

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nicked: drug users' views of drug enforcement

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Abstract

Most countries drug strategies comprise a combination of drug treatment, drug enforcement, and drug prevention. While there has been a tendency in public policy documents over the last few years to emphasise the importance of basing policy on evidence of need and impact, in fact, the evidential basis across these three domains is highly skewed with most evidence being focused on drug treatment, some evidence focused on drug prevention, and relatively little evidence focused specifically on the impact of drug law enforcement. In this article, we report on drug users' views of major drug enforcement operations in their local area. The three drug enforcement operations we were looking at were carried out by the police in three different geographical areas. In each area, we interviewed a snowball sample of local heroin users to establish their views and experience of both the specific operations that had occurred in the recent past and their overall assessment of the impact of police activity in their local area. Most of those interviewed who had been involved in a drug raid described the experience as shocking, upsetting, and profoundly unsettling. However, according to the drug users interviewed, police activity had little sustained impact on the price, purity, and/or availability of illegal drugs locally. The article concludes by considering the policy implications of this research.

Keywords: *Drug law enforcement, drug users' views, ethnography*

Introduction

Drug law enforcement is a key strand of the drug strategies of almost every country in the world – including those that have decriminalised the personal use of illegal drugs. In Portugal, for example, which suspended the use of criminal sanctions for the personal use of illegal drugs in 2002, trafficking in illegal drugs remains a criminal offence. Indeed, from 2003 to 2009, the number of individuals arrested for drug trafficking in Portugal rose from 3739 to 4260 – a 14% increase (Eurostat, 2011). Despite the fact that drug enforcement has a central role in how most countries are tackling illegal drugs, there has been relatively little research evaluating the effectiveness of different approaches to drug enforcement and substantially less research in this area than has been directed at evaluating the impact of either drug abuse treatment or drug prevention which similarly constitute core strands of most countries drug strategies.

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Where research has been undertaken on the impact of drug law enforcement, there has been a focus on quantifying the amount of substances seized (Mazerolle et al., 2007; McKeganey et al., 2009); assessing whether drug enforcement has resulted in an increase in the price at which illegal drugs are being sold (Harcopos & Hough 2005, Reuter 2009); assessing the impact of drug enforcement on reducing drug-related harm (Caulkins, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2005; Kerr et al., 2005; Grieve, 2009; UKDPC, 2009); understanding the links between drug enforcement and violence (Werb et al., 2011); evaluating the relationship between drug law enforcement and drug treatment (Best et al., 2010); and describing the relationship between drug users and the police (Sarang et al., 2010).

In relation to the latter area, Lister and colleagues have suggested that contacts between the police and drug users tend to be of three kinds. First, there are informal encounters that enable the police to maintain a general level of surveillance over the drug users in their area. This is often done by police officers asking drug users general questions about what they are doing, where they are going, and where they have been. These low level enquires were seen by the police officers interviewed by Lister and colleagues as a way of underlining to drug users the fact that they were under some level of surveillance by the police. Second, there were occasions when the police would question drug users about specific crimes that had occurred in their area. These contacts tended to be of an informal nature and were based on the fact that drug users were seen as being knowledgeable about local criminality. Third, there were more formal encounters between the police and drug users. These encounters might involve drug users being stopped, searched, and arrested for drugs possession or as a result of evidence of their involvement in other criminal activities.

According to Lister and colleagues, many of the drug users they interviewed felt a sense of grievance at what they took to be the unfairness of being targeted by the police simply as a result of their drug use:

They just don't leave me alone, because they know of me past history, it's just like every time they see me, they're pulling me up, searching me in the middle of the street and making me pull all me syringes out when there's public walking past. (Lister et al., 2008, p. 44)

Some of the drug users interviewed in this study recognised that they too could increase the level of their conflict with the police depending upon how they reacted to these different types of encounters:

Many drug users recognized that their behavior influenced the way they were treated by police. They described how their reaction within encounters could escalate the level of conflict, particularly in situations where they felt unjustly stopped by police. Where drug users were antagonistic towards those doing policing then this was often reciprocated. (Lister et al., 2008, p. 45)

