Property Crime and Income Generation by Heroin Users

Lisa Maher, David Dixon, Wayne Hall, and Michael Lynskey

University of New South Wales

This paper provides a detailed analysis of patterns of income generation among 202 active heroin users in South West Sydney. We explore both sources of income and the relative contribution of different types of income generating activities, including drug sales and related activities, property crime, prostitution, legitimate income and avoided expenditures. Despite claims that heroin use leads inevitably to property crime, drug market activities accounted for a greater proportion of drug user income in this sample. Results indicate that law enforcement crackdowns that reduce opportunities for generating income from the drug market may increase property crime by heroin users.

Acquisitive property crime has significant social and economic costs. A recent estimate suggests that between two and three billion dollars worth of property is stolen from homes, shops, cars, factories and warehouses in Australia each year (Freiberg, 1997, p. 237). Very little of this property is recovered and a large amount presumably finds its way onto the stolen property market in various ways (Allen, 2000). Four groups of offenders can be identified as major contributors to the property crime market: burglars (Jochelson, 1995); large-scale shoplifters (Shapland, 1995); workplace pilferers (Ditton, 1977; Henry, 1977); and heroin users (Mott, 1992; Sutton, 1995). Little is known about the respective involvement of each group or how the groups overlap and how this may vary over time.

Research in Europe, North America and Australia suggests that many dependent heroin users are actively engaged in the theft and resale of stolen property (Dobinson & Ward, 1985; Johnson et al., 1985; Mendes, 2000; Parker et al., 1988, Hammersley et al., 1989, Dorn et al., 1994, Grapendaal et al., 1995). Similarly, studies of property offenders indicate that many are heroin users who steal in order to finance their habits. In an interview study of imprisoned burglars in New South Wales, Stevenson and Forsythe (1999, p. 34) found that four-fifths of their subjects spent some or all of the proceeds of their crimes on illicit drugs: two-thirds of adults and one-quarter of juveniles were heroin users. Preliminary results from the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia project indicate that 55% of suspects charged with property offences tested positive to opiates (Makkai et al., 2000, p. 6).

Address for correspondence: Lisa Maher, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia.
In England and Wales, it has been estimated that, in the early 1990s, dependent heroin users raised between 58 and 864 million pounds sterling per annum from acquisitive property crime (Dorn et al., 1994). An Australian study reported that heroin users raise at least $312 million per annum from property crime (Marks, 1992). However, this is a “very conservative” estimate (Marks, 1992, p. 29), based on outdated or incomplete data (e.g., Dobinson & Ward, 1985; Dobinson & Poletti, 1988), and an estimated population of only 30,000 regular and frequent heroin users (Marks, 1990). During the 1990s, there was a significant increase in heroin use (and heroin-related fatalities) in Australia (Hall et al., 1999). In addition, it must be emphasised that Marks’s (1992) estimate only includes income generated by users, not direct costs to victims or indirect costs to society. Illegality upends market norms: the sale price (what the user receives for stolen goods) is less than value (the replacement cost to the victim). Additional costs to society include intangible costs such as fear of crime, costs associated with corruption, and defensive costs against theft such as crime prevention measures and insurance.

While property crime by heroin users undoubtedly causes significant social harm, the picture is more complex than the popular stereotype in which heroin use inexorably leads to a life dominated by robbing and thieving in order to finance the next hit. Some of the assumptions underlying estimates of the economic costs of acquisitive crimes committed by heroin users have been shown to be problematic. As Dorn and colleagues (1994) have pointed out, some calculations exaggerate the financial requirements of heroin users by overestimating levels of heroin consumption and under-estimating the number of heroin purchases funded by means other than acquisitive crime. In particular, drug dealing and distribution (drug market) activities have been shown to be an important source of income for heroin users (Brettheville-Jensen & Sutton, 1996) although there are significant gender and ethnic differences (see e.g., Maher, 1997; Maher & Daly, 1996; Anglin & Hser, 1987; Weatherburn et al., 1999).

Many heroin users also expend legitimate income in the form of wages and state benefits on drug purchases (Grapendaal et al., 1995). In Australia, Marks (1992) has estimated that social security payments for a population of 30,000 “regular and frequent” heroin users cost approximately $190 million in 1988. An interview survey involving 511 heroin users in central and south western Sydney report that 16% of participants recorded social security as their main source of income to buy heroin (Weatherburn et al., 1999, pp. 21–2).

