



Report On Resistance Part Two:

Ethical Substance Use

Navigation

The Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War

Ministry of Propaganda

Unceded xʷməθkwə'yəm, Skwxwú7mesh, and
Səl̓ílwəta?/Selilwitulh Territories

1 - Introduction

Recent interventions against escalating drug overdose morbidity have included calls for a so-called government provided pharmaceutical “safe supply” of drugs to replace the existing market of illicit drugs. Many non-user run groups with massive political power have taken the forefront of this conversation, claiming that, despite the need for legalization in some form, punitive justice must be exerted over criminal syndicates made up of “violent individuals”, including drug dealers. Many academic institutions have overlooked the experiences of drug users, as well as dealers, when writing about the ecology of drug use, and have claimed that organized crime poses a threat to our decent society. For example, the BCCSU has argued in favor of eliminating the illegal opioid market altogether, citing the need to reduce violence arising from conflict among those involved in the opioid trade.¹ The idea that drug dealing is the greatest threat, and causes the most harm, to drug users or society more generally is as wildly ungrounded in reality, as it is stupid, given that the greatest amount of violence related to drugs is, and always has been, police related; with the victims being predominantly drug users and dealers themselves. Moreover, this violence will not be reduced by a pharmaceutical safe supply alone, as even if simple possession of drugs is decriminalized, and even if the market is legitimized, the police will still find ways to brutalize the poor, especially those using drugs; that is to say, *if they can't*

¹ <https://www.bccsu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Report-Heroin-Compassion-Clubs.pdf>

catch you on possession, they'll give you possession-with-intent.

Ultimately, the Coalition of Peers Dismantling the Drug War (CPDDW) believes that a non-user centred approach to drug policy marginalizes the voices that should be most heard in this conversation, those of the people most impacted and marginalized by the drug laws themselves. Indeed, at the CPDDW, we believe that the real issue at stake with the war against criminality and drug dealing is actually the coded inscription of racism and a desire to maintain a carceral industrial complex and status quo based upon punishment and violence. Despite the fact that drug dealers are actually keeping their communities safe, they are vilified, specifically by those who understand their role the least. In this report, the CPDDW would like to examine the notion that drug dealers promote community safety. This is because they require their clientele to remain safe in order to make money, and due to the fact that they are friends with many of their customers and community members; ultimately, because if the overall ecology of drug use is safer, drug dealers themselves are safer. To this end, dealers keep their community safer in many ways. In our opinion, some of the most important of which include: direct overdose prevention; the provision of a reliable and tested product; warnings about content changes of their drugs; acting as an impromptu overdose prevention site for the clients (that is, peer-to-peer monitoring of drug use); check-ins with regular buyers; and by preparing their drugs in a safe way. These actions occur in opposition to a patchwork and inadequate system that lacks enough drug testing; that lacks compassion for users; and that funds an overarching and harmful panoptical police. Ultimately, the Coalition of Peers remains allied with those who sell drugs in an honorable, ethical, and

safe way, and sees the role of drug dealers as integral against the racist and imperialistic war on drugs. Should this war end, the question of what should happen to illicit drug dealers in a licit market remains, and also remains beyond the scope of this paper.

2 - Background: What is Ethical Substance Use Navigation?

As previously noted, there is a fundamental issue with current safer supply guidelines as they do not get users what they want, and therefore do not prevent or halt illicit transactions. In a recent report, *Risk Mitigation in the Context of Dual Public Health Emergencies*, protocols for stimulant replacement therapy are to prescribe Dexedrine and Ritalin, and not to give users the drugs they requested, some of which are not even legally produced. This is proof of the lack of drug user control over these protocols. *Cocaine is totally avoided in the document, as is pharmaceutical methamphetamine.* The CPDDW believes that this demonstrates the fact that non-drug users lack the necessary experience to write these policies, and tend to moralistically categorize drugs, only including those that they feel work the best for putting drug users on the path to recovery. Methadone, despite its user-described horrible side-effects, suboxone has widely been prescribed by doctors to help alleviate the symptoms of opiate withdrawal while denying drug users the pleasure of opiates. We believe this is a decision to punish people for wanting to feel good, not simply a medical decision. Hydromorphone (most frequently seen as Dilaudid 8) has been heavily prescribed to illicit fentanyl users; but does not match the strength of fentanyl. Users are also hemmed in as they only receive a certain

