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Maintaining order in the drug game: Applying harm reduction principles to drug detective work

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Drug war rhetoric is losing favour in the political arena due to its increasingly obvious failures and there is a growing consensus amongst governing elites that something ought to change. Against this backdrop, the concept of ‘harm reduction’ has moved to the foreground of the research agenda and some policing agencies appear to be reconfiguring their enforcement interventions to focus on managing drug markets in a way that minimises the various associated harms. This article draws on the findings of an ethnographic study of specialist detective units in two English police services to examine how recent developments in drug policy discourse have been received and implemented at an operational level. Although there have been some positive advancements, it argues that changes to the prohibition regime are largely superficial and strong cultural resistance remains. The discussion considers how harm reduction principles might be better applied to the policing of drug markets.

Keywords: detectives; drug law enforcement; harm reduction; police culture; police reform; policing drugs

Introduction

The ‘war on drugs’ has dominated conceptions of drug control for decades and is central to any discussion on policing drug markets. Broadly speaking, the drug war is a demonising rhetorical strategy in the social campaign against certain people who use or sell certain psychoactive substances that is designed to elicit support for prohibition and punishment. Many policymakers, enforcement personnel and members of the public view blanket prohibition as a functional prerequisite of social order and the only workable policy option. For those who hold this view, draconian laws, snowballing arrest rates and the mass incarceration of drug offenders are justified to protect children, reduce crime, improve health and prevent immorality.

Yet, if the end goal of prohibition is to close down the illegal drug business and create a ‘drug-free society’, most reasonable people would concede that it has not only failed but cannot succeed. Drug markets have proven to be resilient and adaptable to actions taken by the authorities. Despite the vast amount of public resources that have been spent on the drug war to date, the available evidence suggests that it has neither eliminated the market nor had any sustainable impact on aggregate supply or demand. Using innovative, intelligence-led and evidence-based strategies to direct resources systematically to identified ‘hot spots’ can, however, be relatively effective at reducing drug problems in those locations (Mazerolle et al., 2007; McSweeney et al., 2008; Sherman, 2013; Weisburd and Eck, 2004). What’s more, in addition to being largely ineffective, another strong criticism of the war on drugs is that it actually causes a range of significant harms in its own right. Indeed, the damaging impact of prohibition on aspects of crime, security, civil liberties, human rights, police legitimacy, public health and social inequality has been comprehensively documented. These costs result not from drug use itself, but from ‘a punitive enforcement-led approach that, by its nature,

places control of the trade in the hands of organised crime, and criminalises many users' (Rolles et al., 2012, p. 5).

There is some evidence that drug law enforcement has been quietly moving towards a 'post-war era' for quite some time. Dorn and Lee (1999, p. 97), for example, show that a more practical and potentially achievable 'community damage limitation' approach is slowly but surely beginning to replace the 'heroic but politically risky "war" stance'. Increasingly, they demonstrate, with particular reference to British localities, the national level and the European Union, that the police are developing strategies in partnership with the most appropriate agencies, defining their mission in terms of being responsive to the needs of local communities, and scaling down expectations by redefining their aims and modifying the criteria by which success is judged. Having charted the impact of competing government agendas, Parker (2006, p. 38) similarly argues that the 'strategic changes and about-turns so evident in a decade of dealing with the country's drug problem are primarily the product of realisation. The war on drugs rhetoric and eradication targets are long gone as we have come to realise we can only manage UK drugs "around the edges" to reduce harm and contain problems'.

This article considers recent attempts to build on these trends by reconfiguring the evolution of the policing of drugs in accordance with the principles of harm reduction (Caulkins and Reuter, 2009; Felbab-Brown, 2013; Stevens, 2013; UKDPC, 2009). It begins by providing a concise review of the existing literature so as to outline the context in which this reform movement emerged and explain what it advocates and entails in practice. The discussion then draws on the findings of an extensive ethnographic study of specialist detective units in two English police services to examine how enforcement agents view their role in drug control and the extent to which developments in policy discourse have been received and implemented at an operational level. Concepts, themes and theories from the police culture literature are used to help frame the analysis.

