Crack: New Directions in Drug Research. Part 1. Differences between the Marijuana Economy and the Cocaine/Crack Economy

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Abstract

Crack use and trafficking in low-income, minority communities in New York City have pushed into prominence many aspects of drug use/misuse and distribution which had formerly received inadequate attention. For example, the generation and reinvestment of drug incomes are important determinants of how various drugs are experienced. While in retrospect marijuana trafficking appears to have been an almost benign affair, crack trafficking is fast-paced, ruthless, steeped in violence, and impoverishes everyone who becomes engaged in it. In this part the differences between rates, volumes, and methods of income generation related to the use and distribution of marijuana and cocaine are elaborated. The contrast raises a question: Do economies like drug distribution follow a particular rhythmic pattern (capital accumulation during the benign marijuana passage followed by capital depletion in the overheated crack era), and how is it related to the changing demands of the regional economy? Viewed from this perspective, drug distributors and users appear not so much as "deviant" or "alienated" or as a "reserve pool of labor," but rather as a type of labor force which does indispensable work for the whole society.
Key words. Revenues from drugs; Generation and reinvestment of drug incomes; Differential rates, volumes, and methods of income generation related to marijuana and cocaine; Differential income generation related to drugs and the regional economy; Drug users and distributors as a type of labor force

While cocaine hydrochloride powder has been used intranasally in the United States since the late 1800s, smoking it was virtually unknown in 1984. As early as 1981–1982, however, researchers in “inner-city” or low-income Afro-Caribbean, Afro-American, Hispanic, and Euro-American populations in New York City had discovered the growing popularity of freebase smoking among users of marijuana, alcohol, cocaine powder, and heroin (Hamid, 1986, 1987). By 1985, freebase marketing had undergone a revolution. Packaged and marketed as crack, it became accessible to a rapidly increasing number of traffickers and users. In that year, for example, the first public notice of crack dealers in New York City was made. During 1986, crack selling spread rapidly all over the New York metropolitan area. Experienced researchers had observed, however, that New York distributors were already supplying buyers from New Jersey, Baltimore, Washington, and Atlanta. Moreover, crack distributors appeared to be developing the organizational competence which would enable them to establish markets in innocent territory (Hamid, 1987. See also New York Times, 1986, 1987). And indeed, the national and international press are currently marveling over the efficacy of some such distributors, “Jamaican posses,” which have in fact penetrated such unlikely areas as rural Kansas and completely dominated drug distribution there (Newsweek, 1988).

In the New York, Chicago, Washington, Miami, and Los Angeles metropolitan areas, crack distribution now equals or supplants cocaine hydrochloride powder distribution, and both have overtaken heroin distribution (Newsweek, 1988). The United States appears, therefore, to be at the early stage of a new form of cocaine distribution which is likely to change greatly during 1988–1990 and become more widespread nationally in the 1990s (Hamid, 1987). Crack use is already well-established on several Caribbean islands and in urban South America (where it probably originated). Europe beckons as a site of other lucrative markets.

A universally reported effect of crack use appears to be a “craving” for frequent readministrations, or compulsive use. Prior to crack, over 22 million Americans had used cocaine intranasally, and about 1 million were thought to be at risk for escalation to compulsive use. As crack contains larger amounts of pure cocaine than powder, and as the smoking route delivers almost all to the lungs and brain, cocaine snorters who experiment with crack may be at high risk for escalation to compulsive use, and the interval between initiation and compulsive use may be shortened. The pool of persons who may be at risk for crack abuse is therefore very large. If cocaine distributors offer crack instead of cocaine hydrochloride powder, the ranks of compulsive users may grow as occasional cocaine snorters escalate to daily or “binge” crack use. The amounts of cocaine consumed per use episode would be increased. Preliminary observations indicate that both routes to greater consumption have been taken (Hamid, 1987). There is also a sizable number of neophytes who have been launched in substance using or distributing careers by crack.

