



# Risky business

As thousands of teenagers arrive at university – and face the prospect of racking up large debts – **Steve Sampson** reports on how students who turn to dealing drugs to earn extra cash are being targeted by thugs

"Standing in the doorway were two men, one wielding a handgun and wearing a balaclava. The other, bare-faced, had a claw hammer in his hand. They knew what they were after, knew my name and knew there was nothing I could do about it," says Pete, describing an armed raid on his student home in Sheffield.

The duo frog-marched Pete through his home floor by floor, searching each room, taking mobile phones, money and a freshly-delivered half kilo of cannabis resin that Pete had been in the process of weighing out when the knock at the door came.

For that one small detail the attack would more than likely have made the local papers, involved a police investigation and an insurance claim, but Pete, who was dealing to top up his student loan, found himself at the sharp end of violent organised crime without anywhere to turn.

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"It was like the scene from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* when the hippies in Notting Hill are robbed by gangsters, but without the jokes," said Pete. He believes that he was targeted not only as a drug dealer, but as a member of the student fraternity: a soft touch unschooled in the anarchic nature of the urban drug market, the level of violence meted

out as its alternative currency.

"I'm 100 per cent sure that I knew the one wearing the balaclava, it was someone I had done business with before. It was no mistake they knocked on my door. It was as if because I was a student I could afford to be robbed. They were right gents. We all know about the level of violence on the streets now, but when it's in your home and you're the target it's a very different matter."

With more than two million students enrolling or returning to their studies across the UK this month, and with the average graduate leaving university £13,000 in the red, the warning is timely. Many students find it hard to get by because they are living off limited student loans, low credit card limits while paying high rent – an average of £400 a month in London. Despite being advised by universities against working during degrees, many students end up working outside lecture and seminar times in bars and restaurants, with some students opting to take up risky but more lucrative jobs such as lap-dancing or dealing drugs to fellow students.

At the time of the attack Pete was dealing up to half a kilo a week to fellow students. By chance, some months earlier, he had struck a working relationship with a local dealer who lived in the same street. They had little in common bar their love of weed and a desire to make money. It was this man Pete believes turned from business accomplice to armed robber.

It has not been the only attack. In February of this year, Pete returned home from a two-week holiday to find his front door had been virtually kicked from its hinges. That night the attackers returned.

"I just stood on the other side of the door hoping the hinges would hold. There was nothing I could do. In the end



the hinges held. Once again, I know it was some one I knew, I could hear them talking on the other side of the door."

After sharing his experience with other students involved the drugs market, Pete found it was a familiar story. A series of Bohemian parties held by a household of student skunk growers attracted unwelcome guests on the night and two weeks later, when they found their entire crop had been harvested while they were at the pub.

"It's when people look back and piece a train of events together that it becomes obvious who knew about what you're doing and who would want to rob you," says Pete.

The victimisation of student drug dealers using threats of violence is not a rare occurrence, according to testimonies posted on the popular underground web bulletin board Urban75. "One of my friends who sold a little weed was robbed at gun point a few nights ago. A lass came to the door asking for weed then two blokes came crashing in guns out," said one man from Sheffield. "It happened to my mate in December, but with meat cleavers not guns," says another.

Alan McGauley, Senior Lecturer in Social Science and Law at Sheffield University, who lectures in drug use, says students first enrol and are finding their feet, they are unaware of the established dealing networks within universities among students and may buy on the street or in pubs or bars. If they move up from buying for personal use and buy in bulk, says McGuire, they will find themselves in situations that are dangerous. In addition, students have traditionally lived in poorly kept rented accommodation in deprived areas of cities such as Nottingham, Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester, making them easy targets for burglary. "Students start dealing for the same reason as anyone else – cash, kudos and access to drugs," says McGuire.

The link between violent crime and drug use among students was explored by the 2004 Home Office report on student safety in the East Midlands. Drug use was significantly associated with being personally victimised or burgled. The research found that a fifth of students who had used drugs in the last month had experienced personal victimisation while at university – three times that of students who had not used drugs. Twice as many students who had used drugs in the last month were burgled compared to those who had not.

## A lass came to the door asking for weed then two blokes came crashing in guns out

One dealer from north London who paid his way through college and maintains his customer base says: "If someone thinks you're weak they'll exploit it, be it selling you rubbish, robbing you in the street or targeting your home. A lot of it is about body language. If you're nervous, needy or appear to have ready cash, a dealer will spot it. Surviving in this game is all about playing to your strengths and masking weaknesses.

"I made a mistake one day when buying an ounce of cocaine in Ladbroke Grove, west London through a friend of a friend. I had to wait in the bar – a well known hang out for dealers. After about 30 minutes it dawned me that I had become the centre of attention, all eyes were on me. Everyone knew why I was there and that I had £1,000 sitting in my pocket. It was horrible, I made as if going to the gents and left without looking back. If people are trying to source quantities of drugs for resale or even to share among friends, they're as likely, if not more so, to be ripped off or robbed as they are arrested."

## IF YOU CAN'T DO THE TIME... AN INTERVIEW WITH BRITAIN'S MOST FAMOUS STUDENT DRUG DEALER, HOWARD MARKS

The UK's most celebrated student hashish dealer, Howard Marks, came from the hallowed halls of Oxford University, where he launched his much-publicised drug smuggling career while studying a postgraduate degree in philosophy.

"At first, entering the drugs market simply facilitated access to cannabis, a drug I enjoyed very much. I soon became able to deal sufficient quantities to enable me to get the cannabis I wanted for nothing. The potential to make significant money came soon after that. My social life was also enhanced as I would be regularly invited to parties at which drugs were taken or needed," says Howard, looking back on his Oxford days.

"The issue of how much profit to make from one's peers, or certainly from one's friends, is a tricky one in any business. I don't think there is

necessarily a clear, if any, distinction between the ethics of career and student dealers. I didn't experience any threats of violence or intimidation until I became a serious importer."

By the mid 1980s, Marks had 43 aliases, 89 phone lines, and 25

companies

trading throughout the world. At the height of his career, he was smuggling consignments of up to 30 tons from Pakistan and Thailand to America and Canada and had contact with organisations as diverse as the CIA, MI6, the IRA, and the Mafia. After many years and a world-wide operation by the Drug Enforcement Agency, he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison at the United States Federal Penitentiary, Terre Haute, Indiana. He was released on parole in April 1995 after serving seven years of his sentence.

His advice to students considering entering the market to top up their student loans? "To understand that the career is currently a very risky one to undertake with significant chances of imprisonment. The first fear to overcome is that of being busted. Throw a brick into a police station, stick around, and experience a few days in the cells. Then decide."