number of pills throughout the day that they need to go pick up from the pharmacy. This takes time away from doing daily tasks. Further, folks are often dope sick within an hour of taking this prescription, and frequently end up in a cycle of topping off their dose with illicit substances which could make them lose their prescription (if you pee 'dirty' or have illicit drugs in your system). Ultimately, what we see as the 'safe' supply that was introduced during COVID19 lockdown has made it difficult for folks to hold employment, get daily things done or make appointments; due to the system having no trust in people getting carries, etc. These folks will return to an illicit market.

The CPDDW believes that the humanist notion of the maximization of free choice and individual autonomy is at the root of ethical substance use navigation. Morally, we remain individualists and found our claim on the idea that "this is my body, and it is my choice what I want to put into it". The idea that people have the right to ingest or use whichever substances they choose, and that they should be able to remain safe in doing so, is integral in a person centred approach to drug policy. As people who use drugs require a source from which to secure their substances, the idea of ethical substance use navigation stems from providing drugs in a way that reduces the most harm possible.

Ethical substance use navigation has proven to be an effective approach in reducing harmful and deadly drug deaths in our own communities. As early as 1967, researchers have documented what is a long tradition by communities of drug-users. In a 2002 paper, Whiteacre and Pepinsky point to the fact that in sharing knowledge collectively about our experiences: consensus "develops

about the drug's subjective effects, furation, proper dosages, predictable dangers, and how those dangers may be avoided," often reducing the harms associated with using drugs.² This point of ethical drug navigation is to acknowledges *that those who wish to use drugs will do so regardless, and will therefore need a supply of said drugs.* As is covered in Section C, in a more direct manner, drug dealers are facilitators of safety in their communities. All the drug dealers we spoke to, indicated that they took some degree of pre- and/or post-sale measures to ensure the best outcomes possible for drug-users. Whiteacre and Pepinsky also explore the contrary, citing studies of laws and educational programs that promote or practice abstinence aka "just say no" have in one study proven to increase drug-use and is well documented to increase the harmful outcomes that can result. In any manner continuing to disrupt the known harm reduction of ethical substance use navigation is unacceptable, and as documented in this report the low-level drug-dealers who are often most targeted by police are instrumental in ensuring as much safety as reasonably possible for drug-users.

3 - High Level / Low Level Drug Dealing

It should be noted that when a low-level dealer is robbed of their supply or arrested, the damage is minimal to their suppliers. However, when a supplier is taken out of commission, the street-level dealers are cut-off, their buyers are cut-off and everyone suffers from the disruption in reliable and familiar products. This isn't just a matter of buyers having to change brand of laundry detergent - a

² https://www.academia.edu/12168168/Controlling_drug_use (p.22-25)

switch in supply of down can mean a change in potency which can lead to overdose and death.

Most drug trafficking arrests in Canada are happening to low level drug dealers. Low-level drug dealers are often more visible, and therefore, vulnerable than their higher-up counterparts. Many dealers selling small quantities are doing so on the street and are vulnerable to police harassment and arrest. To John Q Public street level dealers are the face of trafficking, and they therefore receive the brunt of the drug war attacks. Along with drugs users, low-level drug dealers (often users themselves) are disproportionately harmed by every drug war assault.

Low-level dealers face constant harassment by police, and even if they are not arrested and charged, they are often robbed by police of their drugs and money. There is objectively no reduction in crime when street-level dealers are attacked by police, and the theft by police of drugs and resources is a catalyst for a myriad of greater trouble and crime - assault against dealers by their suppliers, the pressure on dealers to restore their loss via criminal activity and the increase in overdose deaths because a supply chain has been severed. In the Crackdown Podcast episode *Stand Down* they interviewed Constable Steve Addison, VPD Media Relations officer. Addison stated “[...] you realize after a short time, you can’t arrest our way out of this. This is a much bigger problem.” He went on to say “We’re not out there targeting drug addicts; we want people to get the help that they need.” Yet somehow the arrests continue, the enforcement continues and the harassment continues. All of these actions by police directly target drug users and low-level dealers. The police’s violent actions lead to more

violence within the community and maintain the cycle of harm that they claim to be fighting.