While Lister and colleagues focused upon what one might describe as the more routine encounters between the police and drug users, our focus in this article is with the impact of major drug enforcement operations on the lives of drug users and those selling drugs at a street level. More specifically, we surveyed drug users in the days following three key major drug enforcement operations in different parts of the United Kingdom. Our wish was to gain an understanding from the perspective of local drug users themselves as to how they saw these operations, whether they saw these operations as having a sustained or short-term impact and

whether the operations had a notable impact on the price, purity, and availability of drugs locally. In the next section, we provide an outline description of the three police operations that we were looking at. It is important to stress that we are able only to provide an outline of the operations involved and their location. Criminal proceedings have followed on from these operations and it would be inappropriate within the context of this publication to provide detailed information on the specific operations involved. Following an outline description of the operations involved, we provide a description of the research methods used in this study.

Research sites and police operations

Site A: a UK city with a population in excess of 400,000 with a long-standing and widespread heroin and crack cocaine problem

The police operation in this city began in 2009 and targeted the street supply of heroin and cocaine. In the summer of 2010, undercover law enforcement officers began making test purchases of illegal drugs to gather information on local dealers. Drug dealing was believed to be particularly widespread in the north of the city, although there was a perception that local residents were reluctant to report that dealing was occurring for fear of intimidation. Intelligence gathered by the police suggested that the street dealing network in this part of the city was highly mobile with local dealers using vehicles and pedal cycles and only small quantities of drugs being stored in residential properties. Previous attempts to secure observation points to gain evidence of drug dealing within the community had proved impossible to set up as a result of a reluctance on the part of community members at being seen to have assisted the police.

Street dealers were predominantly young males, operating for financial gain; many of whom, the police believed, had few if any criminal convictions. It was suspected by the police that street dealers working for one particularly well-organised crime group and were being paid £50 for every two hundred £10 “wraps” of heroin sold. Local dealers were thought to be capable of selling 1000 £10 bags of heroin each day.

The overt phase of this police operation began late in the summer of 2010 and took place over a 2-day period with several hundred uniformed police officers involved on both days. Although there were no significant quantities of drugs seized in this phase of the operation, there were a significant number of arrests and the seizure of property, money, and weapons. Following the arrest phase of this operation, there was an increased presence of Police Community Support Officers in the areas coupled with the distribution of leaflets by the police informing the community of a dedicated mobile phone number which local residents could use to report information on any continuing drug dealing activities within the area.

Site B: a small- to medium-sized UK town in a rural area with a population of over 44,000 and an extensive heroin problem

As with Site A, this police operation targeted the street supply of heroin and cocaine and involved test purchasing of illegal drugs by undercover police officers followed up by an overt arrest phase. The test purchase phase of this operation began in summer 2010 with undercover police seeking to obtain two separate drug purchases from each targeted dealer. The arrest phase of the operation began 14 days after the conclusion of the test purchase phase and involved approximately 70 police officers searching a number of homes under warrant. In agreement with the local prosecution authority, all individuals arrested on the day of action were detained in

custody pending their appearance in court and all of those detained were subject to an intelligence interview by local divisional intelligence staff. Unlike Site A, there was no operational follow-up in terms of high visibility police patrols or leaflet drops in this area.

Site C: UK city with a population over 500,000 with a substantial heroin problem

This police operation targeted individuals involved in the large-scale supply and distribution of heroin and cocaine. Based on intelligence gathered by the police, raids were carried out on a number of properties within the city resulting in the seizure of illicit drugs with a street value estimated, by the police, to be in excess of £5 m. Drug-making paraphernalia and weapons were also seized on the basis of these raids.

