothers.”

Although many participants expressed the vital importance of community and looking out for friends, they also recognized that upholding reciprocity acted as a financial safety net. Noah explained his dual motivation: “I know when I have money, I help people, you know. I’m not asking for, you know, ‘Oh, you owe me this because I did that.’ But I mean, you know, if you’re nice to people, people will be nice back, you know, eventually.” Ethan concurred: “It comes back, I think, almost all the time. I think it’s almost like, it’s like free karma. [...] Give a little, take a little, yeah for sure. I mean so many people have been there for me when I was dope sick or whatever.” Within friendship networks, value was derived from the social connection,

sense of self, and perception of a social and financial safety net rather than from positioning oneself for material gain. When asked if he borrowed money from friends, Elijah spoke about community: “Yeah I borrow off my friends. We always look out for each other, around Hastings. Even if you don’t hardly know them, you always look out for them. [...] A lot of people see it, right, and they like it. [...] It’s pretty cool. [...] I try and be as good [a] nice guy as I can, help people.” These social networks – although not immune to conflict and harmful behavior – were protected as credit structures and as a social and physical safety-net. This is evidenced by the care people took to pay back promptly, offer help when needed, share resources, and pay favors forward within the group. Within this context, debt – both social and material – built trust and loyalty and had a catalyzing effect on social cohesion within the community.

### **3.2.2 Opting Out: “I just hate having that burden on me.”**

As many participants recognized that unpaid debt could undermine trust, the theme of debt aversion within social networks was pervasive. We showed above how participants orchestrated self- or externally-imposed limits on credit with their dealers to constrain access to drugs or avoid reputational damage and violence. Here, we discuss participants discomfort with unilateral borrowing within friendship networks. Despite the poverty in which people lived, some participants refused to get into debt of any kind, citing reputational considerations, protection of relationships, agentic control of finances or drug use, identity narratives (as independent or fiscally responsible), and instrumental reasons (as a tool for drug cessation or moderation, or to avoid violence).

As many of the credit arrangements reported in this sample had a social component with potential for repercussions within broader social networks, people often experienced debt primarily as a social burden rather than a financial or safety burden. Johnny related how

borrowing undermined his relationships and sense of self: “Borrowing makes me feel as bad as using. ‘Cause when I use, it doesn’t really affect anybody, it doesn’t. Right? But [borrowing] comes with a price. [...] I don’t borrow if I know I’m not getting a check soon. I’ll wait. I’ll eat Mr. Noodles.” Owen spoke about the explicit proscription against borrowing within his friendship circle, where monetary debt was viewed as a threat to the social integration of the group: “But with my friends there we don’t, what we don’t do is borrow money [...] It’s just yeah, it’s stupid to borrow money cause none of us pay it back and then it just causes fights.” These participants, in expressing their distaste of “grinding” for a loan, suggested that beyond the financial burden, debt carried risk of conflict within social networks and damage to social identity and reputation. The social disdain associated with unequal or unidirectional exchange eroded access to other forms of social capital. The willingness to be generous and gracious about debts within social circles relied on free and equal reciprocal exchange or circumspection and diligence on the part of the borrower, underscoring the respect people had for both relationships and the financial safety net of informal credit structures. Avoiding debt thereby became a central component in forming an identity of independence and forestalling reputational and social harm.

Through investigation of the two arenas of drug-related debt within the DTES –within the dealer/buyer dyad and within social networks – our analysis identifies diverse mechanisms including cooperative or coercive negotiation, intentional default, and reputation capital that facilitated credit structures, stabilized the drug market and increased or alleviated exposure to violence. Our findings indicate that PWUD were strategic in managing debt by mobilizing reputation capital and trust within the buyer/dealer relationship and engaging in costly signaling of generosity, diligence, reciprocity, or credit avoidance within their intimate social networks. We additionally showed that efforts by borrowers and lenders to avoid violent retribution for

unpaid debts sometimes resulted in reputational, social, or financial harms. While acknowledging the symbolic violence of coercive and extortionary tactics used by lenders to secure repayment, we argue that credit structures built on trust and negotiation rather than on retributive physical violence or economics alone acts as a catalyst for social cohesion.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

The association between illicit drugs and violence is complex. While established research has substantiated a relationship between drug market dynamics and violence (Goldstein 1985; Martínez et al. 2008; Richardson et al. 2015; Small et al. 2013), in focusing on violent modes of governing unpaid debt, it neglects complex aspects of the social context and attendant dynamics in which drug transactions exist. We extend emerging research that problematizes Goldstein's drugs/violence nexus and identifies non-violent modes of drug market governance (Dickinson 2019; Dwyer and Moore 2010; Jacques and Wright 2008; Moeller and Sandberg 2017) by highlighting the perspective of those who buy drugs for their own consumption, including disadvantaged PWUD who engage in dealing illicit drugs for survival income. Our contribution includes four important insights.

