Approaches to Disrupting Street-Level, Open-Air Drug Markets

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Executive Summary

'Open-air drug markets' are geographically well-defined, open-air areas in which illegal drugs are bought and sold. They are likely to be open markets where there are few barriers to access and those who appear to be plausible buyers will be able to purchase drugs. These drug markets have many consequences for the communities in which they operate (IE. disorderly conduct, loitering, robbery, theft, weapons offences, assaults, homicides), and residents' quality of life may suffer due to a pervasive sense of insecurity and the negative reputation their community receives as a result of drug market activity. However, some members of some communities may benefit from having an illicit economy (IE. through a local market of stolen goods).

Furthermore, communities with open-air drug markets tend to share similar characteristics such as high unemployment or lack of employment opportunities, limited opportunities for youth, and areas of concentrated poverty. Relationships between a drug market and the community in which it operates can be complex and responses to drug markets must take into account drug market—community relationships, and the key characteristics and conditions of the market (IE. its nature, the market participants, current responses, consequences of the drug market on the community, and provisions for drug treatment). This permits a tailored response to the drug market problem facing that community.

Strategies for disrupting drug markets range from traditional law enforcement initiatives (IE. high visibility police, crackdowns, buy-bust operations, reverse stings) to responses that also include non-police agencies and the community in which the drug market is located (IE. community and problem-oriented policing responses, situational crime prevention). Other approaches include community responses, civil remedies, and demand reduction strategies. Traditional law enforcement measures have been found to have short-term effects and their impact has been inconsistent when used on their own. It has been found that disrupting street-level, illegal drug markets will be most successful when efforts are multi-dimensional and involve a diverse approach of civil, enforcement, community, and environmental elements.

Introduction

Open-air drug markets can have profound consequences for the communities in which they operate. Residents' quality of life may suffer due to a pervasive sense of insecurity and communities may be plagued by traffic congestion, noise, disorderly conduct, begging, loitering, vandalism, drug use and discarded drug paraphernalia, property damage, prostitution, robbery, theft, weapons offences, inability to use communal areas, a poor neighbourhood reputation, assaults, and homicides (Harocopos & Hough, 2005; Personal Correspondence).

Here, 'open-air drug market' refers to geographically well-defined, open-air areas in which illegal drugs (of one or more kinds) are bought and sold (Jacobson, 1999; Harocopos et al., 2005). These types of markets contain drug dealers, buyers, or both. Simply put, dealers will sell drugs where there is a demand for them, and buyers will purchase drugs where there is a supply available to them (Personal Correspondence). In addition to this, open-air markets are likely to be open markets where there are few barriers to access and those who appear to be plausible buyers will be able to purchase drugs (Harocopos et al., 2005). This report is concerned with open-air, street-level drug markets but it should be recognized that more than one kind of drug market (IE. closed drug markets, public markets) could be present in a community or neighbourhood at once (May, Martin, Duffy, Few & Hough, 2005; Harocopos et al., 2005). It has been found that communities with open-air drug markets tend to have similar characteristics: high unemployment or lack of employment opportunities, high proportion of social and private rented housing (often catering for transient populations), limited opportunities for youth, and areas of concentrated poverty and low income (May et al., 2005; Personal Correspondence). Issues in these areas are multi-layered and tend to work against residents.

Furthermore, relationships between the drug market and the community in which it operates can be quite complex. For example, some members of some communities may benefit from having a local illicit economy. A U.K study of four communities with embedded drug markets found that the market for stolen goods that the drug markets stimulated helped residents living in poverty as stolen goods could be used to barter with for drugs or other goods. Additionally, drug dealers often supplemented incomes or gave money to family and friends (May et al., 2005). Thus, while there are many consequences of drug markets, there are those beyond the buyers and sellers of drugs that benefit from an illegal local economy. Responses to drug markets must take into account the relationships that exist between the markets and the communities in which they exist (May et al., 2005).

