

# From Helmand to the high street: a four-year study to systematically prioritise and map illicit drug markets in Lancashire

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## Abstract

For local law enforcement agencies, the subject of illicit drugs can appear all-pervasive. Any multifaceted problem situated in an intrusive media and political environment raises difficult challenges concerning the allocation of resources. This article explores the process behind Lancashire Constabulary's decision to highlight Class A open drug markets as an operational priority, and looks at how a multi-agency intelligence process, based on geographic mapping methodology (GIS), was initiated to direct enforcement and preventative activity.

## Key words

Drug markets, policing, reassurance policing, crime mapping

## Introduction

In 1993, the Audit Commission set out a simple premise in its report, *Helping with Enquiries: Tackling crime effectively*. It argued that in an environment of increasing demand, police agencies should target their resources at the areas and at the times they know that crimes are most likely to occur. Known as 'intelligence-led policing', this became

a widespread approach from which managers were able to 'determine objective policing tactics in regard to enforcement targets, prevention activities and further intelligence gathering operations' (Ratcliffe, 2008, p1). Unfortunately, as Hammersley (2008) points out, drug issues can be complex, as they exist within a multifaceted, multitiered global

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environment. As such, the allocation of resources can be difficult due to the influence of many social and political variables.

In 2004, Lancashire Constabulary, a police force serving a population of approximately 1.5 million in the north-west of England, became one of only a few police agencies in the UK to highlight Class A open drug markets as one of their top priorities. An innovative addition to this decision was to establish a multi-agency intelligence system based on geographic mapping (GIS) for the collection and dissemination of multi-agency information. The following section explains this process in more detail and hopefully provides valuable insight for policy-makers and practitioners in this field.

### Setting priorities: a focus on Class A open drug markets

The supply chain to provide illicit drugs to the UK can be long and complex, although Pearson and Hobbs (2001) propose that there are four main elements: importers, wholesalers, middle market drug-brokers and retail level dealers. Local police forces predominantly deal with retail level dealers who balance the demands of personal security and profit when supplying illicit drugs to potential customers. May & Hough (2004) point out that these transactions vary between 'open drug markets' where, to maximise their customer base, drugs are indiscriminately sold to anyone who asks for them, and 'closed markets' where the seller knows the buyer or insists on identity being verified by a reliable third party. Further, both 'open' and 'closed' markets can occur in either public or private spaces; in this way, even when supplying cocaine from a private dwelling, a 'crack house' can be classed as an open market if it sells to unknown callers.

In 2004, Lancashire Constabulary formally declared its intention to target those offenders who traffick Class A drugs, specifically from open drug markets situated in public spaces. This decision was relatively uncommon as, although all police agencies took action against illicit drug use, it was often both poorly co-ordinated and secondary to government priorities, which focused on volume crime (burglary, vehicle crime and violent crime). Lancashire Constabulary argued that illicit drugs generated a considerable amount of crime, and that by targeting key offenders, overall crime levels (as well as the public's feeling of safety) could be improved. This section explains the four aspects behind this decision: the relationship

between illicit drug use and crime; the public's perception of local policing; the media; and government influence.

Although the link between crime and drugs is often cited as the most enduring reason for law enforcement agencies to take action against illicit drug users, on closer inspection this association is ambiguous. Albery *et al* (2004, p149) provide a useful overview of this confusion by exploring the relationship from a number of perspectives. They initially argue that a causal link exists, by suggesting that illicit drugs cause crime by disinhibiting the user or motivating them to raise money to purchase the drug. Conversely, however, they argue that it could be the crime that drives people to consume controlled drugs, as it provides both the money and the contacts to acquire them. Third, they hypothesise that a more complex association may be at work, in that committing crime could contribute to illicit drug use, which in turn generates other types of crime. Finally, they argue that a link may be present without any direct causation, with the drug consumption merely being another symptom of those individuals who, through personality or environment, are unable to conform to everyday social values and norms (Jessor & Jessor, 1977).

