

## Taxing Times: Inter-criminal victimisation and drug robbery amongst the English professional criminal milieu

**Abstract:** this article considers the oft hidden instances of inter-criminal victimisation in illegal drug markets amongst serious criminals in the North of England. Focusing on proto-criminal activity known in regional argot as 'taxing' (drug dealers robbing one another) it draws on ethnographic material and suggests that contrast to literature on the subject from the USA (Contreras 2012; Jacobs 2000) 'taxing' in England rarely leads to cycles of retaliatory violence. Yet against a more general climate of precariousness in disadvantaged communities in England, 'taxing' as a deviant behaviour is a gainful, relatively low risk activity for a minority of established, professional violent criminals.

**Keywords:** 'Taxing'; Ethnography; Drugs; Victimisation; Organised Crime, Robbery

### Introduction

As Reuter notes, 'Even without the protection of the state and courts, illegal drug markets are generally peaceable'. However, on occasion, some drug 'markets exhibit high levels of violence' (Reuter 2009: 275). It is apparent that some of those involved in the illicit narcotic trade can make alluring targets and experience a high rate of inter-personal criminal victimisation (Contreras 2012; Jacobs 2000; Topalli, Wright and Fornango 2002). Drugs and money can be stolen by rivals, and those involved in illicit drug supply often rely heavily on forms of retaliation as a mechanism to right real and perceived wrongs (Hobbs 1995). Such retaliation, at least in the context of the US, has been described by Jacques and Wright (2011: 733) as a form of, 'unilateral self-help'. American empirical literature, heavily based on qualitative research engagement with active offenders, has not only looked at the act of drug robbery (Contreras 2012; Jacobs 2000) but also at the retaliatory violence, or 'street justice' (Jacobs and Wright 2006), that is utilised to right perceived wrongs and create or solidify reputation and status in criminal settings. Hence, drug robbery, it has both a protective and reactive function, particularly when it is used in and around street drug (and particularly crack cocaine) markets (Jacobs 2000).

There is a burgeoning empirical data from the US on the robbery of drug dealers, for example Jacobs work is based on in-depth interviews with 29 drug robbers in St. Louis, Missouri (Jacobs 2000) and Contreras ethnographic study of Dominican drug robbers in the Bronx, *'the Stickup Kids'* (Contreras 2014). While not a central theme of Contreras ethnographic account, a major theme of Jacobs and Wright of their work is the nature and inevitability of violent retaliation that accompanies drug robberies. Yet in the United Kingdom, in contrast, the topic has received scant attention or academic scrutiny (Dorn, Murji and South 1992). In the UK, and particularly the more proto-criminal drug markets, the term 'taxing' is commonly used as argot amongst an offender group to describe stealing from rival drug dealers<sup>1</sup>. While drugs have always been stolen in robberies (for examples in the 'rolling' drug robberies that accompanied early youth music scenes such as the Northern Soul music scene; see Wilson 2007) the term 'taxing' is presently used to denote quite serious and high end inter-criminal victimisation that infrequently comes to the attention of the authorities or becomes recorded in official measures of crime. In praxis, 'taxing' is frequently a violent crime that now frequently occupies a new place between cash in transit armed robbery (see Gill 2001) and street robbery (Wright, Brookman and Bennett 2005) not entirely different to the 'stickup' drug robbery documented in academic accounts in the US (Jacobs, 2000; Contreras 2012; Topalli et al 2002). The occurrence of such offending is in evidence in the 'true crime' genre, with accounts of the likes of former criminals in such as Stephen 'the Devil' French (Johnson 2007) or by Brian 'the Taxman' Cockerill (Cockerill and Richards 2007) describing the practice in Liverpool and the North

East of England. These accounts are gratuitous, narcissistic and perhaps exaggerated recollections of violent criminality, yet they undeniably run contrary to some of the literature that sees drug markets as peer supply networks based on trust and reciprocity. While unarguably much of the UK drug market does not involve the 'drug dealer proper', but brokers, facilitates or sells drugs for little or no financial gain to friends and acquaintances (Hough et al 2003) much 'minimally commercial supply' (a term proposed in recognition that many otherwise social supply arrangements involve some small financial gain) is still profit driven (see Coomber and Moyle 2014: 160–1).

Academic literature suggests that a disproportionate amount of violent crime is perpetrated against those who are themselves involved in offending (Jacobs 2000; Rosenfeld, Jacobs, and Wright 2003; Farrell and Maltby, 2003). While representing 'one of criminology's dirty little secrets' (Topalli et al 2002:337), the often-ignored phenomenon of inter-criminal victimisation might constitute what the hidden crime not caught in official measures. In the US, where there is an established literature on inter-criminal victimisation and robbery in and around drug markets (see Contreas 2012; Topalli et al 2002; Jacobs 2000) in contrast in England and Wales there is little empirical work. That is perhaps unsurprising, because such topics are difficult to research, but this omission stands out as a serious one.

