

Preventing crime by controlling drug dealing on private rental property¹

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Abstract

Drug dealers seek out places that give them good access to customers, have security from robbers and the police, and have owners who do not intervene. Typically, drug control programs focus on the offenders. In a San Diego California experiment, property owners and managers were the focus of an attempt to improve property management. One hundred and twenty-one residential rental properties that had already been the site of drug enforcement, were randomly assigned to three treatment groups. Owners of places in the 'meeting' group met with a narcotics detective. Owners of places in the 'letter' group received a letter from the police describing the enforcement and offering assistance. Places in the 'control' group received no further police actions. Evidence shows more evictions of drug offenders for the meeting and the letter groups, relative to the control group. The places in the meeting group also had a 60% reduction in reported crime during the 6 months following the intervention. Implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ireland Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Drug dealing and private rental housing

Though public housing has become associated with drug dealing, most drug dealing probably occurs elsewhere. Though there are no figures on what proportion of drug dealing occurs in different settings, private rental housing is probably the single largest type of drug dealing setting, if for no better reason than there is far more private rental housing than public housing. Despite differences in ownership, some of the same factors that make public housing conducive to drug dealing are present in private rental property

as well. Foremost among these factors are the financial constraints imposed by renting to a population that has relatively little to spend on housing. Just as one cannot discount the historical indifference to the poor, particularly minority poor, by local, state and federal officials responsible for the establishment of public housing complexes (see Kotlowitz, 1991), one cannot overlook the similar motives among private landlords (see Levine and Harmon, 1992; Adler, 1995; Simon and Burns, 1997). Even if landlords would prefer to do their best for their tenants, financial constraints are disincentives to managing their properties in ways that curb drug dealing. Predatory crime is often associated with drug dealing. Some of this crime stems from the dealing, but some of the crime comes from the same conditions that led to the dealing. Management of rental properties can have an influence on these crimes as well.

In this paper, I will describe an experiment to reduce drug dealing and crime at private rental

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properties by compelling landlords to improve their management practices. This experiment adds to the growing body of evidence that focusing on the management of places can reduce crime (Eck, 1997).

2. Management, drug dealing and crime

Drug dealers do not randomly or arbitrarily select the places from which they sell drugs. If they want to be able to sell drugs to anyone who is seeking to buy drugs, they have to be located where the buyers can find them and feel relatively safe. This means that drug dealing places are very often found along or near major thoroughfares, rather than on hard to find side streets. Additionally, dealers will need locations that offer them some level of safety from robbery (see Wright and Decker, 1997) and from intervention by the police. To reduce the chances of police intervention, dealers seek out places where owners or owners' representatives ('place managers') are unlikely to intervene. And this means that dealers will be more likely found on rental properties where place managers have little incentive to manage their property, and may even have a disincentive. Such places may produce rental incomes that only barely cover the immediate costs of running the rental properties (Eck, 1995a,b).

Fig. 1 summarizes this relationship. The greater the financial returns of the place to the place manager, the better the management and the less drug dealing. This leads to less crime. Less crime increases the ability of the landlord to rent out vacant apartments, reduces vacancies, and lessens maintenance costs. Low financial returns decreases management: prospective tenants are not carefully screened, lease provisions are not stringent and are not enforced, paying tenants are not evicted when they create problems, and maintenance is not carried out. These practices increase the chances of drug dealing and predatory crime. Decreased safety reduces the managers ability to fill vacancies with tenants who do not cause problems

and further undermines their ability to manage. The implication is that financially sound rental properties remain financially sound, and financially troubled rental properties deteriorate. Without external interventions, rental properties will diverge into two types: those that are not attractive to drug dealers, and those that are attractive to drug dealers.

But there are external interventions. Changes in the rental markets can make formerly lucrative properties less attractive or make deteriorated properties desirable. For example, a turn of the century luxury apartment building might change to a tenement as high income tenants age and leave and the surrounding neighborhood becomes less fashionable. The building may be sold several times as owners try to eke some profit from the location. Later, after the neighborhood gentrifies, and a new generation of high income tenants see the attractiveness of the neighborhood, the building might be purchased by new investors who renovate it and rent it to young professionals.