Responses to drug markets must also examine the organizational structure of the market that exists in the community. Drug markets can be structured, with clear hierarchies and well-defined job functions in which a dealer sellers drugs to a 'runner' and will have little contact with those who buy drugs for consumption or they can be more fluid and fragmented, with 'freelance' dealers selling drugs directly to buyers (Harocopos et al., 2005). In structured markets, middle level sellers (those between the street dealers/runners and those who distribute to the market) will typically have knowledge of the drug supply system and routes whereas in a fragmented market, this is less likely (May, Haraocopos, Turnbull & Hough, 2000). Residents within the community may be recruited for other roles such as 'look outs' (or 'holders'), 'steerers' (refer customers to a particular dealer), 'touts' (employed to find customers), and 'runners' or 'middle-men' (transport money and drugs between the dealer and the buyer, who do not meet) (Harocopos et al., 2005; May et al., 2000).

This report examines the literature regarding strategies of disrupting street-level, open-air drug markets. These responses include traditional drug law enforcement tactics, community policing and problem-oriented policing approaches, situational crime prevention techniques, community responses, civil remedies, and demand reduction strategies. It will also discuss the importance of identifying drug crime hot spots and analyzing the problem in that area as an important first step to creating a response. Literature and case studies primarily from the United States will show that police enforcement and multi-agency cooperation is necessary to reduce drug-related activity.

Approaches to Disrupting Drug Markets

In the past, tackling local drug markets primarily consisted of unsystematic, arrest-oriented measures that generally relied heavily on law enforcement with police as the single intervention agency (Braga, Papachristos & Hureau, 2012; Mason & Bucke, 2002). Traditional law enforcement measures include high visibility policing, rapid response to calls for service, crackdowns, buy-busts (test purchase operations), confiscating drug stashes, 'reverse' stings (arresting buyers), and warning potential buyers (Harocopos et al., 2005; Mazerolle, Soole & Rombouts, 2007). These types of measures usually offer short-term results as drug dealers respond by changing their strategies and the impact of these measures has been inconsistent (Frabutt, Shelton, Di Luca, Harvey & Hefner, 2009; Scott, 2004; Weisburd & Eck, 2004). An example of this is the Tactical Narcotics Team's intensive law enforcement response (buy-bust operations, confiscations and seizures) to two drug markets in New York City. There was an immediate benefit but the effects were short-lived with no measureable effects on public perceptions of crime, quality of life, or police-community relations, and an increase in fear as drug dealing moved indoors (Scott, 2004).

While these tactics are still used as part of broader responses to disrupting drug markets, there has been a shift in more recent years to a model of policing where law enforcement collaborates with non-police agencies and strategies are focused at reducing problems in small areas with high concentrations of crime (also known as 'hot spots'). There is consensus in the literature that projects undertaken to disrupt street-level, illegal drug markets must begin with identifying and analyzing the areas in which crime clusters (Mazerolle et al., 2007; Jacobson 1999; Sherman & Weisburd, 1995; Weisburd & Green, 1995).

Intelligence Gathering and Community Analysis

Data for the purpose of identifying areas where drug activity is clustered can come from sources such as intelligence records, arrest and crime reports, public complaints, emergency calls for service, community meetings, public surveys, and law enforcement tactics such as multiple test-purchase operations within an area (Jacobson, 1999; Personal Correspondence).

Once an area of concern is located, designing effective strategies of disruption will take into account the key characteristics and conditions of the market such as the nature of the market (IE. types of drugs sold, times/locations of drug transactions, physical/environmental characteristics, whether the market is violent), market participants (IE. number of sellers in the area, use of runners/lookouts, structural organizations of the market, use of firearms, proportion of local customers in the area), current responses and effects of those responses, consequences of the drug market on the local community, and provisions for drug treatment in the community (Harocopos et al., 2005).

The dynamics of the community in which the drug market exists is also important (May et al., 2005). Drug activity in a community can be linked with legal and illegal economies of local neighbourhoods and so it is necessary to understand the relationships that exist between the markets and the communities in which they are found. This includes understanding the underlying factors that make the area vulnerable to drug activity, how the drug market became embedded in the community, the relationship of buyers and sellers, and the relationship between the drug market and the 'host' community (May et al., 2005).

