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## **Crack houses in the UK: Some observations on their operations**

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### **Biographical statement**

Daniel's research interests concern drug use, crime, prisons, social exclusion, and, more recently anti-social behaviour and health. His PhD was based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork with crack cocaine users.

### **Abstract**

While the operations of crack houses have received significant attention in the US, by comparison, in the UK, we lack an insight into the precise mechanisms of such venues. Moreover, crack house literature has leaned more towards examining methods to close crack houses, rather than seek to understand the operations which support them and their social function. Based on ethnographic research with crack cocaine users during 2004 to 2005, this article discusses the operations of three UK crack houses, providing a rare UK case study. The volatile nature of the social and structural pressures which direct street drug users and drug markets inhibit categorisation at this point.

Keywords – crack houses – ethnography – drug markets

### **Introduction**

The term 'crack house' has come to mean many different types of locations where many different social acts take place, at different times. Much of the early, explorative and typological literature on crack houses comes from the U.S. (Mieczowski, 1990; Geter, 1994; Inciardi, 1995; Bourgois, 1995). It is only recently in 2001 that the term 'crack house' started to appear more frequently in UK research discourse (Webster, et al., 2001). UK literature, however, has predominantly focused policy and law enforcement mechanisms to close crack houses (Webster, et al., 2001; Burgess et al., 2003; Peters and Walker, 2005) and devoted little attention to their operations. This paper aims to address this gap and is based on ethnographic research with crack cocaine users ('crack users' hereafter) and crack houses a London borough ('Rivertown' hereafter).

In Rivertown, however, there had been a dramatic increase in the use of punitive measures to deal with visible 'problem drug users' such as crack users. While Rivertown's Crack House Closure Protocol (2003) was concerned with emptying crack house residents on to the streets, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003) was concerned with moving visible street populations out of the community's eye. By focussing on enforcement rather than prevention, many crack users were simply displaced to other areas of Rivertown. Crack users, now even more paranoid and anxious were looking for a safe sanctuary to take crack and other drugs. It wasn't long before 'word on the street' indicated where other potential places to use crack became available and it was in these conditions that the social networks of the crack scene tended to thrive:<sup>1</sup>

*Like my sister. She lived in the [crack] house but she was clean [off drugs]. She had a kid. She kept everything under control to a certain extent. At the beginning this is how it all starts. Sent her to school, everything's fine, people come around, smoke, then more people find out you're smoking and more people come around, knocking early hours of the morning, and things just escalate and you never used to want to smoke at two o'clock in the morning, but someone's knocked at the door with a smoke so you let them in. That person tells another person that they've come around so another person comes around the next day. [Big Dred]*

This was why people like Big Dred tried hard to limit knowledge of his crack house operations.

### **US crack house operations**

Much of the early, explorative literature on the operation of crack houses comes from the US (Mieczowski, 1990; Geter, 1994; Inciardi, 1995; Bourgois, 1995). Mieczowski examined the management of crack houses in Detroit. The 'fortified crack house' was 'austere' in that there was minimal interaction between the customer and dealer while the 'tavern' was a crack-using location which was vulnerable to violence, sex-for-crack exchanges, crime and danger. Concluding, he said that the safe operation of crack houses relied on an established and trusted customer base which, in turn, reduced the likelihood of violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Such street connections and pressures were also found to be apparent in Parkin and Coomber's (2009) research on heroin informal sorter houses.

Geter (1994) divided the 'crack house' into four meaningful terms based on its physical condition, its functionality, and the social relationships that it supported and devised two typologies. The first separated drug houses into four general categories: crack house; cop house; drug House III; drug house IV. Geter defined the crack house as *"the social centre for the acquisition and use of crack cocaine"* in comparison to the cop house which was associated with the *"purchase of drugs"* rather than for *"hustling and smoking"*. The drug house III, and drug house IV were *"private homes"* where drugs and money were stored respectively (Geter, 1994: 1018). The second typology categorised the crack house into 'the party house'; the 'hit house'; the 'smoke house'; and the 'bandominium' (abandoned house). The party house and hit house were clean exclusive locations, primarily organised by female crack users. While the hit house was more likely to attract members of the *"poverty class"* who were *"bums and beggars, con artists and thieves"* (Geter, 1994: 1022), the Smoke House and Bandamonium were more chaotic and had potential for violence.