Another external intervention might be civil suits brought by the victims of violent crime against their landlords for failing to protect them from attacks on the property. For reasons I explain elsewhere, the assertion that private civil actions improves the public safety is highly dependent on the incentive structure for attorneys and how courts determine whether landlords could have foreseen the chances of a violent attack. Under some common circumstances, civil suits could accentuate differences between the safety of financially lucrative apartments and financially troubled apartments (Eck, 1996). One of the prime reasons for this is that the apartment complexes that have the most trouble with drug, dealing and crime are those with owners who are least attractive for plaintiffs' attorneys to sue. Consequently, large apartment building owners who have high financial returns, but few if any crime and drug problems, will be at greater risk of being sued than owners of small financially marginal apartment buildings with persistent

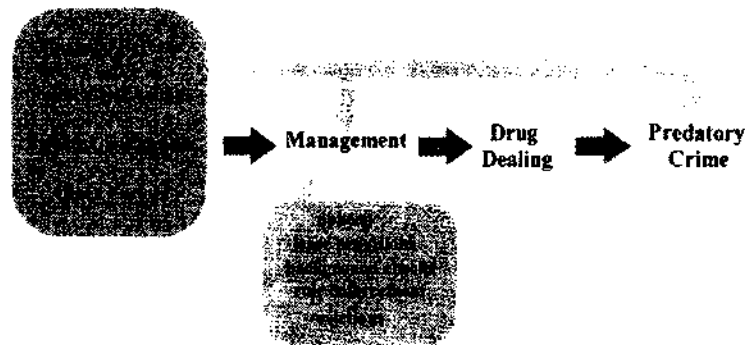


Fig. 1. Model of place management influence on drug dealing and crime.

crime problems. This gives little incentive to the most troubled apartments to improve their management practices.

Government agencies, such as the police and city attorneys' offices, may have a greater incentive to examine those apartment buildings with drug and crime problems. The threat of civil action to close apartment buildings unless drug problems are curbed might force landlords to improve their management practices (Davis and Lurigio, 1996). The question is, does this work? Can the threat of civil action create management changes and will these changes improve public safety?

3. The experiment

To answer this question I worked with the San Diego Police Department to develop a randomized experiment of rental properties with drug problems. From June to November 1993, all residential rental properties in San Diego that had received a drug raid by the San Diego Police Department's Narcotics Section or other police units were assigned to one of three follow-up treatments (Eck and Wartell, 1997). Owners of properties in the first group were asked to meet with a detective from a special unit that addressed drug dealing at residential property. This was the DART — Drug Abatement Response Team — unit. The DART detective was to meet the owner at the property to discuss how drug dealing could be curbed. The meeting was usually held with an official of the city's codes enforcement department. A letter from the police to the owner, prior to the meeting, described the drug enforcement and the civil actions the City of San Diego could take to close the apartment building should cooperation against drug dealing not be forthcoming. Properties treated in this way were part of the 'meeting' group.

Owners of properties in the second group only received a letter from the DART unit, describing the drug enforcement and the possible civil action. Members of this group received no meeting, but the letter did say that the owner could contact the police if they thought it was useful. This was called the 'letter' group.

The last group received neither a letter nor a meeting. In fact, for this 'control' group, no follow-up action was taken by DART. The DART unit was not informed about the addresses of members of the control group.

The DART detective kept a careful log of her activities. We used these logs to examine how closely the experimental conditions were carried out in practice. Table 1 shows the number of properties in each group and the types of treatment they received. Compliance with the planned experiment was high. No

Table 1
Number of places in treatment groups

| | Control | Letter | Meeting | Total |
|----------------------------|---------|--------|---------|-------|
| Places assigned to groups | 42 | 42 | 37 | 121 |
| Received letter | 0 | 42 | 37 | 79 |
| Received follow-up contact | 0 | 20 | 37 | 57 |
| Property inspected | 0 | 0 | 35 | 35 |
| Meeting held | 0 | 1 | 34 | 35 |
| Codes official present | 0 | 1 | 30 | 31 |

control group property owners received letters or meetings, and there was no record of them contacting the DART unit about drug dealing. The follow-up activities — primarily phone calls — held with letter group owners were all at the request of the place managers. Ninety-two percent of the meeting group members received the meetings as planned, and 88% of these meetings (and 82% of all meeting group members) had an employee of the codes department in attendance.

Data on the drugs found at the raided apartments was gathered from official police reports (Table 2). A variety of drugs were found at the experimental properties. Some form of cocaine was involved in over 60% of the locations. Heroin was often associated with cocaine dealing locations. Methamphetamine was also prevalent, but was more likely to be associated with marijuana than the other drugs.

No sooner than 45 days after the assignment of places to one of the three treatment groups, a telephone interview was conducted with the owner or manager of the property. From these interviews we learned that almost three-quarters of the places were owned by an individual (Table 3). Corporations owned a very small proportion of these problem places.