Others derive at least part of their incomes from activities such as prostitution (Maher, 1997), gambling (Johnson et al., 1985) and pawning personal property (Dobinson & Poletti, 1988; Maher et al., 1998; Weatherburn et al., 1999, p. 21). In addition, many heroin users obtain a significant portion of their income in the form of “in-kind” or avoided expenditures. In their study of heroin users in New York, Johnson et al. (1985) found that up to 20% of the income of heroin users took the form of avoided expenditures. These avoided expenditures represent non-cash or in-kind forms of income and include accommodation, meals, clothing, alcohol and other drugs, as well as a wide range of commodities or services not paid for which are provided by family, friends, and social services.
There is a growing body of research on how heroin users finance their drug use. In general, this research suggests that (a) the demand for heroin is more elastic (i.e., consumption levels are affected by price changes) than previous studies would have us believe (Grapendaal et al., 1995; Bretteville-Jensen & Sutton, 1996); and (b) that populations of heroin users exhibit considerable variation in both the proportion of income derived from particular sources and the types of income-generating activities used to support their consumption (Grapendaal et al., 1995). This variation is in large part attributable to the different social, economic, political and cultural contexts in which heroin use and distribution take place (Maher & Johnson, 1999; Johnson et al., 2001).

In this paper, we seek to increase understanding of the links between heroin use and property crime by exploring the income generation activities of heroin users in South West Sydney, in particular, examining the relationship between property crime and other sources of income.

**Methodology and Sample Characteristics**

A review of the costs of drug abuse in Australia (Collins & Lapsley, 1996) does not include estimates of the costs associated with crime by illicit drug abusers. According to the authors, these costs are “not quantifiable” because the data are either not available or insufficient. A recent attempt to interview convicted drug dealers in prison failed because of the subjects’ reluctance to participate (Stevenson & Forsythe, 1998). In this study, we attempt to fill some of these gaps in our knowledge. We do so by interviewing active heroin users involved in property crime and street-level drug distribution and sales activities. Self-reports by drug users have been shown to be reliable and valid in both Australian and international contexts (Darke, 1998; Goldstein et al., 1995). The reliability of our respondents’ self-reports is strengthened by the fact that this was not a one-off survey, but formed part of an extensive, continuing program of research in the area. While such research is demanding and difficult, we believe that the data generated are of potentially greater validity than those obtained from captive samples of incarcerated property offenders or treatment populations.

The data reported here were collected as part of an in-depth study designed to elicit information about the lifestyles and economic behaviours of active street-level heroin users in South Western Sydney. The research, based in Cabramatta, was undertaken between 1995 and 1997 and utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods (ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires). A key aim of the study was to generate comparative data on heroin user incomes and expenditures. Data derived from in-depth interviews and the literature were used to inform the development and pilot testing of a structured questionnaire (the Economic Behaviour Interview Schedule; EBIS). The instrument was designed to minimise recall problems by asking respondents in detail about income and expenditure during the preceding seven days. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling techniques based on local street and social networks. Interviews took an average of 50 minutes to complete and were conducted in the project’s Cabramatta office, in restaurants, coffee shops and pubs, on the street and in subjects’ homes. Ethics approval was granted by the University.
of New South Wales Committee on Experimental Procedures Involving Human Subjects. Respondents were reimbursed $20 in recognition of their time and any inconvenience as a result of their participation in the study.

Data were analysed using SPSS for Windows (9.0). Percentages are reported for categorical variables and means and medians are reported for normally distributed and skewed continuous variables, respectively. A number of comparisons of major variables of interest identified from the literature and previous ethnographic research are reported. Unadjusted odds ratios (OR) (95% confidence intervals) and Pearson’s Chi-squared were used for analysis of categorical data. Normally distributed continuous variables were analysed using t tests. The 0.05 probability level was adopted for all tests of significance.