First, in accordance with previous research, we found that social identity and the nature of the relationship between dealer and customer were central determinants of violence enacted by dealers. Our study documents the intentional processes enacted by PWUD to reduce the risk of violence linked to procuring drugs and to drug-related debt. We identify reputation capital (Brockman 1996) as a key mechanism in building trust and facilitating negotiation between dealer and buyer and uncover reputational and social identity processes that permeate calculations around the accumulation of drug debt or provision of credit. As with other forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984; Sherman 2006), reputation capital created boundaries between deserving and undeserving that were regulated within the community and could be traded for social and economic capital. PWUD cultivated reputation capital to garner favorable financing terms, but also as a buffer to violence as initial transgressions elicited reputational harm with subsequent transgressions provoking violent punishment. Through signaling trustworthiness and

reliability, PWUD activated dealers' clientization practices of extending credit, adjusting repayment terms, or refinancing debt which facilitated the system of credit on which the drug market relied. We argue that these social processes, while heterogeneous across our sample, inform costly signaling (Smith and Bird 2003) to maintain trust between buyer and dealer, constrain the escalation of harm linked to default and coercive debt collection tactics, prioritize social over material relationships, and prompt generosity within friendship groups to preserve the social and financial safety net.

Second, we challenge assumptions of anomic social disintegration in marginalized communities. For PWUD in the DTES, drug-related debt was often entangled with social relationships, dependent on the trustworthiness of the borrower, integrity of the lender, and adherence to normative codes governing debt repayment. When a borrower's circumstances precluded discharging the debt according to the contract, negotiation not violence was the preferred mode of handling outstanding debt. We argue that although credit negotiations were effective means for dealers to control the behavior of their customers, they were also widely used as a measure to avoid outright violence, albeit sometimes resulting in disproportionate financial or social cost to the borrower in usurious interest, loss of reputation capital, or discontinued credit. Rather than drug debt being intrinsically linked to violence and disintegration of social norms and ties, we found that that credit arrangements and the relationship of trust upon which they depended bore important social meaning for people. Beyond securing continued access to a steady supply of reliable drugs and stabilizing the market, being considered an honorable and trustworthy member of a social network was integral to people's identities (Lamont 2000). Taken together, despite the social exclusion in marginalized communities described by previous

research, reputational processes and adherence to clear rules governing drug transactions point to the existence of strong social integration that creates disincentives to violence.

Third, our study challenges perceptions of people who use drugs as non-agentic participants in drug market dynamics. We suggest that negotiation was a mechanism of legitimacy and validation for PWUD despite being instrumental in ensuring adherence to the norms governing drug debt. In addition, we found that in contrast to debt that could be negotiated, when a dealer impulsively threatened violence or blocked borrower attempts to negotiate a payment plan, the borrower would in some instances exercise the sole lever available by withholding payment. We link this signal of defiance to entrenched values of “fairness” required of all actors in the market that also permitted dealers who had been shorted or disrespected to respond with threats, demands for service, extortion of disproportionate compensation, or acts of violence.

Finally, we expand the discussion of drug market dynamics beyond the dealer/buyer dyad to explore social relationships adjacent to drug markets. We found that reputational and identity processes demonstrating reliability, integrity, solidarity, and fairness also bolstered credit arrangements within social networks. PWUD invested considerable resources into safeguarding reputation capital within friendship groups and maintaining robust social ties by sharing generously and reciprocating when able. In prioritizing relationship, PWUD strengthened informal credit structures that served as social and financial safety nets and countered some of the potential harm arising from criminalization of drug use and poverty.

#### **4.1 Limitations**

While the characteristics of the DTES are exemplary of the risk environment in urban drug markets (prohibition, law enforcement, poverty, systemic racism, colonialism), there are

key differences in local drug policy (legalized cannabis) and harm reduction services (supervised consumption facilities) that could restrict generalizability to all contexts. Further research targeting younger PWUD (80% of our sample was over 40 years old), or among those not receiving monthly income assistance, could reveal processes that escalate or counteract exposure to violence related to drug transactions in these groups.

## **4.2 Conclusion**

Our research has implications for understanding the dynamics of illicit drug markets, social structures, and modes of governing drug debt by dealers within marginalized communities of PWUD. We challenge the characterization of drug sellers as violent predators and PWUD as non-agentic subjects of the drug market. However, as the risk of exposure to violence linked to default persists despite the strategies described herein, we suggest that measures should be urgently explored to address the structural and institutional roots of the financial precarity that necessitates informal and illegal credit structures. However, we emphasize that it is critical that any measures taken to alter systemic factors contributing to debt-related harm build on existing solutions in the community and that policy or programmatic interventions are developed in partnership with people with lived experience. Marginalized PWUD have always found creative ways to resist, build community, and reduce cultures of risk (Friedman et al. 2004). Our research offers a glimpse into the processes employed by PWUD to build a culture of care.

