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Problem-Oriented Policing: Operation Mantle—A Case Study

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Rates of illicit drug use and drug-related crime have been on an upward trajectory in Australia for at least the last two decades. As demand for illicit drugs has grown, so too has the number, scale and operation of illicit drug markets. A relatively recent phenomenon is the proliferation and high visibility of street drug markets, with apparent increases in social disorder and drug-related crime in surrounding communities. These markets are operated by low- to mid-level drug dealers. In 1998 and 1999, in an attempt to reduce the impact of drug-related crime in Adelaide, the South Australia Police targeted low- to mid-level dealers in a “problem-oriented policing” operation. Problem-oriented policing is a systematic, intelligence-driven approach to an identified crime or disorder problem. The present study indicates that the operation, named Operation Mantle, was successful in arresting the “ever onwards and upwards” rates of drug-specific and drug-related crime. Across a range of drug-specific and drug-related offences reported or becoming known to police, rates tended to stabilise.

Adam Graycar
Director

Problem-oriented policing is a systematic, intelligence-driven approach to policing. In a problem-oriented model of policing, police address specific problems identified by intelligence gathering. Problem-oriented policing seeks to address the underlying problems which cause crime and disorder rather than individual incidents which are symptoms of these problems. As Eck and Spelman (1987) put it:

The theory behind problem-oriented policing is simple. Underlying conditions create problems... A problem created by these conditions may generate one or more incidents. These incidents, some of which may come to police attention, are symptoms of the problem. The incidents will continue so long as the problem that creates them persists.

Proponents of problem-oriented policing have argued that much police work deals with the “residual problems of society” (Goldstein 1979), some of which become matters for the police by default. Enforcing the criminal code is only one way by which the police do their job. Similarly, catching criminals is only one aspect of police work. Dealing with disorder is at least as important as investigating crimes and apprehending offenders. Preventing crime in the first place is another important part of police work which advocates of problem-oriented policing (and others) believe has been neglected by “traditional”, reactive policing (Goldstein 1979; Wilson & Kelling 1982).

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A problem-oriented approach to policing will incorporate a range of methods in addition to enforcing the criminal code. These methods may include establishing closer links with the local community in order to identify problems and concerns, gather intelligence and get the community involved in addressing their problems (Hope 1994). Community involvement may also take the form of “third-party policing”; that is, encouraging stakeholders such as local traders and public transport employees to monitor disorder in identified “hot spots” (Buerger & Mazerolle 1998; Hough & Edmunds 1999). Problem-oriented policing may use methods of situational crime prevention to reduce opportunities for crime and disorder by modifying the environment and/or increasing surveillance (Clarke 1992). Installing fluorescent blue lights in public toilets is a simple example of a situational prevention measure designed to discourage intravenous drug use. Setting up a closed circuit television surveillance system in a public place where drug deals occur is another (Edmunds, Hough & Urquia 1996). Police may use civil codes to make environments less conducive to disorder, for example, by requiring a slum landlord to repair run-down housing and board up vacant properties which are used by drug dealers and their customers (Green 1996).

A problem-oriented style of policing has obvious relevance for policing drugs and related criminality. Drug markets give rise to a variety of issues of crime and disorder. Drug markets that operate in the open air or in run-down parts of towns cause fear among local people by the mere fact of their operation. Drug markets are associated with increasing levels of fear of robbery, burglary, theft and other crimes (Wilson & Kelling 1982; Green 1996; Hough & Edmunds 1999). Through attracting

numbers of disorderly persons to a particular area, they also increase the likelihood of begging, discarded syringes, and disorderly and uncivil conduct. Drug markets are the underlying problem; incidents of robbery, burglary and theft (as well as less serious crime and disorder) are symptoms. Operation Mantle was developed to address the problem and to reduce the incidence and severity of the symptoms.

Problem-oriented policing is highly relevant to a style of drug law enforcement that emphasises harm reduction. The principle of harm reduction makes the *first* aim of drug law enforcement the reduction of harm caused by drugs—especially (but not only) harm to drug users’ health. Enforcing the letter of the law, interdicting drugs and arresting offenders takes *second* place to this goal. Furthermore, police explicitly recognise that strict law enforcement may sometimes increase drug-related harm and is therefore not always appropriate (Lenton & Single 1998).