We report here on data obtained from the EBIS questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to a total of 202 participants. Sixty-seven per cent were from South West Sydney, and the rest from other parts of (notably central) Sydney. The sample was primarily male (73%) with a mean age of 23 years. Respondents had completed an average of nine years of schooling and three-quarters (76%) were unemployed at the time of interview. The majority of the sample were heroin injectors (93%) and almost all (91%) reported committing crime other than drug use during the week prior to interview. While most respondents (85%) were not enrolled in any form of treatment at the time of interview, just over half (62%) had previously been in treatment for their heroin use. Almost all of those currently receiving treatment (15%) were in methadone maintenance treatment (MMT).

As regards ethnicity, our sample is comparable to a recent study of heroin users in central and South West Sydney, in which 20% were Asian and 53% were Caucasian (Weatherburn et al., 1999). More than half (56%) of our respondents identified as Anglo-Australian when asked about their ethnic/cultural identity. It should be emphasised that this is not primarily a study of Asian heroin users (contrast Maher et al., 1997). Less than one in five (18%) identified as Asian. The remaining quarter (25% classified as other) reflected the ethnic heterogeneity which characterises South West Sydney.

**Results**

The data indicate that heroin users in South West Sydney are actively involved in acquisitive property crime: 70% of respondents were active property offenders. Participants generated a total of $110,218 or an average of $534 each from acquisitive property crime during the week prior to interview. Using data from 1988–1993, Hall (1995) estimated that the number of regular heroin users in Australia ranged between 49,000 and 150,000. Combining these estimates with the median weekly income\(^4\) of $210 earned by respondents from this source, we calculate that heroin users in Australia generate between $535,080,000 and $1,638,000,000 per annum from acquisitive property crime.\(^2\) This is the income generated by users, not the cost to the community: as noted above, in order to estimate direct cost alone, we would need to multiply these figures by a factor of three or four (Stevenson & Forsythe, 1998; Stevenson et al., 2001).

Table 1 summarises the results of recent studies, including our own, which have examined heroin users’ sources of income. Data from the current study indicate
that 70% of heroin users in the sample derived a portion of their income from acquisitive property crime, 70% reported income (both drugs and/or money) from the drug market, 9% obtained income from prostitution, 59% reported legitimate income and 28% reported income in-kind in the form of avoided expenditures.

The closest comparison group to our sample in terms of involvement in property crime are the “new” heroin users studied in the North of England during the 1980s (Jarvis & Parker, 1989, Parker et al., 1988). According to Parker and his colleagues between 64% and 74% of these “new” users derived a proportion of their income from property crime. A comprehensive study in The Netherlands found that 53% of heroin users derived income from property crime (Grapendaal et al., 1995), while, in the US, a similar study found that 44% of active heroin users generated income from property crime (Johnson et al., 1985).

These findings would seem to confirm the popular stereotype which inextricably links heroin use with property crime. However, we need to go on to investigate the relative contributions of various sources of income which heroin users generate. Most studies typically ask about sources of income in general terms and fail to collect source-specific financial data. Data on the proportion of users reporting involvement in various income generating activities fail to elucidate the relative contribution of each source (i.e., as a percentage of total income). In order to accurately assess the relationship between heroin use and criminal activity, we need to know the respective proportions of heroin user income obtained from various sources. As far as we are aware, the current study is the first to report this information in the Australian context. Table 2 compares the results of our study with those obtained by the handful of similar studies conducted overseas.