Research methods

In evaluating the impact of these police operations, we utilised a multi-method approach spanning both quantitative and qualitative methods. The present study is based solely on the qualitative component of the research, which involved semi-structured interviews with 54 heroin users spread across the three sites (20 in Site A, 15 in Site B, and 20 in Site C). These interviews, all of which were audio-taped, were framed around a pre-determined set of topics/questions which the individual drug users were asked to comment on. These were as follows:

1. Individual's own views and experiences of drug seizures, particularly heroin seizures, in this area.
2. Individual's own assessment of how big an impact they felt drug seizures were having on the local area.
3. Individual's own assessment of the impact of drug seizures upon them personally.
4. Individual's knowledge and assessed impact of most recent major police operation in the area.
5. Whether individual has noticed any increase in the price of heroin following the latest major drug seizure.
6. Whether the individual had needed to travel further to source drugs in the aftermath of the police operation locally.
7. Whether the individual had noticed any change in the purity of the heroin that was being sold locally following the police operation.
8. What the individual felt was the attitude of local drug users towards the police.
9. Whether the individual could imagine a time when, as a result of police activity, it would be impossible to purchase illegal drugs locally.
10. What the individual thought was the attitude of the police towards local drug users.
11. What the individual thought was the attitude of drug treatment service providers locally regarding the seizure of drugs locally.
12. How quickly the individual felt that any shortage in drug supply arising as a result of local drug seizures could be plugged by the local drug supply network.
13. Whether the individual felt that drug seizures could cause more harm than good.?
14. Whether the individual felt there were other things police could do locally that would have a larger beneficial impact on the area than the seizure of illegal drugs.
15. Whether in the aftermath of local drug seizures the individual had found him or herself travelling further to purchase drugs.

16. Whether in the aftermath of local drug seizures the individual had needed to purchase drugs from individuals whom they did not know well and had not previously bought from.
17. Whether the individual felt there were additional risks associated with buying drugs from new or less well-known contacts.
18. Whether the individual had personally been caught up in a drug seizure/drug raid and what that experience was like.
19. The individual's knowledge of the most recent major drug seizure in the area.
20. Individual's views as to whether the war on drugs was being won by the police.

Recruiting drug users for this part of our study involved approaching individuals who were attending local pharmacies in our study sites. With the agreement of the pharmacist in each pharmacy, individual drug users were asked about their willingness to take part in a semi-structured interview about their experience of local drug law enforcement activities. The decision to contact local drug users within retail pharmacies was made on the basis that these were settings that were likely to be seen by the drug users as both unconnected to law enforcement and as providing a trusted health focused space within which we could undertake our interviews. This was important given the potential for interviewers to be perceived by local drug users as connected to the law enforcement activities that had recently taken place in their area.

All of the trained interviewers involved in our research carried identification cards that noted their association with the University of Glasgow. Individuals agreeing to be interviewed were provided with a £10 voucher that could be exchanged for food (not alcohol or tobacco) at a local grocery store. Interviews were audio recorded for subsequent transcription. In addition to the drug-user interviews, a small number of qualitative interviews ($n = 8$) were also carried out with police officers from our study sites to elicit their own sense of the impact of the drug law enforcement operations.

Analysis of the audio transcripts was principally undertaken by one of us (NM) who read every transcript on multiple occasions, extracting out drug user comments around specific themes for further review and seeking to identify the range of drug user comments around each theme. An attempt was made to ensure that the breadth of drug user comments were drawn upon in this analysis rather than a focus on only a narrow range of potentially dramatic but untypical comments.

The structured component of our research involved the use of a questionnaire with 149 drug users spread across the three sites. Following an initial completion of the questionnaire, individual drug users were re-contacted approximately 6 weeks following their initial structured interview to establish whether their views and experiences had changed in the intervening period. Finally, the research involved requesting a small number of drug users (26) to complete a daily diary describing in outline form their drug purchasing journeys (time at which first drug purchase journey was initiated, time at which drug purchase was made, number of people approached, estimate of distance travelled). The present study is based solely upon the semi-structured interviews. Other publications being planned will report on the structured and drug diary elements of our research (McGallagly & McKeganey 2011).

Results

In this section, we draw upon the semi-structured interviews to look at the drug users' views and experience of being caught up in a drug raid; individual's views as to whether the police raid had resulted in a notable change in the price and purity of heroin being sold locally, individual's views as to the likely speed with which the drug market would reconstitute itself

following the enforcement operation and finally whether in their view the police were “winning the war on drugs.”