Goldstein’s theory of policing as dealing with residual social problems makes solving problems completely an unrealistic goal. Rather, policing should aim to minimise problems, reduce their adverse impact on people and lessen consequent suffering (Goldstein 1979). Brown and Sutton (1997) argue that a serious commitment to harm reduction demands “by definition” that police gather intelligence systematically on patterns of drug use and drug market activity, as well as assessing the impact of policing on the drug scene. Through this kind of problem-oriented gathering of information, police can establish better indicators of levels of drug use and related problems (James & Sutton 1996).

Empirical evaluations support the claim that local drug markets underlie much (if not most) crime and disorder in areas where they operate, and that

police interventions against drug markets can reduce related criminality, such as property crime. For example, a police crackdown on drug transactions and drug markets in a small city in Massachusetts in the mid-1980s had a clear impact on robbery, burglary and crimes against the person. In the first 12 months after the start of the crackdown, reported robberies decreased by 18.5 per cent, reported burglaries by 37.5 per cent and reported crimes against the person by 66 per cent. In the second 12 months after the start of the crackdown the decrease in reported burglaries was sustained and reported robberies declined even further. Surveys of residents revealed a perception of decreased disorder and increased quality of life. Over the 10 months from the beginning of the crackdown there was also an 85 per cent increase in demand for drug treatment places (Kleiman & Chaiken 1988).

Just as problem-oriented policing addresses specific problems, it also tends to focus on specific places. Identifying problems, such as local drug markets, is often intertwined with identifying locations where incidents of crime and disorder, as well as calls for police attendance, are concentrated (Green 1996). Identifying a particular place as a drugs and/or crime “hot spot” necessarily implies recognising that there is an underlying cause (or causes) of the many and varied incidents and calls for service that police have had to deal with in that place.

For these reasons, students and evaluators of problem-oriented policing have concluded that the most effective police interventions are specific both to the type of crime or disorder and to place, and are based on systematic strategies tailored to particular places and problems (see, for example, Weisburd & Green 1995).

Operation Mantle

Under the umbrella aim of “working together to reduce the level of trafficking in illicit drugs”, the South Australia Police (SAPOL) employed a problem-solving, situational crime prevention approach from October 1998 until March 1999 across metropolitan Adelaide. Operation Mantle used the principles of local accountability to provide an integrated approach to drug enforcement between specialist and non-specialist investigators, with a high reliance on (local) intelligence. Special investigation (tactical) teams comprising six members and including a detective sergeant as team leader and other members from uniform and Command Response and Criminal Investigation branches, were formed in each of six local service areas (LSAs). Collectively, the six LSAs constituted the entire metropolitan Adelaide Statistical District. Tactical teams were supported by local and central intelligence officers and integration was achieved through the attachment to the operation of a Drug and Organised Crime Investigation Branch specialist. Strategies comprised:

- undertaking coordinated and integrated law enforcement activities involving specialist and non-specialist police targeted at mid- and low-level (street) illicit drug dealers;
- use of intelligence-driven/ problem-solving policing methods that take account of the principles of harm minimisation in an effort to reduce mid- and low-level drug trafficking;¹
- fostering and maintaining alliances with government agencies, local government and the community to further enhance an integrated approach to drug reduction and harm minimisation;
- ensuring good communication and intelligence flow within and between each of the tactical units and between the other relevant areas of SAPOL; and

- undertaking internal/external media and marketing activities to promote the integrated drug reduction strategy and provide community reassurance.

Operation Mantle had four explicit objectives:

1. an increase in the level of integration and coordination between specialist and non-specialist drug law enforcement activities;
2. a reduction in the impact of illicit drug-related crime;
3. an increase in the diversion and retention of illicit drug user/dealers into rehabilitation; and
4. disruption of the activities of the illicit drug market at all levels.