### **Talking to the Taxmen**

The research presented here uses empirical data gathered from interviews and ethnographic research with committed, professional violent criminals involved in the drug markets in England and Wales to consider the perpetration, character and impact of 'taxing', specifically through perpetrator accounts, but also in looking at targeting and victimisation. Of course, most organised crime topics can be hard to research, and 'taxing' here is no exception. Adherence to a normative prohibition against grassing has undoubtedly assumed a position of salience throughout large segments of the criminal milieu along with the otherwise law-abiding (Yates 2006; Morris 2010). This is particularly the case for those locked in marginalised and crime heavy areas of permanent recession, locales where often levels and rates of violence (though not all recorded) frequently run far higher. What is more, 'taxing' can be something of a taboo, whether experienced as perpetrator or victim.

Ethnographic research on serious organised crime has long yielded small scale but rich data that shows the action on the ground and the lived realities of criminal conduct (Hobbs 2013). Requiring as it does, a deep commitment and a willingness to confront complex ethical challenges (Winlow and Hall 2015). Ethnographic fieldwork and time spent with active offenders has long been useful in shedding light on criminal practice and the articulated motivations for it. The research presented here has been undertaken as part of several previous projects and with well-established contacts (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016) in places and spaces that have been particularly badly affected by the series of economic reconfigurations associated with the evolution of western neoliberalism (see Harvey 2011; Winlow, Hall and Treadwell 2017). In such an environment of ever-diminishing legitimate economic opportunities, criminal enterprise has become an everyday fact of life for many, with the allure of significant profits drawing a willing supply of actors in (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016). Grounding our arguments on qualitative data and 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) gained with those involved in the drug trade and what might be termed 'professional crime' (despite all the ambiguity that that problematic term admittedly conveys; see Hobbs 2013) we have sought to present a consideration of the nature of the 'taxing' that infrequently occurs in UK drug markets, but forms part of the darker chamber of serious criminality and perpetration of violence that contrasts starkly with more social supply.

These participant narratives come from contacts cultivated over several years for a range of previous empirical projects. However, the data gathered together here is employed in a form of ‘secondary ethnography’ (e.g. see Mullins 2007) and we have revisited previously gathered ethnographic material to take a fresh look at robbery and victimisation in drug markets. The data drawn on here was gathered in separate yet similar geographical locales in Northern England for empirical projects broadly concerned with organised crime (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016).

The accounts here feature a relatively small sample (n= 9) of established professional criminals who have all been involved in drug supply for profit. These self-declared ‘professional criminals’ have spent a period (or in most cases several periods of time) either on remand or sentenced for drug related and/or serious violent offences but were at liberty and actively involved in criminality at the time of interview. At the time of interview their ages ranged between their late-twenties (the youngest Liam at twenty-nine years) to their early fifties. While several have held legitimate paid occupations, from owning businesses or employment (at least in part as it could offer good cover and subterfuge for criminal practices), their biographies are complex tales of precarious and frequently violent lives, sometimes punctuated by addiction, imprisonment, and experiences as both perpetrators and victims of extreme violence, but all have come to prominence as criminal dealers and have established reputations as professional criminals in the towns and cities they reside in.

Table 1 - Interviewees

Name	Age	Interviewer	places of interviews, number of transcripts used here
Granty	52	CA	Interviewed in researchers’ home, his home, several pubs, cafes and the homes of others (only one transcript used here) <sup>ii</sup>
Joe	49	CA	Several interviews in home, two transcripts used here
Des	57	CA	Interviews at his home, pubs and a scrapyard, two transcripts used here
Liam	29	CK	Several interviews, in a public park, his home, clubs’ bars, house parties, a public park and open drug market two transcripts used
Little Legs	54	CA	Interviewed in own home and interviewers and in bars, two transcripts used here) (In contact 2004-present)
Bert	59	CA	Interviewed at his home, in my home, in various pubs and at the homes of others over 2 years, several transcripts used
Stevie	38	JT	Several interviews, bar, gym, pubs, one transcript used
Rocky	43	JT	Several interviews, his flat, bars, in car, one transcript used

As committed ethnographers and criminological researchers, we have spent many years immersed in the places and spaces where entrepreneurial criminality is not alien and have reflected on such a methodological orientation in previously published empirical work (Ancrum 2011; Ancrum 2013; Treadwell 2011; Ancrum and Treadwell 2016). We are well versed in negotiating the inevitable and

inherently complex ethical issues that arise out of undertaking such immersive research and acting in accordance with situated ethics of the field (Winlow and Hall 2015). The ethical complexities of such work have been well rehearsed elsewhere, and we might more succinctly say we know well that ‘no exceptions are made for crimes committed in the name of research’ and acted accordingly (Elliot and Fleetwood 2017: 3). While we cannot attest for the full truthfulness of all the material that comes here, that is a concern in all social research, not just that with offenders. Criminals can exaggerate and ‘bullshit’, but then, so do many people (Hobbs 1995). Our connection to the community meant we could offer a form of limited triangulation, especially as that presented here is the product of hours of often quite mundane fieldwork (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016). What is important here is that the rich data, while limited, presents a realistic insight into a hitherto little seen form of inter-criminal victimisation.