Being involved in a drug raid

In total, 30 of the 54 drug users we interviewed recounted their personal experience of having been involved in a drug raid; 13 of our interviewees said that they had never been involved in a drug raid despite the fact that they had been using illegal drugs for many years. The predominant view of a drug raid on the part of those who had been personally involved was overwhelmingly negative. Our interviewees described the experience as “horrible,” “scary,” “shocking,” “embarrassing,” and “frightening”. Among the majority of those who had been involved in a drug raid, there was absolutely no sense that the experience was seen as being commonplace, predictable, or an inevitable fact of life for the dependent drug user. Rather, when the police operation took place, it appears to have taken most of those involved by surprise, leaving them in a state of shock and alarm:

I’ve walked into three, I mean I’ve had warrants out so I’ve been lifted for my warrant but if your in it’s an automatic strip search anyway tae see if you’ve got anything on you. But as soon as they come in the door, they’ve got you cuffed and they are treating you as if you are guilty as they come in that door so they are talking to you like a bit of crap, do you know what I mean. As soon as they come in the door, they start speaking to you like a bit of shit. (Site C: Interviewer 3)

I was a wee bit shaken with it to be honest with you. They just barged in and shouted “nobody move, it’s the police. (Site C: Interviewer 8)

For some of our interviewees, it was the indignity of the body searching that caused them most alarm:

The police came in and they wanted to search us and I burst into tears because I went listen “I’ve never had anything like this done to me before” and they asked me to sit down and squat you know. And I went “oh please you can’t do this to me” and the policewoman she went “you don’t have to do this but you’ll be here for about five minutes, if not you’ll be coming downstairs with us and well search you. (Site A: Interviewer 15)

I hated it. It was nothing to do with me, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I got handcuffed and dragged up the stairs, strip searched, bend over, part your cheeks, you’re like that “Oh my God”, you’re just glad you’re not black, your snatch is clean, you’ve shaved your legs and all that. . . The two women were big fat ugly bastards so I was like “who cares man. I’ve no drugs on me”, I just wanted it over as quickly as possible. (Site B: Interviewer 10)

As the drug users recounted their experience of being caught up in a drug raid, it was also clear that the presence of children could significantly heighten the stress of the situation:

I was in bed and XXX was in bed. It’s just the way they go into the house. They know where the kids are, they know the kids are in the house and they were nice, they were nothing but nice, but they (the children) were scared what was going on and you’re like struggling see. . . what I mean “don’t move don’t move”. They should have more women there to try to get the kids to calm down because it was frightening what was going on. (Site A: Interviewer 12)

Scary mate. They come through me door about ten of them and I had me kids with me and that. And like I was bollock naked on the bed with me bird, you know me wife was there, the door opened like that, I was scared and the kid was screaming it was horrible, proper scary. (Site A: Interviewer 8)

I mean they wouldn't even let me go to my wean (child) who was in the toilet when the door went in. They've come straight in and they've cuffed me and they've cuffed the missus and they left me sitting and I says "look mate", I says, "my weans in the toilet, barricaded the door". I says, "I want to go". "No you sit there, I'll go and see her". I says "no mate let me, you do what you want but I'm going to go and get my wean". I says "you go in there she's kind of wanting help, it's really a horrible, horrible thing because the weans going, "I don't want you to go to jail", that's what really gave me a kick in the teeth. (Site C: Interviewer 9)

On other occasions the presence of the drug user's adult relatives when the police raid took place was a source of added shame and anxiety:

I was staying with my dad and I didn't really like that. He's dead now but he was quite old. He was seventy odd and they handcuffed him and treated him like a criminal and he's not done nothing. That was pretty difficult for my dad. (Site B: Interviewer 18)

For a minority of drug users, the experience of being caught up in a drug raid was described in more matter of fact terms, as something that they had become accustomed to, and in response to which, they had a clear understanding as to how to behave:

As I say, if you just relax and just let them do their job its fine but if you lie, or you start trying to, you know, they'll just play you back the way you play them basically. I mean I've had no trouble with, you know what I mean. I just if I'm caught up I'm caught up, nothing to fear as I said probably, I don't get scared easily so its no, I don't. (Site B: Interviewer 3)

It's quite annoying. . .but those are the perils of taking drugs. Part and parcel with that sort of life. Aye it's an occupational hazard but that's how I don't like going to people's houses, basically because that's the risk. I'll get somebody to go for me or I'll get it delivered or I'll just no bother. (Site C: Interviewer 4)