Further, drug dealing is more complicated and interwoven into the fabric of our society than most people understand. Police corruption demonstrates this, and what we know is just the tip of the iceberg. In January 2021 Const. Neil Logan was charged with seven new charges of theft, breach of trust and possession of a controlled substance.³ Logan was also alleged to have a connection to a young Surrey drug trafficker. In 2011, former Vancouver officer Peter Hodson was sentenced to three years in jail after pleading guilty to trafficking in the Downtown Eastside and breach of trust.⁴ Currently there is an investigation underway into an unnamed Surrey cop who has “alleged” ties to gang members. He was in the car of a gang member when arrested.⁵ If this is information that makes it *into* the media, we ask, who is actually involved and how much. The narrative of a simple black and white pusher starts to crumble, when we see that those who are supposed to be upholding law and order – are the same people guilty of participating in that which they claim to punish.

4 – The Importance of Drug Dealers

As mentioned before, and much like its equally maligned companion of sex work, drug dealing is one of the

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vpd-neil-logan-suspended-charged-theft-trust-drugs-1.5868796>

⁴ <https://vancouversun.com/news/corruption-cases-troubling-but-rare-in-b-c-policing>

⁵ <https://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/real-scoop-surrey-officer-arrested-after-alleged-involvement-with-gang>

greatest social evils in the minds of an everyday citizen. As with sex work, the tide is shifting so that the act of buying drugs will be legalized while the act of selling them should remain illegal. In August 2020, the Public Prosecution Service of Canada (PPSC) issued instructions for the prosecution of drug related offenses. It directs prosecutors to “*focus upon the most serious cases raising public safety concerns for prosecution and to otherwise pursue suitable alternative measures [...] for simple possession cases.*”⁶ The document explains how criminal prosecution of drug possession causes harm, is not effective and doesn’t contribute to community safety. However, when the same document addresses prosecuting the so-called “serious cases”, the PPSC makes an 180° turn. “Serious cases” of drug possession include “*trafficking or possession for the purpose of trafficking, obtaining a prescription substance for the purpose of trafficking or the use of others*”. When trafficking is involved, the PPSC directs that criminal prosecution is justified. These two extremes in the treatment of drug users and drug dealers naively asserts that users and dealers are separate, defined groups, and that the sale of drugs should be criminalized while their purchase should remain legal. In this way, the PPSC positions drug users as victims and drug dealers as predators. It denies the positive contributions drug dealers provide for their communities in terms of safer supply, overdose prevention and mutual care. However, obtaining a substance with a predictable content for use from others is the very definition of ethical substance use navigation.

⁶ 5.13 Prosecution of Possession of Controlled Substances Contrary to s. 4(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act

The legal system and prohibitionist groups apply the harmful criminal/victim dichotomy to sex work as well. In their work on the criminalization of Third Parties and Clients, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) explains it is not possible draw an arbitrary line and criminalize one part of a mutual relationship without causing harm to all parties involved.⁷ As stated before, the CPDDW believes that drug dealers play an integral part in their communities. Drug dealers are providing substances (often safer and reliable supply), many are supervising people using drugs and many are responding to overdoses. Drug dealers have engaged in keeping people safe long before non-profits came into the DTES to institutionalize harm reduction. To this end, the criminalization and demonization of drug dealers causes harm to the community over all.