Inciardi (1995) also examined crack house operations. He suggested that 'castles' were fortified structures where crack was produced from cocaine by crack dealers. 'Base houses' were locations where different types of drug users frequented and intravenous administration was tolerated but sex-for-drugs exchanges were rare. 'Resorts' were small apartments run by crack users which used different rooms for different activities. The kitchen was used for cooking crack, the living room for smoking and selling, and the bedrooms for sex, although sex was also common in smoking areas. 'Resident houses' were also operated by crack users but crack was smoked and not sold. He concluded that a crack house was:

*A place to use, a place to sell or do both, a place to manufacture and package crack, and the location may be a house, an apartment, a small shack at the back of an empty lot, an abandoned building, or even the rusting hulk or a discarded automobile. (Inciardi, 1995: 261)*

Philippe Bourgois's ethnographic research examined the managerial structures of dealing crack houses in New York. He described how low-level crack-house dealers employed strict and rigid working regimes for crack-using staff while monitoring the crack market and police attention. 'Lookouts' were hired as assistances. Crack users and crack dealers had frequent and open interaction in crack houses. Moreover, 'cooking' crack was confined to separate premises while other crack houses were

*“devoted to cultivating sexual liaisons with addicted women, especially teenage women”* (Bourgois, 1995: 78). The ‘crack house’ also doubled as a legitimate business. However, unlike our American counterparts, rich sociological descriptions of crack house operations have remained absent from UK literature.

### **‘Crack houses’ in the UK**

The term ‘crack house’ started to appear in UK research and policy discourse at the end of the 1990s (Webster, et al., 2001). The literature, however, has focused on closing crack houses (Webster, et al., 2001; Burgess et al., 2003; Peters and Walker, 2005). The various styles of crack house operation in London were classified as: fortified retail outlet; the take-over; sex, drugs and violence; the sex exchange; the broker; and Mr Big (Webster et al., 2001). The fortified retail outlets were associated with iron gates and located in abundance on council estates, and were operated by crack dealers on a 24/7 basis. The ‘take-over crack house’ was found to be a flat or house which had been taken over by crack dealers (also see Home Office, 2003; GLADA, 2004). The ‘sex exchange’ and the ‘broker’ appeared to be constructed on the basis of the type of transaction in the crack houses. Little was written about the sex exchange crack house other than it was operated by women, and their crack use was funded through sex with other crack users and/or dealers. The ‘broker crack house’ operated on the basis of a tenant lending a space for the use of drugs to other crack users in exchange for a share of their drugs. In these locations, injecting drugs was tolerated, violent acts *“occasionally”* took place and the customer base was predominantly male (Webster et al, 2001: 24).

The ‘sex, drugs and violence’ crack house was described as the *“stereotypical crack house whose image was often associated with crack use in the USA”* (Webster et al., 2001: 23). Violence, pimping and prostitution were associated with this type of crack house, as well as reckless violent acts and crimes in the near vicinity of the crack house. ‘Mr Big’ crack house was a feature of a rural drug market. Dealers were found to use and deal drugs, and locked their customers in the flat/house to deter police attention. There has since been conflicting discourses on ‘what is a crack house’ and its associated operations. The government’s Disrupting Crack Markets Best Practice Guide (2003) stated that crack house was *“a catch-all term to describe a range of properties from which drugs are sold. Someone who sells crack from their house to a closed group of people is not really operating a crack house”* (Burgess et al., 2003:

5). However, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act stated that crack houses were *“premises or any type of structure where drugs were used, supplied or made.”* This included houses, flats, apartments, sheds, common areas adjacent to houses or flats, garages, factories, shops, pubs, clubs, public buildings, community centres or halls. The report also stated even stated that ‘premises’ could even be a *“room within a hostel or bed and breakfast hotel”* (Home Office, 2003: 8).