The sudden popularity of crack has overturned many established ideas about initiation into substance use and subsequent escalation. For example, a typical career was thought to begin with “gateway drugs”—marijuana, beer, and cigarettes—before progression to such “hard” drugs as cocaine and heroin. For many young initiands today, however, crack is their “gateway” drug. Only after initiating crack use are Newport cigarettes adopted (because this brand purportedly satisfies the craving for smoke which crack magnifies); then alcohol (to calm “crack-wired” nerves, or for “blacking-out” when no more crack is available); alcohol is also used for cleaning pipes and stems, and Bacardi “151” to ignite crack; then marijuana (finely crushed crack is sprinkled into marijuana to make “wulla joints”); and eventually heroin (which allows users several hours of “nodding out” before the craving for crack can reassert itself (Hamid, 1986)).

In this paper I invite attention to yet another set of novel circumstances which the advent of crack has occasioned. The contrast between marijuana trafficking and crack trafficking in low-income New York communities (and especially the Afro-Caribbean population with which I am most familiar) and, on the part of consumers, between buying marijuana and buying crack is extreme, particularly when one focuses upon the dollars involved, how they are exchanged, and what becomes of them. In this focus, a view is developed of substance using/abusing and distributing populations as a type of laboring population whose income generation enables it to perform vital (but variable) functions for the overall community.

Consider, for example, the young woman who, 3 years ago, might have spent a typical day moping about the house, half-stupified by Olde English Ale (a cheap, popular brand of malt liquor) and a “nickel-bag” ($5.00) of “reefer” (marijuana). Past her “boosting” (shoplifting) years, she might expect to get drunk with friends during the day, or to play cards and listen to music or watch the soaps, or to entertain the man (or men) from whom she receives sporadic supplements to her public transfer income. Once in several years she may participate in a welfare fraud operation (organized by someone else), or “hit the numbers,” or take advantage of some adventitious criminal opportunity which earns extra money. So far, she has avoided any engagement with the criminal justice system. Introduce crack, however, and by 1984 she is smartly dressed-up, on the street, busily begging men in passing cars for a couple of dollars [or however else she “vics” (victimizes) others], abruptly assaulting and robbing a victim, busily running to the “crack spot,” exchanging dollars for crack, consuming crack, robbing family and neighbors while “beamed up” (“high” on crack) before returning to the street to begin the cycle again—over and over again for several days until she collapses. She generates dol-
The current crack "epidemic" is the latest metamorphosis of Brooklyn’s drug-using culture, established popularly and significantly in the 1960s. There has been a progression from the use and trafficking of hallucinogens and “commercial” cannabis (marijuana grown plantation-style, first in Mexico and Colombia and then in Jamaica and the other Caribbean islands) in the 1960s; to use and trafficking in domestic sinsemilla (a more selectively cultivated marijuana from California and Oregon), and in the more exotic cannabis variants (Thai, Hawaiian, Jamaican, and Latin American sinsemillas, Jamaican and Grenadian lambsbeard, Middle-Eastern and Oriental hashish and hash oils—cannabinoids of tremendous potency) in the 1970s; to use and trafficking in cocaine hydrochloride powder by the late 1970s; and eventually in cocaine for freebase and crack by the early 1980s. The progression has been marked by changes in beliefs and justifications about “drugs”; in effects and in methods and patterns of use; in trafficking arrangements, personnel and associations; and in the general character of the drug-affected universe.

This researcher has reported upon the marijuana stage of these metamorphoses extensively in previous works (Hamid, 1980, 1987). Marijuana distribution enabled a large middle echelon of Caribbean distributors to emerge who grew enormously wealthy and reinvested their marijuana revenues in legitimate businesses. They brought prosperity and new life to abandoned neighborhoods and fresh employment opportunities to impoverished Caribbean folk. Many marijuana distributors had been converted to Rastafarianism, an ideology of self-sufficiency which confirmed every aspect of the traffic (beliefs about the worth of marijuana use and distribution, the social division of labor in distribution, propagation of the traffic, development of indigenous sources of wealth, and reinvestment strategies). In this manner, marijuana distributors dominated drug distribution and acquired the status of folk heroes in Brooklyn’s minority communities.

