

Substance Misuse Research

Low-level drug markets: a case study approach

Summary

Richard Cyster - Head of Research, Research and Service Development Centre, Leeds
Simon Rowe - Senior Research Officer, Research and Service Development Centre

Background

As part of the Scottish Executive's Drug Misuse Research Programme¹ the Effective Interventions Unit (EIU) worked with the Scottish Drug Enforcement Agency (SDEA) to develop specific proposals that culminated in an initial research focus on low-level drug markets. As part of this the EIU² reviewed the international evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to reduce the impact of low-level drug markets, which highlighted the need for a detailed picture of experiences in Scotland, and a common approach to reduce drug-related harms.

Aims and Objectives

The objectives of the report are to present data on:

- The extent, breadth and culture of local heroin markets in the case-study areas.
- The impact of the buying and selling of heroin on the local communities.
- The nature and impact of policing, and other interventions on low-level heroin dealing.

Methods

The report covers three case-study areas. The three were chosen as a result of the willingness of local services to participate in a lengthy research process, and the areas' socio-economic and demographic characteristics. They were not subject to any systematic sampling criteria.

The aim was not to gain a representative sample of the drug-related harms that stem from the existence of heroin markets in Scotland but to paint a local picture of the experience of three differing areas. In each area we interviewed users and user/dealers, community members, parents/carers and local professionals.

The information was collected by employing a number of tailored interview schedules with the sample populations. For each population we were not looking for a representative sample, but for as many interviewees, and thus viewpoints as possible. Our data is structured thematically so as to present a range of viewpoints on a particular subject from all sources.

Due to the nature of the research the names of the three areas have been changed. They are denoted in the text as Fishton, Hailton and Tannochbrae.

The study ran for a period of six months from May 2004.

¹ Reflecting the 'Availability' objectives in the Scottish Executive Drugs Strategy; see 'Tackling Drugs in Scotland: Action in Partnership' (Scottish Office, 1999).

² 'Reducing the Impact of Local Drug Markets: A Research Review' (EIU, 2004).

Findings

The nature of the markets

To present the nature, extent and culture of the buying and selling of heroin we focussed on the activities and characteristics of those individuals involved with either, or both activities.

We found the markets in each area to be remarkably similar. The availability of heroin, amongst users and user/dealers was considered high and geographically widespread. No respondent reported any significant difficulty in obtaining heroin. They may, for time-limited periods have had to travel further than they wanted to obtain a supply, but this was not seen as a particular problem.

The majority of users, regardless of area appeared to have multiple possible contacts to obtain heroin within their neighbourhood. They had numerous choices as to where they took their custom. This suggests that the police would have to have a significant and prolonged impact on the supply of heroin to create an effect other than the temporary displacement of the market, and possible inconvenience of users.

In each area the number of potential sellers varied widely. This seemed to suggest that the markets are fragmented, closed and dynamic. The experience of one user, in terms of market contacts, was completely different to another. The market in each area appeared to consist of numerous sub-markets that could be equated with the actions of individual user/dealers over time.

The price of a 'bag' of heroin had been constant in each area for a considerable amount of time. The quality of the heroin within a bag was seen as the variable factor. For the majority of users, and indeed professionals, this was seen as predominantly due to the actions of user/dealers. The need to balance the needs of being a user, with that of dealing could lead to a situation where the short-term needs of use override those of dealing. This would mean a user/dealer lowering the quality of the heroin they would sell by 'cutting' the amount to be sold on in order to satisfy their own use.

Some users suggested that they may look for 'value-for-money' amongst user/dealers by searching out the perceived best quality heroin. Others rejected the unnecessary hassle of this approach, particularly if they were reasonably happy with their regular seller. The rewards to be achieved were too small.

The actions of user/dealers in each area may be seen as a major factor in the organisation and nature of low-level markets. Their focus on the supply of heroin suggested in all three areas that the majority of transactions at the low-level are separate from that of other drugs.

The nature of markets may also become more open, as user/dealers become more desperate to sell. Their method and location of delivery was also seen to change, corresponding to the perceived or actual threat of police activity.

The provision of credit and freebies was considered to be limited due to the activities of user/dealers. The need to fund their own use, and the high demand for heroin in each area was seen by users to have resulted in a situation where neither credit nor freebies needed to be offered.