The Present Study

The present study reports selected results of objective 2. Data for this paper comprise offences reported or becoming known to SAPOL, by LSAs, for the period from October 1997 to March 1999. Three distinct periods are compared: the first six months of the operation, the six months immediately prior to commencement of the operation, and the six months prior to that (that is, the corresponding period one year earlier). Data were analysed using SPSS vs 6.1.2. Because the data comprise only 18 observations per LSA and are not normally distributed, the non-parametric Wilcoxon 2-related samples statistic is used to test for significance of difference.

Results

Two categories of results are reported—drug offences (for example, use/possess, sell/traffic) and other offences commonly associated with drug use (for example, break and enter).

Prior to Operation Mantle, offences commonly associated with illicit drug use were increasing (Table 1) and had been doing so for a considerable period of time. Aggregated across

the six Operation Mantle LSAs, *break and enter (dwelling) offences* reported to or becoming known to police increased from 7,063 in the corresponding six-month period 12 months earlier, to 8,099 in the six months immediately prior to Operation Mantle. *Total break and enters* increased from 12,033 to 13,548 in the same period. Similarly, *total property offences* increased from 37,251 to 43,090. *Armed robberies* increased from 212 to 318 and *total robberies* increased from 633 to 789. All of these results were statistically significant.² There were individual differences in rates of increase between LSAs. Forty per cent of the total increase in the number of *break and enter (dwelling) offences* across the six LSAs, for example, occurred in Sturt (from 1,583 to 2,019).

During Operation Mantle, *break and enter (dwelling) offences* continued to increase (from 8,099 to 8,473), but this was not statistically significant ($p=0.249$). Indeed, results in all of the LSAs were not statistically significant. The failure to reach significance can be interpreted in the circumstances as a stabilisation in the rate of increase which was evident before Mantle. In Port Adelaide (1,649) and South Coast (782), not only did rates stabilise, but there were also absolute reductions in numbers of these offences.

For *total break and enter* there was a similar stabilisation in the numbers of offences between the six months immediately prior to (13,548) and the six months during the operation (14,065). The difference (517) was not statistically significant and compares with an increase of 1,515 between the corresponding period 12 months earlier (12,033) and six months prior to the operation (13,548). Port Adelaide (2,430) and South Coast (1,465) recorded reductions in numbers of these offences.

For *total property offences*, there was a stabilisation from 43,090 to 44,098 (increase of 1,008)

compared to an increase of 5,839 offences between the corresponding period 12 months earlier (37,251) and the six months immediately prior to the operation. Port Adelaide (6,946) recorded a net reduction of 488. In Sturt, however, there was a statistically significant increase (p=0.0277) in the number of *total*

property offences from 9,846 to 10,482.

For *armed robberies*, there was a marginal reduction in the aggregated LSA offences from 318 to 310 during Operation Mantle. Individually, Adelaide (70), Elizabeth (48) and Holden Hill (32) recorded reductions during the same period.

For *total robberies* there was a stabilisation from 789 to 798 (net=9), compared to an increase of 156 for the six months immediately prior (633 versus 789). Elizabeth (128) and Sturt (136) recorded decreases.

With the exception of the category *manufacture/grow*, drug-specific offence trends were also on the increase prior to Operation Mantle (Table 2).

Use/possess offences increased from 617 to 718 in the six months prior to the operation; *sell/traffic offences* from 251 to 285; and *total drug-specific offences* from 1,536 to 1,685.

Manufacture/grow offences, however, fell from 183 to 125. These results were not statistically significant.

For the Operation Mantle period we observe that *total drug-specific offences* fell from 1,685 to 1,567, *use/possess* fell marginally from 718 to 710 and *manufacture/grow* from 125 to 109. Only *sell/traffic offences* increased from 285 to 313. Once again, these results were not statistically significant. As occurred with the non-drug-specific offences (for example, property, robbery) above, there were individual differences between LSAs. None of the individual LSA results were statistically significant.