The rise of harm reduction

Drug war rhetoric has fallen out of favour in the political arena due to its increasingly obvious failures and there is now a growing consensus amongst governing elites that something ought to change. For the first time, we are starting to see serving politicians and senior police officers stand up, speak out and take action against all-out prohibition. Britain is losing the war on drugs 'on an industrial scale', claimed former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (Williams, 2012). In the same breath, he committed the Liberal Democrats to a major review of drug policy in their 2015 election manifesto and urged David Cameron, the Prime Minister, to look at issues such as decriminalisation or legalisation. They have since become the first major party to support the legal regulation of cannabis (Liberal Democrats 2016). According to Mike Barton (2013), the Chief Constable of Durham Constabulary, 'politicians, professionals and the media collude in the fiction that we are winning the war on drugs, or if not, that we still have to fight in the same way'. He calls for a more honest debate, and says that decriminalising drugs would cut off the income stream of criminal gangs and help solve the worsening problems of addiction. Ron Hogg (2015), Durham's Police and Crime Commissioner, recently announced that Durham Constabulary would only go after people using cannabis if there was a complaint or if they were being 'blatant' and that users who grow the drug for their own consumption will no longer be targeted as the activity is not an enforcement priority. Considerable weight has been added to the reform agenda as 'a new

wave of countries have moved toward the decriminalisation model, suggesting growing recognition of the failures of the criminalisation approach and a strengthening political wind blowing in the direction of an historic paradigm shift' (Rosmarin and Eastwood, 2012, p. 11; see also Home Office, 2014). The Conservative victory in the last general election has put an unfortunate halt to progress and sensible discussions about the future of drug policy that are based on evidence rather than rhetoric, spin and sound bites. Nevertheless, now more than ever there is an appetite for change and a more balanced and comprehensive evaluation of the wider impact of drug law enforcement.

Drug policy reformers must continue to campaign to change the terms of the debate and mobilise support for an end to the failed war on drugs (Kushlick et al., 2014; Nadelmann, 2004). However, given that there is no immediate prospect of legal reform in the UK, the next best solution for the foreseeable future is to make prohibition work better through smarter, more pragmatic enforcement interventions and criminal justice policies. To this end, the concept of 'harm reduction' has moved to the foreground of the research agenda, and some policing agencies appear to be choosing to rethink and redevelop their enforcement strategies and tactics to focus on managing drug markets in a way that minimises the various associated harms.

Harm reduction is a philosophy that has been widely accepted as an important pillar of public health policies, focusing on harms to users, most notably from heroin overdose, intravenous drug use and club drugs, but has less frequently been applied to policing drug markets. The school of thought that underpins this movement advocates that the ultimate aim of drug control is to reduce drug harms. The wider purpose of drugs policing, therefore, should be to regulate the drug trade in a way that ensures the safety of the community by reducing harms to its members. Stevens (2013, p. 2) submits that a harm reduction approach can be justified on both pragmatic and ethical grounds because it emphasises a concern for 'what works' and reflects 'the emphasis of both international human rights treaties and rationalist morality on the legal and moral imperative for states to act in ways that support human rights'. It also presents the police with an opportunity to 'do more with less' and reduce the impact of drug offences on the criminal justice system. In contrast to other policing strategies, the application of harm reduction principles is somewhat radical in that it attempts to tackle the inimical aspects of drug markets without necessarily requiring a reduction in the quantity of drugs being sold or used. Moreover, it requires the explicit recognition that drug laws are resources, discretionary powers that can be enforced as a means to an end rather than rules that must be mechanically applied in all drug control situations. Such an approach to enforcement might be criticised for flying in the face of the rule of law, sending the wrong message and being 'soft on drugs', but if one works on the assumption that the drug trade is a constant and policing is a marginal activity with limited capacity and dwindling resources, there are few alternatives if drug policy remains situated within a criminal law framework.

