

Briefing Note

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Summary

According to the British Crime Survey, in the region of four million people in England and Wales use illicit drugs each year (Ramsay and Partridge, 1999). A minority engage in heavier use of a wider variety of drugs, including heroin and crack cocaine; and a proportion of this minority are users with serious problems of dependency. The costs arising from problematic drug use could be in the region of £4 billion a year (UKADCU 1999). Despite the size of the illicit drugs market, little is known about the structure of the distribution process, the way in which the market responds to changes in supply and demand, and the impact of enforcement.

This study examined the impact of low-level police enforcement on two drug markets, and the adaptations to policing that both sellers and users made to avoid detection. The role of police sources in disrupting drug market systems was examined, and the views of local community members were also canvassed. The report presents these findings, explores the provision of local treatment facilities for drug users and proposes ways in which services can target and retain local drug using populations more effectively. Finally it suggests new avenues for the police to explore when setting effective performance indicators relating to drug markets.

To develop a better understanding of distribution systems for illicit drugs, three sets of issues were addressed by the study:

- How are distribution systems organised, and how responsive are they to market forces?
- To what extent can suppliers adapt to, or circumvent, enforcement strategies?
- To what extent do enforcement strategies have perverse effects?

Our findings are based on interviews with 68 drug users, 11 drug sellers or runners, five registered police sources, and 400 members of the public in the two sites. The views of police officers and local treatment services in each site were also elicited.

Main findings

Market 1 and 2

We conducted two case studies of areas where drug markets existed. At the time of fieldwork drug distribution in Market 1 was conducted through a structured hierarchy which was maintained by the threat of violence. Market 2 differed in structure and operated a fragmented 'free market' drug distribution system with many sellers working independently. Both markets were predominantly selling through closed systems, having adapted to high visibility low-level police enforcement. However, at the time of fieldwork, a small amount of pharmaceutical drugs in Market 2 were available and traded predominantly through an open street market. Market 1 dealt mainly in heroin, although crack cocaine was becoming more widely available and used. Market 2 was a dual heroin and crack cocaine market. Buyers and sellers in both markets communicated by mobile phone, which had eased the transition from open to closed markets. Drug sellers earned considerable sums each week worked, and in both markets they reported an increase in the prevalence and use of firearms. In both markets drug sellers and users believed the police posed little threat. Few interviewees had been disrupted by the police when attempting to purchase drugs and a number of sellers had been distributing drugs for a lengthy period undetected.

Policing Markets 1 and 2

Policing both markets had become increasingly difficult

since the visibility of sellers had declined and the use of mobile phones had increased. Police officers in both markets felt that current strategies were having little impact on the activities of market participants and were ineffectual at disrupting market suppliers or those who operated above street-level. A variety of policing methods had been employed in Market 1 but none appeared to have disrupted the selling structure above street-level. Police officers in Market 2 felt hindered by the absence of a drug squad and felt they were able only to react to reported crimes rather than to set up proactive operations. Officers in both sites felt local communities had little confidence in their ability to arrest drug sellers successfully or to make an impact on market activities.

Nearly all the police officers we interviewed believed that source-led policing (the tactical use of registered police informants) was cost-effective when compared with surveillance operations, and was now a reliable method of gathering intelligence on market structures. Surprisingly, some of the sellers we interviewed agreed.

Tackling drug markets

Policing

The study suggests that both communications technology and the deployment of violence by dealers and distributors can serve to prevent the police from gathering the information they need to make arrests within closed drug distribution systems. What needs to be developed or built on is a way to amplify other information flows. A recurrent theme amongst those we interviewed was that properly tasked sources could be one of the most appropriate means of disrupting the operation of middle-level drug sellers. Senior police managers must, however, be mindful of the Human Rights Act (1998) and its implications for managing registered sources.

The lack of specialist resources available to police drug markets above street-level was also highlighted as a concern by police officers. Officers felt that the best way forward would be for dedicated source units to feed directly into drug task units. The general consensus was that greater success would be achieved through this style of policing than by current high visibility policing practices.

Demand reduction through the provision of treatment

One potentially important set of demand reduction

strategies involves the provision of treatment for those with drug problems. Arrest referral schemes and Drug Treatment and Testing Orders both target drug-using offenders in contact with the criminal justice system with the aim of referring or offering treatment. Evidence shows that if schemes are properly conceived, funded and supported (by both treatment services, police officers and the courts) they can have a significant impact on both drug use and criminal activity. If successfully implemented, such strategies would also rob drug markets of their core customers. Responsive prescribing services tailored to drug users' needs coupled with tight monitoring and regulation to avoid leakage to the illicit market were also seen as necessary interventions. Services also need to conduct regular audits to ensure that their client base accurately reflects and caters for the local drug using population. This is particularly important in areas where ethnic minority users, women and young people are under-represented in services.

Points for action

- Police sources need to be utilised effectively where closed market systems operate.
- Senior police managers should give careful consideration to the reasons for conducting test purchases in drug markets and be mindful of the safety of officers. Sustainable disruption of a market's structure needs to be done by targeting sellers rather than buyers.
- Police officers need to be provided with on-going drug training to increase their awareness of changing patterns of use.
- Senior police managers should make effective use of community police officers, and work in partnership with drug agencies and local Drug Action Teams.
- Appropriate arrest referral schemes need to be developed that work in partnership with outside treatment agencies to maximise the number of drug using offenders in touch with treatment agencies.
- Treatment services need to provide services that recognise the diversity of drug using populations.
- Treatment services need to provide appropriate services for stimulant users.

"The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy)."