Though these owners had usually purchased these properties in the prior 10 years, the properties were predominately over 30 years of age (Fig. 2). As a group, the owners were struggling to break even. Seventy-three percent of the owners who answered the question stated that it was 'very' to 'extremely important' to keep their property fully rented. Over 60% of the owners stated they could afford to spend a \$1000 or less to improve their property. One reason for their financial difficulties was that they had few

Table 2
Drugs found at places (« = 121)

| | Percent |
|-----------------|---------|
| Crack cocaine | 36.4 |
| Marijuana | 30.6 |
| Powder cocaine | 27.3 |
| Methamphetamine | 27.3 |
| Heroin | 20.7 |
| Other | 2.5 |

Table 3
Type of ownership ($n = 119$)

| | Percent of owners |
|-------------|-------------------|
| Individual | 73.9 |
| Partnership | 21.0 |
| Corporation | 2.5 |
| Other | 2.5 |
| Total | 100.0 |

units to rent: 20% of the properties were single family homes; 24% were duplexes; and 27% were apartment buildings with fewer than 11 units. Another reason owners were struggling to break even was that these properties were concentrated in the two areas of the city known for drug dealing and crime. This limited the number of tenants who were willing to live in these apartments to those who could not afford to live in other parts of the city.

The financial difficulties of the apartment complexes had an influence on their management. Only approximately half of the owners had property managers attending to the sites, but only half of these managers lived on the property.

Though 45% of the owners interviewed said that they visited their property at least once per week, this meant that for long periods of time, there was no one in authority on their property.

4. Findings

What were the immediate results of the treatments. There is little evidence of substantial physical improvement in the sites and no evidence that the groups differed in this regard. This is not surprising, since most owners reported they could not afford to spend much to improve their property, and any substantial renovation would require more time than we allowed between treatment assignment and the interviews. Landlords could, however, take other actions against drug dealers quickly and with little cost.

Owners were asked whether the offender was a

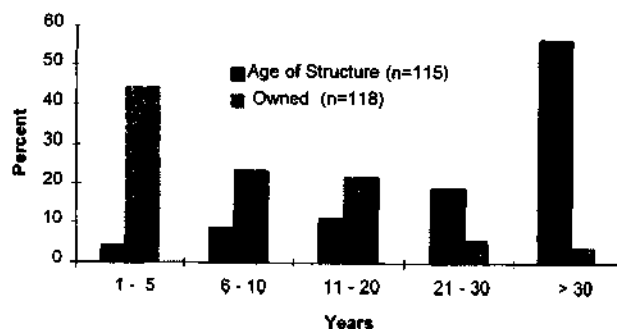


Fig. 2. Age of structures and length of ownership.

leaseholder, and if he or she was a leaseholder, was the drug dealer evicted. As can be seen in Table 4, the more stringent the treatment, the greater the chances the offender-leaseholder was evicted. Though there is no significant difference between the control group and the letter group, significantly more evictions occurred in the meeting group than the control group. Approximately two-thirds of the owners in the meeting group evicted the offender, compared to only slightly more than one-third of the control group owners.

Evictions are only important in so far as they improve the living conditions for the people who continue to live at the location. Reported crimes at each experimental place were collected for five 6-month periods following assignment. These are shown in Fig. 3. During the first 6-month period, both the meeting and letter group sites had substantially fewer crimes than the control groups. The differences among these groups decline over the next 24 months as the number of crimes in the control group decline to nearly the same level as the other two groups. It is important to note that the letter and meeting groups do not get worse over this period. Over the course of the entire 30 months, the average meeting site had two fewer crimes than the average control group and the average letter group had approximately 1.6 fewer crimes than the average control group.

These findings are interesting but they do not take into consideration the number of crimes at the sites prior to the treatments. Some places may be more criminogenic than other places, regardless of the treatment they received. In short, some places may have more crime than other similar places and these differences may be persistent over time. The treatments may have different effects on persistently high crime sites, relative to those with fewer crimes. To control for the long-term 'crime proneness' of sites, a multiple regression model was estimated in which the number of crimes in the 90 days prior to treatment was included as an independent variable. The dependent variable was the number of crimes at the site over the 30-month post-treatment period. Two dichotomous variables for the letter and meeting groups were used to estimate the treatment effects. In this model, the constant measures the effect of no follow-up by DART (the control group) on post-treatment crime.

