



DRUGS BEHIND BARS

By **Kotie Geldenhuys**; Photo courtesy of **Depositphotos**

When Nicholas Ninow, a convicted rapist, addressed the Gauteng High Court in Pretoria in October 2019 in mitigation of sentence, he disclosed that since his arrest in September 2018, he had used drugs on approximately 20 occasions while incarcerated. He told the court about the prevalence of drugs in correctional centres (prisons), stating: "When you are in that cell, there are drugs all around, there are drugs everywhere in prison. There is no rehabilitation in prison" (OFM, 2019). Given that the consumption and distribution of drugs are longstanding criminal offences, the question remains: how are these substances infiltrating prisons which are supposed to be secure facilities?

The dynamics of drug distribution and transactions within correctional centres closely mirror those in the wider society. Nevertheless, within the confines of these centres, the accessibility, promotion and exchange of drugs rely heavily on corrupt correctional staff members, service providers, visitors and innovative inmates.

Drug use by inmates

People who engage in drug use within the community often continue this behaviour during their incarceration. However, the amount and frequency of drug consumption generally decline in correctional centres compared to "outside" as it is influenced by availability, limited resources for obtaining drugs, cost and the fear of getting caught while using drugs (Norman, 2022).

Drug use among inmates who were previously non-users often serves as a coping mechanism to confront the challenges of incarceration. It

further acts as a means to shield against the pervasive violence within correctional centres (Agboola and Kang'ethe, 2024). As in the case of those who had used drugs before their incarceration and who are continuing with drug use during their incarceration, reasons may include alleviating loneliness, regaining a sense of control, combating boredom, managing insomnia and coping with withdrawal symptoms (Norman, 2022). Drug use in correctional centres can further be driven by its role in social dynamics, offering a pathway to status within the inmate community and a form of resistance against institutional norms (Wakeling and Lynch, 2020). Among male inmates, drug use correlates with a history of substance misuse, offences related to drug procurement, prolonged incarceration, crimes committed under the influence, limited education and familial substance abuse. Female inmates' drug use often stems from experiences of abuse, albeit physical, sexual or emotional, as well as intimate partner violence and childhood neglect (Agboola and Kang'ethe, 2024).

Drug use among inmates is linked with negative post-release consequences such as reduced employment opportunities, housing challenges, deteriorating physical health and heightened mortality rates compared to non-drug-using inmates (Norman, 2022). There is also a robust connection between substance abuse and criminal behaviour, as well as substance abuse and recidivism (Wakeling and Lynch, 2020).

Types of drugs used in prison

Cannabis, commonly known as marijuana or dagga, is the predominant substance used in correctional centres across many countries, mirroring its usage in the general population (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017). Within South African correctional centres, cannabis and Mandrax (also referred to as lizards, doodies, MX, Buttons, white pipe, press outs or Flowers) are the primary substances of choice (Mthembu, 2016). Nyaope (also known as whoonga), an illicit concoction comprising a blend of various drugs including cannabis, crystal meth, heroin, rat poison, sugar, bicarbonate of soda, pool cleaner and painkillers, is also prevalent (Agboola and Kang'ethe, 2024). Mandrax is frequently mixed with other substances such as dagga and nyaope (Mthembu, 2016).

The prison drug market

Because the demand for drugs persists even during incarceration, drug usage remains prevalent in many correctional centres where there is a significant demand for such substances. A substantial portion of inmates engage in daily activities that involve trading, both in legitimate and illicit items. A survey conducted by the UK Centre for Social Justice revealed that two in five correctional centres in England and Wales admitted that **inmates commit crimes to finance their drug purchases** (Jordaan, 2023).

Three primary channels facilitate the flow of drugs within correctional centres:

- **Enterprises** which function akin to drug markets outside the correctional centre, employ a network of distributors to supply inmates. Distributors, often the most frequent drug users within the correctional centre, are compensated with drugs. However, tightening security measures in correctional centres has hindered the ability of enterprises to maintain consistent drug supplies. Therefore, individual inmates have turned to trading drugs among themselves, bypassing the traditional enterprise structure.
- **Separate suppliers** serve as another source of drugs in correctional centres, albeit with more fluctuating availability compared to enterprises. These suppliers often collaborate by lending each other small quantities of drugs during shortages to sustain their market. To minimise the risk of detection, independent suppliers typically restrict sales to inmates with whom they share a pre-existing relationship or trust, often stemming from connections prior to incarceration.
- **Social sharing and trading** are prevalent practices within correctional centre communities, driven by principles of reciprocity. In essence, when an inmate possesses drugs, they distribute them within their social circle, expecting reciprocal assistance when they are in need. These sharing networks usually form among inmates with pre-existing ties from the community or previous incarceration periods (Norman, 2022).