There has, however, been some effort to categorise class A drug-using venues in the context of heroin (Parkin and Coomber, 2009). Using qualitative interviews with injecting drug users, Parkin and Coomber (2009) divided informal shooter houses (or shooting galleries) into three categories: ‘regulated’, ‘unregulated’ and ‘restored’ injecting environments; the latter were *“those that had re-emerged from a period of unregulated injecting practice, in which renewed attempts were made to manage and restrict the level of drug use that occurred within”* (Ibid, 2009: 984). They posited that the house rules in these locations (or perhaps lack of house rules) determined their operation and consequently the kinds of social activity which took place. That is, in some locations, the house manager often determined what was permissible while in other locations, there was little social control. Despite this, they also admitted that there was still confusion about the definition of these settings. It is this confusion which has continued to dominate policy documents with regard to crack houses. In Rapid Assessment to close ‘Crack houses’, Peters and Walker (2005: 6) acknowledge that *“in recognition of the broader application of the [closure] powers, and in reflection of the Act they [crack houses] are now being referred to as class A drug premises. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this report.”* However, descriptions of crack house operations seem to have disappeared within these discourses of ‘definition’. Furthermore, no UK researcher has actually been inside crack houses.

### **Research aims**

Funded by a south London Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) from September 2004 to September 2005, the project’s aims were to examine the treatment barriers for crack users, the relationship between crack and crime and the aetiology of crack houses.

## Methods

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in crack houses, hostels, alleyways, council estates, derelict sites, parks and car parks from September 2004 to May 2005. Over this period, 112 days were spent with crack users and 54 open-ended interviews were conducted; 33 were men and 21 were women. The sample was predominantly obtained by 'snowballing'. Achieving reliability through the data was possible through an 'open-minded' research approach; the ability to connect and listen to participants, lending an impartial ear which allowed information to 'flow' between researcher and participant; and cross-examining accounts with other accounts to test for contradictions/similarities. Discussing drafts, 'going over findings', and multiple interviews enhanced the accuracy of the data. Validity was gained through treating the respondents as experts of their social setting (Gilbert, 1993) and through low-inference descriptors, which recorded precise and detailed descriptions of participants and their situations. Van Maanen (1988: 1) has noted that this is linked with the documentation of a "*written representation of a culture.*"

All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and were paid £10 for their participation. Most interviews lasted between one and two hours and were subject to informed consent, and tape recorded for verbatim transcription. Interview tapes were fully transcribed by a professional transcriber. Once transcribed, interview and observation data was categorized thematically, with the key areas of investigation providing the overall framework for coding (Ritchie and Spencer, 2004). Analyses were inductive which meant that themes emerged from the data rather than being hypothesised.

## Findings

Figure 1 – Crack house characteristics

Characteristics of a 'crack house' according to Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003	Flick's crack house	Blood's crack house	Big Dred's crack house
Crack is supplied and used there	✓	✓	✓
Cocaine may be 'baked' on the premises to produce crack			✓
Other class A drugs such as heroin may be supplied and used there	✓	✓	✓
Class B or C drugs may also be available	✓	✓	✓
There is often a trade in stolen goods - particularly credit cards and mobile phones			✓
Users will often take drugs on the premises so chances of arrests for possession are lower	✓	✓	✓
Activity in the house will peak once a delivery has been			

made- this can involve hundreds of people visiting			
Dealers will sometimes use prostitutes or runners to deliver the drugs or will take drugs there themselves if they do not have a trusted proxy			
Internal transportation is a favoured method of delivering the drugs			✓
Sex may be sold or sexual acts obvious in public around the premises		✓	
Houses will often be sparsely furnished and will in most cases contain much drug paraphernalia	✓	✓	
The occupier will usually be a drug user but if not will be a vulnerable person	✓	✓	✓
Crime in the area surrounding the premises will be high – particularly acquisitive crime	Difficult to quantify		
There may be a measurable increase in crime in the 500m <sup>2</sup> around the location following the establishment of a 'crack house'	Difficult to quantify		
Drugs paraphernalia will often be found in the vicinity	✓	✓	✓
There will often be a defensible space within the premises from where dealing can take place away from public view			
There will be separate spaces where people can use the drugs for what are often long periods of time		✓	✓

### Flick's crack house: The 'vulnerable' tenant



After several days hanging around in the streets with Bones, JC and Big T, I was finally invited to Flick's crack house (left Figure 2). Field notes recorded my first experience of its physical appearance:

