

Chasing the dragon - an overview of heroin trafficking

Abstract

There are many problems encountered during the attempt to tackle the heroin trade on a global level. Afghanistan is largely responsible for the production of heroin, providing a global distribution amount of 75%. The trafficking of heroin has continued using the traditional Balkan and Northern routes, however due to the increase in intelligence and border force controls, alternative routes are being established. This demonstrates a key issue being faced by law enforcement agencies. The development in strategies and techniques being used for undetected smuggling are growing, causing a lapse in the effectiveness of detection techniques currently being used. The failure in the success of tackling heroin production and trade towards Europe is being increasingly recognised, which has resulted in a shift in focus onto the organised crime groups involved in the heroin trade within mainland Europe and the United Kingdom. An estimated 5,300 organised crime groups are believed to be active within the United Kingdom with an annual cost of in the region of between £20-40 billion. The complexity and level of intelligence within organised crime has evolved rapidly, and this, along with the increasing levels of corruption within heroin trading countries, give reason for the continual loss of the war against heroin. Concluding that until corruption and the highest hierarchical levels within organised crime groups are overthrown, positive results against the heroin trade will remain unseen, demonstrating that these key areas require further attention by governmental agencies and policies if the war is to be won.

Keywords: corruption, heroin, law enforcement, organized crime groups, trafficking

Volume 1 Issue 4 - 2015

Andrew O Hagan,¹ Clara A Carvetta²

¹School of Science and technology, Nottingham Trent University, UK

²Nottingham Trent University, UK

Correspondence: Andrew O'Hagan, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK, Tel 44115-8483153, Email andrew.ohagan@ntu.ac.uk

Received: October 08, 2015 | **Published:** November 16, 2015

Introduction

Leonardo a recovering heroin user, reported to have been clean for one year stated "I spent 14years begging on the streets, eating out of bins, almost dying from infections and having hell inside my skull".¹ Heroin is in the class of illicit opioid drugs which are synthesized from morphine, a natural opiate that is extracted from poppy plants. Two forms of the drug are available; a powder, which can be either white or brown in colour or as a sticky black substance, known as tar heroin.² The toxicity of heroin itself was not recognised until the 18th century, with the toxic effects of the drug being due to its chemical refinement. This causes an increase in the concentration of morphine present, making heroin up to four times stronger than morphine itself. The opioid receptors in the brain are stimulated by the active ingredients of the drug resulting in pain relief, analgesia, sedation, muscle relaxation, respiratory depression and bradycardia. Addiction to heroin can occur quickly with extreme severity, due to the body's ability to build tolerance to heroin within 24hours. This in turn results in strong withdrawal symptoms, causing relapse and use of the drug once again. Heroin can be administered by intravenous injection, which causes rapid distribution for an immediate effect. It can also be smoked; however the bioavailability and duration of the effects are more unpredictable. The greatest difficulty associated with heroin derived from the production of the hypodermic syringe in the 19th century.³

The mechanism of action that occurs within the body as a result of heroin use is partly caused by heroin in its state of diacetylmorphine, which is made up of three main components, 6-acetylmorphine, morphine, and morphine-6-glucuronide. The acetyl group in these compounds is

responsible for the promptly felt bodily effects. It allows the drug to be lipid soluble, enabling it to readily pass the blood brain barrier to take immediate effect. Whilst travelling in the blood stream, plasma enzymes absorb the heroin into 6-acetylmorphine. The metabolic reaction continues to produce morphine which is further converted into morphine-6-glucuronide. This form allows for highly effective and efficient binding to the opioid receptors in the brain, with its specific target being the MU receptors which drive addiction.^{3,4} The effects of heroin can vary and depend on the route of administration, the feelings experienced with heroin use come in phases, where intravenous injection will take effect within 3-5 seconds, and last between 2 and 4hours.⁵ This form of administration results in an overwhelming feeling of warmth and euphoria which is produced directly by the introduction of diacetylmorphine into the system. This is followed by deep relaxation and happiness due to the presence of 6-acetylmorphine. The transition to morphine and morphine-6-glucuronide will begin to occur within half an hour of the initial administration and the effects felt here will vary dependent on the individual and will include feelings of analgesia, relaxation, chattiness, respiratory depression, stress relief, and the feeling of wellbeing.⁴ Heroin can also be injected subcutaneously and intramuscularly. This has a gradual onset between 5-10minutes and lacks the initial rush of euphoria, however it increases the time of sedation to 3-5hours.⁴ This form of injection is also known as "skin popping" (Figure 1).⁶

