

Home Office Police Research Group Briefing Note



KERB-CRAWLING, PROSTITUTION AND MULTI-AGENCY POLICING

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Summary

The problems created by the presence of prostitution and kerb-crawling within an area can be considerable, ranging from an increase in the volume of traffic to a growth in the number of incivilities. When centred on a residential area, these problems are exacerbated and can be menacing for some residents, especially women.

In the mid-1980's, the residents of Streatham in South London experienced a large increase in the level of street prostitution and kerb-crawling in their area. In response to this they formed 'Streatham Against Kerb Crawlers' (STAKC) and, through close liaison with the police and their local authority, attempted to remove the problem by adopting a similar multi-agency approach to that which had been applied successfully in an area with similar problems, Finsbury Park, North London. This initiative involved the implementation of an extensive traffic management scheme, the development of more intensive and responsive policing and the active participation of residents in the area.

The findings presented in paper 43 are the results of a comprehensive investigation into the problem in Streatham and an evaluation of the initiative adopted. A number of data gathering techniques were employed to examine the different dimensions involved. These were

- Residents' surveys - Two surveys were carried out, one before the initiative was set up and one after. They included questions relating to a range of incivilities, fear of crime and community safety.

- In depth interviews with prostitutes, the police and residents to obtain more detailed information on key issues.
- Police statistics and data - specifically information on crime rates, and details of police arrests and of kerb crawlers.
- Supplementary data such as that collected by community organisations and the local authority, interviewers' observations of the area and its residents, newspaper reports and television programmes and attendance at public meetings.

The Results

The majority of the prostitutes working in the area were white, under 30 years of age and lived in areas which had easy access to Streatham, but did not have any direct associations with the area. Their lives seemed to consist of frequent appearances in court which necessitated a return to prostitution in order to earn the money to pay off outstanding fines. While working, they tried to avoid violent clients, angry residents and police officers.

The clients on the other hand, tended to live slightly further away from Streatham than the prostitutes and the majority were in their twenties and early thirties. A considerable number appear to be married and, unlike the prostitutes, they were less concerned by the probability of paying a fine but more worried by the publicity and shame associated with their actions.

Initially, the police believed that arresting and fining prostitutes was not worthwhile as they soon returned to the streets. They also saw the prostitutes as a very useful source of information on local crime. Because of this, the police were often accused by the residents of being indifferent to the problem and of fraternising with the women. Due to growing pressure from the residents though, the police did adopt an approach of arresting and prosecuting the prostitutes. The direct effects of such an approach on the level of prostitution are unknown but it did seem to deter new women from coming to work in the area.

At the same time the police also began to clamp down on kerb crawlers through prosecution, the use of breathalyser tests and letters of warning to vehicle owners (this last practice was dropped because its effects were felt to be uncertain). Some time after the police began doing this, the local authority implemented a road closure scheme. Although the arrest rate for kerb-crawlers decreased significantly, the belief is that if the police intervention had coincided with the road closures, as was the case in Finsbury Park, the gains would have been greater.

Conclusions

The combined activity of the residents, police and local authority, in conjunction with the road closure scheme resulted in a decrease in the level of soliciting, kerb-crawling and volume of traffic in the area. This was accompanied by a marked improvement in the overall quality of life and a reduction in the 'fear of crime' amongst residents. The initiative also seemed to improve relations and dialogue between the parties involved, thereby increasing community cohesion and public expectations. There was however some evidence of displacement of the problem, but it was to areas such as nearby shopping streets, which residents found less objectionable.

The evaluation also highlights some of the problems associated with multi-agency approaches. The approach in Streatham did undoubtedly lead to significant gains but suffered from a lack of coordination partly because different agencies had different priorities and commitments. The findings indicate that if the gains from such an approach are to be maximised, it must be driven by the residents association and other parties must be responsive and able to act quickly and effectively. Good communication at a formal or informal level is essential to this process.

Points of Action

The points raised by the research are of interest to all groups involved in multi-agency initiatives, especially those concerned with the problems of kerb-crawling and prostitution. These are:

- One agency, in this case the Residents association (STAKC), must play the lead role in coordinating multi-agency initiatives in order to maximise the gains of any intervention.
- Once one of the agencies has adopted, or accepted, the lead role, the other agencies must be as responsive as possible, acting quickly and effectively when requested.
- When dealing with the problem of prostitution and kerb-crawling, more consideration should be given to deterring kerb-crawlers as they seem to be the weak partner in the relation. In particular, they appear to express a lower level of commitment but also a higher level of shame.