So although Lancashire Constabulary established the association between illicit drugs and crime, this relationship appeared complex and required further exploration. Additional assistance was found in research that made clear that not all those who use illicit substances become problematic. Ramsay *et al* (2001) argue that a third of adults who use illicit substances become problematic, and these are especially concentrated in the 16–29 age category. Measham *et al* (2001) agree with this, showing that although illicit drug use is common, many people finance it through legitimate means and differentiate between acceptable and non-acceptable drugs (the latter being heroin and crack cocaine). Albery *et al* (2004) suggest that around four million people a year use illicit drugs in Britain, most of which is recreational and involves cannabis and ecstasy. However, a smaller number (estimated as five per cent of those who use illicit drugs) also commit crimes to support their dependency of heroin and (crack) cocaine. This finding has been supported by others; indeed, offenders have reported an average weekly expenditure of £290 on heroin and (crack) cocaine, mainly sourced through acquisitive crime and drug dealing, with heroin and (crack) cocaine users having an average annual illegal income

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of £15,000 compared to £9,000 for other illegal drug users (Bennett *et al*, 2001). Hearnden & Harocopos (2000) also found that half of drug offenders on probation in London used heroin and crack cocaine, spending an average of £362 per week on such drugs prior to their arrest, generated mainly through shoplifting. In summary, when looking at the academic research surrounding the association between drugs and crime, Lancashire Constabulary decided that chaotic heroin and crack cocaine users appeared to be the most problematic. This was also corroborated locally, through mandatory drug testing pilots that showed a strong correlation between persistent offenders and the use of heroin and crack cocaine.

The second influence was community-generated; it became clear that, as well as being victims of drug-associated crime, members of the public also suffer from the peripheral affects of drugs being purchased in a public environment. Indeed, Reuter (2001, p1) says: *'...markets for illicit cocaine and heroin ... appear to be different from legal markets in a number of dimensions: high levels of violence, rapid turnover of participants; the association, at the individual level, of frequent use and selling; and the large variation of prices and quality in narrowly defined geographic markets at a given point in time'*.

In fact, observing discarded hypodermic syringes in stairwells or hearing disorderly conduct taking place at the homes of drug dealers has recently been described as 'signal crime' as it generates public awareness that crime is taking place, even though actual crimes are not being witnessed. Tackling such issues under the label of 'reassurance policing' has recently been successful nationally in terms of raising public confidence and satisfaction levels with the police and their local neighbourhood (Tuffin *et al*, 2006). Indeed, 'reassurance policing' recognises the significance of what Ditton & Innes (2005) label the logic of 'perceptual intervention' – policing that not only tries to make people safer but also improves their 'subjective' feelings of security. Since 2002, Lancashire Constabulary, which surveys 4,000 residents every three months, has been aware that open drug markets have been linked to citizen concerns. A recent review of monthly community meetings taking place in each of the council wards throughout Lancashire has shown consistent concern by members of the public regarding the visible signs of illicit drug use (Mitchell, 2008).

The third influence is the media, which commentators have shown can focus intense

pressure on public bodies such as the police. For example, Williams and Dickinson (1993, p33) made the point that: *'crime reporting in the news media has been a focus of concern because of the assumption that the salience given to certain types of crime ... creates a distorted picture of reality which is reflected in the beliefs of news consumers'*. A number of other studies have shown that those who read newspapers that contain vivid accounts of crime, report more fear than those who read newspapers containing more subtle crime reports. During this study, Lancashire Constabulary staff highlighted the fact that responding to media stories relating to illicit drug use was a major factor in prioritising open drug markets. In fact, one senior manager said:

*'We were constantly reacting to those areas the local newspaper had highlighted as being inundated with drugs problems, trying to reassure people who lived there it wasn't as bad as it was made out. We needed to do something more pro-active so we could use our resources more effectively in the areas our intelligence showed the greatest problem.'*

The government provided the final reason for Lancashire Constabulary to prioritise this area. It is widely accepted that policing has become increasingly more political since the 1970s, when it became a prominent election issue. Crime and the responses to crime occur within a social and political context and, as such, crime is socially constructed and politically influenced, with the government of the day having the power to determine not only what acts are criminal but also who is criminal and how crimes are tackled. Illicit drugs have always been subjected to political initiatives, and in recent years these have included crack house closures, asset recovery and the use of antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) and CRASBOs (ASBOs on criminal conviction). Although obviously concerned with illicit drugs, the closure of open drug markets was not at this time a government priority for the police or other agencies. However, Lancashire Constabulary was able to argue that the main national priority at that time (street robbery) was a symptom of heroin and crack cocaine use in Lancashire and, as such, the Home Office endorsed the Lancashire Constabulary approach.

In summarising this section, it can be argued that although the issue of drugs is diverse, Lancashire Constabulary came to the conclusion, based on academic, community, media and government concerns, that their priority should be

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to focus operational attention on chaotic Class A drug users, specifically those who sold such drugs in open (public) markets. Having set the priority, the question then arose of how the problem could be tackled.