Table 2 indicates that, in all but one of the studies reported here, acquisitive property crime accounts for less than half of the total income of heroin users. Many heroin users steal — but property crime is not their major source of income. The results of the current study indicate that property crime provided less than two-fifths (38%) of our respondents’ total income. While illegally obtained or criminal income accounts for 82% of total income, a significant proportion (62%) of the income of heroin users was obtained by means other than acquisitive property crime including drug distribution and sales activities, legitimate income, prostitution and avoided expenditures. Notably, the drug market accounted for 44% of total income. Legitimate income other than prostitution (5%) accounted for 11% of total income and a mere 2% of heroin users’ incomes took the form of avoided expenditures. Weatherburn et al. found that 41% of their interviewees reported that the main source of income to purchase heroin was legal, including social security, employment, and “hocking” or selling personal or household possessions. However, they suggest that involvement in crime was under-reported (1999, p. 21). As a proportion of total income, acquisitive property crime was not as significant among our respondents as it was among “new” heroin users in England (65%) (Parker et al., 1988). It is, however, comparable to the findings of studies conducted in Scotland and North America where the proportion of income derived from acquisitive property crimes ranged from 32% to 48% (Deschenes et al., 1991; Hammersley et al., 1989; Johnson et al., 1985).
### Table 1
Comparative Data on Proportion of Heroin Users Reporting Income from Different Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Authors/Date</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Source/Method</th>
<th>Property Crime %</th>
<th>Drug Market %</th>
<th>Prostitution %</th>
<th>Legitimate Income %</th>
<th>In-kind or Avoided %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Maher et al. 1998</td>
<td>Daily heroin users (N = 202)</td>
<td>Street sample — ethnographic</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Dobinson &amp; Poletti 1989</td>
<td>Heroin user/dealers (N = 129)</td>
<td>Street sample — survey</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>Jarvis &amp; Parker 1989</td>
<td>Heroin users (N = 46)</td>
<td>Prison/treatment sample — survey</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>Parker et al. 1988</td>
<td>Known heroin users (N = 61)</td>
<td>Treatment sample — survey</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Grapendaal et al. 1992/1995</td>
<td>Opioid users (N = 150)</td>
<td>MMT/community — ethnographic</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Johnson et al. 1985</td>
<td>Regular male users (N = 201)</td>
<td>Street sample — ethnographic</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Bretteville-Jensen &amp; Sutton 1996</td>
<td>IDU (N = 897)</td>
<td>NSP* clients — survey</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Needle and syringe program
### Table 2
Comparative Data on Income Source as a Proportion of Total Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Authors/Date</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Source/Method</th>
<th>Property Crime</th>
<th>Drug Market</th>
<th>Prostitution</th>
<th>Legitimate Income</th>
<th>In-kind or Avoided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Maher et al. 1998</td>
<td>Daily heroin users (N = 202)</td>
<td>Street sample — ethnographic</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>Parker et al. 1988</td>
<td>Known heroin users (N = 61)</td>
<td>Treatment sample — survey</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Hammersley et al. 1989</td>
<td>Male heavy opioid users (N = 37)</td>
<td>Prison/community — survey</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>Grapendaal et al. 1992/1995</td>
<td>Opioid users (N = 150)</td>
<td>MMT/community — ethnographic</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Johnson et al. 1985</td>
<td>Daily male heroin users (N = 62)</td>
<td>Street sample — ethnographic</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Deschenes et al. 1991</td>
<td>Male heroin user (N = 279)</td>
<td>MMT clients — survey</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Bretteville-Jensen &amp; Sutton 1996</td>
<td>IDU3 (N = 897)</td>
<td>NSP clients — survey</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Kreuzer 19914</td>
<td>Long-term drug users (N = 100)</td>
<td>Treatment sample — survey</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Not Stated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 percentages sometimes do not add up to 100 because of a) rounding and b) not all studies report all sources of income. Most of the studies did not include income for prostitution or “avoided expenditures” (income “in kind”) which, for example, accounted for 21% of all reported income in the Johnston et al. study.

2 These data do not include either regular heroin users (defined as those who used heroin 3–5 days a week) or irregular users (0–2 days a week) who constituted 39% and 30% of the total sample (N = 201).

3 A total of 987 injecting drug users were recruited in Oslo over a 12 month period: 86% were primary heroin users. However, because only 66% of the total sample provided estimates of the amount earned from various income sources, the data presented here are based on a sub-sample of 596 IDU.

4 These figures refer to means of financing drug purchases only: they do not include source of finance for other living expenses. The author does not specify drug type.
The data indicate that heroin users in South Western Sydney generate income from a wide variety of sources, including property crime, drug market crime, prostitution, legitimate income and in-kind income. Table 3 provides a comprehensive breakdown of respondents’ income by source. Collectively, the 202 respondents in the EBIS sample generated a total of $237,291 or an average of $1,175 each from crime during the week prior to interview. Illegally obtained or criminal income accounted for 82% of the sample’s total income. The total amount of income obtained from property crime ($110,218) and the average weekly individual earnings of those involved ($782) indicate that property crime is a significant source of income for heroin users. However, while equal proportions of respondents (70%) reported involvement in both property and drug market crime, drug market crimes were clearly the most lucrative form of income generation. The total amount of income generated from the drug market ($127,073) over a one week period exceeds that generated by property crime. Among those who reported drug market income, the average amount was $901 per week, significantly more than that among those who reported income from property crime. Prostitution earned participants an average of $747 a week while legitimate income ($279) and in-kind income ($114) accounted for considerably less.