### **Taxing Times – The Place of Drug Robbery in Shifting Northern Drug markets**

The eight participants of this piece had, or have, extensive involvement in criminal (illicit) marketplaces as entrepreneurs, but primarily had made money as professional criminals in drug markets, importation, cultivation and distribution. None of our interviewees regarded themselves as ‘specialists’ in drug robbery of the sort of ‘stickup kids’ that are encountered in the US literature (Contreras 2012). Indeed, diversity of criminal history was common. Those we interviewed had also been involved in commercial burglary, robbery, violent crime, car theft, and an array of illicit enterprise as well as crime of a less instrumental motivation.

A member of our research team first interviewed ‘Little Legs’ in 2004, and he has been interviewed on numerous occasions since then. He is still renowned for his violent and unpredictable nature and willingness to go to extremes in his use of violence, though he is now approaching fifty years, he shows no signs of mellowing. He still makes his living by means of the thriving local drugs markets. He has lots to say on taxing as he does about most subjects. Little Legs is undeniably a man for whom serious criminality is lifelong, he has been arrested on suspicion of murder twice but never charged or convicted and has connections to serious organised crime groups both in his locality and in other cities. He spoke freely about his involvement in taxing:

*‘I’ve taxed loads of people, by myself and with other people, it’s more common than you think.... Mostly just knock the door, barge in and ask them for some Charlie or whatever, then just take it, if I’m in a good mood that’s it, just walk out, sometimes though you have to get a bit funny with them, I’ve ran in hooses [houses] with fucking bats, guns all kinds in me radge [crazy, unpredictable] past, we taxed these cunts in Manchester for a load of H, they approached us to buy it but we went and took the fucker, we were all tooled up for that though coz the cunts we taxed were game fuckers, they weren’t mugs... (Little Legs)*

At a more macro and international level and examined through the prism of serious organised crime scholars, there is a tendency to regard the etymology of the ‘selective use of violence’ as rooted in ‘disputes between crime groups over control of lucrative distribution networks and market share’ (Friman 2009). Yet while the violence of the drug trade is often seen through extreme global examples in lawless countries, at a micro-level, there is also an omnipotent and latent threat of violence at a macro level that frames all illicit marketplaces (Hobbs 1995; Hobbs 2013)

During the 1990s there is evidence that aspects of illicit drug markets moved indoors and towards a model of ordered deliveries (Curtis and Wendal 2007). Technological shift has similarly driven

changes in other facets of the drug trade, for example the shift from importation to production that which occurred in cannabis cultivation in 'grow house' industry (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016). The more widespread use of Tor browsers, long with the internet and crypto-markets (Hall and Antonopoulos 2016) mean that in the UK, much drug dealing is quasi-private rather than street based, although new models such as county lines (the use of mobile phone 'lines' by groups to extend their drug dealing business into new locations outside of their home areas) also show that markets occur both indoor and outdoor. What has changed, and arguably provided a great deal of the backdrop of taxing is the rise of homegrown cannabis crops, and those we document here were by no means interested in targeting small amounts of drugs, or for the most part low yield 'user-dealers'—a group we might best understand as drug users first and dealers second. However, the activity of taxing is predatory, and that did not mean that such individuals were not at risk, rather the men we describe here do not regard 'taxing' as the more routine forms of small scale robbery that occur at the lower strata of drug markets, what Coomber and Moyles term the 'street-level supply landscape' (Coomber and Moyles 2017: 3) but rather, target the cultivators/wholesales/distributors of cannabis or, occasionally, importers. Of course, there is violence and robbery at and around County lines style practices (Coomber and Moyles 2017), but our interviewees had encountered little evidence of such satellite dealers in their communities.

Yet growth in demand has 'democratised' the drug marketplace and drawn a broader range of people into production and supply of drugs in pursuit of profit (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016; Hobbs 2013). However, violent, predatory criminality largely remains the preserve of a small cohort of more frequently violent men who have cultivated reputations for violence in specific geographical locales and familiar places; the football firm, the door firm, the family firm, the organised crime group, on violent estates, the gyms, pub, club and prisons (e.g. see Winlow 2001; Ayres and Treadwell 2012; Hobbs 2013). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that many of our participants had crafted fearsome reputations for extreme violence (Winlow 2014; Ellis, Winlow and Hall 2017) and were well known in criminal settings as operators in the higher levels of criminal networks as men of action with established reputations for violence.