The preparation for injection requires heroin to be mixed with water and citric acid. This is then heated on a spoon to produce a liquid form for uptake into the syringe, ready for use.⁷ The mild effects of smoking heroin are produced within 5-15seconds, whilst oral use can take between 60-90 minutes to take effect.⁵ "Chasing the dragon"

is commonly used street slang term to describe smoking heroin; the drug in its powder form is heated on foil causing it to liquidize and flow along the foil emitting the active fumes which are then inhaled through a small tube.⁶ According to the Misuse of Drugs Act,⁸ heroin is categorized as a class A controlled substance, considering it to be a substance which is amongst the most harmful of the controlled drugs. The class A classification of heroin also gives the courts the power to issue punishments of greater severity in relation offences committed. Within the United Kingdom, drug use and addiction remains to be a problem, with an overall increase in drug use from 8.1% to 8.8% since 2013. The proportion of user's age between 16 and 59, with the greatest use found in adults aged 16 to 24. Records show 16.2% of heroin users, between 2012 and 2013, fell into this age category, followed by an increase between 2013 and 2014, up to 18.9%. There has also been a rise in drug use related deaths from 1,636 to 1,957 in 2013.⁹ It has been estimated that drug addiction has an annual cost to the United Kingdom of in the region of £15.4 billion with reference to their treatment, crime, lifestyle and health.¹⁰ Heroin accounted for 23% of the expenditure in the UK illegal drug market during 2003 and 2004. This report has also shown heroin to have the highest number of violent or potentially violent situations in relation to the usage and dealing of the drug.¹¹ This illustrates the dangers of heroin are not limited to its use. It is said that due to the intensity of its pleasurable effects, even the use of heroin once or twice can be enough to trigger addiction.¹²



Figure 1 "skin popping" causing scars, infections and abscesses.⁶

The 2008 report by the United Nations office on drugs and crime, found that around 16 million people worldwide were users of opiates such as opium, morphine and heroin.¹³ Initial synthesis of heroin occurred in 1874 by English chemist Charles Romley Alder Wright;¹⁴ it was then produced commercially in 1898 by the Bayer pharmaceutical company.¹⁵ Primarily it was produced as a cough treatment due to its suppressing effects and it was also believed to be non-addictive.¹⁶ This meant it was also used as an attempt to replace the pain killer morphine to prevent and stop morphine addiction.¹⁷ It was effective for treatment of tuberculosis and pneumonia, which were leading causes of death at the time of its discovery. This resulted in the distribution of heroin to 23 other countries and by 1899 reports of tolerance occurred, closely being followed by research showing addiction and heroinism in 1902. The cessation of heroin production by Bayer was decided in 1913. Though heroin was banned in the USA in 1924, it is still used in Britain in its medical form of diamorphine.

Its medical use accounts for 95% of the world's legal heroin usage.¹⁸ The drug itself is derived from the poppy plant, which requires a dry warm climate for optimal growth. Once the poppy flower loses its petals, the seed pod is exposed. This contains a thick milky colored liquid referred to as Sap, which is crude opium. The Sap is extracted by slitting the pod with a knife and it increases in thickness and darkness as it is released, which forms a brown black gum product, shown in Figure 2.¹⁹



Figure 2 Opium sap on the poppy seed pod.¹⁹

The farmers harvesting the Sap will shape them into bricks and wrap them ready to sell onto the illicit market. Once sold on to traffickers, it can then be refined into heroin.²⁰ The Sap within the poppy seed pod contains 10-20% of morphine and 1-3% of Codeine, The baine and Papaverine. The opium Sap is dissolved in hot water with the addition of lime. A precipitate of ammonium chloride will form and sink to the bottom of the liquid and the crude morphine, of a white colour, forms on the surface. This is removed and purified with the use of charcoal and acid, forming another precipitate of ammonium hydroxide. The morphine is then refluxed with acetic anhydride for five hours and once neutralized, heroin hydrochloride will be produced.³ This will produce heroin in a white powder form ready for trafficking and use. The powder form of heroin is easier to compress and package ready for transport. When trafficked, the substance does not remain pure as the dealers will need to maximise their profit by introducing the addition of cutting agents, mixing a substance within drugs to increase the bulk amount available to deal. As heroin is progressively cut, the purity of the active drug is lessened, which will sequentially reduce the intensity of its effects on the body. Cutting agents need to have an extremely similar texture, taste and appearance to prevent buyers distinguishing a difference. Factors such as colour may differentiate when cutting takes place, as shown in Figure 3.

The white powder displays the purist form of heroin. The cutting agents can consist of bulking materials such as starch, lactose, and glucose. Also substances with similar pharmacological properties, such as dimethocaine, a local anesthetic which induces stimulant effects, procaine, an anaesthetic, paracetamol for its analgesic properties and chloroquine, which is used as an anti-malarial drug. Its appearance represents crystal heroin, and can be used either as a cutting agent, or miss sold as heroin itself.²¹ There has been considerable percentage decreases in the level of purity of heroin when it reaches the United Kingdom, with figures dropping to as low as 13.1% in 2011 and only reaching as high as 40%.²² When cutting heroin, there is also a chance that other opioid will be used in replacement of heroin as they mimic effects which allow them to be easily miss-sold as heroin. A common

example of this is a substance known as Fentanyl, which has been the cause of numerous deaths by its use.²¹



Figure 3 Variation in appearance of heroin due to the use of cutting agents.⁴

Discussion

Heroin trafficking routes

Afghanistan is known to produce 75% of the world's heroin, where the opiate production from the poppy accounts for as much as half of Afghanistan's economy.²³ At the source of the production heroin is worth in the region of £300 per kilo.²⁴ During 2010, the recorded consumption and seizures of heroin, along with the annual usage globally, reached around 430-450 tones,²⁵ with an estimate of 18-23tons of heroin reaching the United Kingdom every year.^{26,27} There are various trafficking routes by which the drugs will travel to reach the United Kingdom ready for onward supply to users for profit. The major route passes from Afghanistan to Iran, which then allows access to Turkey. Heroin is said to be the leading drug trafficked via this route using land borders. Once it has passed the Turkish borders, it can then continue through the second major trafficking route through the Balkans and proceed in to Europe. The Balkan route is greatly beneficial for trafficking heroin as it is the shortest distance to travel into the European target markets for sale,²⁸ which contributes to the choice of its use to minimise travel time and maximise profit. It has also been found that heroin travelling via the Balkan route follows a well-organised mode of trafficking to reach the high value markets located within Western Europe, including countries such as Germany, The Netherlands and France, which also aid the ease of further trafficking into the United Kingdom. Small amounts of heroin traveling this way will be diverted for local sale and consumption.