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 5. The estimated model explains 40% of the variation in post-treatment crime and is statistically significant. The impact of the treatments and pre-treatment crime on post-treatment crime are graphically portrayed in Fig. 4 (Table 5 shows the numerical values). The bars represent the number of crimes contributed by each independent variable and are measured by the scale

Table 4
Was the offender evicted?

| | Percent of places in group (n) | | | n | d.f. | χ^2 -value | P-value |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------|------------|----|------|-----------------|---------|
| | Control | Letter | Meeting | | | | |
| No | 63.3 (19) | 55.2 (16) | 34.8 (8) | | | | |
| Yes | 36.7 (11) | 44.8 (13) | 65.2 (15) | | | | |
| Total | 100.0 (30) | 100.0 (29) | 100.0 (23) | | | | |
| Meeting vs. letter vs. control | | | | 82 | 2 | 4.38944 | 0.11139 |
| Meeting vs. control | | | | 53 | 1 | 4.24641 | 0.03933 |
| Letter vs. control | | | | 59 | 1 | 0.40698 | 0.52351 |

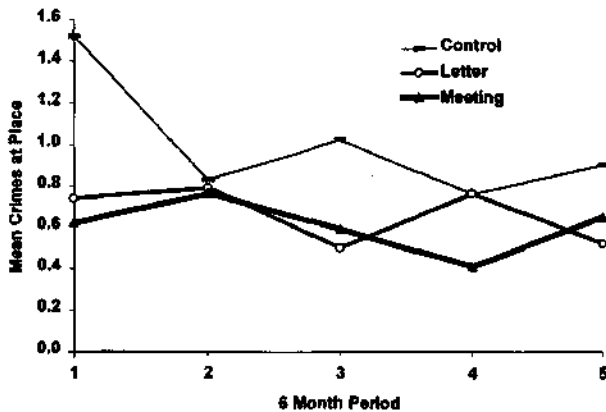


Fig. 3. Mean number of crimes by treatment and 6-month period.

on the left. Crime reductions relative to the control are shown by bars that hang down and crime increases are shown by rising bars. The significance level (p-value) is depicted by the dashed line and is measured by the scale on the right. Whenever the significance level drops below the horizontal axis there is less than five chances in 100 that a coefficient of the size shown by the bar could have arisen by random chance.

These results indicate that some of the rental properties in the experiment were more crime prone than other sites, regardless of the treatment they receive. The number of pre-treatment crimes is significantly related to the number post-treatment crimes. In fact, for every crime in the 3-month pre-treatment period there were almost two crimes in the 30-month post-treatment period. This indicates that some apartments have an underlying propensity to crime, independent of the treatment applied. Factors that may contribute to the long-term crime proneness of some places relative to other similar places is suggested by earlier research: location, physical security, and the management behaviors of the owners (Eck, 1994).

These figures also indicate that crime was declining at all of the sites, independent of the treatments they

Table 5
Summary of 30-month regression results

| | n | F | R ² | P-value |
|----------------|----------|--------|----------------|-----------|
| Model | 121 | 26.009 | 0.400 | 0.0000 |
| | Constant | Letter | Meeting | Pre-crime |
| Coefficient | 3.109 | -0.414 | -1.853 | 1.986 |
| Standard error | 0.647 | 0.870 | 0.884 | 0.235 |
| P-value | 0.0000 | 0.6350 | 0.0383 | 0.0000 |

received. On an annual basis, and netting-out the influence of the treatments, there were four crimes per year per site before the experiment. Over the 30-month period following treatment (and again netting-out the influence of the treatments) the average site had 0.8 crimes per year. This is an 80% crime reduction. It may have been due to the drug raids all of the sites experienced, a city wide decline in crime over this period, or some other factors.

Once the long-term crime proneness of the rental properties is taken into account, we see that the average place in the control group (as measured by the constant) had three crimes over the 30-month period. This estimate is statistically significant. There were four tenths of a crime fewer in the average letter place than the average control group place over the 30 months. Though this reduction in crime is consistent with the letter stimulating owners to improve management, it is not statistically significant. On the other hand, the average meeting group site had almost two fewer crimes than the average control group site over the 30 months. This 60% reduction in crime is statistically significant. These results are shown in Fig. 5.

5. Conclusions

This paper has examined the role of private rental property management on the control of drug dealing and crime on the rental property. It has described the

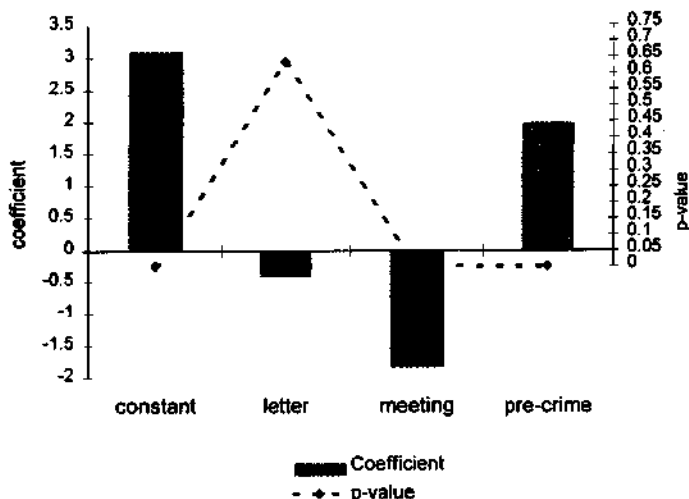


Fig. 4. Multiple regression results.