What was clear was that those we interviewed had reach and familiarity with mid and higher levels of the drugs market, as it was brokers and retail level dealers who tended to be the targets for taxing. As Pearson and Hobbs (2001) have noted, in the UK, the drug supply industry consists of a series of interconnected, flexible and relatively small networks and partnerships incorporating importers, wholesalers, middle-market brokers and retail-level dealers. Our interviewees place was largely in the latter three, although some had historically been involved in drug importation, at the time of interview all were successful, but involved in mid-level cultivation and distribution of drugs. What united all of the subjects here is that they readily moved in circles with well-known and established organised criminals and easily gain access and the knowledge of the mid-market and retail distribution in their own locales, and were networked so as to be able to acquire the 'tools' (specifically, often firearms, such as handguns and sawn off shotguns) needed to engage in successful incidents of taxing and insulate themselves against comeback. These were then, criminally connected men who could gain access to a limited stock in firearms, and who were known to been extremely violent, who were known for criminality and who were connected at the mid-level to drug distribution.

In contrast with the US, our participants were keen to stress that in the areas we researched, though not unavailable, firearms are certainly not common or easy to access. Rather, they were usually only kept by 'older' criminals. These weapons are rarely carried, very rarely brandished, and even more scarcely used. Many of our interviewees regarded mediatized notions of 'kids in gangs with guns'

rather sceptically. Instead they suggested that of those who have guns hide or even bury them and will only bring them out in times of tension or when serious disputes arise. This is not to say that in some inner cities youth do not carry and use guns, but our interviewees regarded as naïve and puerile, why risk lengthy custodial sentences for little reward? As one of Bert stated:

*'How many young uns do you know who carry one of them? (a gun). Guns aren't that easy to get, who's going to sell some young radgie a fucking gun? Fuck off, load of bollocks' (Bert)*

He was seemingly more than qualified to comment having been linked with gun crime for several years. His younger brother was famously caught moving a sub-machine gun for him whilst Bert was in prison and ending up with 'a four-year sentence'. What is more, most of our interviewees suggested that good guns were rare now, and that many of the 'antique' or re-activated guns that had been re-bored or converted from replicas, while potentially lethal, were highly unreliable. Alternatively, there were sawn off shotguns, but again, to get these individuals had to be connected and trusted, and these weapons too were dangerous to possess as they would lead to custodial sentences. Granty, is reasonably successful though claims he is by no means a 'gangster' and though ultimately capable of violence, he usually has little course to resort to it. His 'business partner' on the other hand (who did not wish to appear here) is known not only for his entrepreneurial criminal finesse but is also a feared and respected man. Granty describes how recently were looking to buy a handgun as a dispute had arisen with an ex-friend and colleague. Contrary to the media depictions of easy access Granty suggested that guns are indeed not that easy to obtain, even for those 'connected':

*'Fair enough, shotguns you can get aye, but for a proper one, a handgun, it's not that easy... [you] pay 2 and a half grand [£2,500] for a little Glock ... even dafter prices some places, if you want a good reliable unused one, you have to pay proper money' (Granty)*

Access to firearms was an important aspect of the most serious drug robberies. For example, Liam, who committed robberies of cannabis growers with his associates used a sawn-off shotgun and stressed that that access to firearms was an important dimension in heavy end taxing. In this account of taxing a grow house, the role of the access to the firearm is key:

*'We kick the door down and stick the shotty<sup>iii</sup> in the kidder's face. Thing was when we start looking around it's not a little crop, the whole house is full. So we start making him carry all the plants to [out]. Then drive ... and empty it, come back and he has the next load ready to go, do it like, five maybe six times. One of the lads just stays with him with the gun on him the entire time. The last run we had even made him take all the hydro down, lights everything and load them up... I try not to have to use violence that is why the gun is there, the control. So you make sure they see the gun as soon as you go in, then you make them do all the work' (Liam)*

Of course, not all those involved in taxing use or have access to firearms, but the ability to employ force and violence was a vital component, and knowledge that individuals could access weapons and had been involved in serious violence protected them from comebacks. However, the best protections were to prey on those who would be unlikely to identify them.

For example, another of our interviewees talked of groups that would tax (frequently cannabis crops) using a range of techniques and this part of the sphere of planned burglary seemed to have

become something of a specialist offence. We heard of groups of men targeting growers, sometimes using sophisticated methods such as placing trackers on vehicles or trailing them from 'headshops' to locate crops and supplies that would then be targeted. The home-grown cannabis market particularly previously described (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016) has created new forms of inter-criminal victimisation, as our participants suggested.