We came up in the lift which stank of urine. I stood crammed in the lift with Flick, Big T and JC. We walked out across the landing and Flick fumbled for his key. He apologised in advance for the mess. I guess he felt embarrassed that someone who didn't take drugs was coming in. I felt privileged, as he said he wouldn't normally do this unless someone had crack for him. The toilet was on the right hand side as we went in. There was a fish tank in the hallway, because, for some reason, Flick

said he thought he might one day have fish. The floor was tiled but hadn't been swept for months. JC and Big T went straight into the living room which was on the right as we walked in. Flick politely showed me his bedroom, which was on the left from the hallway. It was made up of a single bed in the corner with white but yellow-stained duvet, broken mirror and cupboard. The living area was a rubbish dump. For some reason there was sawdust everywhere, and some porno magazines lying around. There was no

distinctive smell. The crack-smoking area was around a decrepit sofa which Flick had been given by a church charity. There were small crack wrappers and some crack pipes on the little table near the decrepit sofa, and a television propped up in the corner. The kitchen area, which had no flooring, was bloodstained in areas. [3.9.04]

Flick always denied his flat was a 'crack house' yet his crack-using associates felt otherwise. They had reason for such assumptions because Flick invited all sorts of strangers to smoke any kind of drug in his flat at any hour of the day or night. When not in his flat, Flick lingered around outside the drug service trying to persuade others to part with drugs or to use drugs in his flat in exchange for drugs. Because of this, he was generally perceived as a 'ponce' (beggar): someone who did not work hard for his drug money.

Because of his inability to earn money, Flick bartered out his flat to allow people to use crack in his flat, away from public and police attention, in exchange a 'rock or two'. However, if there was heroin or prescribed drugs on offer, it may easily tempt him to offer out his space. The flat regulars were Blood, Big T, JC, and Bones. Big T and JC appeared only on social security payment days if they could also be persuaded by Flick. Blood and Bones, however, often spent long overnight spells at Flick's, making their money for crack and treating him to a "few pipes". The flat, however, was not exclusive in its operations because although Flick said "only a few knew", it was where I met Fuzz, Holt and Cheque, Brummie and Flea; all smoking and injecting crack and heroin in Flick's premises.

At times, Flick's flat did not display any outside social or drug-taking characteristics of a 'crack house'. Some days, there were no visitors and when dealers were unavailable and Blood and Bones went visiting other crack-using locations. While Flick regarded direct transactions with crack dealers in their flats as crack houses, this view was not shared by Blood, Big T or JC. As we walked to a street deal, Blood declared that "crack houses are places where people take crack – that's all. You don't have to have a dealer there". Perhaps Flick was just cautious about what might happen if too many people found out about his operations because it had backfired in the past. Reflecting on the demise of his previous flat, he said:

**Flick:** *It became a crack house because I was on with the [name of drug service] – on higher dose, methadone than what I'm on now. Instead of fifty five milligrams it was ninety and five valium a day so I was on the two most addictive pharmaceutical substances on the planet and then I got suspended for missing appointments – missing appointments with your key-worker in the*

*afternoons because sometimes I didn't always have the fare or I'd walk here and I'd be late and late counted as a missed appointment so I got discharged. Usually when that happened I used to go to my GP to tell him that I'd been discharged and he'd give me a script until they took me back on again but they've got an Irish GP there. She's not in charge but the other GP doesn't want to upset her because she won't give the pill out to anyone and all that because she's a catholic so she won't give tranquillisers out or anything so even though she's not my doctor my doctor didn't want to upset her or anything so 25 mls of methadone is equivalent to a quarter gram of heroin – I think that's how the Government or the doctors work it out so if you're on ninety milligrams that's like one hundred and ninety quids worth – plus the valium that made it about a 125 quid that I had to get every day so two days or three days into that...*

**Dan:** *...of going without your medication?*

**Flick:** *Yeah of being chucked off the [name of drug service] a black guy I knew - just a dealer not really someone I knew – like a Yardie, Jamaican – came up with someone he said was his cousin and brown and white, you know, heroin and crack and said to me he wanted to see what it was like do I want to try it out for him to see if it's any good or not. He knew it was actual gear but how strong it was sort of thing. So I yeah “yeah alright then” and then I had to have a doctor's appointment to get something else – to get some antibiotics – and he goes “can't I just stay over with a spliff” and I said “yeah yeah that's alright. No problem” and when I came back they were using it as a crack house.*

