



## The prison economy of needles and syringes: what opportunities exist for BBV risk reduction when prices are so high?

Never Stand Still

Arts & Social Sciences

Centre for Social Research in Health

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Note on language: “inmate” – for ease of identification; identify participant by number – anonymity concerns

# HITSp

- Cohort of male and female inmates, 30 NSW prisons
- People with life time history of injecting drug use
- HCV negative at enrolment
- Survey and bloods every 3-6 months
  
- *Qualitative research*
  
- Interviews with 30 inmates (20 men; 10 women)
  - Incident HCV: 8
  - Not exposed to HCV: 14
  - Chronic infection: 8 (incl 1 clearance via treatment)

HITS



# HITSp

- We know risk factors for HCV in prison
  - Injecting drug use, tattooing, violence
- Lack of harm reduction measures
  - Provision of sterile injecting equipment
  - ? access to OST
- This analysis attempted to provide something new...

# Economies

- Informal economies in prison
  - Generate rules/regs that govern behaviour
  - Can generate specific risks esp if unable to pay debts
  
- Analysis
  - Determine the cost
  - Follow the money – what other resources required to maintain economy?
  - What opportunities are there to minimise BBV risk?

# Cost of sterile N/S?

- In community



## Cost of sterile N/S in prison?

- Dependent on supply/demand – range



\$50-\$350

- Wrt, single dose of heroin in community = \$50

## Costs of N/S

- Supply and demand
- Inherent value of sterile equipment & safety

*Like I've, I've been to C-classo gaols before and the syringes that are available ... you can buy them in a packet and they're very cheap. And they're not modified. Like they're not cut down or anything like 'cause of how easy they are to smuggle in, you know. So it's a lot safer. Like I've, I've been in C-classo gaols before where I've used like I've used on the outside. I've used a syringe and, you know, then thrown it out because I can go get another new one. (6)*

*I mean I could have sold that for 200 bucks. It's absolutely ridiculous how much you can sell fits in here for. And yet that's the thing: if it's brand new and clean, yeah, you could sell it for 200 bucks. (1)*

# How to get N/S

- Visits
  - Cut-down, pass between visitor and inmate
  - Swallowed, secreted on person, hidden and retrieved by another
- Drops
  - Pre-arranged sites, thrown over walls
  - Low security/community release inmates retrieved packages
- Inmate transport (from community; between prisons)
- Stealing equipment from prison health centre

## How to get N/S

- Inmate transport (from community; between prisons)

*They get in trouble at C-classo gaols, lose their classification, come back to maxo and they'll smuggle some shit back with 'em, you know. They'll bring back syringes, you know. So like, you know, you, you see stuff make its way in, into the hands of, you know, of blokes in maxo by that means too. (6)*

*I left another gaol where I left my fits... I didn't have access to where they were buried. ... Before I was shipped out, I couldn't get access to 'em and I was moved on a truck out here, and I couldn't get to 'em. ... So now I'm here with no fit. (8)*

## How to get N/S

- Stealing equipment from prison health centre
  - During own consultation
  - Inmate working in the clinic
  - BBV minimisation eg used IM and not necessarily on someone with BBV
  - mass vaccinations

*I met a young bloke and I gave him a couple of smokes of pot, you know. ... This was around the time when the swine flu epidemic came out and I said, "Hey, listen," you know, "there's, they've got thousands of, of syringes up there." 'Cause they had to vaccinate the [whole] gaol. And they did: they had two boxes, call 'em 1,000. I said, "Look ... get into the fridge and I'll pay ya." ... And so he did. He was bringin' nearly two back a day for me. ... I was sellin' them for like 60 bucks each, you know. But, at one stage, it was somethin' like 20, 25 syringes just in our wing alone. (6)*

## How N/S are paid for?

- No access to currency in prison to pay for high price of N/S
  - Cash exchanged in community
  - Inmates pay for vendor's buy ups (at prison store)
  - Trading of goods, incl drugs ("going halves")
  - Sex (less frequently mentioned)

*Between bank accounts. For example, if you and me are two criminals and I wanna sell you a syringe yet you say, "I wanna buy it off you," obviously \$350 is a lot of money so that cannot be organised. That, can't be accessible inside gaol. So I then arranges for you to put the 350 into an outside account which I have access to or my people outside have access to. That's how that transaction's done. (9)*