Consultations undertaken by the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC, 2009) found some evidence that the police have been learning the lessons of research and a widespread view amongst enforcement personnel that they should have a harm reduction role, although the extent to which this approach has been recognised and embraced varied considerably across forces and regions. The Commission also found that harm reduction was increasingly being made a target of enforcement operations, albeit often limited to considering the reductions in acquisitive crime that can be attained by diverting drug using offenders into treatment. Focused-deterrence strategies, selective targeting and sequential interdiction efforts against those offenders who are causing the most harm to communities are being increasingly

embraced as promising enforcement alternatives to zero-tolerance approaches to drugs and crime (Felbab-Brown, 2013). Examples of targeting specific individuals or groups identified as being particularly harmful are assertive outreach schemes such as Operation Reduction in Brighton and Operation Iceberg in Kent (UKDPC, 2009). In these schemes, street-level dealers, who have been identified as user-dealers, are approached and offered the opportunity to enter a programme of treatment as an alternative to arrest and prosecution. An evaluation of Operation Reduction suggested that it was a cost-effective way of rehabilitating individuals and reducing their offending (Brown et al., 2008). ‘Pulling levers’ operations, to give another example, which have been experimented with by a number of US and Latin American police departments in order to close open drug markets, reduce serious gang violence and alleviate community tensions, generally involve the innovative use of problem-oriented policing and restorative justice techniques. Having carried out a systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical evidence, Braga and Weisburd (2012) conclude that such strategies seem to be effective in reducing crime and increasing both the legitimacy of police actions and the collective efficacy of communities. However, they urge caution in interpreting these results owing to the lack of more rigorous randomised controlled trials.

Applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets is a break from tradition that necessitates significant transformations in the organisation of policing and a cultural shift in thinking about the role of the police in drug control. To work effectively, there needs to be a commitment from police leaders, a shared understanding of what a harm reduction approach involves, and an analytical framework in place to assess holistically and systematically the potential benefits and costs of policing interventions. Whilst recent publications provide valuable insights into shifts in thinking about the values, objectives and norms of drug law enforcement and evaluations of specific operations, what is unclear at present is how these changes have affected the everyday realities of the drug war on the frontline as there remains a distinct lack of empirical research into the routine activities and occupational culture of enforcement personnel. Police culture lies at the centre of much research and theorising about policing and the police because it is known to exert considerable influence over the attitudes and behaviours of police officers. Another proposition that remains central to understandings in this area is that the culture of the lower ranks has proven to be stubbornly resistant to changes in policing and capable of undermining organisational reforms (Bacon, 2014; Chan, 1997; Loftus, 2009). In times of change, then, ethnographic accounts are even more vital than usual, for there is a need to know how things are perceived and put into practice at the operational level of policing if we are to see the direction in which they are going or could potentially go.

Investigating the investigators

The empirical data that informs this article derive from extensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in two English police service areas, during which I was primarily concerned with the everyday realities and occupational culture of specialist detective units assigned to the task of policing drug markets (Bacon, 2013, 2016). From an empirical standpoint, ethnography has proven unparalleled for penetrating the inner world of police organisations and examining the working rules, tacit understandings and underlying assumptions that operate beneath the presentational canopy of institutional frameworks.

Research settings

So as to preserve the anonymity of the police forces and those police officers and members of staff who participated in the study, the research settings have been given the pseudonyms 'Metropolis' and 'Smallville'. Both locations were coterminous with the geographical boundaries of a district of the associated constabulary and selected to provide variation in local context.

The detectives of the Smallville drug squad were tasked with making cases against suspected drug dealers on an exclusive basis. Their base of operations was a small room of a moderately sized police station, located outside a village on the outskirts of town. The station acted as the intelligence centre of the district, as it housed the intelligence unit, the source unit, the financial investigation unit and the whole proactive investigation department (which consisted of the drug squad, the burglary squad and the vehicle theft squad). During fieldwork, the drug squad was made up of seven detectives – the self-proclaimed 'magnificent seven': one detective sergeant, five detective constables and one trainee detective constable. Membership changed only slightly when the trainee detective left to work in reactive CID and another officer was temporarily assigned from the force-level serious organised crime unit. The squad operated under the management of the head of the proactive investigation department, a detective inspector who reported to the detective superintendent in charge of divisional operations. Plans were put into motion by middle management to disband the drug squad as the fieldwork was coming to a close, with the intention of merging the separate squads of the proactive investigation department into a generalist crime squad.