A thorough analysis of the characteristics and dynamics of the target drug market area allows for a better understanding of the factors contributing to it and is crucial to developing appropriate responses tailored to that area.

Multi-Dimensional, Multi-Agency Approaches to Disrupting Drug Markets

Successful responses to drug markets will incorporate the information gathered about the area in which drug activity is occurring and utilize enforcement efforts coupled with community support to close or eliminate a drug market. The following approaches describe multi-agency responses to disrupting street-level, open-air, illegal drug markets. Community policing and problem-oriented policing represents a contemporary shift towards multi-agency collaboration in dealing with crime problems (Mazerolle, et al., 2007).

Community Policing Approach

This type of approach pays little attention to targeting repeat offenders, repeat victims or geographic concentrations of crime in a given jurisdiction but adopts a broad multi-agency approach (Mazerolle et al., 2007). These interventions seek to improve police—citizen relations in a neighbourhood, build neighbourhood cohesion and increase contact with citizens to build trust and rapport (Mazerolle et al., 2007). Service providers, community members and other public and private agencies work with police to develop, implement and maintain drug law enforcement activities (Mazerolle et al., 2007).

Such initiatives include Weed and Seed programs that have been popular in the United States throughout the 1990s. These programs are coordination strategies that link concentrated and enhanced law enforcement efforts and community policing with community-focused human services programs and neighbourhood revitalization efforts to prevent and deter further crime. Weeding efforts consist of local, state, and federal law enforcement partnering with prosecution teams to identify, arrest, and prosecute violent offenders, drug traffickers, and other criminals operating in target areas (Dunworthy & Mills, 1999). Key stakeholders in the target area community including members of local, public, and private agencies, non-profit community organizations, clergy, local residents and service providers then come together to develop a revitalization plan with programs and provide essential services such as employment training, continuing education and health services that improve the quality of life for target area residents (Pennsylvania's Weed & Seed Initiative, 2013).

Project ROAR ('Reclaiming Our Area Residences', 1994) in Spokane, Washington, is another initiative that mobilized community and law enforcement to eliminate drug crime. Tenants of the public housing authority unit, local business owners, local law enforcement and the housing authority developed a program of drug crime elimination based on empowering public housing tenants in an effort to produce a safer neighbourhood (Giacomazzi, McGarrell & Thurman, 1998).

These types of initiatives have been shown to reduce fear of crime within a community but there is little consistent evidence for its impact on crime and disorder (Mazerolle et al., 2007). Evaluations of Weed and Seed programs and Project ROAR seem to support this. Weed and Seed programs have been found to create improvements in community crime conditions and increase residents' positive perception of their neighbourhood and in police responsiveness, but decreases in serious offences were not widespread (Perkins & Zepp, 2004). An evaluation of Project ROAR found that residents reported less visible signs of drug-dealing and drug taking, improved feelings of safety in the project area and a decline in calls for service but there was little change in levels of social disorder (Giacomazzi et al., 1998).

Problem-Oriented Policing Approach

Problem-oriented policing is similar to community policing in the sense that both utilize multi-agency collaboration in dealing with crime problems. However, a problem-oriented approach focuses resources to concentrations of a problem (IE. victims or offenders) or concentrations of problem places (IE. areas that have been identified as hotspots of crime) and on the underlying causes of problems while community policing emphasizes the development of strong police—community partnerships to reduce crime (Mazerolle et al., 2007; Braga, 2002). However, community policing efforts will often use problem-solving and problem-oriented policing efforts will collaborate with the community (Braga, 2002).