## Other arrangements for N/S

- Purchase vs renting – BBV risk minimisation opportunity
  - Arrange import of a number of N/S, kept one for self, rented others

*They bring a few cut-downs in and the, the owner will keep one and sell two, you know, to make more profit, more money. ... They won't let anyone use their own fit. Smart thinking. (24)*

## Resources of N/S economy

- Visitor prepared to risk

*She didn't have a choice. ... It was money that we didn't have that I could make. I could sell a fit, you know, a brand new fit for \$200, \$300 and go to the hospital, and get 10 for nothing. You know what I mean? That was good money and I'd tell her, "Do it!" And she would have done it, you know. She was bringing in pills every weekend. I was making a killing. More money than I make on the outside.*

***Interviewer: How do you, how do you know it'd be 200 bucks?***

*I put a price on it. If they want it, they'll buy it. They'll take it (11)*

## Resources of N/S economy

- Visitor prepared to risk

*so it's just a matter of getting their girl to bring it in. You'll get one out of every pod that does do it, not everyone has the people on the outside to do it because they burnt everybody they fucking know, but the ones that do have people out there, they but they eventually get caught anyway. They never have a full run their whole lag, their visitors will get caught, they will get barred, it's only a matter of time but until that happens by then if he gets caught someone else has rocked up (29)*

## Resources of N/S economy

- Relationships with other inmates
  - To retrieve hidden equipment, steal from clinic
  - Keeping quiet, keeping drug use in “dark”
  - Reputation and connections

*you have a reputation sort of thing, you know, whether it's bad or whether it's selling drugs. You have a reputation in here. So, if you've got the good reputation and you have connections, then that makes it a lot easier for you to get to where you want. ... And to access what you want sort of thing. (1)*

*They might want to borrow it but the bloke who owns it might not lend it to them so they don't end up using it and that happens a lot, they pick and choose who they fucking lend their needle to (29)*

## Resources of N/S economy

- Relationships with corrections officers
  - Prisoner code: blue vs green

*like I try to treat officers with at least a bit of respect unless they just, they've done their dash with me, because I need to do things as well like especially if you're, if you're in the drug scene and that. Normally you've gotta get out of the wing to go and get fits and get drugs, and that, so normally you've gotta keep a good relationship with them. ... So that's my, my end of the bargain is to keep good with them. (19)*

## Resources of N/S economy

- Threats, violence, standing

*Yeah, he used to just charge half a packet of [tobacco] to [rent] the needle. ... And then you've gotta bring the needle back. That was in maximum security 'cause they're a bit harder to get. Used to maintain it. He'd sharpen it up for 'em and everything, you know. Clean it. And then send out the Rent-a-Hep as he used to call it. ... He was makin' a fuckin' probably 100 bucks a week from it. ... He's a big guy though. To be able to do something like that you've gotta have muscle, you know. You can't be just a, a weakling or an underling to do something like that.*

**Interviewer: Otherwise he just wouldn't get it back.**

*No-way. He wouldn't get it back. It wouldn't be comin' back. They've gotta know that they're gonna have their head jumped on unless it's been returned (18)*

# Resources of N/S economy

- DIY skills
  - Acquire equipment and manufacture N/S
  - BBV risk minimisation (except for needle)



- [Bendigoweekly.com.au](http://Bendigoweekly.com.au)

# Discussion

- Little attention to economies of N/S in prison
  - Economic drivers/resources required for trade
  - Imperative for sterile equipment
  - BBV risk minimisation opportunities
- BBV risk
  - Risk outweighed opportunities to reduce risk
    - Keep drug use, equipment ownership “dark”
    - Steal used equipment from clinic
    - Import to “own” vs “rent”
    - DIY – BBV vs other risks

## Discussion

- Business relationship management
  - inmates are “already skilled at financing and obtaining illegal substances; managing lieutenants, adversaries and turf; and eluding social control agents” (Lankenau, 2001)
- Formal prison NSP
  - Reduce BBV risk
  - Reduce violence by wiping out economy (ostensibly)
  - Need to interrogate NSP models for unanticipated impact on prison economies

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