Before fieldwork commenced in Metropolis I learned that the drug squad had become the firearms squad a few years earlier. Whilst the detectives employed therein remained the foremost drug investigators of the district and spent most of their time policing drugs, their focus was now on firearms offences. The firearms squad occupied the top floor of a small police station, which they shared with a Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) and a team of school liaison officers. It generally consisted of around eighteen officers: one detective inspector, three detective sergeants, ten detective constables, two trainee detective constables and two uniformed officers on attachment. Officers were split into a reactive and a proactive team: the former responded to firearms-related incidents and calls from the public about potential firearms offences, whereas the latter specialised in investigating firearms offences and suspected drug dealers. Each team operated under the management of the detective inspector, who reported to the superintendent in charge of divisional operations.

Research methods

In total, ninety-six days were spent in the field between April 2008 and May 2010. The research primarily comprised over five hundred hours of direct observation of ordinary police work both on and off the streets, everything from meetings, briefings and administrative duties to covert surveillance operations, the execution of drugs warrants and court proceedings. Following Loftus (2009), I distinguished two types of data as pertinent for accessing the features of the occupational culture: the ways actors talk spontaneously about aspects of their occupation provide an important insight into their values and beliefs; and how they deal practically with real situations conveys a great deal about the norms and craft of routine policing. Along with the informal conversations that were integrated with observations, another strand of the methodology comprised fifty semi-structured interviews. In addition to the drug detectives, interviews were carried out with key individuals within the participating police services, such as strategic managers, intelligence officers and civilian analysts. The process of interviewing was useful for focusing on specific topics, testing the

veracity of observations and asking questions aimed at isolating and capturing individual perspectives towards the job, the working environment and the field of drug control. Finally, in order to interrogate the ‘organisational front’, understand the legal and policy context surrounding the investigations under observation, and examine how such frameworks structure the work of detectives on the frontline, it was crucial that I analysed the relevant statutes and internally and externally published police documents. These included drug laws, police drug strategies, training manuals, analytical products and case files. Documentary analysis enabled me to describe and analyse ‘official’ definitions of the situation and how the police present themselves and their work. It also provided an insight into strategic priorities, operational activities, management structures and mechanisms of accountability.

Views from the frontline

Sense of mission

Despite the complicated, contested and counterproductive realities of drug control policy and practice, the drug detectives had a remarkably clear understanding of their role in the global prohibition regime. Above all else, they saw themselves as elite crime fighters and considered the detection, arrest and successful conviction of those involved in the illegal drug business to be the core justification for the policing of drugs. This was the task to which they had been assigned by the organisation, their mission, the means through which they made a difference and helped ‘keep the lid on’ the local drug problem. Detectives accepted the need for a multifaceted approach to drug control, appreciated that enforcement alone was never a silver bullet, and advocated the benefits of partnership initiatives in tackling both supply and demand, but for them it was essentially about disrupting markets by making cases against suspected drug dealers:

‘It’s about upholding the law and getting the dealers and drugs off the streets.’ (Detective, Metropolis)

‘Our job is to go after the biggest dealers in town. It’s not our job to go after everyone who does drugs.’ (Detective, Smallville)

‘We play our part, but there’s only so much we can do. We take a problem-solving approach to drug law enforcement, and work in partnership with local agencies to “tackle drugs together” – “protecting families and communities” is the new national strategy ambition. Only last week one of our neighbourhood teams was working with a housing association to close a crack house ... We “test on arrest” and have drug workers carrying out assessments in custody suites. The idea is to get drug users into treatment and away from a life of crime.’ (Detective Sergeant, Metropolis)