Smuggling drugs into correctional centres proves to be more challenging compared to distributing them to the general population due to stringent security measures and regulations (Jordaan, 2023). However, a study revealed that one-third of inmates in England and Wales stated that obtaining drugs in prison was actually easier than outside (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017). Most contraband items smuggled into these facilities are drugs, which are then sold to finance gang-related activities. Cellphones, which are used to facilitate continued criminal behaviour such as arranging crimes including hits on people and drug deals, also find their way into correctional centres (Jordaan, 2023). Profits generated from drug sales in correctional centres may further fuel criminal activities beyond the confines of the correctional centre's walls (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017). Detecting these illicit items within prison walls poses a significant challenge, as inmates resort to creative hiding methods and often receive support from corrupt officials who are bribed to ignore such activities (Jordaan, 2023).

Smuggling drugs into prisons

Reducing drug use among inmates is most effectively achieved by decreasing the availability of drugs within correctional centres. This necessitates understanding the diverse smuggling avenues and implementing robust security measures to thwart them (Norman, 2022). This is however easier said than done, as drugs infiltrate correctional centres through a myriad of means, making it challenging to keep pace with the innovative methods devised by inmates to traffic them. Drug trafficking routes into correctional centres are diverse and likely to vary from one facility to another. They often entail intricate planning and preparation to evade detection measures. A warden once remarked that inmates demonstrate ingenuity and resourcefulness in their drug smuggling endeavours, exacerbating the complexities of security management (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017). Enterprises, separate suppliers and social sharing groups frequently use the same smuggling routes to introduce drugs into correctional centres, which can vary depending on contextual factors and existing security protocols (Norman, 2022). In this article, we will briefly explore some of the smuggling routes used to get illicit drugs to inmates behind bars.

Inmates as smugglers

One common route for drugs to find its way into correctional centres involves using newly convicted or returning inmates. It is a known practice for individuals who were out on bail to hide drugs if they anticipate being incarcerated, or for inmates on probation or parole to intentionally commit minor crimes, such as missing a probation appointment, to return to the correctional centre briefly to be able to smuggle drugs into the facility for financial gain. Remand prisoners - those held in custody awaiting trial or sentencing - frequently attend court sessions where they can receive drugs concealed by family members, legal practitioners or court security personnel before returning to the correctional centre (Norman, 2022).

Inmates use various methods to smuggle drugs into correctional centres. One such a technique involves tightly wrapping drugs in cling film and concealing them within body orifices, such as the rectum or female genitalia, a practice referred to as "plugging," or by encasing them in balloons which are then swallowed and stored in the stomach (Norman,

2022). Others may hide drugs in the back of their throat (Jordaan, 2023) or attempt to conceal them within clothing. One such an example happened in January 2015, when a convicted gunman on return to a British prison concealed 20 ecstasy tablets in the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms and stitched bags of cannabis into the lining of his boxer shorts and trainers. These drugs were discovered during a search (Thomas, 2015). In some cases, inmates use legally prescribed medication by "ingesting it" in front of medical staff and later spitting it into a cup to distribute or sell to other inmates. While confined to their cells, inmates fashion makeshift ropes known as "lines" to transfer drugs between cell windows (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017).

Smuggling visitors

Family members, partners and peers often serve as common channels for drug smuggling during visits to correctional centres. People providing various services such as religious, spiritual, cultural, educational, awareness and technical support can inadvertently contribute to the proliferation of drug trafficking within correctional centres (Mthembu, 2016).

The concealment of items during visits depends on the specific regulations governing permissible items within each correctional centre. While correctional centres enforce strict guidelines regarding items allowed for visitors, these regulations can vary between institutions. As smuggling methods evolve, prisons adapt their regulations to counter new tactics used by visitors and inmates (Norman, 2022). Typically, visitors resort to concealing items in body cavities, undergarments and occasionally in babies' clothing or diapers to bypass security measures (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017).

In September 2022, a woman was stopped by a warden in Mpumalanga for suspected drug possession while attempting to enter the Bethal Correctional Centre to visit an inmate. Following standard procedure, she underwent a search before entering the premises, revealing a black plastic bag concealed beneath her undergarments. The bag contained approximately 59 assorted tablets, 20 small plastic bags, as well as other substances including crushed leaves and a plastic bottle containing oil. The estimated street value of the drugs was around R6000. She was arrested and charged with drug possession. During a search of the bed of the inmate she wanted to visit, another plastic bag containing dagga was discovered by the wardens and police officials (Maromo, 2022).