In terms of income generation, the marijuana traffic was peacefully and prosperously conducted within neighborhoods. The financial burden upon the consumer was extremely light, the average per person contribution not exceeding $35 a week [if the consumer purchased a “nickel-bag” ($5 for 3-1/2 grams of “commercial” marijuana, good for several “joints”) a day]. These contributions were returned to the community in the form of other cheap goods and services and in fresh employment opportunities. Fueled by marijuana revenues, Rastafari were able to feed, clothe, transport, provide daycare and schooling, and entertain (with reggae and calypso music, art, and dramatic productions) minority communities. In 1981, marijuana grew scarce as a result of law enforcement efforts on city streets and successful interdiction (Hamid, 1987). When Colombian marijuana cultivators joined other Andean peasants in diverting to coca, the production of cheap, high-grade cocaine hydrochloride powder was quadrupled. Reluctantly at first, Rastafari experimented with its use and distribution. As smoking was their preferred route of drug administration, they favored freebasing over intranasal use, and promoted it in the period when they were major importers of cocaine hydrochloride powder (Hamid, 1987).

Details of how the distribution of cocaine hydrochloride powder for intranasal use, of cocaine hydrochloride powder for freebase preparation, and of crack supplied marijuana distribution has been provided by this researcher in previous publications (Hamid, 1986, 1987). Compulsive use obliges users and distributors to pursue readministrations until all resources—money, cunning, crime, sex—are completely exhausted (Hamid, 1986, 1987). On account of it, a rapid succession of personnel fill street-level and mid-level positions in crack distribution. Thus crack revenues are not accumulated at the points of supply but only in the hands of the few who control large-scale coca cultivation or processing. A monopolistic tendency grows where formerly it had been curbed (Hamid, 1987).

There is therefore an enormous contrast between marijuana distribution and crack distribution in terms of rates, methods, and volumes of income generation. While the distinguishing feature of marijuana trafficking appears to be the development of an extensive middle echelon of distributors who reinvested their enormous revenues in community development, the feature of crack distribution which
most differentiates it is the upward and outward flow of capital from the study population. And it should be noted: all capital fortunes derived from numbers running, prostitution, and well-established, successful criminal enterprise have joined this flow, usually on account of crack use on the part of their proprietors and other personnel (Hamid, 1986).

The transformation in income generation (from pre-crack to crack-specific) in substance using/misusing and trafficking populations is not adequately explained in those traditions of sociological criminology which view them as “deviant,” or expressing anomie and alienation (Durkeim, 1952; Merton, 1938; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Matza, 1969; Parker, 1974; Davis, 1967; Parsons, 1951; Cohen, 1955). Indeed, the dollars which are generated and the uses to which they are put are not very important data for these approaches. Their studies of social organization and of the frames of mind which members of these populations manifest are not informed by a consideration of what has to be done and what has to be thought in order to generate these dollars. A better concept, therefore, is to view them as types of laboring populations whose income generation enables them to perform necessary and indispensable functions for the wider community. This perspective is informed by at least two bodies of relevant theoretical literature. One is derived from social policy concerns and deals with segmented or dual labor markets; another, more comprehensive in scope, represents recent Marxist-related theories and orientations.