Of special note is Holden Hill where, for each drug-specific offence between the period which corresponded to Operation Mantle 12 months earlier and the period immediately preceding the operation, the number of offences declined, only to “recover” during the operation. For example, *use/possess offences* fell from 68 (period 1) to 52 (period 2) and then rebounded to 70 during the operation. There were also isolated occurrences of similar results for particular offences in other LSAs. For example, South Coast *manufacture/grow offences* by period were 49, 13 and 23 respectively.

Table 1: Selected offences reported to or becoming known to police

	Period			Significance tests (p)	
	Oct 97– Mar 98 (1)	Apr 98– Sep 98 (2)	Oct 98– Mar 99 (3)	(2) v (1)*	(3) v (2)*
Break and enter (dwelling) offences					
Adelaide	805	892	1,037	0.345	0.173
Elizabeth	1,026	1,199	1,350	0.344	0.345
Holden Hill	1,286	1,386	1,417	0.345	0.600
Port Adelaide	1,631	1,750	1,649	0.249	0.249
South Coast	732	853	782	0.141	0.463
Sturt	1,583	2,019	2,238	0.028	0.093
<i>Total</i>	<i>7,063</i>	<i>8,099</i>	<i>8,473</i>	<i>0.028</i>	<i>0.249</i>
Total break and enter offences					
Adelaide	1,579	1,842	2,103	0.027	0.116
Elizabeth	1,865	2,229	2,356	0.075	0.345
Holden Hill	1,971	2,082	2,236	0.345	0.172
Port Adelaide	2,548	2,608	2,430	0.599	0.917
South Coast	1,311	1,517	1,465	0.116	0.528
Sturt	2,759	3,270	3,475	0.027	0.345
<i>Total</i>	<i>12,033</i>	<i>13,548</i>	<i>14,065</i>	<i>0.028</i>	<i>0.249</i>
Total property offences					
Adelaide	7,675	9,549	9,659	0.046	0.753
Elizabeth	5,737	6,475	6,547	0.075	0.917
Holden Hill	4,801	5,557	5,844	0.027	0.116
Port Adelaide	6,620	7,434	6,946	0.028	0.249
South Coast	3,866	4,227	4,617	0.116	0.116
Sturt	8,551	9,846	10,482	0.028	0.043
<i>Total</i>	<i>37,251</i>	<i>43,090</i>	<i>44,098</i>	<i>0.028</i>	<i>0.600</i>
Armed robberies					
Adelaide	52	76	70	0.141	0.753
Elizabeth	45	57	48	0.750	0.345
Holden Hill	26	47	32	0.168	0.246
Port Adelaide	37	59	68	0.072	0.674
South Coast	14	14	23	0.891	0.157
Sturt	38	65	69	0.244	0.916
<i>Total</i>	<i>212</i>	<i>318</i>	<i>310</i>	<i>0.043</i>	<i>0.751</i>
Total robberies					
Adelaide	181	217	219	0.293	0.753
Elizabeth	118	158	128	0.109	0.207
Holden Hill	80	98	117	0.176	0.753
Port Adelaide	122	137	140	0.461	0.674
South Coast	40	38	58	0.750	0.066
Sturt	92	141	136	0.027	0.917
<i>Total</i>	<i>633</i>	<i>789</i>	<i>798</i>	<i>0.046</i>	<i>0.753</i>

* Wilcoxon test for 2-related samples; for ease of reference, statistically significant results at p</=0.05 are highlighted by shading.

Discussion

In 1998 SAPOL identified that law enforcement strategies lacked integration between high-level and low-level trafficking and that supply reduction measures predominantly aimed at the high level were relatively unsuccessful in reducing the supply of illicit drugs. Operation Mantle put in place a more integrated approach through the establishment of regional tactical investigation teams which targeted low-level and mid-level traffickers, and which also sought closer collaboration with a range of other agencies to improve harm minimisation and treatment options.