The trafficking here is most commonly carried out using vehicles such as trucks and busses, and it has been found that the vehicles being used will change multiple times along the route to minimise tracking and interception. Larger loads of heroin passing this way will also be split into smaller loads to minimise the profit loss if vehicles are stopped and seized. The smaller packages will then remerge into bulk when reaching the western areas of Europe.²⁸ At present, it has been stated that one hundred and five metric tons will be sent out via the Balkan route, with only 37% of this reaching its European destination, by reason of diversions and interception occurring during the attempted trafficking as a result of the increased border control.²⁹ According to the European monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drugs of Addiction,²⁸ during 2006, ten tones of heroin was seized

within Turkish borders, which accounted for half the heroin seizures throughout Europe during that time. Turkey was ranked second, closely behind Iran, for the largest quantity of seizures during 2006. The impact of the increase in security and border force controls within Turkey has been shown by an increase of heroin seizure to 13.3tons in 2012, as reported by the 2013 Turkish Drug Report³⁰ (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Turkish truck stopped in France in 2006, containing 300Kg of Heroin.⁴⁵ Graphical reconstruction of annual heroin seizures in Kg between 2009 and 2012 as recorded by the Turkish drug report 2013.³⁰

There is a considerable amount of heroin that is still trafficked into Turkey, which raises concern. During the past decade the Turkish government has increased their drug related law enforcements, covering almost every border with scanning systems, highly trained sniffer dogs and well trained drug specialists. Though large quantities of drug seizures have increased, it has not yet been successful in combat as alternative routes are being used.²³ A decreasing pattern of illegal substance entering Turkey should be displayed due to a drop in the production of opiates in Afghanistan, resulting from the banning of drug cultivation in six Afghanistan states, post American invasion. Rather, there has been an increase in the amount of illegal substances entering Turkey. This was first shown in 2009, where seizures increased by 31% compared to the previous year. The answer to this unlikely statistic was the upcoming production of opium within northern China, accounting for the loss of production in Afghanistan.³¹ The level of security and difficulty passing from Turkey into the Balkan countries does not consist of the same challenge. These borders have low levels of law enforcement due to their lack of governance, high poverty together with open borders without customs control.²³ This also allows for the Balkan route to be used in the opposite direction for the trafficking and transport of chemicals that are required for refining opium into heroin, such as acetic anhydride. The alternative use of the Balkan route is supported by the findings that morphine and acetic anhydride has been found to be readily available within Turkey, which may further indicate the presence of illicit heroin clandestine laboratories.²⁸ The Balkan route is not the sole route used for trafficking heroin into Europe. Alternatively, the Northern route can be used. This route transports heroin from Afghanistan through to central Asia, towards northern locations such as Tajikistan and reaches Europe mainly via Russia. The bulk of heroin that uses this route is said to be bound for the Russian Federation.

However as little as 20% of the heroin from Afghanistan will travel via this route, due to its longer travel duration and the type of transport used. The initial trafficking from Afghanistan to neighboring countries is carried out most commonly via foot transportation, or the packages are loaded onto camels and donkeys.²⁸ Camels and donkeys will form trains, and will be packed with drugs and left to travel without being led due to their impeccable memory.³² They will remember the route taken after previous runs and therefore, no longer require leading. This also minimizes the risk to individuals involved and reduces tracking the heroin back to its source. Nevertheless, due to the lack of security and speed, trafficking in this way can be easily intercepted and the heroin can be seized causing a loss in profit. There have been records made of up to 60% of the heroin being trafficked via the Northern route being seized when traveling to its neighboring countries.²⁸ When the heroin reaches its destinations outside of Afghanistan, trafficking into Russia and European destinations such as Germany, Bulgaria and Scandinavia, will be carried out with the use of air travel, trains, vehicles and trafficking overseas. In comparison the Northern route lacks the high levels of organisation, and it is less commonly used due to its ease of monitoring and frequent seizures and arrests.²⁸ These factors indicate little reason supporting the use of the Northern route, which causes the speculation of the question, why is it still successfully being used? The Turkish authorities have increased their level of security with the installation of scanning equipment at almost all land borders, and the increase in use in specially trained dogs and security staff for searching.³³

