

WEEKEND EXTRA

Cellphone a key commodity for drug gangs

Trafficking takes place through phone-line networks, rather than on the street corner

BY KIM BOLAN
VANCOUVER SUN

A 10-digit telephone number is the most critical tool for front-line B.C. drug traffickers.

The number — usually for a prepaid cellphone purchased anonymously — is what drug users call to make their purchases, and therefore the key to profits.

Dial-A-Dope operations are the standard business model for gangs here, according to police and former gangsters. In fact, B.C. gangs have specialized in Dial-A-Dope techniques to the point they have become sophisticated operations designed to evade detection from police and trouble from competitors.

"We don't see the American model of trafficking where someone is standing on a street corner," said Sgt. Shinder Kirk of the Integrated Gang Task Force. "If we compare places like South Central Los Angeles to the Lower Mainland, there it is turf-oriented. Here it's all based on lines and distribution networks."

Police have called for greater regulation of cellphone sales to prevent gangs from buying

them undetected and in large quantities.

Many of the front-line drug groups are small — four to eight people. They start by getting a beat-up car and a phone and then make their pitch to a more established gang. They pick up a small amount of cocaine — usually an ounce — and they pick a location to set up their phone.

They work in teams — two work 12-hour day shifts, the other two cover the night shift.

They drive around their chosen area looking for crackheads and other obvious users to create a client base. If the group is larger, the profits have to be divided among more workers. The crew sets up a "safe house" where they sleep when not working, and to keep their stash of money and drugs.

A new crew usually sells about half an ounce a day, earning about \$1,000 to split among the workers.

A group hits the radar of rivals when it decides to expand, which means it must increase its client base. At this level, groups start arming themselves, usually with bats and golf clubs. Bigger groups have firearms.

Preying on other gangs' client lists leads inevitably to conflict.

In a simple attack plan, a rival group will make a fake client call and assault the crew member who shows up with the delivery.

The rival group will take the most precious commodity from the other dealer: his phone. Anyone who calls that number will be told the line is shut down and that they should call a new line linked to the raiding group.

The group that got ambushed may take revenge, sometimes with deadly consequences.

Four youths gunned down in Abbotsford this spring — Dilsher Gill, Joseph Randay, Ryan Richards and Sean Murphy — were front-line crew members perceived to be earning for the Red Scorpions and the Bacon brothers.

Because of the "phone rips," street crews now send their workers out with decoy phones while the real phone stays at the safe house. Calls to the real phone are forwarded to the decoy phones, so business can be conducted without the key phone number ever being at risk.

Crews worried about their own workers selling on the side for their personal benefit hire live operators instead of "call-forwarding," making it harder for

internal rip-offs to occur.

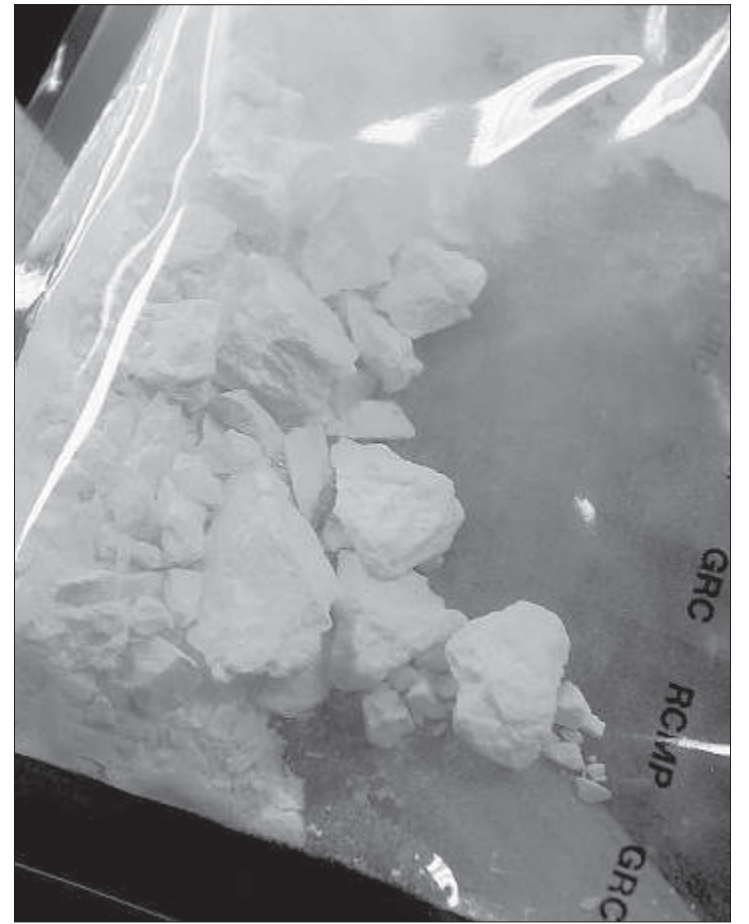
Mid-level drug gangs may have dozens of lines running at the same time, earning tens of thousands a month in profits, but also often putting them in conflict with rivals.

When Vancouver police announced in March it had arrested members of two mid-level crime groups, Insp. Mike Porteous said much of their violent dispute was over drug lines.

"Both these groups run drug lines in the Lower Mainland and there is an ongoing conflict for control of those drug lines in southeast Vancouver and other areas of the Lower Mainland and that's what funds their activities," Porteous said.

"We have information that sometimes on the drug lines, they are making as many as one drug transaction a minute."

The chance to make money may be great, but so is the risk. The luckier ones end up in jail. Others, like Randay, Gill, Richards and Murphy, end up dead. A report last month from the Integrated Threat Assessment on Organized Crime in B.C. said most of the violence is among those at the bottom.



KEITH ANDERSON/KAMLOOPS DAILY NEWS

Bags of cocaine were taken during the recent arrests of gang members belonging to the Independent Soldiers.

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No longer 'rules' in gang violence, criminologist says

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Cantera said the drug trade works very much like the legitimate business world.

"You have the manufacturer, you have the wholesaler, and you have the guy who is selling it out of the business," he said.

Which one is the most power-

ful crime group in the province varies depending on the groups' success getting their products in and out of the country, Cantera said.

"You are only as big as your last importation."

Cantera thinks the increase in gang murders is in part due to the increasing importance of gun trafficking in the under-

world business model. He said they are using marijuana and synthetic drug profits to get more guns into Canada.

"When you have access to firearms, you are potentially going to use them."

But Schneider, who teaches at Halifax's St. Mary's University, thinks the violence in B.C. has resulted from a fracturing of tra-

ditional organized crime codes.

"At least the Italian Mafia had certain codes: You didn't shoot police officers. You didn't shoot people's relatives. You didn't get kids involved," Schneider said. "There are no rules any more."

High-level groups are deliberately engaging more vulnerable groups at the lower end of their crime chain.

"You have these upper-level, very sophisticated powerful criminals like the Hells Angels, or mainland Chinese or others and then they use immigrants or young offenders to do all the dirty work," Schneider said.

"In B.C. and Quebec, you now see innocent people being deliberately targeted. You look at Mexico. There is no honour

among thieves any more. There are no rules any more and that is the scariest part of this, and that is why the problem has become so bad in B.C. and Mexico."

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