Generally speaking, the detectives viewed community policing and multi-agency partnerships as ‘soft’ policing activities and low priorities in the drug control agenda of the police because they departed from ‘proper’ images of police work associated with masculine ideals of crime fighting (Loftus, 2009; McCarthy, 2014). Those officers with experience of such activities, however, so long as they proved to be pragmatic and beneficial, spoke highly of their colleagues in neighbourhood teams and partner agencies and worked with them wholeheartedly as and when required. ‘You end up seeing the same people [drug users] from a different perspective,’ said a trainee detective as she spoke about her community placement with the Drug Interventions Programme (DIP).¹ ‘It definitely opened my eyes and taught me a lot about the pros and cons of treatment and offender management.’ Yet, save for diverting drug-using offenders into treatment, a common feeling was that demand reduction is ‘not our

job' and has 'nothing to do with policing'. Opinions on drug treatment ranged from 'it's a complete waste of money' and is 'condoning criminal behaviour', through to 'there are some success stories, but most of them struggle to stay off drugs'. The fact that the police were repeatedly dealing with the same 'problem' drug users served only to confirm these kinds of belief. And when they came across dealers in possession of prescription drugs it could lead them to accuse the health service of being part of the problem. 'They're only giving them more drugs to sell,' said an irritated detective after discovering a dozen boxes of Subutex in a drawer in the kitchen of a suspected heroin dealer.

Police officers often have a heightened 'sense of mission'. They view their 'thin blue line' of work as a vocation, a calling or moral imperative, a unique and indispensable social function to preserve a valued way of life and protect the 'good' members of the public against the forces of 'evil' (Loftus, 2009; Reiner, 2010). The detectives I worked with knew that drugs are 'bad'. 'Drugs kill people', they said, they're 'behind everything these days', the breakdowns and broken families, for instance, the crime, disorder and general deterioration of society. The indisputable truth of such damaging effects left them with little doubt about their value and the righteousness of their actions. During fieldwork, an event that really brought this belief to the fore was when plans were put into motion to disband the Smallville drug squad. It provoked the detectives into questioning the motivations and competencies of their supervisors and chief officers. Signs of anger and frustration were regularly displayed as they told me about how management 'didn't have a clue' and would 'end up regretting their decision'. They were convinced that drug dealers would take advantage of their newfound freedom and in turn there would be more drugs on the streets and more drug-related crime and disorder. To be sure, the detectives truly believed in the importance of their work, so not only did the decision to disband the squad deprive them of their territory, it also challenged their sense of mission and made them feel devalued and dejected. From their perspective, the police no longer considered the control of drug supply to be a priority and this was a huge mistake.

War?

Although the detectives considered their basic function to be 'getting the dealers and drugs off the streets', in both police organisations they readily acknowledged that enforcement is a marginal activity with limited capacity and certainly did not perceive their task as arresting all the dealers or eradicating all the markets in their service area. They were not at war with drugs in either a figurative or an operational sense. They were working within their limits to manage the drug trade, trying their best to 'make sure it doesn't get any worse' and 'keep the public happy'. A 'drug-free world' was simply 'not on the cards'. Even as an aspirational goal, the slogan was ridiculed for being unattainable and criticised for creating unrealistic expectations. Drug war rhetoric was equally disparaged and noticeably absent from standard police vocabulary:

'[The "war on drugs"] is a melodramatic way of saying drug law enforcement. You won't hear the police calling it that – it's the politicians and the press who call it that.' (Detective, Smallville)

'The "war on drugs" is nothing more than hot air coming out of politicians' mouths.' (Senior Officer, Metropolis)

'I don't like it, I never have. Don't get me wrong, I'm anti-drugs; I'm not saying legalise drugs and let everyone take them if they want to. Drugs should be illegal because they can do a lot of damage to people. But why can't we just call it what it is; we're not at war with drugs, we're policing drugs.' (Detective, Metropolis)

Politicians are regarded by the police as ‘remote and unrealistic ivory-tower idealists, corrupt self-seekers, secret subversives, or simply too weak to resist villainy’ (Reiner 2010, p. 125). Being adherents of realism, pragmatic, ‘down-to-earth’ and ‘anti-bullshit’, the detectives said that in practice they targeted the drugs, dealers and marketplaces that caused the greatest harm to local communities in terms of crime and disorder. The underlying rationale was that interventions would punish priority offenders and criminal groups in the first instance and alter the market in the long term by deterring other actors from engaging in the designated harmful behaviours. Dealers who traded in heroin and crack were thought to be worthwhile operational targets, chiefly because of their link between the use of these drugs and acquisitive crime, as were dealers who had a history of violence and access to firearms, dealers who were part of organised crime networks or streets gangs, dealers who operated openly in public places, and ‘Mr Bigs’ who dealt in large quantities and made large profits. They had, in other words, what Collison (1995, p. 169) described as ‘a prevailing operational and practical sense of a normal and orderly market over which they could stamp their authority’. Drug offenders became the target of a drug investigation when they acted ‘out of order’:

‘The fact of the matter is millions of people commit drug offences every year – what are we supposed to do about that? Apart from the ones that cause people harm, I’d say no one expects us to do anything.’ (Detective, Metropolis)

‘What you’re calling “dance drugs” are just not a priority. Management aren’t interested; they’ve got more serious problems to deal with ... they’ve got targets to meet ... The public aren’t interested either, they don’t kick up much of a fuss about people getting messed up on pills because it doesn’t really affect them.’ (Detective Sergeant, Smallville)

As we can see from the previous quotations, the detectives sometimes inferred from the pervading presence of drugs throughout society that policing is only really necessary – or possible, given the limitless workload and limited resources of the police – when drug problems become ‘serious problems’ or cause harms that warrant calls for service from the public. These findings clearly show that they were implicitly applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets. Furthermore, such an approach to drug law enforcement was thought to reflect the norms, values and beliefs of the communities they policed and be more responsive to their fears and perceptions of the problem. It might be implied, then, that drug problems that fall below this threshold for intervention were seen as falling within the remit of other drug control agencies. At a push, it might even be implied that some police officers think that recreational drug use is best dealt with through informal mechanisms of social control.

Drug policy reform

Whilst the detectives rarely questioned the authority of the law, believed they were making a positive difference, and remained motivated by operational successes on a case-by-case basis, their efforts were accompanied by a sense of futility and doubt. Many officers had a cynical outlook. They were defeatist, pessimistic about the future of policing drugs and disheartened by their failure to stop things ‘getting worse’:

‘Drugs aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. One thing you quickly come to realise in this job is that no matter how many dealers you put away there’s always someone out there selling.’ (Detective, Smallville)

‘Sometimes I think we’re like those [Japanese] soldiers in World War II, you know, those ones on the islands who just kept fighting because they didn’t know the war was over. Only difference is we’d lost the war before we even started fighting.’ (Detective Sergeant, Metropolis)

‘We’ve thrown everything at it, even the kitchen sink, but drug problems just keep getting worse. In the end, the drugs are still on the streets no matter how many people we lock up.’ (Senior Officer, Smallville)

Yet, even though there was widespread acknowledgment that the current system is not exactly working as intended, the majority of police officers remained faithful supporters of the status quo and resistant to change. Prohibition was seen as the only morally legitimate and feasible policy option. The more authoritarian and closed-minded officers were of the opinion that the drug problems of today are the result of the failure to enforce fully and properly the external ordering imposed by the criminal law:

‘We’ve all gone soft on drugs, that’s the problem. If the police decided to crack down harder on drugs we could make a massive difference.’ (Detective Sergeant, Smallville)

Arguments for reform, such as decriminalisation or legal regulation, were generally viewed with scepticism or given zero weight when they appeared irrelevant or repugnant. ‘Those people who want to do away with drug laws don’t know what they’re talking about,’ I was told. ‘They’d soon change their tune if they spent a day in our shoes’. The police were particularly dismissive of claims that enforcement was a waste of resources and could actually exacerbate drug problems. Criticisms of police activities and attempts to correct them are often perceived as a direct threat to their integrity and authority, which, according to Crank (2004), reinforces rather than diminishes their cynicism and defensive solidarity.

After the morning’s warrant the members of the firearms squad who had escaped the trip to the station to process and interview the arrestee promptly headed to a local café for breakfast. Over bacon sandwiches and coffee they decided to have a discussion about drug policy – for my benefit, no doubt. ‘The truth is we’re fighting a losing battle,’ Joe said. ‘Any cop with enough experience will tell you the same.’ There were murmurs of agreement and nods of heads from some of the other detectives sat round the table. ‘People want drugs, and nothing we can do will change that.’ Another detective went on to tell the group how he thought enforcement was futile and treatment didn’t work. ‘Management wouldn’t be happy if they knew I was saying this, but I think drugs should be legalised. You won’t find many officers who’ll say it on the record, but lots of us think it. I don’t know how it would work, all I know is this shit isn’t working. Can’t you academics figure it out?!’ ‘I think they should all be shot,’ blurted out one of the other detectives. The officer to his right, who up until now had barely spoken, butted in to voice his disagreement. He said that heroin should be made legal, that way ‘there’ll be no crime, it’s out of our hands and they end up killing themselves anyway’. ‘Trust you idiots to come out with something like that,’ Joe said in a jocular manner. ‘You don’t know your arseholes from your elbows’. (Fieldnotes, Metropolis)