As a result of this, alternative trafficking routes into Europe have been adopted, using countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. This in turn causes a transfer of organized crime groups, with expert knowledge from working in Turkish trafficking rings, to relocate to these countries to continue work. They now use these countries as routes to their European market. With growing knowledge of this alternative route, the Romanian government have now invested heavily into border and custom controls to aid in the efforts to clamp down on the trafficking into Europe. However they have invested more than 1 billion Euros to join the Schengen area.²³ The Schengen area does not implement any form of control, and is not part of the European Union. This allows free movement between countries included within the Schengen area, including Poland, Germany & Norway.³⁴ This could potentially result in the counteraction of the success gained from the investment into the border controls of Romania. The allowance of free movement of the citizens between the Schengen areas increases the opportunity for successful drug trafficking through greater areas of Europe. It has been estimated that 49,000 seizures of heroin take place throughout Europe, with reports in 2006 showing 19 tons of heroin being seized, with an increase in seizures being recorded in the following years.²⁸

Recent reports of heroin seizures during 2012, display the lowest recorded seizures during the last 10 years, with only 5 tons being seized and the number of seizures declining from 50,000 during 2010, to 32,000 in 2012. This may be in accordance with the decrease in production and demand found in recent years for heroin, nonetheless these statistics have raised the concern that common heroin users are replacing the drug with other synthetic Opioid such as Methadone, which is prescribed during heroin addiction treatment.³⁵ Within Europe, the trafficking becomes more complex due to the increase in security and detection. Organised crime groups are located in various countries within Europe. The packages will change many hands during

travel to reduce tracking and suspicion. When looking into trafficking of western and central Europe, the heroin will be transported on land by vehicles to places such as Belgium and the Netherlands to be sent out to the United Kingdom. The south coast can also be used to send heroin into the UK.²⁸

Trafficking into the United Kingdom

According to the National Crime Agency, trafficking into the United Kingdom costs £10.7 billion annually. The risk taken to smuggle drugs into the United Kingdom is due to the street prices charged being some of the highest within Europe.^{26,27} There are traditional methods of smuggling heroin into the United Kingdom, such as trafficking via cargo containers on ships, body packing, within luggage via air travel and postage of disguised packages. The trafficking itself has become more difficult to detect, with reasoning for this being the increase in cultural and familial links within the United Kingdom, to areas of production or trafficking. This results in United Kingdom dealers and wholesalers arranging their own imports, which reduces the chances of organised crime activities being detected. This has created a growing problem, as the distinction that was previously present between United Kingdom wholesalers and international importers has now become unclear.^{26,27} Changes in smuggling techniques are becoming increasingly recognizable. As new elaborate methods are being practiced, areas of the unknown are growing within security force control. Methods include the hiding of substances within the linings of bags, which has been detected and reported in a recent case at Manchester airport during 2013, where heroin with a street value of £4 million had been concealed, resulting in eight years imprisonment. This case was closely followed by another at Manchester airport, where 500g of heroin had been concealed in the lining of handbags, with a street worth of £125,000, which was traced back to the origin of Pakistan.³⁶ Efforts to transport heroin undetected are increasing. With cases being reported using pets and pet cages to transport the drugs, as was found at Heathrow airport in November 2014. Pet cats had been sent from South Africa to the UK and the cages were carrying 15kg of heroin with a street worth of £750,000.³⁷ United Kingdom customs controls have reported smugglers going to extreme lengths to traffic drugs into the country. These include the processing of the drug inside of sweets and bananas, concealing the drugs within buttons, wheelchair seats and even within paintings. Though such methods seem as though they would be undetectable, during 2013 the security forces seized 445kg of heroin coming into the United Kingdom^{38,39} (Figures 5 & 6).



Figure 5 Bananas used to conceal drugs, flight from Ghana to Heathrow.³⁸

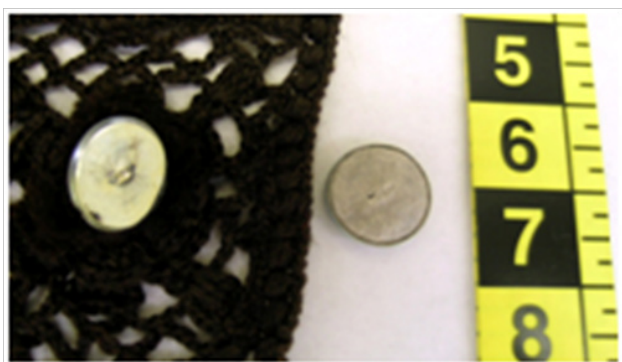


Figure 6 Heroin concealed within buttons on items of clothing.³⁹

Most commonly the heroin trafficked from Pakistan and Afghanistan into the UK will be found to hit the UK in Bradford, the West Midlands and the south of Manchester due to family links and relations.⁴⁰ One of the most frequently used and most undetectable methods for smuggling is body packing and body stuffing. This is an activity that is low cost for exporters and can be done voluntarily for payment, or in many cases of organized crime, people are forced or threatened to carry out the highly illegal activity. The packets of drugs are either swallowed or inserted into the body cavity. On average a single smuggler, also known as a drug mule, will carry 1Kg of drugs in 50–100 packets, containing 8–10g of the illicit substance. This weight contains an excess in the fatal dose required of the substance and therefore carries high risk. The amount carried is dependent on the individual's capacity limit, as there have been reports of drug mules carrying over 200 packets.⁴¹ The packages themselves come in forms of capsule shape, with the contents concealed within condoms, latex fingers of gloves, plastic bags and balloons (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Annotated image of drugs package capsule concealed within body packers.⁴²

