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7.12 Police crackdowns: environmental and community changes sustain impact

Findings The largest police offensive against drug dealers ever seen in London caused some ripples but no major impact on the availability of crack – its prime target.

Mounted in two phases of two and six weeks in the winter of 2000/2001, Operation Crackdown netted over 1600 arrests from concentrated 'sting' or 'test' purchases and during raids on scores of crack houses and dozens of street drug markets. Study ❶ investigated the impact in four of the ten boroughs initially targeted but also gathered data from police records in 13 boroughs.

A priority objective was to reduce street crime. Reports of robberies and burglaries near the operation sites yielded no indication that this had occurred. Local police agreed, except for areas where street robberies were strongly linked to adult users of crack houses. Where juveniles were the main offenders, some police felt that diversion of officers to Crackdown had allowed street robberies to increase.

Crack users, police, and community safety and drug service staff, all said the operation had not caused difficulties in obtaining cocaine or heroin or an increase in prices. Crack house operators rapidly relocated; test purchases caught easily replaceable 'retail' staff rather than managers. However, closures of troublesome crack houses were welcomed by residents and in one area test purchases netted core dealers and caused at least a medium-term disruption of a street crack market. Police said the centrally timetabled crackdown had distorted normal anti-drug enforcement and could only be mounted by drafting in less experienced staff, reducing effectiveness. Crackdown was also seen as diverting attention from potentially more effective ways of tackling drug markets. A major limitation in the operation's ability to dent crack dealing was that most crack purchases are arranged over mobile phones rather than in street markets or crack houses.

After Crackdown was under way, study ❷ interviewed 174 heroin and crack users at treatment services mainly in the initially targeted boroughs. Three-quarters had recently bought heroin and over half crack. The great majority had not noticed any recent changes in the price, purity, availability or adulteration of heroin or crack. Nearly 1 in 5 felt crack had become *more* easily available since the operation started, four times the number who felt the reverse.

In context Despite the difficulty of quantifying levels of drug dealing and availability, the triangulation of different data sources in study ❶ give confidence in the findings. Where study ❶ was weakest – interviews with drug users – study ❷ adds weight to its findings.

A clear lesson from the literature and from study ❶ is the need to tailor policing to local dealing dynamics and the social and physical context. In the early stages of rapidly spreading markets, crackdowns can contain the spread of the business, but well established markets often quickly relocate or re-establish themselves once the drive is over. In these circumstances, crackdowns can still usefully clear the way for more sustainable policing and long-lasting alterations in the social and physical fabric which resist reversion to the pre-crackdown situation. Among these tactics (which are also viable without an initial crackdown) are a continuous low-level police presence inconveniencing purchasers and sellers, engaging the local community and local agencies in informal 'policing' (such as evictions of drug dealing tenants, denying access to meeting places like fast-food outlets and pubs), and environmental and social changes which make areas less amenable to drug crime (securing vacant properties, street lighting and camera surveillance, etc). In response, markets rarely disappear but become closed, operating on the basis of deals pre-arranged usually by mobile phone rather than in public. The result may not be to reduce the level of dealing, but nuisance to local residents and fear of crime diminish, and entry into the market by new users may be impeded.

A consistent theme in the literature is that crackdowns have a more lasting impact when communities are strong enough and have sufficient investment in their neighbourhood to sustain improvements and keep hold of territory 'liberated' from drug dealers and buyers. Another important factor is the availability of attractive treatment services to mop up users 'inconvenienced' into retiring from the scene. Without these, the risk is that user-dealers will simply be pushed into more non-drug crime and that addicts will engage in more risky drug purchase and drug use behaviour.

Practice implications ◤ *Additional reading* for a fuller account. Where markets are widespread and well established, police resources will not be great enough or able to be sustained at a high level for long enough to noticeably reduce drug dealing. Relocation and resurgence reverse short-term gains. However, sustained, locally organised enforcement, reinforced by police-community partnerships aimed at making areas less 'drug market friendly', can limit collateral damage by forcing markets to become more circumspect. Feasible goals include reducing serious crime, the fear or crime, and the nuisance caused by open drug use and dealing. Such goals are aided by and in turn aid reversal of the deterioration of the social and physical environment which creates spaces for drug markets to flourish.

Without tolerating drug dealing, a policy which focused on these goals could also harness the very flexibility of the drug market which defeats head-on attacks. Concentrating limited resources on the most troublesome dealers and markets entails a de-focus from those which cause least aggravation and crime, giving these a market advantage which magnifies the impact of policing on the priority targets. Such targeting requires an in-depth assessment of the causes of local nuisance and crime and how far these truly are related to drug use and dealing. Without this, diversion of police resources to drug dealing could relieve pressure on the non-drug related perpetrators of street robberies and other crimes of public concern, decreasing community safety and increasing the fear of crime.

Featured studies ❶ Webster R. *et al*. *An evaluation of the impact of Operation Crackdown*. Criminal Policy Research Unit, South Bank University, 2001. Copies: ◤ *Contacts* ❷ Best D. *et al*. "Assessment of a concentrated, high-profile police operation." *British J. Criminology*: 2001, 41, p. 738–745. Copies: apply DrugScope.

Additional reading Jacobson J. *Policing drug hotspots*. Home Office, 1999. Copies: Home Office Police and Reducing Crime Unit, phone 020 7271 8225.

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Extended text with references

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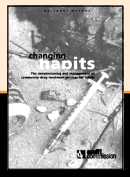

The Audit Commission has painted a stark picture of the **inadequacies of adult drug treatment** provision after studying community drug services and primary care drug treatment in eleven drug (or drug and alcohol) action team areas in England and Wales. They found wide variations in the availability of different services, in working practices, and in how effectively agencies worked together. Weak commissioning practices and the absence of management information and effective performance monitoring contributed to the problems. Often drug misusers struggled to get the help they needed when they needed it. Long delays and under-developed care management allowed too many to 'fall through the net'. Some of the problems stemmed from constrained resources, but also factors were poor service planning, different views about 'what works', and poor collaboration between treatment services, GPs, mental health services and prisons. For the Commission, the starting points for improvement are better intelligence about local needs and about the performance of existing services. Developing more flexible approaches and improving care coordination and joint working are also priorities. Parallel improvements in the national framework are required, spearheaded by the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse.

◤ Changing habits (Audit Commission 2002) can be downloaded from www.audit-commission.gov.uk, or order stating stock code HNR2696 from: Audit Commission Publications, PO Box 99, Wetherby LS23 7JA, freephone 0800 502030, price £30.