Thus, beginning in the 1960s, a number of American economists uncovered an “urban crisis” in which ghetto residents were poor and underemployed (Gordon, 1972). The neoclassical labor economics framework consisting of the marginal productivity theory of demand (the profit-maximizing behavior of employers) and a supply theory based on utility maximization by workers (Feldstein, 1973; Friedman, 1972; Phelps, 1970; Ross, 1958; Pencavel, 1970) was faulted for not accounting adequately for the persistence of poverty, income inequality, the minimal impact of education and job training on occupational mobility, discrimination in labor markets, and the role of monopolies, unions, neighborhood, kinship, and other associational ties in producing “protected” labor markets (Gordon, 1972; Piore, 1970; Lucas, 1972; Harrison, 1972; Jencks et al., 1972; Coleman et al., 1967; Hawroth et al., 1975; Galbraith et al., 1971; Doeringer and Piore, 1972; Dunlop, 1957; Kerr, 1950; Wachtel, 1972; Edwards et al., 1975; Franklin and Resnick, 1973; Bowles and Gintis, 1975). These researchers attacked the methods, theories, substantive hypotheses, and policy recommendations of the neoclassicists economists (Cain, 1976). They produced instead a picture of labor markets which emphasized the existence of “internal” and “external” markets and the processes by which workers’ attitudes, motivations, work habits, and their involvements with the welfare system and illegal activities serve to maintain the distinction (Doeringer and Piore, 1972; Harrison, 1972; Cain, 1976). In some aspects, their work resembled that of noneconomists of the same period who argued that a "culture of poverty” permanently segregated some workers from candidacy for better employment (Lewis, 1968; Banfield, 1970; Seligman, 1968. For critiques, Duncan, 1968; Duncan et al., 1972).

Complementing these analyses of segmented labor markets are several schools of recent Marxist thought or Marxist-inspired scholarship. In their studies, markets are seen to be organized supranationally, supraregionally, and, of course, supraindividually; and the world economy is seen to respond to the needs of monopoly capital (Wallenstein, 1976; Frank, 1972; Amin, 1973). In this view, the labor market is differentiated internationally. Types of labor to which great accumulations of cultural, political, and monetary values accrue are concentrated in core countries. In peripheral countries to which the core is linked, and to which capital is exported to generate fresh dividends in cheap labor and new markets, types of labor (often migratory), policed by local tyrannies and dictatorships (mild or terrible), are developed out of collapsed social relations and destroyed traditional modes of production.

The study populations described in this paper are such a type of peripheral labor and have long traditions of exploiting ties of reciprocity and redistribution, not merely to survive but in order to discharge functions crucial to the survival of the whole economy (Hamid, 1980). In the 1950s, for example, capitalism on one of the Caribbean islands (or in the Carolinas) would have been restricted to tiny commercial enclaves or plants where extractive industry was established and would have involved no more than some 10% of the population. However, those excluded would have produced food, clothes, housing, entertainment, schooling, fiduciary institutions, welfare funds, and the like which everyone, especially poorly paid workers in the enclave, consumed. The whole would not have been viable without their efforts. In order to perform these functions, people were distinctively organized, and they were people of different loyalties and passions than those within the enclave (Hamid, 1983).

In the 1960s, folk culture and folk organization, as well as folk production, were destroyed by modernization and development plans, and migration strengthened and enlarged the capitalist enclaves (Hamid, 1983; Koslofsky, 1981; Chaney and Sutton, 1979; Bryce-Laporte, 1982). With the demise of these folk institutions, many lost their identities as well as access to labor. Eventually, ties of redistribution and reciprocity were rebuilt in the 1970s in marijuana distributing organizations, and folk production geared up again with marijuana cultivation and trafficking.

How will these ties of reciprocity and redistribution be rebuilt after the dismantling of the marijuana economy? An answer to this question may be approached by researching the structure and function of contemporary crack distributing organizations, such as the “Jamaican posses” which have established themselves in the press and in the public imagination quite indelibly (Newsweek, 1988) since ethnographers’ first speculations about them (Hamid, 1987). These group-
ings are poorly depicted in these journalistic accounts. The ages of arrestees who have alleged "posse" connections are never over 27, a circumstance which rules out the widely held belief that they stand in a direct line of descent from the political "posses" which were once very active in Jamaican politics. Rather, "posses" appear to be descendants of the marijuana-distributing "gates" or "blocks," and they have been created by US-born youngsters, both Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American, who had looked up to the Rastafari, reggae music, marijuana use, and Rastafari prosperity and ideology as among the more colorful, interesting, and even positive things in the neighborhoods where they were growing up (Hamid, 1986). Because that world lost its ideological and economic underpinnings, these young men have inherited the role of "pusher" at a time when money is easily spirited away (not only in drug distribution but in every form of "primitive accumulation"—numbers running, prostitution, criminal enterprise, etc.) and when "control" (of crack use, of oneself, of one's colleagues) is the urgent principle of self-definition and survival—a time, moreover, which distinguishes sharply between male and female but brings populations together which previously had little contact with one another. The urgent need among crack distributors and users today is to curb the upward and outward flow of capital, and that need underlies every crack phenomenon (Hamid, 1986).