5 – Drugs, Data, and Dialogue

A - Methodology

Given the difficulty of finding drug dealers willing to be interviewed, this report works with a relatively small sample size of 14 people ($n = 14$). Nevertheless, our administrative team and board believe that this report is widely representative of the DTES as a community, and drug dealing more generally. The report itself involved a mixed method design. Quantitative data was collected by CPDDW board members, and the program's administrative team and the question set used was developed by the membership of the CPDDW, and included the following talking points:

⁷ <https://www.nswp.org/fr/node/2952>

1. *Why do you think drug dealers play a part in preventing overdoses?*
2. *Do you test your drugs? Why or why not?*
3. *How have the police prevented you from keeping people safe?*
4. *Are “criminal syndicates” as dangerous as people are led to believe they are?*
5. *Do you supervise people’s use like an impromptu OPS?*
6. *Do you check in with your daily buyers if you don’t hear from them?*

Ultimately, the interviews produced a series of closely linked but diffuse data due to the way dealers responded to questions. Interviews were fully transcribed, and qualitative data was extracted from these records. Nonetheless, due to disparities in the way surveys were conducted, and the way questions were asked, there remain data asymmetries that prevent direct conclusive themes to be drawn out between interviews, save for *from our understanding of the ecology of drug use as users*. From transcripts, it should be noted that many questions were asked in different ways or not asked at all, this yielded convoluted results and some answers that do not actually address the questions at hand. However, on the whole, drug dealers can be seen to be dramatically reducing the harm experienced in their communities, and we believe that the punitive system directed at them should be immediately dismantled.

B – Why Do Dealers Reduce Harm

From our initial analysis, it seems that dealers have a tripartite reason for trying to keep the drug using community

safe, and ultimately, dealers are part of the ecology of drug use and have a vested interest in keeping it, and therefore themselves, safe. Their integration in this community initially stems from the fact that they rely on buyers financially they need to ensure that they stay alive. In the words of one dealer:

Well I think that we play a pretty good role at trying to prevent overdoses in other people's lives because the main source of income that we do get is from these people so we want to make sure that are as well as possible and that they keep coming back, kind of like any convenience store or whatever, you know if they see you coming to their store they don't want to see you get hurt crossing the road or something like that (Mal-Interview-7).

Drug dealers, without a market for which to sell their product to, cannot survive in a modern world based on a transactional market, they therefore must ensure their clients remain safe, and thus have an obligation to keep their communities safe.

This extends to a further need to support their communities, because through their role within the economy of substance use, dealers come to consider many of their customers to be friends and develop relationships with them beyond that of a client/service provider, in fact many of their customers are deeply cared about. One dealer bluntly stated, “My customers are my friends and I don’t want them to die” (Sam-Interview-2).

Finally, as the ecology of drug use becomes more unstable due to violence, police repression, and other causes of instability, dealers themselves are at risk. One dealer explained how closely knitted they are within the community in this way:

Yes I do [use my own drugs]. That way I know that they're safe, and I'm not selling something that could potentially harm somebody. As well, I do find enjoyment in the substances. [...] If we stay together we will stagger our uses...our doses, so that we are watching each other (Dev-Interview-1).

Rather than standing apart from their communities, as the lecherous predators described by the police and narratives of the pusher, dealers are in fact a vital component of community safety. In fact, the vast majority of dealers increase community safety and reduce the diverse harms that their buyers may encounter. This is revealed via further exposition.

C – Ethical Substance Use Navigation and Harm Reduction

Due to their vested interest in their customer base, because they both care about their community, and rely on their buyers financially, there are several ways dealers help reduce the harm of the regime of prohibition.

This includes the following examples:

I - Providing reliable product / source for their product

First, of the dealers interviewed, half (7/14) said that they ensured their product came from a reliable source (i.e.

someone who would not cut their drugs dangerously). The majority of these dealers ensure this is the case by taking their own drugs themselves, and cutting their drugs themselves in a way that they know is safe. One dealer explains:

Well, when I'm making up my dope I've gotta' make sure I'm using the right ratio of fentanyl and the other additives that you use. You have to make sure that you're not putting in too much, we call them "hotspots". It's gotta' be mixed properly and really well blended. If it's not then whoever I sell to runs the risk of hitting a hotspot and that could kill them. So it's the responsibility on my part, I have to make sure to take these things into consideration (Mal-Interview-9).

