

Police Efforts to Address Street-Level Drug Markets

Dr. Cynthia Lum

*This is a shortened version; the full presentation can be found at
<http://webb.senate.gov/pdf/lum.pdf>*

What has research taught us about effective street-level drug enforcement strategies?

There is often a gap between the tactics regularly used by the police and those that have been shown to be effective in reducing street-level drug markets. While there may be a few exceptions to this, most local drug enforcement is usually carried out by officers who react to crimes that have already occurred. Officers tend to rely on their individual perceptions, on calls for service from citizens, and on informant tips, to conduct case by case investigations, impromptu operations and arrests, crackdowns, or raids. Yet, while some of these tactics may result in arrests and seizures, evidence has shown these approaches to have, overall, a negligible effect on drug availability, violence related to the drug market, intensity of selling or addiction, and treatment of post-released offenders.¹

On the contrary, tactics that have been shown to be effective in reducing street-level drug markets depart from these activities and have two very proactive characteristics: they are geographically specific and problem-oriented.² Geographic specificity refers to the target of the enforcement. We know crime is highly concentrated at very small places— over 50% of a city's crime tends to occur in less than 3% of all its addresses.³ Likewise, the evidence is strong that when police target these micro-level hot spots of crime, they can have a significant impact on the overall crime rate of the entire city.⁴

The second requirement of effective drug enforcement intervention follows from the first - a problem orientation. The term problem-oriented means to address the underlying factors that facilitate the drug market rather than its symptoms or consequences. Successful problem-oriented approaches against street level drug markets have used such tactics as nuisance abatement laws to force drug dealing individuals from their residences which they are using as distribution locations. Other successful strategies have used multi-pronged approaches that involve both directed police action, such as hot spot patrols, AND mechanisms to manipulate the physical environment. For instance, past physical environment interventions have included removing trash in alleyways, boarding or removing vacant buildings or homes, increasing sanitation in a neighborhood, removing obstacles that block pedestrian and police movement, and changing entry and exit points in and out of streets. Research indicates these types of environmental hazards can either facilitate drug market transactions or reduce social capital, both of which can lead to less formal and informal social control of an area, and subsequently less crime prevention opportunities.

Given this evidence, what changes in policing can achieve this type of approach?

First, effective, evidence-based, problem-oriented geographically specific strategies require a strong crime analysis capability. Strengthening the capacity for an agency to conduct statistical, geographic, and criminological trend analysis, should be a priority in an agency attempting to move towards any proactive preventative paradigm. Secondly, multi-agency approaches must move beyond cooperative agreements or memos of understanding. Agencies must substantively identify and create systemic mechanisms that help to facilitate specific aspects of problem solving between the police and non-law enforcement organizations. Finally, police leadership need to make a conscious effort to change their mentality and organizational culture in responding to crime by advocating and training their officers in a more proactive, analytically driven, evidence-based way, as opposed to a traditional, reactive, or anecdotal-based approach.

¹ Sherman, L., Farrington, D., Welsh, B. and MacKenzie, D. (Eds.) (2002). *Evidence Based Crime Prevention*. London, UK: Routledge.

² Dr. Lorraine Mazerolle has reviewed this evidence in a Campbell Systematic Review, which can be obtained at http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/campbell_library/index.php.

³ Sherman, L., Gartin, P. and Buerger, M. (1989). Hot Spots of Predatory Crime: Routine Activities and the Criminology of Place. *Criminology* 27: 27-56. See also Weisburd, D., Bushway, S., Lum, C. and Yang, S. (2004). Trajectories of Crime at Places: A Longitudinal Study of Street Segments in the City of Seattle. *Criminology* 42(2): 283-322.

⁴ Weisburd, D. (2002). From criminals to criminal contexts: Reorienting criminal justice research and policy. *Advances in Criminological Theory*, 10, 197-216.