Table 4 illustrates gender differences in the proportion of income generated from different sources. While men and women derived similar proportions of their total income from acquisitive property crime (38% vs. 39%), drug market income accounted for a greater share of income by men (52% vs. 24%). Significantly ($p < .05$) more males (75%) than females (59%) reported generating income (cash and/or drugs) from the drug market in the week prior to interview (see also Maher 1997). However, prostitution (16%) and other legitimate income (18%) accounted for a greater proportion of women’s total income and significantly ($p < .001$) more women (21%) than men (3%) reported earning income from prostitution. Similarly, Weatherburn et al. report that more women (50%) than men (35%) said their main source of income was legal (1999, p. 21).

An examination of acquisitive property crime by source reveals that shoplifting was the most frequently committed crime with almost half of respondents (48%) reporting shoplifting in the past week and 40% earning income from shoplifting. The victims of this crime were typically large department or chain stores. Respondents rationalised this choice by claiming that such stores were able to

### Table 3
Total Income by Source*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Income</th>
<th>Total Weekly Amount</th>
<th>Mean $ per Source</th>
<th>Median $ per Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property Crime</td>
<td>110,218</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Market</td>
<td>127,073</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>14,185</td>
<td>747</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate Income</td>
<td>33,212</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income In-kind</td>
<td>6,374</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * The mean and median refer to those who reported each activity.
absorb the costs of shoplifting: thefts were either covered by insurance or factored into the retail price structure. However, while similar proportions of men and women (40% vs. 39%) were engaged in shoplifting for resale, shoplifting for resale accounted for a greater proportion of women’s total income from crime (29%) than for men’s (16%). Similarly, Stevenson and Forsythe report that shoplifting produced almost as large a percentage of total income as burglary (1998, p. 23). Shoplifting was reported by 15% of Weatherburn et al.’s respondents to be their main source of income for heroin purchases (1999, p. 21).

Approximately one quarter of respondents (28%) had committed one or more burglaries during the week prior to interview. Although these differences were not significant, a greater proportion of men (29%) than women (16%) were involved in burglaries with men generating double the proportion of criminal income of women (33% vs. 16%) through “break and enters”. Burglary also appeared to be a young person’s crime among the heroin users in our sample. Respondents aged between 14 and 24 (29%) were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to report income from burglary than respondents aged 25 and over (15%). A total of 36 respondents reported earning income from “other thefts” in the week prior to interview. These other thefts included items from motor vehicles ($n = 13$) and garages ($n = 3$), as well as thefts during “searches” of offices and other workplaces ($n = 5$).

Unarmed street robberies, including bag snatches and muggings, were reported by 13% of the sample in the week preceding interview. Street robberies were predominantly committed by males (16% vs. 9%) and accounted for 9% of total criminal income. One in five respondents (20%) reported committing a “violent offence” in the month prior to interview; it is not known what proportion of these offences were property crimes. Only 4% of the sample (all male) reported committing an armed robbery during the week prior to interview. While armed robbery only accounted for 7% of total criminal income, with a median of $1100 earned from each offence, it was clearly the most lucrative property crime.

Drug markets provide a significant source of income for heroin users. The international studies reviewed in Table 2 report drug markets providing between 11% and 53% of total income. Our respondents reported that 44% of their income came from the drug market. In their survey, Weatherburn et al. found that drug selling was the most commonly reported main source of income to purchase heroin (1999, p. 21).

More than one in three (39%) of our sample reported selling drugs in the previous week. As illustrated in Table 6, the drug most frequently sold by respondents

---

**TABLE 4**

Percentage of Total Income by Source by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Income</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property Crime</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Market</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income In-kind</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was heroin, which provided a median income of $830 during the week prior to interview. While most of those who sold drugs reported selling only heroin (90%), some respondents sold more than one type of drug. Some sold as small scale freelance independents, while others sold as agents for established suppliers. Most (89%) of the latter were paid in cash by higher level dealers. Only eight respondents were paid in drugs. A significant minority of respondents (21%) also reported selling cannabis in the past week. Table 6 summarises the number of people reporting dealing each of a number of various drugs and the income earned from selling drugs during that week.