To this end, drug dealers are actually keeping their community safer by keeping drugs in circulation that have a somewhat predictable content, and that are cut in a way that ensures client safety. This is just the first of many ways that dealers keep their communities safe.

II - Testing

Second, of the dealers interviewed, half said that they tested their drugs spectrographically (7/14), and two said they would occasionally spectrographically test their drugs if they said it was necessary (i.e. "If they affect me differently, I test them (Mal-Interview-3)". However, many of the dealers that could not test their drugs in this way, for various reasons, came up with creative alternatives such as testing through self use, or getting other reliable people testing

samples of their drugs. Ultimately, all the dealers polled have *some* variation of a testing process. In the words of one dealer:

I have, for myself, usually three different testers, in house. Three different testers on the street, using the different delivery devices. They're seasoned users, as far as I'm aware, so I'm confident I'll get a very descriptive and a very fitting run down (Mal-Interview-6).

As stated before, dealers care about their community, and will find ways to ensure that their clients understand what is in their drugs to the best of their ability. This includes use of spectrographic testing, when available, and other creative forms of drug testing when it is not.

III - Warning buyers of the product strength or changes in the product

Third, half of the dealers interviewed (7/14) said that they would warn their buyers if the strength of their product changed, in order to prevent overdoses. Several dealers brought this up:

I can warn my fellow smokers, I guess I would say, so I can let them know if you're going to do this alone, I wouldn't. Do half. Do the other half later (Mal-Interview-5).

I mean if fentanyl is in, say, the crystal meth I sell, at least I can say, you know what? There are traces of this in here (Eri-Interview-1).

Letting my customer know how strong the dope is and how much to do at the time (Mal-Interview-3).

The important theme here is that drug dealers act as de facto regulatory institutions, ensuring that clients know what they are receiving (that is, the content of their drugs). Much like the liquor control board acts to ensure alcohol is labelled and regulated, so too do dealers act as a regulatory institution that protects consumers of drugs.

IV - Supervising buyers when they use (impromptu OPS)

Fourth, of the dealers interviewed, **all** dealers said they would supervise use of their drugs to ensure their client remained safe. 11 of the 14 dealers do this every time, while 3 out of 14 would sometimes watch their client's use, if they deemed it was necessary.

Yes I do and I tell them to be careful and not to do too much (Sam-Interview-1).

Yeah, I do. And I refer people to certain OPS sites, because no one should use alone. [...] Usually the higher mark up of deaths is people who use alone so yeah, I don't want people to use alone (Sam-Interview-2).

We go through a lot of supplies here because once people buy their dope, they wanna' do a shot right away and I don't mind them doing it here [...] If there is a problem, which there has been a few times, I've had to step in. That means you gotta' call the

ambulance and everything. You've gotta' get the staff up here with the oxygen. So it's putting it on me a little bit, but that's the risk that we run. You never, ever want to put someone's life in jeopardy just to save your own ass (Mal-Interview-9).

Unlike other pandemics, necessary and life saving interventions are not being provided to a population so heavily at risk. As the government frequently prevents the institution of overdose prevention services, and closes down institutions which open, both provincially and federally, dealers are frequently the first line of defense in overdose prevention and response. They are the true first responders and deserve to be recognized as heroes, rather than vilified.

V - Carrying Naloxone and/or responding to overdoses

Fifth, of the drug dealers interviewed, 6 of 14 said that they carried naloxone with them (we are unsure of the real accuracy of this). Many of the dealers have responded to overdoses and remain the first responders to overdoses in the community, in the words of one dealer:

I have saved now, 13 or 14 different people from overdosing. First 12 were in an SRO, the other times I was just hanging out with friends (Dev-Interview-1).

Drug dealers are not only seeking to prevent overdose from happening, but are also prepared to respond appropriately, when and if it should happen. They are literally saving people's lives, while at the same time being castigated for this work.