**Dan:** *How long were you away?*

**Flick:** *About two hours. The dealer phoning them up and they were saying “yeah. We're up Flick's house. You know where Flick lives” blah blah blah, like giving them directions to my house and then he pulled me into the bedroom (not physically pulled me) and told me could he do it there and what the arrangements would be, you know like he would make sure I had enough drugs etc and he'd give me a tenner as well so it'd be like forty quids worth of crack because I am not eating enough and twenty quids worth of heroin and a tenner.*

Throughout September and October 2004, Flick's flat was one of the busiest on the floor, and there was a clear indication that the neighbours were curious about the out-of-hours social life. It wasn't only Flick though. Two floors below, two other crack houses were in operation. There lived two different crack dealers who did not deal from the door but instead sent out young drug runners on to the nearby streets to do business with the local addicts. I came face to face, on many occasions, with the runners on their new BMX bikes in the estate grounds offering me crack. Flick and Bones, however, had no association with the dealers or runners because they did not want the immediate attention from other neighbours. Despite this, the young and naïve Blood was frequently trying to deal directly at their doorstep in an attempt to save a precious 50p to call a dealer.

### **Blood's 'crack house': Not just any old space**

Flick grew increasingly angry with Blood because this attention endangered what he considered to be his “*non-drug using reputation*” with the neighbours. For this reason, he lost patience with Blood and often banned him for short periods. It was on these occasions that Blood sheltered in what he called the ‘crack house squat’. Nevertheless, Blood frequently referred to it his “*home*”. It was sandwiched between two arches of a bridge and was extremely inaccessible. My field notes recorded the physical realities of entering this setting:

Figure 3: Blood’s squat crack house after a raid



We [Blood and I] had to climb a wall near an old train bridge under some barbed wire and then almost jump down into what might once have been a garage. It was slippery because it had been raining. I nearly fell by slipping on the bricks and wood. In the yard, there were old tires. There were flies buzzing around, and there was a strong smell of piss and shit. As we walked into the downstairs room, over the broken bricks and wood, there was a mattress in the corner and loads of fag butts on the floor. We went upstairs or tried to as there were stairs missing and you had to almost jump up, but there was a rope to hold on to. Blood warned me to watch where I stood, as there were needles and syringes everywhere. It was so dark; I could hardly see where I was going. We pulled

ourselves to the top of the stairs, where there was a hole in the roof. A bird flew out. I looked to my left and there was what looked like a bedroom, couple of mattresses and sofas – half upturned, half torn. The piss and shit smell became stronger. We walked through a narrow corridor to the right and came into what looked like the main room. There was piss, shit, syringes, semen stains all over the mattresses and sofas. Under each step I took, I could hear the crunch of syringes. I was glad I was wearing my heavy-duty boots. I was invited to sit down by Biker, a squat regular who was well practiced in the art of bike theft. I looked at the sofa, and carefully perched on the arm. The place lacked everything - light, water, electricity, warmth, and it was right under the railway so I reckon no one slept. Blood had spent the last two nights there since Flick kicked him out. Now he had lice. [12.10.04]

This place didn't seem to have much organised activity. People who knew of this place came only to either smoke or inject themselves with heroin and/or crack. There was a core of eight residents who, between them, shared a couple of mattresses, a few broken sofas, and various makeshift beds. When there were new residents, they were welcomed – often in exchange for some drugs. But there also appeared to be no manager or anyone clearly in charge – but just general consensual agreements. Most residents used their social security funds to 'sort each other out' and did favours when others had a 'touch' (got lucky with money through crime or begging). Some had sex in exchange for money/drugs – the evidence of which was to be seen all over the mattresses and sofas. Yet eight homeless people had to find some shelter; some comfort from the bedlam of the crack scene. Two months after my final visit, the location was raided under the Rivertown Crack House Protocol and the eight 'residents', including Biker, were emptied out on to the streets without the offer of treatment. In the photo on the previous page, taken some months later, some thoughts were poignantly written on a wall by a former resident: *"Please respect my home and u [you] will all be welcome"*.