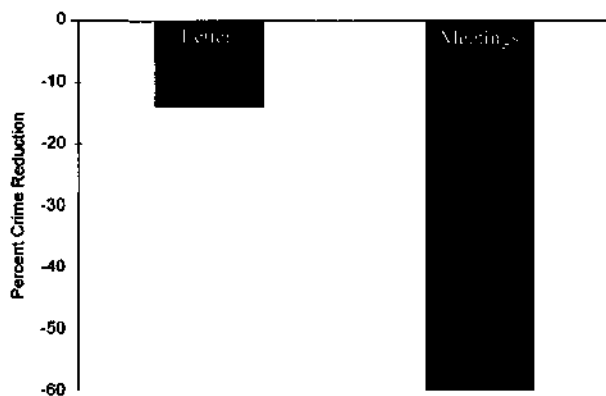


Fig. 5. Crime reduction effects relative to control and accounting for long-term crime proneness of sites.

reasons we might expect management to influence crime and drug dealing. To understand management's role, one must understand the financial pressures on rental property owners and the needs of drug dealers. Rental properties can be in financial difficulties and be poorly managed but have no drug dealing, if drug dealers find the site, or the area containing the site, unfavorable to their trade. But a poorly managed property, with fences and gates that protect tenants, near an arterial route, in an area where drug dealing is prevalent, is very likely to become a drug dealing location (Eck, 1994, 1995b). This experiment examined the effects of putting pressure on private landlords to improve their management practices. The primary direct effect was to increase the evictions of drug dealers who were lease holders from places with meetings. This reduced crime at the rental properties as much as 60% at meeting places relative to sites that received no follow-up intervention. Furthermore, these effects of the meetings are net of long-term trends across all sites.

These findings provide strong support for having

police work with other officials to encourage property owners to improve the management of their property. Though there has been a great deal of effort by police to help train rental property owners in management practice that can curb or prevent drug dealing, there are no rigorous evaluations of such efforts. Nevertheless, this experiment can help us understand the conditions under which such programs might be effective.

In this experiment we contrasted a weak form of encouragement and a stronger form of encouragement. The strong form, the meetings, appear to result in large reductions in crime. The efficacy of the weaker form of encouragement is unclear. We can be reasonably sure that even if the letters had an effect on drug dealing and crime, it was a small effect. There are two possible reasons for such results. It may be that the letters did not convey as great a risk of civil penalties for not addressing drug problems as did the meetings. If this is the reason, then letters might be augmented by follow-up phone calls and other measures designed to increase owners' perception of impending enforcement of civil law. However, training programs for landlords may not be effective unless they increase owners' perception of the risk of civil penalties.

Alternatively, it might not be the perceived risk of civil penalties, but the increased contact with the police that created the differences between the letter and meeting treatments. If contact makes a difference, then police should seek out opportunities to increase their one-on-one contact with rental property owners. This implies that training programs may be effective, particularly if there is some follow-up activity by the police with the trainees.

The results of this experiment are consistent with other experiments that have examined stimulating landlords to control drug dealing (Hope, 1994; Green,

1996; Mazerolle et al., 1998). They are also consistent with a growing body of evidence that points to the important role of place managers in controlling crime. Sloan-Howitt and Kelling (1990) describe how the management of the New York City subway system contributed to the vandalism it suffered and how changes in management prevented vandalism. Experiments with drinking establishments' serving practices have found evidence of reduced assaults, drunk driving, and other offenses (Saltz, 1987; Wagenaar and Holder, 1991; Felson et al., 1997; Homel et al., 1997).

In summary, this study has provided evidence of an effective method for preventing crime on rental properties but it also has broader implications for how we think about crime prevention. Rather than focusing on increasing the risks of drug dealing, this experiment, and the program it evaluated, were informed by a simple fact: drug dealers need places and at least the tacit compliance of the managers of these places. Focusing on the people who control places can have an effect on crime. Just as we need to understand the choices of offenders and the opportunities that give structure to these decisions (Clarke and Cornish, 1985), we must take into account the choices made by place managers and the markets that influence their decisions.

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