Carrying these packages comes with two health risks; primarily the drug mule may experience gastrointestinal obstruction or perforation and secondly, most dangerously; the packages can rupture within the body and lead to fatal toxicity and death.⁴¹ Capsules which are swallowed are required to be concealed for at least a day, whereas inserted packages are for short travel times. Heroin is still found to be one of the most common substances contained within capsules of body packers. The drug mules will go to the extent of taking anti diarrhea medication to prevent the passing of the capsules.⁴² Common

signs of identification of such drug mules have been detected, yet in many cases, experienced drug mules and smaller airports will miss these signs and the drugs will pass into the destination undetected. Suspicion may arise when forming a link between the origin of the individual and the destination; this may be followed by their declaration of travel being vague or doubtful. Other physical signs may be the lack of mobility whilst sitting and an odor from the mouth as a result of the gastric acid on the packets concealed.⁴¹ If drug mules are traveling on a long-haul flight and refuse to eat during this time, the passenger will be notified to security, as this is common to prevent the passing of the illicit substances. The appearance of a mule may be nervous, with shaking of the body due to a combination of hunger and anxiety along with perspiration and uneasy walking due to the body cavity discomfort. If any signs are detected and deemed suspicious, the individual will undergo an in depth full body x-ray as Figure 8 shows.^{42,43} This demonstrates the desperate measures being taken to ensure the cycle of the trade of drugs such as heroin continues, due to its vital role in fueling the economy and the addiction.



Figure 8 Body cavity x-ray of a suspected smuggler who swallowed 134 capsules.⁴³

Organised crime groups

Gang crime and organised crime are deemed different, but are growing to share a relationship. Gangs tend to be young localised groups that commit crimes and can be violent. The activities they undertake could be said to be disorganized crime in comparison to that of the organized crime groups. These groups tend to consist of individuals of an older generation. This crime type has progressed from street level into a business enterprise and they commonly engage in multi commodity crime. However due to changes in criminal activity and technology, relationships are being established between the two groups. Traditional organized crime groups followed the structure of hierarchical roles, with each being given specific jobs. These traditional groups would be known to engage in violence and corruption to gain profit from single commodity criminal activity.⁴⁴ Those involved in the drugs trade have previously been known as drug cartels. Their primary purpose is to organize and control drug trafficking operations. It has been known that organized crime groups within Europe cooperate with each other to minimise risk and cost to maximise profit. They act as business partners, using drugs as tradable commodity for stolen property, fire arms and other drugs. The activity of business partnerships between these groups may be by trade of goods, or the renting of cash couriers between groups for profit and establishment of business relationships.⁴⁵

The major trafficking activity towards Europe takes place by Turkish organised crime groups. According to the Europol, it is estimated that there are around 3,600 organized crime groups involved in trafficking within the European Union.²³ More recently, Turkish groups have been forming partnerships with other organized crime groups throughout Europe to aid the transport and sales of heroin. Many of the Turkish people involved in the drugs trade will choose to reside in other trading countries. In turn, allowing them to form links with non-Turkish organized crime groups for business opportunity. The most common collaboration is between Turkey and Albania due to their historical and cultural links.⁴⁶ Therefore the European law enforcements targeting suspected drug traffickers who speak Albanian, as they have been found to buy the heroin from Turkish wholesalers and supply to the Scandinavian market.²⁷ Certain groups from Turkey will permanently reside in Western Europe, most commonly within the Netherlands. This is due to a change in the drugs trade, where there has been an increase in the distribution of synthetic drugs. These groups will traffic the synthetic drugs into Turkey for the exchange of heroin.⁴⁶ It has recently been found that the Balkan route is now being used for the trafficking of Cocaine into the EU and the Balkan crime groups work with the Turkish crime groups to exchange Cocaine and heroin along the route.⁴⁷ Within Europe, one of the largest organized crime groups that specializes in the smuggling of heroin is the Sicilian Mafia, known to be involved in the trafficking of heroin for decades. They previously consisted of two major groups, known as "French connection" and "Pizza connection".⁴⁷ Using chains of pizza restaurants to disguise and transfer the heroin and profit. Previously, nineteen people involved in the activity were convicted, finding involvement from locations of Brazil, Sicily and New York.⁴⁸ Their involvement in the drugs trade is linked to other organized criminal activity of political corruption and military arms trafficking. They ensure the success of their work by inflicting assaults on highly ranked members of the Italian law enforcement. It has been estimated that the Sicilian Mafia have around 2,500 affiliated members.⁴⁷

Large organized crime groups have been found operating in Austria, Germany and Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. These groups were investigated and prosecuted by Europol, with 400 suspects being found and 100Kg of heroin being seized along with 4tons of cutting agents. This demonstrates the extent of the operations being carried out. They were found to obtain the heroin via the Balkan route. Though many of the main organizers of the group were arrested, the large scale of their network has allowed them to rebuild and continue their work as organized drug traffickers. Within the organized crime groups, hierarchies are formed and it was reported that members of the lower levels, who package and deal, do not have contact with those of the highest levels, who organize and bulk buy.⁴⁹ In the case that was investigated, members were mainly recruited from Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were transported to work in Vienna and Frankfurt. Each member had strict roles to carry out, including the cutting, packaging and transport of heroin throughout Europe.⁵⁰ This is common practice for most organized crime groups. Within the UK, organized crime groups cost between £20-40 billion annually. During 2014 there were 5,300 organized crime groups, consisting of 35,000 individuals, known to be active within the UK. Throughout the UK drug trading organized crime groups account for 50% of the organized crime that takes place, with areas such as Bedfordshire experiencing 25% of organized crime shootings found to be in relation to the drugs trade, and these statistics have been continually increasing since 2012.⁴⁴ British organized crime has now developed on from traditional activity, as have many of the groups throughout Europe. This is due

to the development of business like relationships between multiple groups from various destinations.