I went in to the XXX pub with the boys after work, went home at four and ma ma said to me go on down to your sisters and get me nappies because my ma had taken ma youngest wean to her. So I went down but I'm half drunk and I fell asleep and I just just woke getting booted in the knee with these steel toe caps. I woke up and there's the coppers. Well, it happened to be a Friday didn't it, and her boyfriend at the time, right arse-hole, doesn't stay there no more, he's in XXXX, had left seven hundred Temgesic tablets wrapped in cling film on top of the fucking wardrobe in plain eye. In plain eye and just a case of the cop walking over to the wardrobe and going bump, that was me week-endered. Got out on Monday. It was an XXXX we were on and they accepted a guilty plea from one of us and accepted two not guilty plea for the other two of us so 'cause it's her house he just said I'll take the blame. (Site C: Interviewer 6)

The impact of police activity on price, purity, and availability

There are three ways in which the effectiveness of drug enforcement activities is generally assessed. The first is in terms of whether that activity is having a demonstrable impact on the

purity of the drugs being sold on the streets, the second is whether the price of those drugs has increased as a result of the shortages in availability arising from the drug seizure, and the third is whether there are fewer drugs available on the streets. In this section, we look at the drug users' views of each of these areas.

With regard to the question of whether drug enforcement activities were having an impact on pushing up the price of heroin, the clear-cut message across each of our study areas was that this was not the case:

Has the price of heroin changed?

No it's the same price but sometimes you have to wait a while because the lad who's doing it for them he's in a lot of debt with them and they'll only give him a ball of white and a ball of brown and there's ten in each. (Site A: Interviewer 15)

What about the price of heroin do you think that's changed because of it (seizure)?

No. (Site B: Interviewer 2)

Over the range of interviews undertaken, there were only four cases where individuals referred directly to an increase in the price of heroin following a seizure operation. Two of those instances were from our third site where by far the largest seizure of Class A drugs occurred:

Have you noticed a price increase in the heroin?

Well the now it's gone up because of the dry up you know. Maybe it's the seizure, maybe it's down to that. You still get your tenner bag and that but supposing you were buying it in kilos do you know what I mean, it's went up another quarter. (Site C: Interviewer 9)

Have you noticed if there's been an increase in the price of heroin following the recent seizure?

Aye. People have stopped doing tenner bags. It has went up to like score deals. The likes of the tenner bag and that, it went up to score deals. A lot of people are doing score deals now. (Site C: Interviewer 12)

In the case of our second site one of the drug users interviewed described how though the overall price of heroin had not changed, nevertheless the quantity of the drug being sold on the streets had reduced:

Was it (heroin) more expensive?

If you were buying weight, aye. . . (at the street level) no still ten pound bags but I've been told the bags are basically fiver bags for the tenner. (Site B: Interviewer 11)

The finding that the price of heroin being sold on the streets did not greatly alter even in the wake of a major seizure is to some extent paradoxical, since one would ordinarily have assumed that, in the aftermath of a drug raid, there would be an upward pressure on price arising from a reduction in supply and the operation of the basic laws of supply and demand. However, heroin is by no means the same as any other economic commodity and the market for the drug can clearly accommodate reductions in availability following a major drug raid by reducing the purity of the drug being sold:

Have you noticed any increase in the price of heroin since that seizure?

No. . .the quality of it went down. (Site A: Interviewer 20)

Have you noticed any increase in the price of heroin because of that operation?

No.?

Any change in the quality?

Yea, its shite.

That's been since the raid? (Site A: Interviewer 5)

Have you noticed an increase in the price in the area at all following a big seizure?

Naw.

What about the quality?

Aye.

Why do you think the quality has gone down?

I don't know, its just people cutting it. (Site C: Interviewer 8)

Have you noticed an increase in the price of heroin since this police action?

No. . .the quality' s gone a bit crap.

Is it still like that?

Yea. And the deals are smaller.

The quality's gone down a bit but other than that I wouldn't say there was any difference. (Site A: Interviewer 4)

Have you noticed an increase in the price of heroin?