VI -Checking in with regular buyers

Sixth, the vast majority of dealers interviewed (10 of 14) said they checked in with their regular buyers to confirm that they remained safe, while only 2 of 14 said that they would do so sometimes, as they potentially “cannot find people” or they “know their tolerance”. Of the 2 who said they did not, they reported that they “see these people around” or ask others about them. This reveals the fundamental relation between drug dealers and their clientele, and the obligation to keep them safe.

VII - Preparing drugs in a safer way

Finally, although not a question directly posted in the survey, some dealers talked about preventing cross-contamination of other drugs with fentanyl when they were distributed. This included wiping scales; always using new baggies; mixing non-fentanyl buffers thoroughly; etc. In their own words:

I have three sets of scales - I don't use the scales I have for side to weigh any down because it's just too risky. It just takes forgetting once and somebody can get hurt (Mal-Interview-9).

I personally wipe my scale and use different containers every time I weigh (Eri-Interview-1).

Ultimately, preventing cross-contamination from happening, is the method of selling drugs most likely to keep individuals secure and prevents a common cause of overdose death.

D - Conclusions from Data

It is our hope through the exploration of the aforementioned themes, we have demonstrated that drug dealers, far from being evil, vile monsters, and in fact simple business people, trying to ensure their survival, and the survival of their community in the face of a war on drugs that is trying to squash them down into pulp.

E - Barriers

Although dealers try their best to keep their clientele safe, they noted several barriers to being able to do their work. 9 of 12 dealers reported that the police were the biggest barrier **to** keeping those who accessed their services safe. The three most repeated claims are:

I – Police Seizures

Police taking drugs from reliable dealers causing buyers to seek new and un-vetted sources, and thus overdose risk increases. In the words of the dealers:

The more busts they have, the more likely it is that people will be mixing their good quality substances with buffs that are likely to cause seizures or psychosis or god knows what else (Dev-Interview 1).

When the police, ya' know, ruin my day by arresting me and take me off the streets, a lot of my customers end up losing because now they gotta' go down to an unknown source or untrusted source (Mal-Interview-7)

II - Police Presence Preventing Supervision of People Using

Many dealers also raised issue with police surveillance preventing safer use supervision. In their own words:

Let's say for example, when we're all hanging out outside and I do provide them with the substances they need and the cops roll up. Now I can't monitor my friends because we all just scattered. I can't make sure people aren't using by themselves, because they probably will use by themselves now (Dev-Interview-1).

When they interrupt us, we can't pay attention to everybody, 'cause we have to pay attention to them. And if we don't pay attention to the people we sell to, we don't know if they are okay (Mal-Interview-1).

III - Lack of access to spectrometer testing

Of the five who explained that they did not test their drugs, the majority many of those who do not, brought up limited access to spectrometer testing as an issue to keeping folks safe, one person stated that if they picked up later in the day it was more dangerous – “you know, especially at night, right? When I pick up after 6pm, then what do I do, you know (Eri-Interview-1).

Nevertheless, dealers answered that they don't test their drugs because they don't want to; because they use dollar store test strips; because it's inconvenient when batches change so fast; because they know the cook; and

because “it’s a dollar game, some people just want to make a profit” (CPDDW Minutes Mar/20/2019).

F – By the Numbers

Index	
Y – Yes	N – No
S – Sometimes	NA – Question Not Asked

Vertical column – interview subject

Horizontal column - ways drug dealers are keeping community safe:

1. Testing
2. Carrying Naloxone
3. Reliable Source
4. Knowing Strength
5. Informing Buyers about Strength
6. *Impromptu OPS*
7. *Checking in*
8. *Wiping scales*
9. *Experience barriers due to police*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
1	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	S	N	S	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	7/14	
2	Y	NA	NA	Y	NA	Y	Y	NA	Y	NA	NA	NA	NA	Y		6/14
3	Y	Y	Y	NA	Y	NA	NA	NA	Y	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Y	7/14
4	Y	Y	NA	Y	NA	Y	NA	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		11/14
5	Y	NA	NA	Y	NA	NA	Y	NA	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NA	NA	7/14
6	Y	Y	Y	Y	S	Y	Y	S	Y	S	Y	Y	Y	Y		12/14
7	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	S	Y	Y	Y	S	Y		12/14
8	NA	NA	NA	Y	NA	Y		2/14								
9	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	NA	Y	NA	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N		9/14

6 – Discussion: the Lived Experience of Selling Drugs

Drug dealers remain some of the most marginalized members of the illicit drug economy, yet integral parts to that economy, and to keeping it safe. In many cases, they are the first responders to overdose, and overlooked guardians of people who use drugs.