## References

- Banerjee, Mousumi, Michelle Capozzoli, Laura McSweeney, and Debajyoti Sinha. 1999. "Beyond Kappa: A Review of Interrater Agreement Measures." *The Canadian Journal of Statistics* 27(1):3–23.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
- Boyd, Jade, Alexandra B. Collins, Samara Mayer, Lisa Maher, Thomas Kerr, and Ryan McNeil. 2018. "Gendered Violence and Overdose Prevention Sites: A Rapid Ethnographic Study during an Overdose Epidemic in Vancouver, Canada." *Addiction* 113(12):2261–70.
- Brockman, Paul. 1996. "The Role of Reputation Capital in the Investment Banking Industry." *Applied Economics Letters* 3(7):455–58.
- Campbell, John L., Charles Quincy, Jordan Osserman, and Ove K. Pedersen. 2013. "Coding In-Depth Semistructured Interviews: Problems of Unitization and Intercoder Reliability and Agreement." *Sociological Methods and Research* 4(23):294–320.
- Culhane, Dara. 2003. "Their Spirits Live within Us: Aboriginal Women in Downtown Eastside Vancouver Emerging into Visibility." *The American Indian Quarterly* 27(3):593–606.
- Degenhardt, Louisa, Fiona Charlson, Bradley Mathers, Wayne D. Hall, Abraham D. Flaxman, Nicole Johns, and Theo Vos. 2014. "The Global Epidemiology and Burden of Opioid Dependence: Results from the Global Burden of Disease 2010 Study." *Addiction* 109(8):1320–33.
- Deterding, Nicole M., and Mary C. Waters. 2018. "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach." *Sociological Methods & Research*.
- Dickinson, Timothy. 2019. "Identity, Situational Elements, and Responses to Drug Debt." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 0022427819866495.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 2016. *The Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Dwyer, Robyn, and David Moore. 2010. "Beyond Neoclassical Economics: Social Process, Agency and the Maintenance of Order in an Australian Illicit Drug Marketplace." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 21(5):390–98.
- Friedman, Samuel R., Carey Maslow, Melissa Bolyard, Milagros Sandoval, Pedro Mateu-Gelabert, and Alan Neaigus. 2004. "Urging Others to Be Healthy: 'Intravention' by Injection Drug Users as a Community Prevention Goal." *AIDS Education and Prevention* 16(3):250–63.

- Goffman, Erving. 2014. "Stigma and Social Identity." Pp. 256–65 in *Understanding Deviance: Connecting Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goldstein, Paul J. 1985. "The Drugs/Violence Nexus: A Tripartite Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Drug Issues* 15(4):493–506.
- Gouldner, Alvin W. 1960. "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement." *American Sociological Review* 25(2):161.
- Heckathorn, Douglas D. 2002. "Respondent-Driven Sampling II: Deriving Valid Population Estimates from Chain-Referral Samples of Hidden Populations." *Social Problems* 49(1):11–34.
- Jackson, Kevin. 2008. "Natural Law, Human Rights and Corporate Reputational Capital in Global Governance." *Corporate Governance* 8(4):440–55.
- Jacques, Scott, and Richard Wright. 2008. "The Relevance of Peace to Studies of Drug Market Violence." *Criminology* 46(1):221–54.
- Jaffe, Kaitlyn, Huiru Dong, Anna Godefroy, Davin Boutang, Kanna Hayashi, M. J. S. Milloy, Thomas Kerr, and Lindsey Richardson. 2018. "Informal Recycling, Income Generation and Risk: Health and Social Harms among People Who Use Drugs." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 60:40–46.
- King-Casas, B. 2005. "Getting to Know You: Reputation and Trust in a Two-Person Economic Exchange." *Science* 308(5718):78–83.
- Lamont, Michèle. 2000. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Link, Bruce G., and Jo Phelan. 1995. "Social Conditions As Fundamental Causes of Disease." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 80–94.
- Linton, Sabriya L., David D. Celentano, Gregory D. Kirk, and Shruti H. Mehta. 2013. "The Longitudinal Association between Homelessness, Injection Drug Use, and Injection-Related Risk Behavior among Persons with a History of Injection Drug Use in Baltimore, MD." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 132(3):457–65.
- Lupick, Travis. 2017. *Fighting for Space: How a Group of Drug Users Transformed One City's Struggle with Addiction*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Martínez, Ramiro, Richard Rosenfeld, and Dennis Mares. 2008. "Social Disorganization, Drug Market Activity, and Neighborhood Violent Crime." *Urban Affairs Review (Thousand Oaks, Calif.)* 43(6):846–74.
- Merton, R. K. 1938. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3:672–82.