### An intelligence process to monitor Class A drug markets

Dupont (2003) points out that one of the real difficulties with the police service is the lack of any real 'institutional memory', with lessons being learned locally and forgotten locally. What Lancashire Constabulary required was a template on which to consistently monitor information about illicit drug use, which was accessible and relevant to strategic and tactical decision makers. However, the gathering of illicit drug information generates a number of methodological problems. For example, traditional data has relied on drug arrests for trafficking and possession. This data can be manipulated through police crackdowns, however, as increased numbers of arrests highlight a 'drug problem', inactivity can be interpreted as the absence of a 'drug problem'. Similarly, other indicators (such as the purity of a particular drug) provide useful information but again are sensitive to the effort placed in relation to seizures.

There are also concerns about how the information is gathered. A distinction can be made between information from 'open' sources and that from 'closed' sources, and information can also be categorised as quantitative (numerical) or qualitative data. 'Open source' information, for example, could emanate from the media, and also from public concern. As mentioned previously, Lancashire Constabulary holds police and communities together (PACT) meetings in each local area every month, which often provide a forum for concerns to be voiced about illegal drug use. Again, methodological issues arise; public meetings can be dominated by individuals who aren't representative of the local community, and residents may stay away due to intimidation.

'Closed source' information refers to more private information not found within the public domain. Although information from partner agencies (ie. the ambulance service) may be straightforward, other information such as that emanating from informants (now termed 'covert human intelligence sources') is more problematic, as the individual may have a historical association with illicit drugs, making their motivation and testimony unreliable, while their information

may be affected by rumour, fear and suspicion. As Freisthler *et al* (2005) contend, the arena is complex and difficult to negotiate because the activities are illegal and those involved are motivated to avoid detection, having no recourse to the police for protection or to the courts for compensation. In essence, analysis of these difficulties leads to the view that no single source of information is completely compelling and that it should always be corroborated by a variety of sources. Lancashire Constabulary looks to combine primary, secondary and tertiary datasets. Primary data is factual and auditable information such as recorded crime and population censuses; secondary data includes other police databases (ie. offender and intelligence databases); and tertiary data could include information from partner agencies on, for example, health, housing, fire, education and land use. Indeed, the use of multi-agency data is often seen as a valuable method, both for providing a different perspective and as a further tool for interpreting police data.

In essence, this debate led Lancashire Constabulary to gather the following information:

- the type and quantity of drug involved (divided into cannabis, cocaine, heroin, amphetamine, MDMA, crack cocaine, ketamine, methadone and other)
- arrests (possession and trafficking)
- locations of deaths resulting from illicit drugs overdose
- locations where naxolone has been used by paramedics to revive a subject suffering from a drug overdose
- intelligence reports from operational officers about drug markets
- public accounts at community meetings about open drug markets
- associated disputes linked to drug markets.

From these accounts, intelligence on drug markets is built up, categorised as follows:

- open markets where drugs are sold on the street in residential areas
- open markets where drugs are sold in public areas (eg. bus stations, cafes or clubs/pubs)
- markets open to new callers but accessed through arranged meetings; off-street locations where drugs are bought, sold and used (eg. crack houses) and that may be open or closed
- closed markets where sales are made only to people known to the suppliers at pre-arranged meetings, either on the street or in houses
- no known market in the area.



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Lancashire Constabulary was therefore able to gather a balance of quantitative and qualitative information that could be aggregated to present an overall score on which to base an assessment of illicit drug activity within the county. Although traditional methods such as bar graphs could be used to depict trends, these were felt to be limited and unable to effectively layer data sets over each other. A more sophisticated approach was needed and, as a result, a geographical information system (GIS), was thought appropriate. The use of geographic mapping systems first became popular in the US and have since found worldwide appeal, with the use of such systems continuing to develop as commentators become more aware of the sociospatial aspects of crime (Bottoms, 2007). Today, a number of commercial products are available that provide different options in relation to the depiction of the data, illustrating incidents through a variety of symbols and colours. This approach has the benefit of providing a very graphic image of the data, which can be monitored over time.

Although information about crime events can now be geo-coded to identify the exact locations of incidents, this facility was unavailable across all agencies when the initiative began in 2004, so council ward boundaries were used as the common denominator. Since then, the data has been consistently collected and mapped over time to show strategic snapshots relating to Class A drug usage and trafficking within Lancashire. By viewing different maps across time, different colours immediately depict such issues as where the concentration of open markets are, what type of drug is most prevalent, where the highest concentration of those in treatment are, or where drug overdoses or deaths are more likely to take place. Beneath this picture is a wealth of information that can be mined further. If the map shows an area of concern, it allows the analyst to drill down into the intelligence on which it is based, finding more precise tactical information regarding individuals and locations. As LaVigne & Groff (2001, p212) state from their experience of seeing GIS systems used under the direction of mayors within the US:

*'The purpose behind such expansive mapping efforts is to collaborate with other city and county agencies in an effort to pool resources to address public safety problems in a comprehensive manner.'*

In this way, Lancashire Constabulary and public agency partners have focused their particular

activity on enforcement and prevention initiatives. The enforcement strand relates to Operation Nimrod, which uses data to pinpoint open drug markets and allows for test purchase operations to take place. Once sufficient evidence is gathered, the main offenders are arrested or persuaded to engage in treatment. Similarly, the preventative strand, known as Operation Tower, supports persistent and chaotic offenders by introducing them to professional and voluntary bodies to assist them in controlling their consumption and finding employment and stability.

### Benefits of the system

Lancashire Constabulary has provided quarterly reviews on illicit drug markets since 2004, and the analysis shows four main benefits.

First, there is a consistent baseline on which to target resources and assess the impact of both preventative and enforcement action, and results have shown a reduction of open drug markets across many parts of Lancashire. Using a mapping tool to present diverse data sets has proved to be effective and popular with community safety practitioners; in one case, a crime and disorder partnership (CDRP) diverted resources to redesign a local park after seeing how it facilitated a concentration of drug markets. Indeed, this process provides more reliable intelligence to all decision-makers, such as police officers, magistrates, local government officials and private employees, when consulted about the design or location of facilities such as phone boxes or public toilets, or about decisions on 'crack house closures' or ASBOs.

Second, this baseline information allows for a wider understanding of wider drug market trends as well as the implications of drug use. At a strategic level, this data allows agencies in Lancashire to assess such concerns as whether the increase in the poppy harvest in Helmand Province in Afghanistan has had an effect in the county (interpreted through increased availability, increased purity and reduced cost) or whether the concern over methylamphetamine is justified or a 'moral panic'. Further, as analysts now monitor diverse data sets, hypotheses are more rigorously tested. In this way, the council wards thought by police staff to have the highest level of drug dealing, the highest number of drug deaths, and the areas where members of the public are most concerned about drugs also show the highest number of open drug markets.

The third benefit relates to the media. Rather than reacting to stories highlighted by local media outlets in Lancashire, the police are now more

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systematic and proactive in their approach. As such, the media have been provided with a cohesive picture of why and where action has been taken and this is communicated to the local community in a more positive light.

Finally, Lancashire Constabulary has seen a significant increase in terms of public confidence and satisfaction over the past few years. As was mentioned earlier, Lancashire Constabulary surveys 4,000 people from the population of 1.5 million every three months, asking directly what (if anything) has made the respondent more or less confident in the police. It has consistently been shown that activity against drugs has been material in improving overall confidence in the police. Although it is widely accepted that this activity is targeted at the lowest level of the supply chain and has little impact on overall availability, it is effective against those who cause the most crime and disorder at a local level.

### Conclusion

It can be argued that a consistent approach to Class A drugs over the past five years, specifically in relation to policing open drug markets, has produced significant results. On the positive side, it provides a picture that, although never fully complete, produces a systematic review of illicit drug issues and provides a consistent process over time, allowing changes to be identified quickly. This has enabled resources to be targeted more effectively, leading to the reduction of open drug markets in many areas of Lancashire. Further, the use of geographical mapping to illustrate data is seen to be particularly effective in a multi-agency setting. Goldstein (1990), Morgan (1991) and others have argued that crime and disorder is the symptom of more fundamental problems with society and cannot be counteracted by one agency working alone. Policing is therefore much wider than 'the police' and the issue of drugs is a prime example of this. Commentators know that illicit drug use impacts on a wide range of agencies, including the health services (overdose and addiction), housing managers (drug abusers are more problematic as tenants), local authorities (the cleansing of discarded needles), social services (the children of drug abusers) and probation services (the supervision of offenders with drug problems). By providing agencies with simple and consistent intelligence, they are not only able to understand their own roles but can also appreciate how they fit together with others.

Not surprisingly, there are difficulties with this approach. First there is an obvious cost; the cost of a dedicated analyst at police HQ coupled with the work required to provide substantial intelligence briefs at a local level should not be underestimated. In the early stages of this programme, this was something that was resisted by a number of the local areas. Secondly, the police as an organisation is well known for the level of discretion it enjoys. Coupled with the fact that intelligence is often subjective and at times not immediately verifiable means that there is a crucial decision to be made about whether a specific location is actually devoid of a drug market or just devoid of intelligence about the issue. Lancashire Constabulary would maintain that their investment in this area has reduced this uncertainty.

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