



Policing Drug Hot-Spots

Police Research Series No. 109
Jessica Jacobson
May 1999

Background

The subject of this report is the application of situational crime prevention methods to the policing of local drug markets. The term 'drug markets' is used here to refer to locations at which illicit drugs are sold; and 'situational crime prevention' refers to measures taken by the police and other agencies to modify the social and physical features of drug market sites in order to make them less attractive to dealers and users.

The Government strategy on drugs, **Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain**, emphasises both the importance of community-level, partnership approaches to tackling drug problems, and the need to target and disrupt drug-dealing at a local level. Hence the potential benefits - and potential difficulties - associated with situational initiatives at drug market sites are likely to receive increasing attention in the UK.

This report reviews the findings of a number of studies conducted in the United States and Britain of policing initiatives at drug dealing locations. These indicate that situational strategies, when properly implemented, can have a beneficial impact on drug-related crime and disorder. However, since such strategies tend to be multi-dimensional, in the sense that they involve several agencies and comprise various components, their effects can be mixed and difficult to assess.

The case studies presented by the report include an assessment of a crime analysis programme used in New Bedford, Massachusetts, to identify addresses at which there was repeated drug activity; a study of the effects of New York City's Tactical Narcotics Teams, which carried out short-term, intensive narcotics enforcement in designated areas; and the case of Operation Welwyn, the police contribution to a multi-agency crime prevention initiative in King's Cross, London.

Key themes

This report considers four key themes relating to the situational policing of drug markets:

Identifying and analysing drug hot-spots The identification and analysis of drug hot-spots is a necessary first stage of any operation. The implementation of situational initiatives is dependent upon thorough knowledge of the geographical locations and spread, and the major social and environmental features, of the markets that are being targeted. Strategists will also wish to find out about the nature and patterns of the transactions conducted at the sites. The data used for the purposes of mapping and analysis can derive from many sources, including intelligence records, arrest and crime reports, emergency calls for service and public surveys.

Police crackdowns Situational prevention strategies at drug-dealing sites are frequently implemented by the police in conjunction with locally-based enforcement initiatives. Low-level enforcement at drug market locations can involve any combination of a number of elements which inhibit drug transactions - and ultimately, it is hoped, drug use - by increasing the risks of arrest and general inconvenience faced by buyers and sellers. Enforcement strategies most commonly take the form of covert surveillance, test-purchase operations, highly visible patrols, police raids, and sweeps.

Place management There are various strategies of place management which can be employed in order to modify the environments of drug-dealing sites. These initiatives are most effectively carried out by the police in partnership with other agencies operating in the local areas. Hence Drug Action Teams, which have responsibility for co-ordinating action at a local level, can play an important part in developing strategies. Multi-agency action at drug market locations can encompass a wide range of measures to tackle such problems as lack of surveillance, weak management, the presence of potential customers for drug dealers, and the presence of facilitators for buying and using drugs.

Displacement Displacement is said to occur when a

situational initiative at a drug market location has the effect of changing the patterns of, rather than eradicating, illegal activity. Displacement may, however, have benign effects: as when a movement from overt to covert dealing results in a reduction in forms of anti-social behaviour associated with street-level markets. A reverse process to that of displacement can also be a consequence of situational initiatives: a 'diffusion of benefits' occurs when the positive effects of a strategy have an impact upon an area or a form of crime that was not directly targeted.

Points for action

It is concluded from the literature reviewed by this report that there are six crucial elements to successful multi-agency, preventive initiatives against local drug markets:

- **Appropriateness of intervention:** Tailor intervention to the specific characteristics of the drug market site in which it is to be introduced, by analysing the parameters and nature of the local problem. Consultation with residents and community groups can enhance sensitivity to any unique features of the site.
- **Intensity of intervention:** Use proactive enforcement tactics in combination with alternative methods of crime prevention in order to counter-act the weaknesses of certain approaches with the strengths of others. A willingness to consider the full range of options available to the police and other agencies is thus often a feature of successful initiatives.
- **Leverage:** Use levers creatively in seeking to persuade other agencies to contribute to the initiative. In some cases, this will primarily be a matter of encouraging potential partners to recognise that they have common interests and goals. In other cases, the police may have to draw on civil laws and regulations in obliging place managers to take actions against drug dealers and users.

- **Sustained action:** In designing and implementing strategies, always take into account the fact that the beneficial impact of initiatives is likely to be eroded over time. Preventive strategies should incorporate components that will have at least some long-term effects upon drug market sites, and should be sufficiently flexible to respond to changing patterns of behaviour among drug dealers and users.
- **Sensitivity to community relations:** Involve local residents and community organisations in the development of strategies, and make efforts to incorporate representatives of as many segments of the population as possible. Crime control initiatives that exacerbate existing tensions within neighbourhoods may be counter-productive.
- **Evaluation:** Build thorough process evaluations into the design of strategies, so that implementation and other problems can be brought to light, and wherever possible resolved, as and when they arise. Evaluations should also allow early mistakes to be avoided and achievements to be built upon in later phases of operations, and facilitate interchange concerning good practice between agencies and regions.

Other related PRC papers

CDP Paper 80 **Tackling Local Drug Markets**

CDP Paper 81 **Tackling Rural Drug Problems: A Participatory Approach.**

CDP Paper 89 **Police Anti-Drugs Strategies: Tackling Drugs Together Three Years On.**

CDP Paper 92 **New Heroin Outbreaks amongst Young People in England and Wales.**

PRS Paper 97 **Testing Performance Indicators for Local Anti-Drugs Strategies.**