

Policies to discourage drug trafficking should account for complexity of 'the game'

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Drug traffickers who want to leave the "game" behind often struggle to do so because they fear loss of power and status, a new study shows.

Those who do leave the illegal [drug](#) trade often do so because of a complex mixture of issues including fatherhood, drug use and abuse, and threat of punishment by authorities or fear of retaliation. Researchers concluded that traffickers need ways that allow them to leave the drug business without surrendering their entire identity.

The new article, now online in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, is one of the first ethnographic studies to interview former drug traffickers in detail.

Tobin Hansen of Oregon State University and lead author Howard Campbell with the University of Texas-El Paso conducted detailed life history interviews with 30 former drug traffickers from the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez border, which has one of the highest homicide rates in the world.

They wanted to find out why traffickers quit selling drugs, and also discover more about their perspectives on the lifestyle and reasons why they entered the drug trade.

Hansen, who teaches Spanish at OSU, said very few studies of this kind exist. He said the former traffickers interviewed were primarily young white and Mexican-American males.

"Our primary goal in this study was to look at motivating factors why traffickers may, or may not, choose to get out of the drug game," Hansen said. "We found they often want to quit, for safety reasons, for family and just as a part of life course as they get older, but that it is very difficult to relinquish the power and status they get from the business."

Many of the [study participants](#) talked about feeling powerless, or being poor as kids, and how joining a gang or starting to sell drugs helped change this.

"In this area, it is also a rite of passage to become part of the drug business," Hansen said. "Most of the people we talked to knew someone in the business, or had family directly involved. It is very difficult for them to remove themselves from that at a young age."

Even those traffickers who had quit drug smuggling often spoke fondly of those years looking back, remembering specific moments when they were "on top" and powerful. Hansen pointed out that for young men who are used to having a great deal of wealth and power at their fingertips it is seen as a huge loss of status to become welders or janitors.

In addition, Hansen said media and the glorification of the drug trade entered into the conversations with traffickers. One man they interviewed dropped repeated references to the Al Pacino movie "Scarface," and the TV series "Gangland." More than 25 percent of the former traffickers they spoke to were trying to sell their stories to the media or to Hollywood for script development.

"Three of these guys had already written books about their lives," Hansen said. "The desire for acknowledgement and to maintain some sort of outlaw image is pretty important."

Hansen and Campbell believe the complex motivating factors for why

these traffickers left the drug business points to the fact prison sentences aren't enough. They recommend policies that directly address the factors that make it difficult for traffickers to quit. Specifically, the researchers have suggested a program structured similarly to Narcotics Anonymous, where traffickers could meet and develop insight into the ways their narco-identities confined and limited their lives.

They added that these meetings could also be a place to share ideas and for them to write their life stories, thus helping them maintain a sense of dignity and excitement without engaging in the drug game.

"Policies need to start addressing that these issues are not created in a vacuum," Hansen said. "We need to look at the socioeconomic conditions, cultural values and systems that pull people into, and out of, the drug business. We also need to come to terms with the biggest factor of all – the demand for these products from the United States has not dropped in four decades."

Provided by Oregon State University

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