Problem-oriented policing involves four key stages: Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment (SARA model – Eck & Spelman, 1987). Law enforcement will identify an issue and determine whether it is a problem, analyze underlying criminogenic factors within a community that lead to crime problems, develop and implement customized responses and then evaluate whether the interventions reduced the problem (Mazerolle et al., 2007; Jacobson, 1999). According to Goldstein (1979: 236), this process requires:

> Identifying these problems in more precise terms, researching each problem, documenting the nature of the current police response, assessing the adequacy of existing authority and resources, engaging in a broad exploration of alternatives to present responses, weighing the merits of these alternatives, and choosing from among them.

'Pulling levers' focused deterrence is a strategy to shut down local street-level drug markets rooted within a problem-oriented policing framework that has had success in many jurisdictions in the United States.

'Pulling Levers' Focused Deterrence Strategy

'Pulling levers', also called a 'threat-sanction' approach, is a strategy of disrupting street-level, illegal drug markets that has had successful outcomes in a number of communities including High Point, Illinois and Nashville, Tennessee (Keeping Drug Markets Closed: The High Point Protocol, 2011; Corsaro, Brunson & McGarell, 2010; Frabutt, Shelton, Di Luca, Harvey & Hefner, 2009; Kennedy & Wong, 2009; Kennedy, 1997). The purpose of focused deterrence initiatives are to integrate local citizens to bridge police—community partnerships and reduce concentrated crime rates and disorder associated with drug markets (Corsaro & Brunson, 2013). Multiple levels of deterrence are employed such as more traditional methods (threat of arrest and prosecution) as well as non-traditional methods (family, friends, and close associates) (Frabutt et al., 2009). There are three operational phases:

Identification. This phase involves intensive intelligence gathering and crime mapping to identify the target area of intervention, identify the street drug offenders, and identify drug offences. In this phase, there will also be internal engagement of the police department, and the community will be made aware of the imminent intervention and engaged to contribute (Hunt, Sumner, Scholten & Frabutt, 2008; Frabutt et al., 2009).

Notification. This phase consists of establishing contact with the dealer's family and informing them of the dealer's actions. The dealer receives notification that they have been observed committing drug crimes and are asked to attend a 'call-in' notification session, without threat of arrest. Community members, service providers, and the dealer's family are typically present at the session. A police officer presents the dealer with evidence of their crimes and ultimatum is made: cease the drug activity or face the maximum sanction available (Kennedy et al., 2009).

Resource delivery and community support. After a deadline is set for the dealer to cease drug activity, the dealer is put into contact with resource coordinators that work closely with the dealer and their family to provide support in areas such as housing, employment, education, and transportation (Kennedy et al., 2009).

As simple as these operational phases seem this strategy is complex and multi-dimensional. Success is dependent on the input and collaboration between law enforcement and the community. Law enforcement must fully understand the principles of the strategy and active community engagement must be cultivated and developed (Frabutt et al., 2009).

High Point is a community in North Carolina that used a focused deterrence and pulling levers framework to close drug markets and reduce drug-related violence. Subsequent evaluations of the High Point protocol found that violent crime decreased and overt drug markets were eliminated, directly and sustainably with no evidence of displacement (Kennedy et al., 2009; Frabutt et al., 2009).

The success of the initiative in High Point led to the implementation of similar interventions in Newburgh and Hempstead, New York; Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Raleigh, North Carolina; Providence, Rhode Island; Rockford, Illinois; Nashville, Tennessee; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin and the impact of the majority of these has been positive (Kennedy et al., 2009). Evaluations of the Nashville initiative found that "the specific impact on drug crimes appears to have been robust and sustained rather than short-lived and fragmented" (Corsaro et al., 2010: 537). Results were similar in Providence, Rhode Island along with improvement in police—community relations (Kennedy, et al., 2009). However, it has been noted that while this type of initiative is capable of impacting local drug-related incidents it may be more limited when it comes to reducing serious forms of neighbourhood crime (IE. violent crime and property crime) (Corsaro et al., 2013; 2010).

Situational Crime Prevention

Situational crime prevention methods can also be applied to the policing of local drug markets. These techniques are typically used as part of a larger problem-oriented policing strategy (Jacobson, 1999). This approach to prevention involves "identifying and removing the situational conditions that give rise to specific crime problems" (Braga, 2002: 12).