The organized crime groups have expanded and developed into dealing with multiple commodities. Drug trade is commonly associated with that of money laundering.⁴⁴ The criminal associates now form a looser network than that previously shown in 'tight knit' communities such as Mafias. The hierarchical levels are still present in the modern formation of the groups, consisting of high level organisation and enforcement, followed by distributors and low level dealers. However due to access to modern technology, the distance between each level, in relation to location, has made it more difficult to track and combat.⁴⁴ In recent years there has also been an increase in British traffickers travelling out to the countries which source the drugs. Where dealings will take place with the local organized crime group to obtain the drugs for a lower cost to maximise profits for the individuals working in the UK.⁴⁵ When discussing the issue with current Detective Chief Inspector, Roberts from Bedfordshire Police, he reported a new strategy being implemented within the UK to tackle drugs trading, including that of heroin. Explaining the major fault in previous years, being the lack of partnerships and combined approaches between agencies. This is now changing, allowing for the inclusion of various specialists and sharing of vital information, with an increased support network to tackle each drug case. The government has developed a new approach based on the four P's peruse, prevent, protect and prepare. Taking action to peruse the case and the criminals, the prevention of the drugs entering the UK and there distribution, the protection of the public and the preparation for the future. Due to the known troubles with trying to target the head of the organized crime groups, and the failure to do so, relentless disruption is now being practiced. This is an act focusing on tackling members of lower hierarchical status, to result in disruption and prevention of success, when selling the illicit substances.⁴⁴ This in turn may result in a decline in members available, forcing higher members that act via a hidden environment, to have to engage in practical elements to ensure successful trade. This then increases the chance of their identification and arrest. Though there has been a moderate decline in the level of heroin consumption within Europe, trafficking still remains a problem, with the largest threats being that of the serious organized crime groups that allow for the European opiate market to still maintain its estimated value of 12billion Euros.⁴⁹

Effects of corruption

The effects of corruption within the heroin trade begin at the source of heroin's journey, in Afghanistan. It has been reported that the drugs trade is a profitable activity for not only the local criminals, but the international drug cartels and also the Taliban. Research has shown that drug trade and corruption within Afghanistan generates a greater profit than that of lawful economic trading. Major contributions to the corruption is that of bribes made to government officials and the opium trade employing 1.6million people, which accounts for nearly 7% of the Afghanistan population. When viewing these statistics in context, it demonstrates why the corruption within the drugs trade has such a large impact on the economy and provides great difficulty when trying to combat the issue. Afghanistan is also said to be the second most corrupt country globally after Somalia.⁵⁰ There have been reports indicating the violent and corrupt nature that have been expressed through certain political groups situated throughout countries such as Afghanistan. Though it remains unproven, it can be said that certain acts of organized crime form a nexus with terrorism.⁵¹ These factors, contribute to the increasing risk that law enforcement face. When

trying to tackle the illicit drug trade together with corruption, as they are said to be the weaker party. The illegal activity that finances such a large amount of the economy is so powerful. This explains why extensive lengths are taken to prevent disruption by other authorities, as it could result in destabilization of the country.⁵¹ With Turkey being one of the most important countries involved in the heroin trade, it is not surprising to find that in a magnitude of corrupt activities are believed to be encouraged. Turkish Mafias and organized crime groups have formed networks that are subject to the presence of the political circles that are present, to benefit their activity. This has allowed them to have up to 93% control over the European drugs market, in locations such as Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.⁵¹

The main areas of corruption that contribute to the success of the illicit drug trade within Turkey include bribery and abuse of officials, fraud, money laundering; this is mainly directed towards public procurement, the purchase of work and goods.⁵² This allows for undetected purchase and transportation of heroin into the European market for profit, to benefit the Turkish economy. It has been noted by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drugs of Addiction,²⁸ that countries found along the Northern route appear to demonstrate corrupt practices. Russia, which has been reported to have over 1.6million heroin users, using an average of 80tonnes of heroin annually, has been identified as one of the countries actively involved in corruption. Large amounts of heroin have been detected traveling regularly throughout Russia under levels of protection, preventing the detection by law enforcement agencies.²⁸ This is referred to as selective blindness. The statistics given indicate the reason for this corrupt activity is the huge benefit to the Russian economy. This example demonstrates one of the larger underlying issues of combating the trafficking of drugs such as heroin, and the large challenges that need to be overcome. Within the UK, corruption in relation to the drug trade is common. Not only has the use of modern technology aided the development to more sophisticated trading, but the use of professionals as corrupt facilitators has contributed to the success, as they act as a gateway into regular society, leaving the criminal activity undetected. Examples of this include using professionals within the shipment of cargo containers and private pilots for the transportation of drugs, and furthermore, the use of low level employees within the financial industry, such as accounting, investment and banking, to aid the money laundering.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Whilst researching the contributing factors that enable the production, transportation and sale of heroin, it becomes clear that there is a strong understanding of the routes and methods used enabling this to be successful (Figure 9).⁵³