*'I mean sometimes like, I know people who that's [taxing cannabis crops] all they do. This one lad I know has a little firm that taxes the Chinese weed growers, they go round looking for grows, up the West end where it's full of chinks (Chinese) and look for signs, they even bought a fucking thermal image camera, fucking crazy. If they reckon it's a go they just mask up and crash through the doors' (Joe).*

Clearly such robberies are at least in part a reflection of the changing nature of drug markets and the shift from importation to cultivation of cannabis in many parts of Northern England, but at centre is the ability of well connected, violent criminals to identify lucrative criminal opportunities that will never likely come to the attention of the authorities.

### **A Taxing Situation**

To elaborate on the specifics of taxing in the UK, detailed previously, and illustrate how it is different to the context of the US, we present a case study here not of perpetration, but victimisation. Des is a successful and well-known drug dealer who grew up in the North of England. Hailing from a well-connected family steeped in criminal history (his father was a member of the areas 'criminal robber elite' in the late 60s early 70s and later ran a scrap yard infamous for the plethora of scams and dodgy deals) he graduated up through commercial burglary and the occasional foray into armed robbery, and wound up as a major importer/distributor of cannabis and ecstasy as well as financing a very lucrative amphetamine 'factory' during the early 90s. He was only later to receive a lengthy custodial sentence for his nefarious activities. He was once a relatively successful criminal owning the trappings of success; a large portfolio of property; an overseas villa, a legitimate business and several expensive vehicles, one of which is central to this account. It is also worth noting that it is his role, as mid-level distributor that Des perceived brought him to the attentions of a violent group of taxmen. In short, these men knew Des had made serious money from involvement in distributing amphetamine.

Des described in detail an account of the time he was 'taxed' by some well-known and feared violent 'gangsters'. At the time this event takes place Des was at the zenith of his criminal career and as such had attracted the attention of some even more serious and ruthless criminal predators:

*'It's jealousy, isn't it? They see you doing well and think they'll just fucking have you...Them daft cunts haven't got the brains to make money.*

Des had begun to hear rumours in week or so prior to the event that he was on the radar of these very dangerous men, and as such it suggests that there was an element of planning rather than simple quick opportunism on the part of the more established criminal group who were targeting him:

*'I got told they were talking about me, warned to watch me back'*

*Interviewer: 'were you worried?'*

*Des 'why aye I was, they're fucking crazy fuckers, always off their heads, they don't give a fuck, I'm not a fucking gangster'*

The 'crazy fuckers' in question are indeed to be feared. The main protagonist had serious antecedent history that was not lost on Des. He had previously been convicted of firearms offences and shootings, including the wounding of his own girlfriend whom he maimed with a shotgun for alleged unfaithfulness. He had also been jailed for a particularly nasty kidnapping case some years back. The group had also cultivated a reputation for being 'unpredictable' due to their Heroin and Crack cocaine use.

*Des 'they go about off their nappers (heads) all the time, full of crack and brown, they don't even know what the fuck they are doing half the time'*

On the day of the incident three heavies, including the main protagonist and his side kick had arrived at the house of Des' friend and business associate 'Wally', and demanded that he ring Des and ask him to come down to visit him. To persuade Wally to co-operate they held him at gunpoint in his own home, a modus operandi reminiscent of 'tiger kidnaps' used in serious cases of armed robbery.

*'One of them had a handgun and one had a little machine gun thing, an UZI or a MAC 10, oh aye they're proper fruitcakes these fuckers'*

Wally understandably did as he was told and when Des arrived he was greeted by the sight of them with their 'hardware'. Once settled and over the shock the negotiations began:

*'They wanted three grand a week off me, said that I was treading on their toes, as if that wasn't enough they wanted a ten grand 'one off' bung as well, cheeky fuckers.'*

*Interviewer: 'did you protest or just comply?'*

*'Fucking too right I protested they didn't know what a mistake they were making, I told them who I was pals with (Des obviously has links both business and personal with equally feared gangsters from other parts of the city) but the daft cunts already knew that plus they were too off their heads to care, that's how fuckers like this go on, can't think ahead or fuck all'.*

When he refused to offer any monetary settlement, he was ordered to hand over the keys to his expensive Range Rover

*'What the fuck was I supposed to do, I gave them the keys, you can't argue with them naughty things can you? I kept telling them they were making a rick (a mistake) but they took the fucker anyway, said I could get it back if I laid the ten G over, fucking mugs.'*

The matter was eventually settled due to the intervention of some of Des's gangster associates, even then there had to be a token financial settlement:

*'I got someone to get the fuckers told, a couple of people told them they had got the wrong kid and they were out of order. Thing is though, nobody really wants to push the cunts too far, you never know what they might do they're fucking crazy, you've got to tread carefully, no matter who you are.'*

*It got sorted but cost us 2G [£2000] for 'their trouble' fucking horrible cunts'.*

Des case proves an interesting example, as it could have easily escalated, it was settled relatively easily and at low cost and did not create a cycle of retaliatory violence. Yet while Des described this example of his own victimisation as capturing the very essence of how 'taxing' as an unrecorded and unseen crime that is encountered amongst those involved in highly lucrative and high end professional criminality.