- Messner, Steven F., and Richard Rosenfeld. 1997. "Political Restraint of the Market and Levels of Criminal Homicide: A Cross-National Application of Institutional-Anomie Theory." *Social Forces* 75(4):1393–1416.
- Moeller, Kim, and Sveinung Sandberg. 2017. "Debts and Threats: Managing Inability to Repay Credits in Illicit Drug Distribution." *Justice Quarterly* 34(2):272–96.
- Palepu, Anita, Michelle Patterson, Verena Strehlau, Akm Moniruzzamen, Jason Tan de Bibiana, James Frankish, Michael Krausz, and Julian Somers. 2013. "Daily Substance Use and Mental Health Symptoms among a Cohort of Homeless Adults in Vancouver, British Columbia." *Journal of Urban Health : Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 90(4):740–46.
- Pierce, Matthias, Karen Hayhurst, Sheila M. Bird, Matthew Hickman, Toby Seddon, Graham Dunn, and Tim Millar. 2017. "Insights into the Link between Drug Use and Criminality: Lifetime Offending of Criminally-Active Opiate Users." *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 179:309–16.
- Rhodes, Tim. 2009. "Risk Environments and Drug Harms: A Social Science for Harm Reduction Approach." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 20(3):193–201.
- Richardson, Lindsey, Allison Laing, M. J. Milloy, Russ Maynard, Bohdan Nosyk, Brandon Marshall, Eric Grafstein, Patricia Daly, Evan Wood, Julio Montaner, and Thomas Kerr. 2016. "Protocol of the Impact of Alternative Social Assistance Disbursement on Drug-Related Harm (TASA) Study: A Randomized Controlled Trial to Evaluate Changes to Payment Timing and Frequency among People Who Use Illicit Drugs." *BMC Public Health* 16:668–668.
- Richardson, Lindsey, Cathy Long, Kora DeBeck, Paul Nguyen, M. J. Milloy, Evan Wood, and Thomas Kerr. 2015. "Socioeconomic Marginalisation in the Structural Production of Vulnerability to Violence among People Who Use Illicit Drugs." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 69(7):686–92.
- Richardson, Lindsey, Evan Wood, and Thomas Kerr. 2013. "The Impact of Social, Structural and Physical Environmental Factors on Transitions into Employment among People Who Inject Drugs." *Social Science & Medicine* 76:126–33.
- Rowe, Christopher, Glenn-Milo Santos, Eric Vittinghoff, Eliza Wheeler, Peter Davidson, and Philip O. Coffin. 2015. "Predictors of Participant Engagement and Naloxone Utilization in a Community-Based Naloxone Distribution Program." *Addiction* 110(8):1301–10.
- Shaw, Souradet Y., Lena Shah, Ann M. Jolly, and John L. Wylie. 2007. "Determinants of Injection Drug User (IDU) Syringe Sharing: The Relationship between Availability of Syringes and Risk Network Member Characteristics in Winnipeg, Canada." *Addiction* 102(10):1626–35.

- Sherman, J. 2006. "Coping with Rural Poverty: Economic Survival and Moral Capital in Rural America." *Social Forces* 85(2):891–913.
- Small, Will, Lisa Maher, Jeff Lawlor, Evan Wood, Kate Shannon, and Thomas Kerr. 2013. "Injection Drug Users' Involvement in Drug Dealing in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver: Social Organization and Systemic Violence." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 24(5):479–87.
- Smith, Eric A., and Rebecca Bliege Bird. 2003. "Costly Signaling and Prosocial Behavior." P. 24 in *Moral Sentiments and Material Interests: On the Foundations of Cooperation in Economic Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sordo, Luis, Gregorio Barrio, Maria J. Bravo, B. Iciar Indave, Louisa Degenhardt, Lucas Wiessing, Marica Ferri, and Roberto Pastor-Barriuso. 2017. "Mortality Risk during and after Opioid Substitution Treatment: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Cohort Studies." *BMJ* j1550.
- Suri, Harsh. 2011. "Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis." *Qualitative Research Journal* 11(2):63–75.
- Taylor, Matthew, and Gary R. Potter. 2013. "From "Social Supply" to "Real Dealing": Drift, Friendship, and Trust in Drug-Dealing Careers." *Journal of Drug Issues* 43(4):392–406.
- Werb, Dan, Greg Rowell, Gordon Guyatt, Thomas Kerr, Julio Montaner, and Evan Wood. 2011. "Effect of Drug Law Enforcement on Drug Market Violence: A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 22(2):87–94.