Figure 9 The Northern and Balkan routes used for heroin trafficking from Afghanistan.⁵³

The confusion then arises in relation to why with this level of intelligence, is there still an undefeated battle? There is a high level of risk and conflict associated with targeting the countries of production and the success of stopping opium growth is unlikely due to the employment rate, corruption and benefit to the economy. When targeting the production, the risk of triggering conflict between various countries has become apparent, resulting in a focus shift to increasing the level of security and detection by customs officers. A good example of this is the increase in security at the port of Calais, introducing patrols across the English Channel, sharing the border control with Albania, and the introduction of exit checks on those departing the UK.⁵⁴ Though increased seizures indicate that, the changes are effective, a change in the techniques used to smuggle heroin and other drugs are beginning to emerge. Therefore continual improvement of intelligence within the drug trafficking area is required, with continual up to date search training and improvements on detection methods used. This in itself would display that the law enforcement agencies remain one step behind those involved in the drug trafficking trade. This view is reinforced when changes in enforcement seem to occur once different trafficking methods are identified. In previous years it has also been known that law enforcement agencies work as separate groups.⁴⁴ Where border controls would work separately to the police and information on drug cases would not have been shared. Therefore the lack of communication may be the reason that individuals had not been caught and importations missed. It has now been recognised by governmental agencies, especially within policing departments, that tackling the supply route has been ineffective and a change in approach toward tackling the dealing within each country is required.⁴⁴ The lack of communication and interaction of agencies has resulted in a flourish of organized crime and organized crime groups. The heroin trade falls under organized crime, which is changing daily being increasingly more difficult to tackle. Organized crime has developed in complexity due to the development in technology and the use of professionals and specialist, showing that a major part of the success is reliant on corruption.

The use of corrupt facilitators is becoming increasingly common,⁴⁴ varying from paid individuals that work in cargo loading and shipment into ports, and the use of low level new employees of banks, that can easily be persuaded and bribed to set up falsified accounts and transactions for money laundering. Though we encourage the education of individuals in any society, the highly specialized education in computing and manufacturing technology has benefited this trade.⁴⁴ With computer specialists accessing forbade information online, bank accounts and security settings. They are also able to organize the strategy for drug trading from various locations around the world, in a way that is untraceable, causing huge difficulty when trying to locate and source the members in charge of organized crime groups. The exploitation of new technology is highly responsible for problems that are encountered within the illicit drug trade. The line between gangs and organized crime groups is now blurred as younger generations, who are more skilled and educated with modern technology, are becoming more and more involved in the drug trade. The United Kingdom practices a free and open society, with great opportunities available to all.⁵⁵ There is a positive policy encouraging immigration, and these factors explain the great attraction to permanently reside in the UK. However as a result of this, contacts and connections remain with host countries by the migrant communities and the younger generations of these communities born as United Kingdom citizens possess UK passports. They can travel more readily back and forth from other countries, with a further benefit of obtaining a permanent address that can be used for fast postal deliveries from familial links in host countries.⁴⁴ These factors may link to the increase in ease of the drug trade, specifically within the UK.

As these methods allow for little to no detection, which may explain the decline in seizures of heroin, rather than explaining it as a decline in heroin use.⁵⁶ This indicates the magnitude of problems faced by the law enforcement agencies that aim to tackle the issue of heroin along the trafficking route and when it reaches the UK. Heroin is said to be one of the most dangerous and addictive substances.⁵⁷ This point is often missed when assessing where true issues lie within tackling its trade, as the profit and success may in fact portray the users and their addiction. If addiction remains constant, the trade will constantly be funded. Over time and with increased use of heroin, the addiction gets stronger; the illicit trade of the drug has developed along with corruption, to a state that seems to be uncontrollable by government agencies, in the same way in which the addiction becomes uncontrollable once addicted. The heroin trade appears to be overpowering our society physically and economically, which illustrates the failure of society to win the battle against its distribution and use. The extent of the extreme lengths undertaken to use heroin are continually growing, which is continually defeating the impact made by law enforcement agencies. The power of corruption will remain to be one of the largest factors responsible for the success of the heroin trade, and unless overthrown by governmental agencies, positive changes will remain unseen. The power of heroin and the trade itself will continue to persist, as it has been said that “heroin is the drug you would sell your own mother for”.²⁴