Instances of innovative smuggling methods are also documented internationally. For example, in the UK, drugs were mixed with paint on a child's picture before being smuggled into a correctional centre (Thomas, 2015). Similarly, in the USA, visitors used ballpoint pens filled with heroin or cocaine after removing the ink cartridges, exchanging them with inmates (Norman, 2022). Smugglers often use tactics to mask the odour of drugs, such as coating packages with substances such as marmite (Thomas, 2015).

Upon receiving drugs from visitors, inmates must conceal the drugs within the facility. One example of how this is done came to light after a female inmate in a South African correctional centre disclosed that drugs received from visitors are often concealed in socks and then

smuggled into the correctional centres. She noted that while wardens typically conduct searches upon inmates returning to their cells after visits, they do not require the removal of socks (Agboola and Kang'ethe, 2024).

Corrupt Correctional Services personnel

The involvement of corrupt Correctional Services personnel, including civilian personnel (Jordaan, 2023) as well as prison tutors and nurses (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017), who aid organised crime groups by smuggling illicit drugs into correctional centres, is a grave concern, as highlighted by various researchers (Jordaan, 2023). Numerous inmates have confirmed that both uniformed and civilian staff are the primary sources of drugs within correctional centres, often exchanging contraband for financial gain (Norman, 2022). This is one of the more worrying ways in which drugs enter correctional centres (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017) and is a concerning issue worldwide.

Numerous examples in South Africa highlight the involvement of corrupt wardens in facilitating the entry of drugs and other prohibited items into correctional centres. One such incident happened in December 2022 at the Zonderwater Correctional Centre, near Cullinan, where a warden was arrested for smuggling contraband, including drugs, into the facility. During an attempted entry through the visitors' gate, the warden aroused suspicion when a routine search revealed two Ultramel custard containers in her possession, which felt unusually solid. When she was questioned, she claimed they were frozen and offered to store them in her locker. Upon investigation, it was discovered that the containers actually contained cellphones, with one missing, allegedly taken by inmates. Further scrutiny of this warden's belongings revealed hidden contraband, including 30 tablets, six cellphones and seven SIM cards, concealed within frozen chicken strips. Subsequent searches of the warden's residence on correctional centre's grounds reportedly uncovered more contraband hidden in food tins, consisting of cellphones, SIM cards and 2 kg of dagga (Hancke, 2023).

Staff complicity extends beyond direct involvement in smuggling operations. Some may facilitate entry or re-entry into the correctional centres without proper searches, accepting bribes known as "gate fees" (Norman, 2022). Research confirms that drugs often infiltrate correctional centres through admission points manned by staff members (Jordaan, 2023).

Staff members may become unwitting accomplices due to coercion or manipulation. Once involved, the fear of exposure and retaliation from inmates can compel continued participation in illegal activities (Norman, 2022).

In essence, the collusion of corrupt personnel in smuggling drugs and contraband not only compromises prison security but also undermines the integrity of the justice system. Addressing this issue demands comprehensive measures to root out corruption and fortify security protocols within correctional institutions.

Volunteers and contractors participate in smuggling

Contractors or volunteers may also sneak drugs into correctional centres. Since correctional centres function as small communities, contractors must be allowed entry for mail, food and other supplies. Drugs might be concealed in vehicles entering the prison premises or tucked away in deliveries, such as in produce or other food items going into the kitchen of the correctional centre (Norman, 2022).

Drugs in the mail

Mail serves as one of the main avenues for smuggling drugs into correctional centres, with various reported concealment methods. These include placing drugs under postage stamps or labels, within the folds and glue seams of envelopes, inside slit-open heavy card stock such as business cards or postcards and between the pages of magazines, newspapers or letters (Norman, 2022).

In the case of Tanya Baird, a South African citizen, drugs managed to infiltrate correctional centres via mail. Over a period of a couple of years, Baird sent "legal paperwork" and greeting cards soaked with K2 and Suboxone to inmates in an Ohio prison in the USA. K2, also referred to as Spice, Black Mamba, Bliss, Red Ex or Genie, is a synthetic cannabinoid typically smoked or used as a tea. Described by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as a synthetic version of THC, the psychoactive component in marijuana, K2/Spice comprises plant material sprayed with synthetic psychoactive chemicals. Suboxone, on the other hand, is a brand-name prescription medication used to manage opioid withdrawal symptoms (Dolley, 2022a).