No. It's more the quality . . . just from people talking to me they thought it was going downhill. You would be as well keeping your money, do you know what I mean. It was being cut, cut, cut. Jumped on as they call it. I mean they put talcum powder and all that. (Site C: Interviewer 7)

It was also evident from our interviewees that in the aftermath of the police operations some drug users were having to travel further to buy drug and to approach individuals who were less well known to them:

Is it easily available, easy to get?

To me aye, still aye. There's that many people doing it aye but its crap. So you're getting people going to all different dealers to try and find the best stuff that's going about. You get people phoning. My phones going constantly "do you know anybody that's got good stuff". That's all I've heard the last month. (Site C: Interviewer 9)

A lot of people can't source their drugs and it involves going out and finding them in different places to get them. They have to travel further afield. (Site B: Interviewer 2)

See when there's a big drugs seizure have you had to travel?

Aye I had to travel everywhere XXXX, XXXX . . . We were increasing our risk but we had already known people that would go there anyway, so we knew what we were getting really. But your still a bit wary. (Site C: Interviewer 8)

The last couple of seizures that they had in this area hasn't had any impact on us. It hasn't really. I would say that the quality of the gear went down but other than that it hasn't. It hasn't bothered me . . . The first day I had to travel about half a mile.

Do you normally travel?

They normally come to my house. (Site A: Interviewer 5)

The phones were off. The phones were turned off. I don't know why the dealers were off, so I just went over to XXXX then the next day . . . It's about two miles something like that. (Site A: Interviewer 2)

On the basis of the data extracts above, one of the clearest signs of the impact of enforcement activities within our study areas had to do with drug users needing to travel further afield to source the drugs they were looking to purchase. According to the drug users we interviewed, this could result in increased risk particularly around the possibility of being sold fake drugs or of being robbed of the money they were carrying by individuals who recognised their outsider status:

When there's been a dry up have you gone to another area?

I've done that.

Have you felt more under threat when you've been doing that?

Definitely. It's the fear of getting robbed. It's the fear too of getting ripped off . . . the fear is just going into an area you don't know. You don't know people but you know it's XXXX and it's a tough scheme and you could get jumped and done for no reason whatsoever. (Site C: Interviewer 15)

Did that make you more afraid?

Aye because you didn't know if you were going to get hit with obviously shite.

It wasn't the violence you were afraid of, it was getting ripped off? (Site C: Interviewer 2)

Travelling to a different area after a raid?

No, I use the same people, like I said, I don't go to the street corners to buy my drugs but I would doubt anybody would have to travel after a raid cos, like I said, somebody else comes along to take the place of whoever just got nicked. (Site B: Interviewer 18)

Do you feel at risk travelling to a different area to buy drugs?

Yea sometimes because they're all fucking firms and gangs and all that. It's like gangs out there and its all that firm, that firm, that firm, know what I mean . . . You get your money took off you and they'll add shit or they'll give you shite. (Site A: Interviewer 4)

I don't like it because I'm always fear in case they rip you off and you don't get what you are expecting to get I've had it happen before. I've had sawdust. (Site B: Interviewer 6)

If these were the range of effects on purity, on the distances which drug users were having to travel to buy drugs, and on the local availability of heroin that the drug users we were interviewing identified as following on from the drug enforcement activity within our study sites, the key question becomes one of establishing how long those effects remained evident. In the next section, we look at the drug users' views as to how quickly the local drug markets in our study sites were able to reconstitute themselves following the police activity.

Reconstituting a drug market following an enforcement operation

The predominant view among our interviewees was that evident impact of the drug raid in their area would dissipate with a matter of days and in some cases hours:

They maybe stop for a day or two and then they'll go back to it. They'll just not give a fuck. (Site C: Interviewer 2)

There's always somebody else there to take the dealers place (in) a week or two. (Site C: Interviewer 8)

How long would you say it takes for someone to plug the gap if a dealer is taken out?

Less than twenty four hours . . . He would go out in the street and he would start telling people to sell this. (Site B: Interviewer 3)

How long does it take for people who are selling drugs locally to pug the gap following a big seizure?