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

References

- Spencer R, Popovich N. The mind of a heroin addict: the struggle to get clean and stay sober. *The Guardian*. 2014.
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). *Drug Facts: Heroin*. USA. 2014.
- Freeman F. Opiates. *Nottingham Trent University*. 2013.
- Grey pages: Morphines. *Derekwmeyer.blogspot.co.uk*. 2010.
- Erowid. *Erowid Heroin Vault: Basics*. 2014.
- Stop Heroin. *Heroin Facts*. 2015.
- Drugs-information. *Heroin*. 2015.
- The National Archives. Misuse of Drugs Act. UK, *legislation.gov.uk*. 1971.
- Great Britain. Drug misuse: Findings from the 2013/14 Crime Survey for England and Wales. *Home Office, UK*. 2014.
- Public Health England. Drug treatment in England 2013-14. *PHE publications, UK*. 2014.
- Matrix Knowledge Group. The Illicit drug Trade in the United Kingdom. (2nd edn). *The Home Office, UK*. 2007.
- Drug free world. Heroin Addiction Stories - Why is Heroin So Addictive? - *Drug-Free World*. 2014.
- World Drug Report. *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)*. 2008.
- Ferreiro C. Heroin. *Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, USA*. 2003;104 p.
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Bulletin on Narcotics -1953*. 2014;2.
- Drug policy. *Heroin Facts and Effects: Drug Policy Alliance*. 2014.
- Merry J. A Social History of Heroin Addiction. *Br J Addict Alcohol Other Drugs*. 1975;70(3):307-310.
- Askwith R. How Aspirin Turned Hero. *Sunday Times*. 1998.
- Opiophilia. *Opiophilia: How Heroin is Made. UK*. 2012.
- Front line. Transforming Opium Poppies into Heroin. *PBS, USA*. 2014.
- Home Drug Testing Kits. *Drug Purity & Cutting Agents*. 2014.
- Simonson P, Daly M. The Great Heroin Crash. *Druglink*. 2011.
- Turkey and Balkans battle drug trafficking crossroad. *novinite.com*. 2013.
- O'Hagan A. Treading the fine white line: cocaine trafficking. *Forensic Res Criminol Int J*. 2015;1(2).
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Drug trafficking, USA*. 2015.
- National crime agency. *National Crime Agency-Drugs*. 2015.
- National Crime Agency (NCA). *Drugs*. UK. 2015.
- European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drugs of Addiction (EMCDDA). Monitoring the Supply of Heroin to Europe. *Luxemburg: Official Publications of the European Communities, Portugal*. 2008;20 p.
- Narcotic Superhighways: The Top 5 Routes for Drug Trafficking. *Occrp*. 2013.
- Reitox National Focal Point. Turkish Drug Report 2013. 2013 National Report (2012 data) to the EMCDDA. *KOM Publications*. 2013.
- Today's Zaman. *Report: Drug trafficking via Turkey on the rise*. 2015.
- Gall C. Armed and Elusive, Afghan Drug Dealers Roam Free. *The New York Times, USA*. 2005.
- Tokyay M. Turkey and Balkans battle drug trafficking. *SETimes.com*. 2013.
- Axa-Assiatance. The countries of the Schengen area. *AXA Schengen*. 2015.
- European Drug Report out today-Europe's drugs problem increasingly complex. *EMCDDA*. 2014.
- Border Force. Border Force - Partner Bulletin. *Boarder Force Communications, UK*. 2013.
- Dearden L. Heroin 'smuggled into UK hidden with pet cats on plane. *The Independent*. 2014.
- Spillett R. The weirdest methods used to smuggle drugs into Britain - including inside a portrait of Nelson Mandela, a Snickers bar, bananas and lollipops. *The Daily Mail*. 2014.
- Yang A. PHOTOS: See the crazy ways heroin smugglers hide their drugs. *New York, USA*. 2014.
- National Crime Agency (NCA). *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime*. 2014.
- Hassanian-Moghaddam H, Abolmasoumi Z. Consequence of Body Packing of Illicit Drugs. *Arch Iran Med*. 2007;10(1):20-23.
- Dan Nosowitz. FYI: How Much Cocaine Can You Fit In your, Ahem, Body? *Popular Science*. 2015.
- Gulf News. Man swallows 134 capsules in Oman drug smuggling bid. *OMAN*. 2012.

44. DCI Roberts S. Project Genesis of Organised Crime. *Bedfordshire Police*. 2015.
45. De Mera D. Drug Cartels and their Links with European Organised Crime. *Special Committee on Organised Crime, Corruption and Money Laundering (CRIM) 2012-2013, UK*. 2012;1–8.
46. Michaletos I. Turkish Organized Crime. *World press, Greece*. 2007.
47. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (2015) Italian Organized Crime. USA.
48. Lubasch A. 17 found guilty in 'pizza' trial of a drug ring. *The New York Times, USA*. 1987.
49. Major heroin trafficking network dismantled by joint investigation team. *Europol*. 2014.
50. AFGHANISTAN: Running on drugs, corruption and aid. *IRIN news*. 2010.
51. Mafia, crime and corruption - Turkey (#). *ESDAW*. 2012.
52. Business Corruption in Turkey. Business-anti-corruption portal, Turkey. *GAN Integrity*. 2014.
53. The Northern and Balkan routes. *Serbianna*. 2015.
54. Border Force. Border Force - Partner Bulletin. *Border Force Communications, UK*. 2014;2–5.
55. Czaika M, De Haas H. Determinants of Migration to the UK | The Migration Observatory, UK. 2014;8 p.
56. Patey W. The war on drugs is lost – legalise the heroin trade. *The Guardian, UK*. 2014.
57. Addictive Properties of Popular Drugs. *Drug War Facts*. 2015.