Baird received the K2 from China and soaked legal documents with the substance in South Africa before sending them to the USA. In June 2021, she dispatched at least eight packages, each containing 30 pieces of paper saturated with K2, to an inmate in an Ohio prison. She was arrested in March 2022 upon arriving in the USA and entered a plea bargain with USA law enforcement in June 2022 (Dolley, 2022a).

According to the statement of facts, Baird would receive requests for K2 from inmates, directed to her by her fiancé. Payments for the K2/Spice and postage were made to Baird using PayPal, Western Union, MoneyGram, CashApp, Cash, Bitcoin and other money services. Baird, who used an address in Randpark Ridge, Johannesburg, sent approximately 69 packages of what was believed to be "fraudulent legal paperwork" saturated with the drug to the USA (Dolley, 2022a). Despite facing a potential 20-year prison sentence, Baird was ultimately sentenced to one year and one day of incarceration in a USA prison on 13 December 2022 (Dolley, 2022b).

Throwing drugs over perimeter walls/fences

Depending on the correctional centre's location and architectural layout, "throwovers" across the perimeter are a prevalent method of smuggling. Inmates frequently coordinate these throwovers with accomplices outside the facility using illicit cellphones smuggled into the prison. They often create a diversion, like a staged altercation, to facilitate the throwover and subsequent retrieval by a fellow inmate. Typically, drugs are concealed within various projectiles, such as

sliced-open tennis balls, oranges, bird carcasses or arrows, which are then thrown over the perimeter fence or wall (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017 and Norman, 2023). In January 2024, reports emerged of a Montgomery man who was apprehended for tossing backpacks filled with contraband over the fence of an Alabama prison in the USA. These backpacks contained illegal drugs, cellphones, weapons, lock-picking and re-keying kits, as well as assorted tobacco products (Robinson, 2024).

Drones fly drugs into prisons

In recent times and with advancements in technology, drones have become a preferred method for dropping packages beyond correctional centre perimeters. Their surge in popularity can be attributed to their capacity to transport large payloads, such as drugs and other prohibited items, in a single flight. With careful planning, coordination and timing, deliveries can be made without detection. Reports of drone sightings near prisons have been increasing globally (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017). In March 2024, it was revealed that USA officials arrested 150 individuals, including eight prison officials, as part of a month-long operation in Georgia. They were charged in connection with an intricate scheme involving smuggling drugs and other contraband into prisons using drones. The confiscated items included 87 drones and various contraband, including more than 400 kg of tobacco, 140 kg of marijuana, 26 kg methamphetamine, 112 kg of ecstasy, 10 g of cocaine and 90 assorted pills (Santucci, 2024).

Anti-drone technology is now accessible, capable of preventing drones from infiltrating correctional centre premises. This technology works by obstructing radio signals surrounding the facility, prompting the drone's internal homing system to activate, guiding them back to their operator (Norman, 2022). In a significant effort to combat the escalating threat of contraband smuggling into prisons, the UK government has implemented new regulations instituting 400 m drone exclusion zones around correctional centres. Violators of these regulations could be subject to fines of up to £2500 (+/-R57 500), while individuals involved in smuggling illicit items that fuel violence and criminal activities within prisons could face a maximum prison sentence of ten years. This initiative comes in response to the concerning surge in the number of drones detected or observed within prison premises, which more than doubled between 2019 and 2021 (McNabb, 2024).

The role of illicit cellphones in smuggling

The prohibition of cellphones within correctional centres has been longstanding, yet efforts to enforce this ban have proven ineffective. Inmates persistently find new methods to smuggle these devices into correctional centres, enabling them to continue with their criminal activities from within. The illicit use of cellphones and SIM cards inside correctional centres, facilitates continued criminal operations among offenders. The lucrative trade in illegal drugs within correctional settings is not only profitable for suppliers but also profoundly harmful to inmates and financially burdensome for the state. The evolution of technology, including cellular technology and online financial systems, as well as the emergence of new and harder-to-detect drugs, have led to significant changes in the strategies used to smuggle contraband into correctional centres (Jordaan, 2023).

In August 2016, legislation in the UK and Wales was enacted to empower prison authorities to obtain court orders compelling network providers to blacklist devices and deactivate SIM cards. Under the telecommunications restriction orders outlined in the UK's Serious Crime Act, prison governors no longer need to conduct searches for illicit cellphones. Instead, they use routine phone surveillance systems to identify unauthorised devices within their facilities. Information gathered is then forwarded to law enforcement authorities to pursue telecommunications restriction orders (Travis, 2016).

