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The fight against drug-related crime requires more than ordinary police work

The fight against street-level drug crime cannot be won by spending more resources on traditional, reactive style police work. Rather, partnerships between the police and other “third parties” should be applied, such that police work cooperatively with third parties to analyse underlying problems, target hotspots and establish cooperative partnerships with e.g. housing associations, local businesses, and government regulators. This is the conclusion of a Campbell systematic review based on a comprehensive search of the evaluation literature in the field.

Drugs mean more crime
Street-level drug trading creates neighbourhoods plagued with drug addicts and drug dealers. Furthermore, other crime problems, such as fights, theft, burglary and vandalism, often coincide with cocaine, speed and heroin street-level drug markets. These crime problems exacerbate the feeling of insecurity among the residents in areas where drugs are traded.

Curbing drug-related crime has traditionally been a police responsibility. Until the late 1980s, in countries like the USA, Australia and England, policing efforts consisted mostly of traditional, reactive policing, largely characterized by police responding to calls for service; an approach which does not reduce crime problems. Policing strategies in the fight against drug-related crime have since undergone dramatic change, amongst other things resulting in more targeted efforts and cooperation with different groups.

This Campbell systematic review examines the effects of the range of different drug law enforcement strategies.

Community wide partnerships yield the best results
The researchers conclude that the most effective strategy to reducing drug-related crime involves community-wide partnerships between police and third parties, combining three critical elements: 1) a local analysis of what is needed to change underlying causes, 2) efforts that target the underlying conditions of drug dealing places, and 3) cooperation with local third parties such as local businesses, government authorities and housing associations.

Police-third party partnerships that combine these three elements are more effective than traditional police work.

The benefits of police partnerships
The most promising approach to combat drug-related crime involves the police establishing cooperative partnerships with different actors who otherwise might have very little association with the police. These could be local residents, local authorities, local businesses, enterprises or housing associations.
The partnerships might be used to target the general conditions across neighbourhoods with drug crime problems. Alternatively, the partnerships might be more geographically-focused in micro places with a lot of crime, the so-called hotspots, or at specific individuals who, for example, have repeatedly been on the periphery of criminal activity or who have repeatedly been the victims of crime.

About the systematic review
The systematic review compares the results of 14 studies of police intervention aimed at drug-related crime. All of the studies were carried out in the USA, the majority in the early or mid-1990s. All the studies measure the effect by comparing an intervention group with a control group.

The researchers emphasise that measurements of the effect of policing efforts may be ambiguous. Do more or fewer arrests indicate a positive effect? For example, more offences reported might be a sign of greater public trust in the police and at the same time have nothing to do with the trend in actual number of offences. However, the researchers have endeavoured to take account of such issues in their analyses.

The researchers have not made an assessment of the costs associated with different efforts. However, they emphasise that decision makers should consider carefully which efforts are most cost-effective, as the sums spent on combating drugs and drug-related crime are enormous.