### **Big Dred's crack house: Exclusive is best**

It was around this time in November that I was reunited with Cuz – someone I had met in prison some years earlier on another drug research project. Cuz started making promises in an effort to help out with the research. He wanted to take me to all sorts of crack houses – some of which, he said, *"you wouldn't fink they was crack houses"*. This certainly became true when he introduced me to Big Dred - a short and stumpy 44-year-old former crack dealer turned crack user with dreadlocks and a high-pitched voice. Big Dred had recently managed to avoid another visit to prison despite breaking the conditions of his Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) on several occasions. This is because he swapped his positive urine tests (for drugs) with another at the DTTO offices. Generally when at the DTTO offices, he kept interaction to a minimum thereby limiting those who knew about his crack house operations. We met by chance outside the DTTO office just after Cuz had been for a 'chat and a swab (drug test)'. After a few chance meetings, we were invited to his crack house:

It was an old Victorian house. We arrived just after 1pm. The TV was on and Twitch answered the door. She was welcoming. She was wearing a white bathrobe and checked cautiously down the street. She looked so thin, I thought her legs were going to snap. Cuz and I walked in through the hallway.

There was no carpet but it didn't have that decrepit feel like some other places had. The air was not stale but fresh. We walked past the front room on the right. The curtains were drawn and it was filled with boxes of merchandise. There were brand new clothes all stacked up in the room but I didn't ask about them. The place was well kitted out with furniture and the bathroom was stocked up with expensive toiletries, shampoos, aftershaves, perfumes and at least ten toothbrushes. The toilet was clean (to my surprise). Big Dred was in the bedroom in a vest and trousers. I sat down and Cuz immediately asked if I could put the tape recorder on. I was annoyed that he asked but Big Dred and Twitch allowed me. [11.11.04]

Big Dred had something very valuable in the crack scene - safe accommodation. Moreover, unlike Flick, there were only a select few who knew about it. There was Big Dred's girlfriend, Twitch, Babe and Tiny. Babe and Tiny came most days from a nearby street. The operation of Big Dred's 'credit-card scams' had broadened to include them because Babe's boyfriend, who also used crack and supported her crack use, had been imprisoned. Big Dred's crack house appeared to offer decent sanctuary from the chaos of the crack scene. There appeared to be a 'shared understanding' among the unit: that 'whatever came in' went around to whoever was present. This philosophy was spearheaded by Big Dred whose calm demeanour appeared to filter down to his workforce and this appeared to diffuse the potential for explosive disagreements over crack. Essentially, the whole operation relied on Big Dred stealing credit cards between the time the cards were 'run dead' for a few weeks.

The effectiveness of the management was evident in the desire to keep a 'good thing', going; knowing that they were working undercover in a Victorian house, on a reasonably 'well-to-do' street where the police had little interest. No one else apart from Cuz and a few "*reliable others*" knew about the flat or their operations. Since one of Big Dred's main concerns was the location of the 'grafting area', much of the credit card fraud took them out of London. Although the fundamental operation of Big Dred's unit continued like this over the next month, it did not prevent some 'slip ups'. This all seemed to stem from the release of Babe's boyfriend from prison in December. Once he had resumed his car-smuggling business, Babe and Tiny reduced their appearances at the flat. This meant that Big Dred had to take the wheel of the car on 'grafting days'. Big Dred however, had a significant number of previous convictions, most of which were driving offences. Conscious that he did not want to spend long periods driving in case they were caught, they started to use the credit cards more locally. However, this disrupted the routine of the longer journey and the

close proximity of crack dealers made it a little too tempting to just “*have a quick blaze*” then go to another shop. It was during this period, that Big Dred’s crack use seemed to escalate once again.

However, once again, Big Dred’s carelessness behind the wheel and hasty scoring abilities put him in trouble once again. In March, he was stopped in the car by police and was arrested again for driving while banned. This offence was added a court case which had been set at for the 12<sup>th</sup> April. Shortly after, he was then caught in possession of crack and heroin while in the car and this charge was added to the court date. In the days preceding the case, Big Dred was nervously anticipating a custodial sentence. He said they were “*silly offences*” which he could not believe he got “*nicked for*”. I too was confused because they didn’t seem to reflect the skill he applied to his credit-card operations. We all went down to court on the day of the hearing. I sat with Twitch as we watched Big Dred enter the courtroom. The charges didn’t seem to take that long and before we knew it, the judges went away to deliberate. Then Big Dred was back in the dock and in a miraculous turn of events:

The solicitor’s argument was honest: Big Dred had done this before but the seriousness of his offences had reduced over the years and it would need time for him to adjust to a ‘crime-free life’ – he also played on the fact that prison would not be a suitable answer although it seemed like the inevitable punishment. The judges then said they would retire and we all had to stand up. Big Dred looked at Twitch and I, and pointed a thumb down as if to say he was going to prison. Ten minutes later, at just after 1pm (we had been in there for about 20 minutes) the judges came back and commended the Probation officer for his report. To my astonishment, they said that this really was his last chance and sentenced him to 100 hours community service, an 18-month driving ban and a compulsory driving course “*Think Drive*” (or something). The Probation officer came out of court and couldn’t believe it – even the solicitor was surprised and said to Big Dred “*what ever you do, don’t get in a car.*” [12.4.05]

However, one hour later in Big Dred’s flat:

Big Dred seemed happier and almost had a schoolboy bounce to him. We had done it, I felt a sense of elation too. He said he was going to score crack and to meet us back at his flat. We arrived at Big Dred’s and I made a drink while Twitch went straight to smoke heroin. Soon after Tiny came over – his hair was longer and he hadn’t shaved. He started saying how he was fed up with grafting every day for drugs and said he might give up soon – he had a bad cough which he said was down to smoking crack. He had some Iranian Rias which he had taken from someone’s bag which were worth around £100. I turned the tape recorder on while they both started talking about drug

treatment. Tiny mentioned Subutex and said it interested him. Big Dred then came in with a large rock [of crack] and laid it out on the bed. This time he shared it out. Minutes later, there was a call on Big Dred's phone – it was Twitch's brother trying to sell him a car for £100. She relayed this all back to Big Dred while he concentrated on piling the crack on to his pipe. He took a quick crack pipe. Twitch badgered him for an answer so he nodded in agreement but it looked like a painful decision. I thought to myself what would happen now. [12.4.05]

The next day, Big Dred bought the car.

## **Discussion**

This paper has attempted to show the complexities of crack house management against the structural and social pressures of the crack scene - if indeed, some of the premises were managed at all. In Flick's crack house management appeared to be governed by Flick although there were no social rules, no restrictions on where or how drugs were used and careless regulation of how many people used the flat (or knew about it). It appeared to function similar to the 'resident house' (Inciardi, 1995) which was operated by crack users but where crack was smoked but not sold. Premises were bartered out in exchange for drugs (Webster et al., 2001; Parkin and Coomber, 2009). Conversely, Blood's crack house appeared far less organised relying predominantly on consensual agreements between residents to supply each other crack as well as other drugs. Perhaps it was not too dissimilar to Geter's (1994) 'hit house' which attracted 'bums and beggars'. Sex exchanges took place at times (Inciardi, 1995; Webster et al., 2001) and most activity appeared to be unregulated (Parkin and Coomber, 2009). In the end, it did not take long for law enforcement agencies to intervene and close the venue.

Perhaps Big Dred's management structure resembled that of US research (Bourgois, 1995) but roles were not clearly defined. Nevertheless, his crack house and its operation appeared to be 'reasonably successful' when trusted customers were involved (Mieczowski, 1990) and when knowledge of its operations was limited (Parkin and Coomber, 2009). Nevertheless, when the social dynamics of the crack scene shifted, effective crack house operations could be jeopardised. When Babe's boyfriend came out of prison and resumed the car-smuggling business, this reduced the efficiency of the operation. This, in turn, undoubtedly led to Big Dred exposing himself to driving, the subsequent arrests and court case and it may have been only be a matter of time before, once again, operations were once again jeopardised.

The organisation and operation of crack houses perhaps makes it difficult to categorise or typologise them and this is reflected in the definition of 'crack house' in government documents (Burgess et al., 2003; Home Office, 2003). This paper shows that crack house did not necessarily resemble typologised constructions of 'crack house' (Webster et al., 2001; GLADA, 2004). It appears to be problematic to categorise them because such venues are perhaps more 'fluid' (Inciardi, 1995) than we suspect and will often evolve and diminish according to the volatile nature of the social and structural pressures which direct street drug users and drug markets (Parkin and Coomber, 2009).

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