The impact of markets on the communities

In all of the three areas the visibility of heroin markets in public spaces appeared to be the exception rather than the rule. From the reports of the samples of community respondents drawn, the visibility of the buying and/or use of heroin could be considered to be small. Professional respondents reinforced this, by suggesting the visibility of market transactions, or the discarding of needles or other paraphernalia to be low in frequency, but also variable with time. From the samples interviewed it is impossible to draw a definitive conclusion on this. It would appear that these activities are not predictable, with the levels of resulting harms varying.

The fear of crime was a more prominent theme amongst community respondents. In the majority of cases this was not linked to actual incidents, but to a general view about heroin users. Users were seen as individuals who commit levels of crime, and who are consequently to be feared. Based on this, community respondents felt uneasy undertaking particular tasks, particularly at night, due to the perceived level of heroin use within their community, and the likelihood of heroin users undertaking criminal, and possibly violent acts.

This view was not uniform amongst respondents, even within our small samples. Within each community there appeared to be multiple views existing towards heroin users, from intolerance, based primarily on the perceived levels of heroin-related crime, to sympathy, based on personal knowledge of the users concerned.

Those respondents sympathetic towards heroin users did not necessarily believe them to be law-abiding citizens, but were more tolerant than others, primarily due to having a user in the same family unit, or to have known a user before the onset of use.

Users in each area understood the intolerance they received from the wider community, but did not necessarily agree with it. Users considered community members treated all drug users the same, regardless of their individual differences. A number of those interviewed acknowledged that some heroin users commit crime, but not all. The uses of either state benefits or a working wage as methods of funding drug use were discussed. For those committing criminal acts, shoplifting or low-level dealing were the principal methods chosen. Violent crime or crimes against the person were less frequent, but did occur.

The levels of drug-related crime in each area were seen by police respondents to be high. However, in Fishton it was thought that levels of drug-related crime should be even higher, given the acknowledged level of heroin use. The disparity was due to some users funding their use through full-time employment.

Responding to low-level markets

Police respondents from all areas have to limit the amount of time they devote to tackling drug-related crime although Hailton respondents included a number of officers funded through the Council's Housing Department who could devote all their time to local 'beats' if not totally to drug issues within those 'beats'.

The Police in the three areas are under pressure to show results from operations against drug dealers that are commensurate with the level of resources invested. This has prompted a move towards targeting sellers' higher-up the supply chain and a more strategic approach, based principally around the development of packages of intelligence. With this approach there are still difficulties in reassuring the public that information passed to them is not ignored just because immediate action is not taken.

Respondents were realistic about the impact of police activity in reducing the overall availability of drugs in their areas. However, the Police believe that they are 'holding the line', stopping the problem growing any larger than it already is. Although arresting a high level dealer might affect the supply of drugs temporarily, the market is so lucrative that someone would soon come in to take their place. The police feel that they have made greater progress in their approaches to disrupting drug markets. This generally comprises any action to stop drug dealing or to interfere with the dealing process. This has the added advantage of demonstrating to the local community that the police are taking drugs seriously. However, the police believe that they are unable to solve the drug problem on their own. Success depends on all agencies working together. If they take drug crime seriously, then so should the local community and its constituent agencies.

Partnership working is a significant feature of all three areas. Strategic partnership takes place through the Alcohol and Drug Action Teams, including initiatives aimed at diverting young people away from drug use. Although arrest referral schemes are in place they do not appear to have achieved their true potential. Co-operation with housing has proved a great deal more promising, using tenancy agreements and anti-social behaviour orders to evict known or suspected dealers. There are good links with the ambulance services and with Accident & Emergency Depts., the police in theory, although not always in practice, adopting a policy of attending cases of drug overdoses. Police in all areas stressed the importance of building and maintaining good working links with their local communities.

Conclusions and implications

Despite the geographical and socio-demographic diversity of the case-study areas chosen, the nature and structure of the drug markets appeared surprisingly similar. In each area the high availability of heroin, coupled with the nature and structure of low-level markets provides a difficult situation for local policy-makers. Enforcement activity appears to be having only a small and time-limited effect on a significant local issue.

The response of the police is containing the size of the illicit market, but is it not limiting it, other than for short periods of time. There is a need for a co-ordinated and multi-agency approach between supply and demand-side initiatives driven by local partners. To instil confidence in the local community, and to be able to engage members in initiatives, responses need to involve policing that is high visibility and grounded in the community with the development of treatment provision that is accessible, timely and responsive.

At present our findings would suggest that without such an approach it will be difficult to engage with the local community. Interventions towards low-level markets should aim to reduce the scope and scale of the markets, whilst limiting the level of collateral harm. A given level of success in this approach by local partners may be required before involvement and engagement with the community can be successfully achieved.