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# How drug gangs are taking a leaf out of legitimate business manual

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Criminals run the illegal drug trade in Britain increasingly as if it were a legitimate business, employing salaried staff to increase efficiency, according to a report commissioned by the Home Office.

Three hundred big drug importers operate in Britain as well as 3,000 wholesalers and 70,000 street dealers, according to an internal Home Office estimate, published in the report.

The £8 billion-a-year trade is a third of the size of the tobacco market and two fifths of the size of the trade in alcohol, the report calculates. Two international dealers even highlighted how the exchange rate was helping profits. "The strong British pound makes the UK an attractive target," the report said.

The research showed that prison is regarded only as an "occupation hazard or an unlikely risk". A prison sentence meant having to hand an established enterprise on to an employee, or it could provide an opportunity to make new business contacts.

Among professional costs facing the drug enterprises at the international level are payments to "haulage companies, mariners, serving army officers in South America, bank employees, solicitors, accountants and law enforcement officers", the report said.

The findings are in research commissioned by the Home Office on the scale of the illicit drug market in Britain. Based on prison interviews with 222 high-level drug dealers, it said that two thirds of those questioned reported "that demand had remained either constant or grown in recent years".

The report outlined a "business style" structure, with national drug dealers distributing illicit substances and employing salaried staff as transporters, runners and buyers. The report found that transporters could be paid £4,500 a week to deliver a kilogram of heroin in Britain, or about £490 for cannabis.

Although prison was regarded as an occupational hazard, the report said that longer sentences for dealers did have some effect. One dealer said that the increase in sentence lengths, along with more police action, did persuade people to leave the trade. But asset recovery action, under which the State seizes the proceeds of the trade, appeared to cause much more worry for the drug trade.

"People who are arrested are losing everything that they have – even the things they acquired through honest means," one convicted dealer told the researchers.

The study was one of seven Home Office drug research reports released yesterday. Another study showed that the number of people dependent on drugs has remained at about 332,000 in England and Wales in the past year.

David Davis, the Shadow Home Secretary, criticised the number of reports released in one day. He said: "The Government have gone back to their bad, old habits. Far from being transparent under Gordon Brown, the Home Office has reinstated the old habit of burying the press in statistics, presumably in the hope they will fail to find the key story. This is not just spin, it is the very worst form of spin."

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Tim Hollis, the Chief Constable of Humberside, said yesterday that there were "persuasive arguments" for reclassifying cannabis from a Class C to a Class B drug, including confusion among young people who think that it is legal and increasing medical evidence about harm caused by the drug. His revelation of a change of mind among members of the Association of Chief Police Officers provides support for the Prime Minister, who has asked scientists to review the harm that cannabis can cause.