Almost basically straight away really. Yea, no sooner are they out of the police station and they are back again. Well it's not long anyway; it's not like weeks or anything like that. It seems like most people are prepared for that to happen in my opinion. You know, I think they expect that, so its already lined up like . . . it feels like that because like it just seems when they get arrested someone else is straight out there. (Site C: Interviewer 2)

How long in your experience does it take for people to plug that gap?

Oh straightaway, straightaway yes straightaway.

So there isn't any gap there?

No no, there will always be somebody ready to step in. XXX is a port. There loads of people looking for money so . . . and there loads of people who will do. They can get drug users, they can get like thieves, like shoplifters, like burglars, to do it and they'll make a few quid. (Site A: Interviewer 1)

It is striking in these accounts that the drug users interviewed in our research were of virtually one view; namely that while seizures and other enforcement activities could have an immediate impact on the local drug market that impact would be very short lived. According to our interviewees, the heroin markets were often so well organised that it would be possible to accommodate even relatively large seizures and a large number of local arrests and for the drug market to remain largely intact even if its operations were suspended or diluted for a short period:

There's no impact at all on any of them. None whatsoever that I see. Someone I know, he's supposed to be doing about seven to ten years right, and the day he comes out of prison he was back selling again. It's a joke . . . What they do is they swap people. Like, she got pulled up so many times, so she'll say to somebody "you go out for a bit" and then another one will go out for a bit and then another one so it changes. Different people, so the police won't think that one's doing it . . . The dealer will go, you go out tonight because the police have collared her the other night, and then you go out in the day, but you go out in the night and you go out in the afternoon like nine till four, four till eleven, and eleven till four in the morning and that's the system. (Site A: Interviewer 4)

The impression here then is of a co-ordinated sales team that can be shifted from place to place, and from time to time, depending upon the activities of the police in arresting local drug sellers. Although one might expect that such a level of organisation would be confined to the larger drug markets within major cities, it was also the case that a similar level of organisation was evident within our small town research site:

How long does it take to plug a hole in the market after a drug dealer is taken out?

Can be minutes, they've always got somebody dealing but there's always somebody in the back waiting to take over . . . The boyfriend will get taken to jail and they'll approach the girlfriend and say here you are can you put it out and you'll know what I mean. (Site B: Interviewer 3)

In view of the drug users perceptions of the short-lived impact of drug arrests and drug seizure operations they were witness to it is perhaps not surprising that the drug users interviewed in our study predominantly felt that the police were a long way from winning the drugs war.

Are the police winning the drug war?

Among the drug users interviewed in our research the most commonly expressed view was that the police operations were having only a limited impact on the drug problem more broadly:

Do you think the police think they're winning?

I don't know but if they had any brains they would know they're no winning it. (Site C: Interviewer 8)

I think the police think they're winning the war on drugs. What do you think?

Not really. Round here nothing changes. Nothings changed here for years. (Site A: Interviewer 3)

What I see right are people getting pulled by the police and all that but they seem to be on top of it. Do you know what I mean. To know what to do when they see the police and all that. Straight in the mouth and all that. (Site A: Interviewer 9)

They think they're winning but they're fighting a losing battle I don't ever think they'll win it. No I don't believe they think they're winning either I think they think they're probably losing. (Site B: Interviewer 19)

The predominant view among the drug users interviewed in our research was that the sheer scale of the drug problem, and the number of drug users meant, that it was going to be virtually impossible to cease the sale of heroin in the local area and that heroin abuse had become a permanent fixture of the local community.

Although the focus of this article is on the views of drug users themselves of drug law enforcement operations, it is perhaps useful to note the striking contrast in the view of drug law enforcement between the drug users and the police. While the drug users we interviewed were modest in their assessment of the impact of the drug law enforcement activities in their local area among the police interviewees the view (perhaps predictably) tended to be more positive. Among the police personnel interviewed, seizing drugs was seen to be an important part of efforts to tackle the drug problem and was seen as something that produced a wide range of positive outcomes. Mention was repeatedly made in the police interviews of the beneficial impact of seizures in reducing the local availability of illegal drugs, in leading to an increase in the price of drugs locally, in reducing the quality of drugs being sold locally, in appeasing the concerns of the public, in weakening the activities of organised crime groups within the area, in reducing crime generally, and in instilling a degree of caution on the part of those selling drugs:

The short term effect of the drugs that makes an impact on the local community whereby drugs which were regularly available are no longer readily available, it may increase the price of drugs at that time and it may have the effect of other drugs being mixed with each other, the quality of drugs being handed out are crap. (P2)

Appeasing the public is the biggest outcome really, the public need information on a regular basis and we've seen when we executed between the other week up to a hundred warrants within a five mile radius geographical area so the public response to that you know was very very good. (P4)

First and foremost you are taking a large quantity of drugs off the street so healthwise albeit it is a drop in the ocean but you are still taking millions of pounds worth of drugs off the street which to me is great because there is that many kids coming up and they see it as you know. (P3)

I think short time in the community focused the operation, certainly a difficulty for the drug users sourcing drugs shortly after, it was noticeable that nobody was willing to sell drugs again, a lot of people were retained in custody, so short term it had a big impact. (P2)

First and foremost availability of drugs is greatly reduced in the area following the operation has certainly been one outcome, I think drugs has made a lot of drug users look at themselves and re-address their habits in life, and probably I think that the people further up the tree who are supplying drugs to the street dealers are finding it more difficult to find street dealers who will deal on their behalf. (P5)

Among the police personnel interviewed, there was broad support for the positive impact of drug seizure operations across a wide range of dimensions going well beyond simply reducing the availability of illegal drugs in the local area.

Summary and conclusions

This article has focused on the views of a small sample of drug users in the period following a major drug enforcement operation in their local area. These operations involved dozens of uniformed and plainclothes officers searching properties, seizing drugs, weapons, money, properties, and arresting individuals for drug possession and drug-trafficking offences. In describing the experience of being caught up in a drug raid, it was clear how shocking this was for the majority of the individuals involved. Only a small number of drug users we interviewed viewed the experience as a predictable and inevitable feature of the drug-using lifestyle. Rather, it seemed as if the experience, when it happened, was utterly unexpected, stressful, and deeply shocking – particularly when there were other family members present.

Aside from the emotional upset of being involved in a drug raid, the drug users we interviewed assessed the broader impact of the drug enforcement operation in their area as being relatively modest. It was recognised that in the days following the enforcement operation, the availability of heroin and other drugs locally had diminished and that some individuals reported the need to travel further afield to source drugs than would ordinarily be the case. While it was recognised that there were risks in seeking to buy drugs in areas that were less well known to the individual and from dealers whom the drug user may not have previously bought drugs from, it was recognised that the need to travel to new areas and approach unfamiliar dealers was generally short lived. Within a matter of days and, in some cases, hours, individuals who had been arrested for selling drugs locally would be replaced by others who would assume those responsibilities and ensure the continued supply of drugs locally. Similarly, while it was not reported that in the period following the major police operations that the actual costs of heroin increased, there were indications that the quality of the drugs being sold had reduced although this too was reported as being fairly temporary. The impression one had, from the drug users we interviewed, was of the drug selling networks within our study sites being sufficiently deeply embedded such that even in the face of the fairly major law enforcement operations those drug – networks remained largely intact.

On the basis of our data, one would have to say that intensive police operations targeting sellers of heroin operating within well developed street drug markets are unlikely to have a sustained impact unless those operations themselves are of a long-term nature. Our finding in this respect is somewhat similar to that of the Matrix Knowledge Group (2007) who undertook research on the impact of law enforcement activities on those selling Class A drugs. According to the Matrix researchers, the drug dealers they were interviewing were largely able to cope with the prospect of arrest and drug seizures, but were much more challenged by the use of asset seizure legislation which they felt threatened their financial and power base. On the basis of our results, law enforcement agencies may have a greater impact on local drug markets by targeting the income derived from those markets than by focusing on the apprehension of those involved in drug selling. Even fairly intensive drug law enforcement operations (as occurred in our study sites), involving large numbers of police officers and combining covert and overt tactics, may only produce relatively modest and short-term impacts unless those operations themselves involve a longer term and sustained presence on the part of drug law enforcement personnel within the drug-dealing sites being targeted.

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Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and cannot be ascribed to the European Commission.

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