However, a significant minority sat at the opposite end of the policy spectrum, said they would welcome fundamental change and were well aware of the unintended consequences of prohibition. Some of these officers believed that the criminalisation of recreational users was overly punitive, for example, that ‘a record can fuck you up for life’, and that the disproportionate use of stop and search on young people of black and other minority ethnic origins had severely damaged police legitimacy and police-community relations. Then there were the agnostics, those who were open to change but remained on the fence because they were unaware of the evidence or uncertain about the practical application and likely outcomes of alternative policy options. ‘Maybe we’ve just got to suck it and see.’

Detecting change

Before progressing any further with the discussion, it is worth reminding ourselves of what the existing literature tells us about police reform and cultural change. Importantly, organisational studies suggest that change cannot be forced but will happen when an organisation is ready, either because of an external crisis or internal impetus and imperatives (Schein, 2004). Reforms are implemented in large part by the people to whom they are addressed. More often than not, therefore, unless police reformers enlist the support of the lower ranks, their efforts will not succeed in fundamentally changing policing on the frontline. Police officers must believe there is a need to change, be convinced that the proposed policies of reform are both necessary and appropriate, and be properly motivated and equipped to introduce and maintain support for the changes in their everyday activities. Legislators and policymakers can define new working models that will gradually alter values, beliefs and basic assumptions if they are of practical benefit and provide meaning to the social experience of police officers. As a general rule, however, this will occur only if new ways of working are considered to work better than existing practices and make more sense than traditional understandings. Police studies have repeatedly shown that innovations have habitually failed to override the conservative culture of the police when they conflict with accepted wisdoms. Changes to the status quo are resisted or adopted superficially when they challenge existing worldviews, require officers to break from their established routines and do not accord with their intuitive common sense (Chan, 1997; Loftus, 2009; Skogan, 2008).

The notion of applying harm reduction principles to drug law enforcement emerged during the fieldwork period and remains a relatively new movement that is gathering momentum but still exists almost entirely in academic discourse and occasional dialogue between drug researchers, policymakers and practitioners. It was all but unheard of in the police organisations under study. On the surface, ‘harm reduction’ was central to national drug policies, had been incorporated into police drug strategy documents, and was regularly used as a justification for policing drugs in management meetings and operational planning and paperwork. In practice, however, there had been no meaningful change in what Sackmann (1991) calls ‘axiomatic knowledge’, which represents the basic assumptions about ‘why things are done the way they are’. For the most part, ‘harm’ reduction was thought of as being synonymous with ‘crime’ or ‘supply’ reduction, or in terms of public health initiatives that focus on harms associated with drug use. There was a lack of clarity over the definition of harm and little discussion, no guidelines or training sessions, about what a harm reduction approach to policing drug markets actually involved or how success might be measured. As Skogan (2008, p. 26) makes clear, abstract concepts ‘must be turned into lists of practical, day-to-day activities and then enshrined in enforceable orders to which officers in the field can fairly be held accountable’. The instrumental framework developed by the UKDPC (2009, pp. 40-56) could fill this void and help the police focus existing practice to target harms more clearly.