It is difficult to determine the number of people in prison in Canada for drug offenses. The Vancouver Network of Drug Users (VANDU) report *Drug use, Arrests, Policing and Imprisonment in Canada and BC* explains this lack of data:

It is difficult to obtain the exact number of people sentenced to prison for a drug offence because Corrections Canada (federal prisons) and provincial corrections only keep track of the most serious offence designation of each prisoner. For instance, if you are sentenced for murder and drug possession, the drug possession charge will not show up in the statistics provided by federal and provincial governments. Thus, one can assume that the majority of prison statistics for sentences for drug charges are non-violent.⁸

Despite the limitations, VANDU was able to determine that, for federal prisoners, at least 18% of all prisoners were serving sentences for drug-related crimes.⁹ Black and Indigenous communities are disproportionately represented

⁸ Boyd, S. (2018, March 9). Drug use, arrests, policing, and imprisonment in Canada and BC, 2015–2016. Vancouver: Author.

⁹ Ibid

in the prison system with 54% of black women in prison serving sentences for drug offences.¹⁰

Drug users have been calling for the decriminalization of drug possession for a long time and some recent measures have been implemented locally and federally that may reduce incarceration for simple possession, including the previously cited guidelines for prosecution. The same cannot be said for drug trafficking. As long as dealers continue to be criminalized, drug users will continue to be impacted. Criminalization of drug dealing brings police into drug user's communities and it upsets the flow of reliable substances. Putting drug dealers in jail is not in the best interest of drug users.

7 – Conclusion

Our society and the media have made drug dealers out to be these hard up gangsters that are only in it for the money, who kill and violently attack you and your loved ones over drug debts; a caricature of uncaring about as long as they are bringing in revenue, of thugs. That's not true in our community, in the Downtown Eastside, it's the exact opposite. Yes, some dealers are indeed violent, but this is only a select few. They often are not street level dealers, who need to make a reputation for themselves to have respectable buyers or clients. Many of the street level dealers test their supply so they are able to tell you what it's cut with and purity levels are, they often will warn you if it's stronger, and they often will witness drug use. If one does overdose, they will reverse it. Street level dealers are integral when it comes to safe supply and decriminalization. They

¹⁰ Ibid

should be a part of drug policy decisions and conversations, despite the fact that they are helped the least when it comes to service organizations that help with housing, social assistance and more. This is primarily due to the assumptions society has made about them, such as an idea that they don't need support because institutions assume they have all this money coming in, when that's not often the truth. Street level dealers are some of the most caring people that take the time to check-in on you if you're a regular, and it's been a few days, or even if you pick up and you don't look ok.

Although there were some issues in our methodology, the CPDDW hopes that we have explicitly shown that dealers promote community safety primarily *because* they require their clientele to remain safe in order to make money, and because they are friends with many of their customers and community members, and ultimately because if the overall ecology of drug use is safer, drug dealers themselves are safer. As mentioned before, dealers keep their community safer in many ways, but some of the most important are of which include: direct overdose prevention; the provision of a reliable and tested product; warnings about content changes of their drugs; acting as an impromptu overdose prevention site for the clients (that is, peer-to-peer monitoring of drug use); via check-ins with regular buyers; and by preparing their drugs in a safe way. These actions occur in opposition to a patchwork and inadequate system that lacks enough drug testing that lacks compassion for users, and the overarching reach of the panoptical police. Ultimately, the Coalition of Peers remains allied with those who sell drugs in an honorable, ethical, and safe way, and sees the role of

drug dealers as integral against the racist and imperialist war on drugs.