Direct sales of drugs are not the only generator of income in the drug market. Notably, a freelance drug market of the kind found in Cabramatta during the study period offered extensive auxiliary employment opportunities for people to operate as scouts, touts, and look-outs. More than half (54%) of our respondents reported involvement in drug distribution and sales activities during the past month. While just over a third (39%) had actually sold drugs in the past week, almost three-quarters (70%) of respondents reported that they had generated income (in the form of cash and/or drugs) from the drug market during this period. Approximately half the sample (51%) reported that they had earned income by helping others to sell drugs in the past week. Most (85%) of those who reported helping others to sell drugs had sold heroin. Of the 107 individuals involved in helping others sell heroin, most (82%) had been paid in heroin and in only 19 instances did those who sold heroin for others report being paid in cash. Table 7 summarises the number of people reporting helping deal each of a number of classes of drugs and the median amount of money earned.

In total, 70% of the sample reported earning some income from either selling drugs or helping to sell drugs. These activities were not mutually exclusive: 31%

---

TABLE 5
Property Crime by Source — Respondent Involvement and Proportion of Total Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Income</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Report</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Report</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoplifting for Resale</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoplifting for Own Use</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any shoplifting</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Robbery</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unarmed Robbery</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgery/ Fraud</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con Games</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Theft</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Crime</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
reported selling drugs; 19% reported helping others to sell drugs; and 20% reported both selling drugs and helping others to sell drugs.

Table 8, which illustrates the ethnic breakdown of those involved in heroin sales in Cabramatta, indicates ethnic differences in drug market participation. A significantly \((p < .001)\) higher proportion of Asian than non-Asian respondents reported earning income from the drug market. Both the amounts and the proportions of income obtained from the drug market were substantially higher for Asian participants. However, participation in the drug market was not confined to Asian respondents.
While almost all Asian respondents (97%) reported drug market activity, so too did 61% of Anglo-Australians and 69% of the “ethnic other” category. However, only 26% of all respondents who reported drug market activity were Asian.

Although more than a quarter of Anglo-Australians (29%) and more than two-fifths of “ethnic others” (43%) reported selling drugs, these groups were more likely (respectively, 55% and 51%) to generate income from the drug market by acting as auxiliaries. The typical auxiliary role was that of an intermediary (or steerer or tout) whose function was to recruit customers for a particular seller. In return, the intermediary received payment, usually in the form of drugs. For example, study participants typically reported that for every five, or sometimes four, caps of heroin that they helped to sell they would receive one cap as payment.

The distinction between property crime and drug market activity should not be overdrawn. Those whose main source of income is selling drugs are often indirectly dependent on property crime: their clients pay for drugs either with the proceeds of theft or with the stolen goods themselves. Equally, some users commit property offences in order to finance purchase of drugs, some or all of which are then resold at a profit (Maher et al., 1998; Stevenson & Forsythe, 1998).

As regards our respondents’ drug use, we found that the consumption of heroin was highly variable. Participants routinely used diverted pharmaceuticals (primarily flunitrazepam and methadone) purchased through the street market to supplement their heroin intake and to avoid “hanging out” or experiencing heroin withdrawal. In some instances, the (illegal) availability of these drugs may set limits or controls on the amount and type of crime heroin users commit (Grapendaal et al., 1995). However, this study did not find evidence that methadone maintenance treatment significantly reduces involvement in crime. While only 14% of the sample were enrolled in MMT, there were no significant differences in the percentages of those in MMT (86%) and those not in MMT (92%) who reported earning income from property crime. Similarly, there were no significant differences in the percentages of people in MMT who reported either selling drugs (35%) or helping to sell drugs (48%) compared with people not in MMT (40% reported selling drugs and 52% reported helping others to sell drugs. However, most of those in methadone treatment were enrolled in private programs (79%) which incurred a cost to the consumer of between $6 to $7 a day. As one respondent put it, “I’m still jumping fences, only now I’m doing it to pay for my [metha]done”.

### Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% Reporting Helping Sell Drugs</th>
<th>% Reporting Selling Drugs</th>
<th>% Reporting Drug Market Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Australian</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This finding might appear to contradict those of a number of previous studies which have indicated that participation in methadone treatment is associated with significant reductions in criminal activity (Hall 1995; but contrast Best et al., 2001). However, to the extent that the present sample is not a sample of MMT clients but rather a sample selected for their illicit drug use, this study does not provide an adequate basis for assessing the efficacy of MMT. It may be that many of the negative attitudes towards MMT which exist among heroin users and amongst the wider community are based on contact with this highly visible group of clients who continue both illicit drug use and criminal activity while enrolled in MMT.

**Discussion**

Our findings indicate that the relationship between heroin use and crime is more complex than is usually portrayed. Media and popular conceptions, as well as some literature (e.g., Goldman, 1981), have tended to present a picture of heroin users as propelled into property crime by the need to sustain a heroin habit. This “inevitability” model suggests that heroin users are devoid of criminal agency (Maher, 1997), ignoring the hidden population of heroin users who are able to manage (and afford) their habits legally and those who rely on criminal activities other than property crime. There is no inevitable causal connection between heroin use and property crime. The heroin users interviewed here obtained a larger share of their income from drug market participation than from involvement in property crime.

The availability of opportunities for drug distribution and sales activities may also work to protect some heroin users from involvement in acquisitive property crime. This was notably the case as regards Asian respondents, who were significantly more likely to earn income from the sale of heroin than respondents from other ethnic groups. We also found a significant association between ethnicity and the amount of income earned from selling drugs. Asian respondents in the current study were less reliant on acquisitive property crime than their non-Asian counterparts. Because of the particular nature of the street-level heroin market in Cabramatta and its physical location in a tightly knit and predominantly Asian community, these socially determined opportunities do not present so readily for Australians from other ethnic backgrounds. The fact that the market provides some protection for Asian heroin users indicates that “pillaging and plundering” are not inevitable consequences of heroin use. The presence of realistic (if criminal) alternatives for income generation may have a moderating effect on behaviour and the harms directly generated as a result.

A consistent theme of our respondents’ accounts was their adaptability: type and level of drug use and type and level of criminal activity were not fixed, but depended upon opportunity. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude by briefly considering how law enforcement activities can affect the crime associated with a street-level drug market.\(^8\) Intensive policing reduces heroin users’ opportunities to take from, as well as give to the market. In order to survive, retail operations may become more sophisticated, concentrated, and professional (Dorn et al., 1992; Maher & Dixon, 2001). Employment for freelance sellers and casual auxiliaries often dries up in the wake of a police crackdown (Maher & Dixon, 1999). One possibility is that reducing drug
market employment opportunities may encourage heroin users to moderate their consumption, or to enter treatment (if appropriate facilities are available). However, it may also push or displace them into other forms of illegal activity, notably property crime. This price may be worth paying. However it should be openly discussed when calls for intensive policing of drug markets are made. This would alert potential victims, encourage police to increase the level of enforcement activity devoted to property crime when they undertake drug market crackdowns, and ensure that appropriate treatment facilities are available.

Endnotes
1 Based on this estimate, Marks calculated the total value of forced transfers resulting from property crime committed by heroin users in 1988 at $466 million (Marks, 1992).
2 A copy is available on request from the authors.
3 These calculations are based on responses from 199 of the 202 respondents in the EBIS for which there was complete information on income from property crime in the preceding week.
4 We use the median rather than the mean because the data are highly skewed (i.e., 67 respondents reported no earnings from property crime and 15 respondents reported earning $2000 or more).
5 Some of this value is the form of drugs (i.e., when stolen goods are bartered directly for drugs). The frequency of such exchanges is noted by Stevenson and Forsythe (1998, p. 33), while ethnographic insights into the process are provided in Maher et al. (1998).
6 Because we had no way of knowing whether prostitution reported by respondents involved the commission of offences (e.g., soliciting in particular contexts) or not, we have shown prostitution separately but for purposes of analysis have included it as legitimate income.
7 Break and enter was reported to be the main source of income to buy heroin by 10% of Weatherburn et al.’s respondents. Stevenson and Forsythe’s study of imprisoned burglars reports a weekly median income from burglary of $2000 (1998).
8 For fuller discussion of these issues, see Maher and Dixon (1999, 2001).

References


