

# Bodybuilders illegally sell steroids to fund own use and maintain social status, finds report

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Many bodybuilders illegally sell steroids to help fund their own use of performance and image enhancing drugs and maintain their social status in the weightlifting community, a new academic study has found.

Researchers at Birmingham City University analysed more than 60 criminal cases and interviewed dozens of people involved in the purchase and sale of [performance](#) enhancers in the Netherlands and Belgium, to identify the different types of people drawn to selling the drugs.

The report found that sellers often broke the law to help fund their own use of steroids and that most viewed the substances no differently to high street supplements such as protein powders, energy bars or sports drinks.

While many government agencies and sport officials have suggested that substances are sold largely by organized crime groups for financial gain, the findings showed that the majority of performance and image enhancing drugs within bodybuilding subcultures were distributed by individuals for social reasons or to support their own training.

Those who sold products such a steroids, [human growth hormone](#) or illegal tanning lotions most commonly did so to put extra money towards the sport, to help out friends, or to ensure safe and quality substances

were being taken.

Their [social status](#) within the bodybuilding community was found to normalise the sale of drugs, with many overlooking legal implications of the act, while some saw sale as an entrepreneurial opportunity.

One seller said: "It depends who it is, not with friends. But sometimes I do ask extra. Bodybuilding is such an expensive sport, especially when you do cycles, so it is nice to have something extra once in a while. Most of my money goes to the sport."

The research paper titled, Social suppliers: Exploring the cultural contours of the performance and image enhancing drug (PIED) market among bodybuilders in the Netherlands and Belgium, identified three main types of dealer:

- Market oriented dealers – Less embedded in bodybuilding culture but aware of entrepreneurial opportunities
- Social-commercialist dealers – Heavily embedded in bodybuilding culture but aware of money making opportunities through sale
- Minimal commercialist dealers – Heavily embedded in bodybuilding culture but normally sell to help friends, build contacts or ensure [high quality products](#) are used

The report, published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, is one of very few studies to look at the criminal element of performance and image enhancing drugs.

Another seller said: "At gyms you always knew one or multiple people who sell. Most people use themselves and if approached in the right way, they are always prepared to do it [sell]. Maybe they have never sold before in their lives, but if you ask them, they basically automatically

drift into it.... You just sell something to a buddy and you just ask 50 Euros extra. In that way you also financed part of your own consumption."

The report suggests that in order to cut crime, reduce harm and improve treatment, greater attention needs to be paid to the social and cultural factors which lead to sales of performance and image enhancing drugs.

Dr Katinka Van de Ven, Lecturer in Criminology at Birmingham City University, said: "While preventing performance and image enhancing drugs use is important, we need to realise that in certain subcultures the use of steroids and other substances is not likely to stop soon – and may even increase in the coming years.

"For these people that currently cannot stop or wish to continue, it is important to reduce harms as much as possible, and have proper harm reduction measures in place, like we do for recreational drug users.

"For example, some of these suppliers in bodybuilding subcultures, often referred to as 'steroid mentors', have a high status in these communities. Instead of driving them away, by targeting them with law enforcement measures, this may offer a potential opportunity to deliver accurate information via an established and credible communication network, and may help in providing accessible and acceptable health-related information."

The report was co-written by Kyle Mulrooney, DCGC fellow at the University of Kent.

He added: "It is much too simple to point to organised crime and criminal groups and to respond with zero-tolerance and criminal justice measures.

"The fact is we know very little about the illegal market for performance and image enhancing drugs. Our point here is to indicate that there are different rationales and motivations for selling these substances and as such policy should likewise reflect this plurality of drivers.

"To do so however, we must first learn to separate 'performance and image enhancing drugs as a public health matter' from "performance and image enhancing drugs as anti-doping matter."

The research was funded by the School of Social Policy, Sociology & Social Research of the University of Kent and the Educational Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Union.

**More information:** Katinka van de Ven et al. Social suppliers: Exploring the cultural contours of the performance and image enhancing drug (PIED) market among bodybuilders in the Netherlands and Belgium, *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.07.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.07.009)

Provided by Birmingham City University

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