### **A Taxonomy of Criminal 'Taxing'**

Hitherto we have begun to suggest some of the background and characteristics of those involved in what is often termed 'taxing'. While there was a tendency to promote taxing as something unplanned, opportunistic and spontaneous (and some of our interviewees talked of doing it while drunk or on drugs or opportunistically and in an ill-conceived manner) there were others who were more willing to accept that the practices were frequently well planned and calculated. For example, Stevie who had served sentences for armed robbery described how he and his contacts moved to 'taxing' local drug dealers with firearms (and often used quite extreme violence) during the late 1990s and early 2000s as armed robbery of banks, building societies and post offices became more difficult, and hence, taxing became a logical and rewarding alternative, albeit one that came with some different risks.

*'Sentences [for armed robbery] were going up, from 5s when we were youth to 15s and 20s.... a lot of lads [armed robbers] moved into drugs, and there was always a lot of robbing going on, dealers that were not connected would get done, or even someone would put on one of their own like, have them done and put in debt, it's a snide world underneath it all, there isn't much honour in the business, rivals of dealers get done, everyone talks. It's a dangerous game going through someone's door, but for me, it was less dangerous than doing a post office and ending up on a twenty. I'd say taxing is one of the reasons you don't see proper professional armed robbery anymore, it's the same lads involved, and nasty shit went on'*  
(Stevie)

Joe is approaching 50 years of age and has been involved in serious crime for most of his adult life. He has built a reputation for himself in the criminal 'elite' of the area largely due to his physical presence, and willingness to use violence. In the past, he was linked to feared and well-known crime gangs and heavily involved in door 'security' and the lucrative city centre drugs trade, which was controlled by a strict monopoly on visible acts of violence. Though only a self-declared 'foot soldier' Joe's notoriety for violence is legendary and has resulted in long term loss of liberty in prison and his connection with (although no convictions for) two high profile shootings and the murder of a notorious local 'hard man'. In contrast with many others of the younger cohort, who were willing to accept that they were involved in taxing, even going on to self-identify with that term, Joe despised that descriptor. Indeed, in the older cohort there was a great deal of dislike for the term 'taxing' and instead, interviewees talked frequently of the *ambiguity regarding the definition of 'taxing'*:

*'Mainly it was about taking gear off people trying to deal in our bars and that. You know, you'd catch them, take what they had off them, give them a little clout (slap or punch) and send them on their way. I don't know if that's taxing really though more just downright blagging'* (Joe)

Joe's comments introduce a useful point for discussion here, in so far as while there have been some celebratory accounts written by (or with) self-avowed 'taxmen' (Johnson 2007, Cockerill and Richards 2007), within our interviewees terminology, and discussions of the ethics, legitimacy and parameters of 'taxing' was complex, based on a range of considerations. At least in part on occasion, there was a reticence to admit to 'taxing' because of the imbalance in the power dynamic, admission of the practice at least in part being predatory and predicated on the victims less authoritative position (hence it was exploitative, and could be akin to bullying) and the tendency for such practices to be considered somewhat 'dishonourable', and hence, taxing was understood via a relatively specific and narrow definition of

*'Proper taxing is when you take something for fuck all. Like when people tax little divvy dealers and that, just take gear off them... (Joe).*

*'I am not a fucking taxman or a fucking bully or that, because, it's like, well I don't really take a pleasure in torturing people, I am not tying up people and threatening to put a fucking clothes iron on their back like [names another, called Rocky in this piece] used to do, or you know, putting cigarettes out on them, properly battering them, all the dark stuff [laughs]. I go looking for their money, and so will do what needs to be done. I just rob from dickhead drug dealers that fucking think that they are gangsters (Stevie)*

### **Putting 'Divvies' in their Place: Predatory inter-criminal criminality in England's Precarious Criminal Milieus**

In highly complex and stratified drug markets such as that in the UK, an excess of opportunity and the democratisation of the drug market (Hobbs 2013), created at least in part by the demands of the market mean that there are a range of highly differentiated individuals involved in the drug market. Some participants are highly organised, highly criminal and have extensive networks as part of wider structures of support when it comes to their dealing (Ancrum and Treadwell 2016). Others, particularly dealers that have benefited from the democratisation of criminal opportunity and at the lower retail end (Pearson and Hobbs 2001) that have accompanied changes in criminal entrepreneurship (Hobbs 2013, McKenzie 2015). These lower level suppliers often have less back up and support and are more self-reliant and self-starting entrepreneurs. Our interviewees clearly spoke of taking advantage of more careless drug dealers, whose cash-only profits often leave them with money or drugs that can be easily targeted:

*'If you are selling gear, whether its brown or fucking weed, most of the time you have people, cars, fucking faces showing up coming to your door don't you, then it's pretty obvious, if I know the area I will know what you are doing. I know what you are doing, you don't know me. I know what a dealer's house looks like, and if I see them going into some yard regularly, well it's no great secret is it. The other thing is people fucking talk, it can be a few words in a pub or whatever, and if I check out and someone hasn't got the fucking backing, then fuck it, I will tax them, why not. A lot of these kids, they are like 19 or 21. They think they are fucking bad men, but they are not, they have victim writ all over them, and if I don't fucking do them someone else will, so why not me eh?' (Stevie).*

Such a view of taxing was common amongst our sample, and what united them more than anything else was a worldview that saw victim and victimiser, where those who were not hard, not connected, not savvy; was fair game for all that could be brought down upon them. There was no honour code, rather a very predatory, instrumental self-interest that compelled those with guile and ability to take advantage. Criminal drug markets and the promotion of hedonism rooted in immediate lived experience flooded into the chaotic former British manufacturing hubs just as interpersonal competition become the very logic of the present. Harnessing this, while trivialising violence, even the most extreme forms presented responsibility outside the locus of the individual and made taxing simply something which was to be done, despite the predatory connotations. The drug market was simply dog eat dog, and it was better to be the predatory great white shark than the small fish, as this was simply the naturally occurring order of things:

*'There was one, we had been before, me and wor kid (his brother) and took a few grams of Charlie off this daft cunt. Anyway, we were out pissed one night and decided to go see him and get some. Long story short, he lets us in then tells us he's dealing for the '\*\*\*\*\*' (names another local organised crime firm) as if that's going to put us off, we fucking hated the cunts at the time, we had loads of frisk with them, so we took liberties didn't we? (laughs) we fucking took everything, about an ounce and a half of Coke five or six hundred quid and smashed the fucking granny out of the stupid cunt an all, fucking red rag to a bull, dropping them daft cunts names (laughs) (Joe).*

*'[First raise up] well... lad was sat there one night while we chillin' telling us his step dad had fifty grand stashed.... Silly bastard is just telling us, bragging.... The lad was a bull shitter, there was money, but not that much.... Now the lad that told us, [when only] he was in there we just stuck it [a shotgun] in his face and made him bag the money up for us. Not like he could say oh by the way dad I told [everyone] where you keep your money so someone jacked you. (Liam)*

For our participants' victims of taxing self-precipitated their targeting because, they were 'divvies', 'wannabe gangsters' and 'muppets'. While interviewees recognised that of course inter-criminal victimisation existed in macro communities without legal redress, they little feared consequences and were fatalistic about the potential for comebacks or retaliation. Largely they put fears of such vengeance aside, because they considered victims in entirely this dismissive manner. In many ways though, such a view is not simply unrealistic, but rather founded on experiential knowledge. In contrast to the US, where it is commonly suggested that retaliation following experiences of robbery often ignite acts of counter-retaliation (Jacobs and Wright 2006; Mullins 2007) and potentially lethal retaliatory cycles and contributing towards the contagion of aggression (Jacobs 2000) in our cohort, interviewees suggested that such outcomes were not very likely:

*'What normally happens though is that they (the victim) either just put up with it or pack in doing what they're doing, if they got no back up they're fucked basically, it's up to you to be strong, far too many little mammy boy pricks trying to be villains these days, at least taxing the cunts lets them know where they really stand doesn't it? It sounds shan (harsh, cruel) but it's right, it's a fucking nasty world with nasty people and if they want to play then they can't go fucking crying when it goes tits up, fuck the daft cunts I say' (Little legs)*

*'We done this one, we got the lad, and there is no easy way to say this, but he starts mouthing, who he knows, who he works for. We took a lot of cash and gear off him, he was making a lot of money, but now what happened, basically is where we had him, the place, there was a mop and a bucket in the corner, and well the mop handle ended up going up his arse basically, and then someone takes a fucking photo or two on a phone, him, with a mop handle up his arse. I won't go into any more details, but he was shouting about how he was connected. He gets told, if this [what happened] ever leaves this room, this photo comes out, and it gets sent to everyone you know, by the night, your mam will have it in a fucking framed on the fucking fireplace next to her picture of the grand kids. What could he do, come out and go off on one? He just had to bend over and take it like, but the worst part is, he never realised that it was his own mates that put him in it.... [Realising what he has said about bending over and 'taking it', he bursts out laughing] (Rocky)*