No LSAs managed to “turn the tide” and record large reductions in offences in the six months that the operation was in place. At the end of this period, most offence rates were still higher than the corresponding period 12 months previously. However, all LSAs managed to arrest a previously escalating crime rate. The apparently anomalous results for drug-specific offences in Holden Hill (the rebound effect) is explicable in terms of increased activity by SAPOL in the LSA during the operation period, resulting in an increase in these offences being reported or becoming known to police, compared to the results which flowed from the previous strategy which had been employed in that LSA. Other data collected during the evaluation (for example, surveys of injecting drug users, key informant interviews) suggest that actual offending during the operation did not increase, but higher rates of notifications and detections resulted in the increases observed.

The operation appears to have had an impact on drug-related crime. The impact was not spectacular, nor was it expected to be. The “ever onwards and

Table 2: Drug-specific offences reported to or becoming known to police

	Period			Significance tests (p)	
	Oct 97– Mar 98 (1)	Apr 98– Sept 98 (2)	Oct 98– Mar 99 (3)	(2) v (1)*	(3) v (2)*
Use/possess offences					
Adelaide	210	241	212	0.345	0.345
Elizabeth	69	112	110	0.116	0.834
Holden Hill	68	52	70	0.249	0.416
Port Adelaide	108	112	122	0.893	0.462
South Coast	49	86	85	0.140	0.917
Sturt	113	115	111	0.684	0.892
<i>Total</i>	<i>617</i>	<i>718</i>	<i>710</i>	<i>0.116</i>	<i>0.753</i>
Sell/traffic offences					
Adelaide	44	57	57	0.599	0.916
Elizabeth	39	49	65	0.462	0.288
Holden Hill	35	28	40	0.343	0.344
Port Adelaide	44	58	41	0.206	0.916
South Coast	40	33	34	0.686	0.787
Sturt	49	60	76	0.279	0.753
<i>Total</i>	<i>251</i>	<i>285</i>	<i>313</i>	<i>0.115</i>	<i>0.498</i>
Manufacture/grow drug offences					
Adelaide	14	11	5	0.715	0.336
Elizabeth	34	31	25	0.786	0.752
Holden Hill	25	15	19	0.089	0.715
Port Adelaide	32	24	15	0.463	0.462
South Coast	49	13	23	0.026	0.144
Sturt	29	31	22	0.833	0.343
<i>Total</i>	<i>183</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>109</i>	<i>0.046</i>	<i>0.461</i>
Total drug-specific offences**					
Adelaide	414	453	400	0.600	0.207
Elizabeth	221	312	275	0.173	0.399
Holden Hill	184	151	187	0.345	0.400
Port Adelaide	254	269	229	0.752	0.753
South Coast	180	201	191	0.600	0.893
Sturt	283	299	285	0.753	0.753
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,536</i>	<i>1,685</i>	<i>1,567</i>	<i>0.173</i>	<i>0.116</i>

* Wilcoxon test for 2-related samples; for ease of reference, statistically significant results at $p < / = 0.05$ are highlighted by shading.

**Total drug-specific offences do not add up to sum of component offences due to miscellaneous category not elsewhere specified.

upwards” rates of growth in drug-related crime were well established before commencement of the operation. Mantle stabilised the rates—a significant achievement in light of the previous trajectories of most of the indicators. Results echo Goldstein’s contention that the best that should be expected is a minimisation of the problem, a reduction of the adverse effects, and a lessening of consequent suffering.

Operation Mantle was kept in place in a modified format after the initial six months and continues in this form to the present day. The challenge for SAPOL, as with other agencies which initiate problem-oriented policing, is in building on the initial achievements when the tasks were innovative (compared to traditional approaches) and when enthusiasm was high, to entrench stable (or lower) rates of crime as a permanent feature of the communities that they serve.

Notes

- 1 Harm minimisation, as employed for Operation Mantle, was defined as:
 - recognising that for injecting drug users there was a priority health issue;
 - assisting, where possible, in the referral of injecting drug users to treatment/rehabilitation services;
 - the provision of information on treatment/rehabilitation services;
 - involvement of police in broader integrated community solutions;
 - the preservation of needle exchange services as non-targeted locations; and
 - attendance at overdoses on an exception principle only.
- 2 Significance limits were not set *a priori* but are reported here at the 0.05 level. For monthly breakdowns of the aggregates reported, contact the principal author.

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