Albeit down to pragmatics rather than ethics, the fact that the principal role of proactive drug investigations was to target the elements of the drug trade that emerged from the police intelligence picture as most harmful might be taken to indicate that there was some degree of support for rethinking and redeveloping enforcement strategies and tactics to focus on managing drug markets in a way that minimises the various associated harms. Then again, it could equally be perceived as business as usual, in the sense that detectives have always responded to the more serious crimes and made cases against the most serious and organised criminals. The views expressed by the majority were certainly not indicative of an all-

embracing harm reduction philosophy. Detectives tended not to think outside the box of traditional enforcement interventions – warrants, covert surveillance and test purchase operations – and seldom integrated aspects of community policing or partnership engagement into their investigative activities. Nor did they work with intelligence analysts or researchers to better understand the potential negative consequences of their tactical resolutions prior to taking action or commission them to carry out operational reviews and results analyses afterwards. ‘We just don’t have the time,’ said one detective. ‘As soon as we’ve finished one operation we’re onto the next one.’ It was generally assumed that arrests, seizures and prosecutions would automatically have a positive impact on individuals and communities. These were the ultimate measures of success in an organisation focused on reducing crime and bringing offenders to justice. This much was common sense and there was no compelling enough reason for them to break from their established routines.

Conclusion

Policing the ‘drug problem’ is about enforcing order and managing expectations in a way that reflects the unfolding dynamics of society. It is a complex and delicate issue, a balancing act between conflicting interests in a field that is awash with confusion, contradiction and controversy. The police play multiple roles in the long-running drug control drama series. Over the years, they have brought drug offenders to justice, disrupted the market and protected people against themselves, encountered the counterculture, fought in a war and worked in partnership to reduce the harmfulness of drug use through treatment services and the provision of education. They have needlessly criminalised countless citizens and caused a great deal of harm in their ineffectiveness and excesses. And the show must go on. It must go on because drugs are prohibited and it is the duty of the police to enforce the law. It must go on because drugs are connected to a range of crime and disorder problems and it is the duty of the police to reduce crime and maintain social order. It must go on because drugs are a cause of public concern and it is the duty of the police to reassure the public and respond to their calls for service. But it need not go on in the same way. For too long we have had deterrence at the price of injustice. ‘Justice’, Husak (2002, p. 13) argues, ‘should not be conceptualized as a goal our policies should try to achieve, but as a constraint that limits what we are allowed to do in pursuing our objectives’. Until the global prohibition regime is overthrown, therefore, enforcement agencies should be governed by the principles of harm reduction and only use tactics that are experienced by the community as being fair, lawful and effective.

This article has shown that there have been some positive advancements in applying harm reduction principles to policing drugs. However, with a particular focus on drug detective work, the ethnographic findings reveal that the theory and practice of taking a broad approach to reducing the entire suite of harms generated by drug markets and drug control efforts have not yet entered police decision making processes in any meaningful way. Notwithstanding the apparent failures and costs of the war on drugs, at present there are no external pressures in the drug policy arena or internal forces that are powerful enough to trigger the seismic shift that seems to be needed to reform significantly the role of the police in drug control. Calls for change are loud and persuasive but have a tendency to fall on deaf ears. Being a heavily politicised policy area, evidence is all too often jettisoned in favour of an overriding need to appear ‘tough on drugs’ and ‘send the right message’ (MacGregor, 2011, 2013; Monaghan, 2011; Stevens, 2011). If there is any hope of walking further down the path towards a more effective and just approach to drug law enforcement, the wider policing landscape must be

ripe for organisational change to occur. Police forces around the world are beginning to break from the drug war mentality and experiment with innovative strategies and tactics that are yielding positive results. Some officers would welcome fundamental change and others are open to persuasion and debate. As MacGregor (2011, p. 41) points out, research which ‘challenges an accepted consensus tends to have less immediate impact on policy per se but over time it can be seen to help to develop alternative perspectives and, in alliance with other forces, may lead then to a further policy shift when a “window of opportunity” arises’. It pays to be optimistic. The day will come when the evidence can no longer be ignored and forces for change will tip the balance and bring out transformation.

¹ The Drug Interventions Programme (DIP) is a key part of the UK’s drug strategy. Introduced in 2003, it aims to provide more coordinated and joined-up provision of treatment for drug users going through the criminal justice system. In 2006, an extension of the more coercive elements within DIP was launched under the title ‘Tough Choices’. This consisted of a set of measures contained in the Drugs Act 2005: ‘Test on Arrest’, ‘Required Assessment’, and ‘Restrictions on Bail’ (Seddon et al., 2012).

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