In the context of disrupting local drug markets, situational crime prevention measures taken by police and other agencies include "modifying the social and physical features of drug market sites to make them less appealing to dealers and users" (Jacobson, 1999: v). These are typically effective in geographically fixed markets (Jacobson, 1999). Techniques include removing thick or overgrown foliage, securing vacant buildings, improving poor street lighting, changing access routes to discourage drug dealing, installing and monitoring surveillance cameras, and re-claiming public spaces (Harocopos et al., 2005). These types of measures increase the effort and risks of crime for an offender and reduce the rewards they might gain (Clarke, 1992).

Other Approaches

In addition to other initiatives, community responses, civil remedies, and demand reduction strategies are necessary to end local drug markets:

Community responses. It should be noted that there is very little academic literature that speaks directly to actions that neigbourhood or community residents can take themselves to disrupt drug markets. Generally, there are initiatives led by grassroots community groups such as anti-drug initiatives, intelligence gathering hotlines (Harocopos et al, 2005), neighbourhood watch-type programs, and revitalization/renewal projects. These types of responses may involve some partnership with service providers and law enforcement.

However, a response by neighbours within a community can be as simple as positively using the public space in the area. In a sense, this is the idea of having multiple 'eyes on the street' (Jacobs, 1961) where neighbours see each other and constantly interact together, rather than watch each other, in order to create a safer community (Justice For Families, 2013). For example, a group of local grandmothers in the Yesler Terrace public housing community in Seattle Washington set up lawn chairs every evening on the corners of their neighbourhood that drug dealers frequented and would knit and chat; this eventually drove the drug dealers away (Walljasper, 2007). This conspicuous use of public space contributed to the safety of the neighbourhood by increasing surveillance, and disrupting drug activity by discouraging drug dealers from entering the area. Other activities include walking through the neighbourhood whenever possible, enjoying a coffee and newspaper on one's front porch or stoop, frequenting local businesses and interacting with neighbours (Jacobs, 1962; Walljasper, 2007). These activities promote the legitimate use of public space and also lead to the formation of neighbourhood social ties among residents.

Civil remedies. Examples of civil remedies for responding to local drug markets involve fostering active engagement of local place managers (IE. landlords, local businesses, housing authorities), employing nuisance abatement laws, issuing Drug Offender Restraining Orders (U.S), imposing curfews and conditions or 'no communication orders', notifying mortgage holders of drug related problems at their properties, enforcing regulatory codes, and seizing and forfeiting assets related to drug dealing (Harocopos et al., 2009; Personal Correspondence).

Demand reduction strategies. These strategies focus on providing treatment and prevention opportunities to those who want treatment for their use (Harocopos et al., 2005).

Disrupting street-level, illegal drug markets will be most successful when efforts are multi-dimensional and offer an "eclectic approach" of civil, enforcement, community, and environmental elements (Hough & Edmunds, 1999; Frabutt et al., 2009).

Conclusion

The literature documents a range of approaches that have been employed to disrupt street-level, open-air, illegal drug markets. These approaches range from traditional responses by law enforcement that are typically arrest-oriented (IE. increased police patrols, crackdowns, buy-busts) to responses that also include non-police agencies and the community in which the drug market is located (IE. community and problem-oriented policing responses, situational crime prevention). Other approaches include situational community responses, civil remedies, and demand reduction strategies.

The literature suggests that community-wide and problem-oriented policing efforts that employ partnerships with non-police agencies and that build better police-citizen relationships are likely to be a more effective approach to tackling drug problems than enforcement-only approaches to tackling drug hot spots (Mazerolle et al., 2007). While arresting and punishing drug offenders is an important part of disrupting drug markets, non-police agencies and community support are also necessary (May et al., 2005). A thorough understanding of the characteristics of the community in which the drug market operates is key to creating and implementing successful, multi-dimensional strategies that include a range of responses designed specifically for that area and its needs (May et al., 2005).

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