Review of drug law enforcement interventions

Lorraine Mazerolle, David Soole & Sacha Rombouts

Rationale

The systematic review of police-led law enforcement strategies had three goals:

1.   to advance our knowledge regarding effective and ineffective law enforcement interventions;
2.   to establish effects of interventions that would inform models (such as agent-based modelling and stocks and flows); and
3.   to establish potential interventions for demonstration projects in Stage Two.

This is the first systematic review of drug law enforcement strategies to be undertaken with a broad mandate, including those strategies implemented at international, national, state and local levels. It has been endorsed as a Campbell Crime and Justice Group Systematic Review (see http://www.aic.gov.au/campbellcj/reviews/published.html).

Approach

Searches were conducted of all the relevant literature sources. Our review sought to uncover as many non-US studies as possible, given the bias in the literature towards US-based interventions and evaluations. A total of 168 research studies were identified that reported evaluations of law enforcement interventions aimed at illicit drugs. All 168 studies were examined and are summarized in our qualitative narrative review (see below). But of these 168 papers, only 16 studies could be used to quantify the effect sizes of the interventions. These 16 studies are used in our quantitative meta-analytic review.

Key findings

The quantitative meta-analytic review broadly classified the drug law enforcement interventions into reactive (including crackdowns, raids, undercover operations and search/seizure) and proactive (third party policing, community policing, CPTED, taskforces and Problem Oriented Policing) interventions. Effect sizes were then calculated for reactive policing and proactive drug law enforcement.

The choice of outcome measure is complicated in law enforcement research. The kinds of outcomes reported in the literature are usually numbers of arrests, numbers of reported offences, and calls for police service. In most experimental field trials of law enforcement interventions, a decrease in arrests, reported offences and calls for service is interpreted as a positive, desirable outcome. This is due to a decrease in arrests. Reported offences and calls for service implies a decrease in crime.

We note that using arrests to measure police intervention outcomes is a problematic measure because it is often part of the intervention itself. In addition to interpreting decreases in arrests, reported offences and calls for services as positive effects, we also separated the outcomes by whether they were specific to drugs (drug-related) or more general criminal activities (non-drug-related). That is, drug-related outcomes were reported offences, arrests, and calls for service that pertained directly to illicit drugs. In the non-drug outcomes, we included decreases in arrests, reported offences and calls for service pertaining to all criminal matters such as disorder, property offences, and violent crime offences.

The meta-analysis on reactive policing strategies produced only 17 effect sizes, of which the vast majority were non-significant, indicating no overall effect of these strategies. These non-significant effects pertained to the non-drug-related decreases in arrests, offences and calls for service (there was only one non-significant effect size for drug-related outcomes). The meta-analysis therefore did not demonstrate strong support for reactive policing.

For the proactive strategies, 40 effect sizes were generated. Overall, the effect sizes were significant and supported the positive impact of proactive policing strategies. This applied to both decreases

in arrests, reported offences and calls for service for drug-related crime as well as for non-drug-related crime.

Table 1: Evidence of effectiveness of police-led law enforcement interventions: narrative review

Intervention	Evidence of effectiveness	Evidence of lack of effectiveness	Mixed evidence of effectiveness	Inconclusive evidence
International/national				
Drug seizures				√
Crop eradication				√
Reactive/directed				
Crackdowns			√	
Raids			√	
Undercover operations			√	
Intensive policing			√	
Search & seizures	√			
Proactive/partnership				
Drug nuisance abatement & civil remedies	√			
Community policing	√			
Multi-jurisdictional taskforces		√		
Crime prevention through environmental design	√			
Drug free zones		√		
POP and combination of proactive/partnership	√			
Individualised				
Arrest referral	√			
Diversion	√			
POP and combination of reactive/directed & proactive/partnership	√			

The poor quality of the law enforcement evaluation literature, the limited number of studies from which to draw effect sizes (16 studies in total) and hence the repetition across the 57 effect sizes means the conclusions from the quantitative review are more indicative than definitive.

To supplement the findings of our meta-analysis, we returned to the larger pool of 168 studies and conducted a narrative, or qualitative review. The results are summarised in Table 1.

The challenges associated with the law enforcement systematic review have included the dearth of published evaluations and lack of methodological rigour to the existing research; and the reliance upon American data (the Australian research is extremely limited). Other issues included the heterogeneity of the studies, the difficulties with interpretation of outcome measures, and the absence of drug-specific outcome measures.

Implications
Proactive and partnership policing strategies appear to have stronger supporting evidence than reactive policing strategies. This finding applied to both the quantitative and the qualitative review.

This is the first systematic review of all law enforcement interventions and has been accepted as a Campbell Crime and Justice Group publication. It will provide the foundation for examining law enforcement responses in our various models, and be used to select appropriate interventions for the demonstration projects.

A completed technical report is available on this project.

Research team
Lorraine Mazerolle, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University
David Soole, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University
Sacha Rombouts, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University