

'High salaries and little risk' for UK's £8billion drug barons

Last updated at 22:23pm on 20th November 2007

The illegal drugs trade in Britain is worth a staggering £8billion a year and involves 70,000 street dealers, secret Home Office research revealed yesterday.

Major importers stand to earn more than £16,000 every day and run their operations like a business. Some even have a list of salaried employees.

The drug barons have little fear of being caught and view jail as nothing more than an "occupational hazard", the study reveals.

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ANATOMY OF A COCAINE FIRM

The business has two senior 'partners', importing 50-60kg of cocaine a week. The typical transaction, of which there are five or six a week, involves 10kg of the drug, bought from Colombian producers for £180,000 and sold to street dealers for £220,000.

MR BIGS

The 'partners' or Mr Bigs share profits of £40,000 per transaction, minus £1,750 in wages and other expenses.

■ Average daily earnings: £16,390 each

MAIN COURIER

Meets the Colombian smugglers in London and distributes the cocaine to dealers across the UK, usually in 10kg amounts.

■ Salary: £500 per transaction, plus £800 in expenses. Equivalent of £188,000 a year

MONEY COLLECTOR

Street dealers who buy the drug deliver cash to London the next day, where they meet the organisation's 'money counter'.

■ Salary: £250 per day

MONEY COUNTER

Counts up to £220,000 per day, delivered in any denomination. Once task is complete, contacts a 'money deliverer'.

■ Salary: £250 per day

MONEY DELIVERER

Delivers to two places. A courier acting on behalf of the Colombians, and a 'money holder' acting for the two Mr Bigs.

■ Salary: £250 a day

DRIVER

On-call to transport Mr Big around London or elsewhere in the UK

■ Salary: £200 a day

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Opposition MPs said the findings - slipped out yesterday in a blizzard of Government research papers - are a damning indictment of Labour's ten-year drugs strategy.

The study concedes there remains a "high and stable demand for illegal drugs".

Shadow Home Secretary David Davis, said: "It is extraordinary that drugs are cheaper and more available yet more lucrative than any other crime under this Government.

"Since drugs breed other crimes, including murder, this figure amounts to a disgraceful condemnation of a central plank of this Government's anti-drugs policy."

The report reveals how the Government has been sitting on unpublished research on the total value of the illegal drugs market. It was finally published yesterday as part of a wider study. It shows a turnover of £7billion to £8billion each year - three times the profits of Tesco.

It involves 300 major importers of drugs, 3,000 "wholesalers", and 70,000 street dealers.

The report says the mark-ups - or profit - as the drug is passed along the supply chain are huge, standing at 15,800 per cent for cocaine and 16,800 per cent for heroin.

A fifth of dealers operate alone, with the remainder being run as "small or medium-sized enterprises". Some even have "salaried staff", the report says.

It gives the example of one Mr Big who, along with a partner based in Spain, imported and distributed 50 to 60 kilogrammes (110lb to 132lb) of cocaine each week.

The profits, after salaries and expenses, were £16,390 each every day.

Large numbers of dealers had legitimate careers before turning to a life of crime, including some successful businessmen.

They viewed prison either as an occupational hazard or an unlikely risk. Asset recovery - when the profits of crime are seized by the courts - was more troubling for dealers.

Most individuals enter drug dealing through their family or friends. This suggests that drug-dealing spreads "contagiously" from dealer to new dealer. Dealers even carry out detailed research of local markets in order to make the maximum amount of money.

One convicted criminal, interviewed by researchers, said: "If you want to see what the market is like, go look at the street corners where heroin is sold.

"If each street corner has a dealer on it, you know there is enough heroin about. If there aren't any dealers about, then you know there is a shortage and you can push the price of the kilos up."

Dealers forge relationships inside prison, where they meet other inmates they can "trust". Serving time in jail is viewed by criminals as a sign a dealer is "trustworthy".