Searches are important

Ensuring the thorough screening of individuals entering correctional centres is crucial. Correctional centres globally employ various methods such as body searches, including intimate ones like cavity searches, to prevent smuggling. However, due to the potential for physical and psychological harm, some jurisdictions prohibit these methods advocating for them only as a last resort (Norman, 2022).

Body scanning technology has been adopted by correctional centres worldwide to detect hidden items (Sinclair and Herzog, 2017) despite the considerable financial burden they impose. Some facilities use searches or scanners for both inmates and visitors before accessing visiting areas, extending to scanning any items brought in by visitors. Jordaan (2023) proposes the use of drug-sniffer dogs, X-ray machines, closed-circuit television (CCTV) and adequate personnel for observation to bolster security measures. It is important that correctional centres prioritise enhancing security whenever feasible (Mthembu, 2016).

Violence behind bars

The correlation between drug use and violence within correctional centres is persistent and has grown over time (Jordaan, 2023). The presence and use of drugs in correctional centres contribute to heightened incidences of assault among inmates and towards staff, as well as an elevated risk of suicide among inmates (Wakeling and Lynch, 2020).

Over time, the proliferation and strengthening of various gangs within South African correctional centres have posed a significant hazard. In particular the "number gangs" exert control over the contraband market, dictating the rules of the inmate economy, enforcing compliance, setting prices, negotiating with other gangs involved and maintaining connections with external criminal networks. This affords them greater opportunities for financial gain within the facilities and enables intimidation tactics over those not aligned with them. The inmate economy is governed by illicit activities orchestrated by both inmates and corrupt officials who smuggle contraband into the facilities (Jordaan, 2023).

Inmates use drugs to assert their dominance within the correctional centres environment, resulting in assault, extortion and violence not only among inmates but also directed at prison staff. In times of drug scarcity due to heightened enforcement measures, inmates are reported to assault, threaten or coerce staff members. The drug trafficking dynamics within correctional centres establish a hierarchy, with weaker inmates coerced by their stronger counterparts into serving as smugglers, couriers and dealers. Such inmates are exposed to greater risks.

Violence becomes a means to safeguard the credibility, profits and reputation of their illicit enterprises. Inmates are enlisted to collect debts and employ intimidation tactics, threats and physical aggression against debtors. The level of violence escalates corresponding to the amount owed, from verbal threats and altercations to more severe forms involving improvised weaponry. This violence extends beyond the confines of the correctional centres as debts are enforced upon the inmates' friends and families on the outside (O'Hagan and Hardwick, 2017).

The abuse of substances poses a threat to the security and stability of the prison system, as well as the well-being of both inmates and staff (Wakeling and Lynch, 2020). The illicit drug consumption by inmates also puts a significant financial toll on correctional centres management due to the substantial resources allocated to detox programmes and drug rehabilitation efforts (Agboola and Kang'ethe, 2024).

Prohibited by law

Although the use of illicit drugs inside correctional centres is highly prohibited in terms of section 119 of the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998, this practice is common.

"119.(1) No person may without lawful authority -

- (a) supply, convey or cause to be supplied or conveyed to any offender, or hide or place for his or her use any document, intoxicating liquor, dagga, drug, opiate, money, or any other article;
 - (b) bring or introduce into any correctional centre, or place where offenders may be in custody, any document, intoxicating liquor, dagga, drug, opiate, money, or any other article to be sold or used in the correctional centre; or
 - (c) bring out of any correctional centre, or convey from any offender any document or other article.
- (2) No correctional official or other person in the service of the Department or in the employ of a Contractor may without lawful authority allow or participate in the commission of any act prohibited in subsection (1).
- (3) Any person who contravenes any provision of this section commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or, in default of payment, to incarceration for a period not exceeding four years, or to such incarceration without the option of a fine or both."



As long as there remains a demand for drugs within correctional centres, the efforts of correctional service personnel to diminish the influx of drugs will prove futile. Globally, the pervasive issue of drug trafficking within correctional centres highlights the urgent need to tackle corrupt staff members who facilitate the smuggling of drugs and contraband or turn a blind eye to inmate misconduct. The prevalence of drug usage among inmates sustains a thriving market, accompanied by coercion, indebtedness, violence and overdoses. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort driven by political will and intelligence-based strategies to eradicate drugs from correctional centres.

Editor's note

The list of references is published on p78.

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