The above point might seem logical and self-apparent, in the context of the UK at least, retaliatory fatal violence is not seemingly a normal feature of such inter-criminal victimisation. For example, in their research study, Hopkins, and colleagues identified only 17 homicides (from a total 696 recorded non-terrorist homicides) committed as part of organised crime in England and Wales in 2005-06. In contrast to the US where accounts suggest ruthless and often fatal retaliatory violence (Mullins 2007) Hopkins and colleagues note, 'the relative rarity of organised crime related homicides in Britain' (Hopkins, Tilley and Gibson 2012: 291). Rather than normalised retaliation as in the US, in the UK the reality seemed very different. Taxmen were the criminals to be feared, and there was little likelihood of these predatory operators facing any real risk of violent retribution. This brings us to a further point, that in some instances and not infrequently, it was the individuals doing the robbery that had provided or brokered narcotics to the lower level dealers in the first instance, a fact that many of our interviewees acknowledged. Therefore ironically, taxing could also work to force a victim into a position of indebtedness to the very person who had just robbed them.

## **Conclusions**

Much of the established literature on taxing is based on small scale empirical work undertaken with offenders in the USA. In this piece, drawing on our ethnographic material generated in central and Northern England, we have attempted to present a slightly different picture, one that acknowledges both similarities and differences to the US in the English context. In contrast to the US and street crack cocaine markets with high public rates of violence and robbery, the English situation was heavily tied middle markets in cocaine and cannabis cultivation, with the cultivated 'crop' in and of itself often regarded as the pay off. However, taxing could be justified anywhere that opportunity existed. There was always a reason to tax a rival, even when they were former friends and associates; 'it's better we take it off them than the old bill', 'he was a mug', 'he acted the big one', 'didn't show respect' 'he is a div' or even 'that's just how the world is, bad luck'.

For our interviewees, there was a recognition that this democratisation of the drug markets had been further propelled for example via the rise of the internet and with the shift in cannabis markets from importation to cultivation. Unlike the USA, taxing was not associated with any specific drug market, but any opportunity. For our interviewees, the democratisation of opportunity also meant that unprecedented numbers of people presented as potential victims. That might also explain why for our interviewees, what constituted taxing was hard to pin down, and hence 'taxing' was a somewhat amorphous and ambiguous concept. However, as sale and trade in illicit drugs has also

become increasingly normalised as in urban neighbourhoods and illicit enterprise and active participation in both the licit and illicit marketplace becoming more commonplace, so too was 'taxing'.

For our interviewees, the economic and social restructuring of recent years coupled, with the increasing normalisation of recreational drugs had eroded traditional criminal hierarchies and groupings, had created new opportunities to exploit others. The more serious, violent and ruthless professional criminals whose accounts we have drawn on here, regarded such changes as personal opportunities for individual advancement and advantage. For them, the democratisation and growth of the drug market meant an ever-greater share of 'divvies and wannabies' were available, ready and primed for exploitation. Yet, in contrast to the US, where drug robbery is frequently seen to be tied to patterns of lethal violence or homicide, that does not seem to be the case in our cohort. It seemed that the lack of easy availability of firearms make for significant difference that often separates the taxed and the taxers in drug markets in the UK and mitigates against high levels of lethal retaliatory violence when criminals prey on one another, quite in contrast with some accounts in the US (Jacobs and Wright 2006). That did not mean reprisals were not possible, but our interviewees took a fatalistic and blasé view of such possibilities. The stuff of the criminal settings they were familiar with was violence, and if it happened so be it. Yet against a backdrop characterised by increasing precariousness and the erosion of traditional criminal hierarchies, the contemporary life was a taxing time, and those they selected as a good source of income were going to be required to pay their taxes.

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<sup>i</sup> We are aware of the way that the term taxing has different uses, and that for example the term taxing can also be employed also used by recreational user/dealers and social suppliers to describe the charge levied on supplying friends and acquaintances with recreational drugs.

<sup>ii</sup> In accordance with Lubert in 'interrogating ethnography', we can provide further details that underscore the credibility and reliability of the material presented here, and we can provide more detail on sources and times dates of interview. We have gained credibility for our claim. However, we also have had to balance this with recognition that the nature and character of the criminality in our subjects' lives mean that some degree of anonymity is a necessity.

<sup>iii</sup> 'Shotty' in this context is slang for a sawn-off shotgun, a longstanding firearm of choice and convenience for many English criminals when committing robberies, given that tight firearms controls mean there is much less availability of handguns in the UK, a point to which other interviewees attest elsewhere.