While our own approach is strengthened by structural analyses and conceptualizations of low income populations, some researchers nevertheless dismiss lightly as "false consciousness" the constructs, interpretations, responses, and explanations—Rastafarianism, marijuana trafficking, and the beneficial effects of marijuana use, Pan-Caribbeanism and Pan-African organization, "posses" and crack use/distribution—which our informants offer themselves. Critical theories of labor markets are often subsumed in Marxist dialectical analysis which emphasizes class conflict as the outstanding feature of modern society. Animating the Marxist perspective on these phenomena is the axiom that capitalism is criminogenic; only societies embodying the principles of "socialist diversity" are crime-free. With this orientation, several researchers, especially in Britain, responding to the same social problems which preoccupied economists in this country, concentrated upon how, in a class society, youthful deviance is rooted in the refusal to accept, and in the struggle against, relations with "authorities" which ultimately represent the interests of the capitalist ruling class. Youthful years are the testing ground when working class adolescents must learn to acquiesce in their entry into subordinate occupations (Willis, 1977; Cohen and Robin, 1978; Hall et al. 1978). Describing the young, British-born West Indians' refusal to accept low-paid jobs, the researchers observe that "being penniless breeds hustling," and conclude that "crime is one perfectly predictable and quite comprehensible consequence of the process" (Hall et al., 1978). In America, Marxist scholars were particularly interested in establishing the links between the circumstances of labor among the poor and the prosperity of the ruling class. In Seattle, therefore, it was found that street crime was orchestrated by mobsters, but that these mobsters were themselves at the beck and call of financiers, businessmen, politicians, and law-enforcement officials. These findings suggested that illicitly earned dollars subsidized legitimate concerns and demonstrated also the "total interconnectedness" (Mays, 1964) of crime and capitalist society (Chambless, 1978). Yet these analyses ignore other informants we encounter regularly in the field: neighbors for whom "crime is one perfectly predictable and quite comprehensible consequence" but who are not criminals, who do not belong to "posses," who do not smoke marijuana or crack or traffic in them. Nor are they young socialists, for that matter.

Other sociological traditions have recognized that there are diverse sources of conflict in any society. While it is true that the logic of postindustrial capitalism necessitates the formation of noncompeting groups (Harrison, 1972; Doeringer and Piore, 1972); and while the noncompeting unemployed and underemployed form a critical component of the modern postindustrial age (Braverman, 1970), the manner and extent to which these substrata are formed, and the degree and forms in which they become involved in criminal or deviant lifestyles, vary from region to region, from neighborhood to neighborhood, and even between genders, and therefore reveal the agency of a plurality of factors. The segmentation of labor markets has brought about the development of a host of nonmarket economic processes; relationships based on reciprocity and redistribution often become crucial for mere survival (Miller, 1958; Scharf, 1981). These relationships are patterned in the interaction between structural and individual provenances, vary over time and space, and acquire a social force of their own. If one considers the extensive work the Rastafari have accomplished—stimulating Pan-Caribbean cultural and political cooperation; sponsoring an agricultural renaissance; wresting control of illegal activity in mainland ghettos from outsiders; creating an African identity which is at the same time both deeply ethnic (Caribbean) and broadly universalistic (one is African if one smokes marijuana, eats vegetarian food, reveres Haile Selassie I, and abhors Babylon) so that Caribbean minorities (East Indians, Chinese, Euro-Caribbean, New York Hispanics, and Afro-Americans could also be mobilized; restructuring consumer habits so that imports may be discouraged (Hamid, 1980)—one recognizes that this is a lot more than one expects of a "reserve pool of labor" (indeed, what exactly does a "reserve pool of labor" do?), and recognizes also the patterned interplay of international, regional, and cultural factors which cause these outcomes.

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