



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Reducing Crime and Drug Dealing by Improving Place Management: A Randomized Experiment

A summary of research by John E. Eck and Julie Wartell

Retail drug dealing creates many problems in the community where it occurs, and closing down a drug market can improve the quality of life in the surrounding neighborhood. Researchers in San Diego noted that drug dealers frequently rent in buildings with weak property management. These properties often have no onsite manager, and the owners are seldom present at the property or conduct background checks of prospective tenants. To determine if improved onsite management could be induced by police action and whether this would reduce crime, the researchers conducted a randomized study of rental properties with drug dealing in San Diego. The study was done with the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) and with funding from the National Institute of Justice.

Methodology

The researchers randomly assigned all residential rental properties where some form of SDPD drug enforcement had occurred during a 6-month period (June–November 1993) to one of three groups: a control group and two test groups—“Drug Abatement Response Team (DART) letter only” and “letter plus DART meeting.” Most of these properties were apartment buildings, but about 20 percent were single-family dwellings. Although these properties were located throughout the city, the vast majority were in two economically depressed neighborhoods. For 45 days after the enforcement action, SDPD initiated no contact with the place managers (property owners or building managers) of the 42 sites assigned to the control group. Place managers of the 42 sites assigned to the “DART letter only” group received letters from the SDPD DART within 5 days of assignment to the group. These letters informed them of the police action (usually a narcotics unit raid), offered police assistance to remove the drug dealers from the property, and outlined California’s laws regarding the owner’s liability for drug dealing on the premises. The DART unit did not follow up these letters; however, just over half (52 percent) of the owners in this group contacted the DART unit themselves, and one owner met with DART staff.

The 37 property owners assigned to the “letter plus DART meeting” group received a letter within 5 days of assignment that emphasized the legal consequences facing them and also asked them to call a DART detective to schedule a meeting at the property. DART made a followup phone call to these owners within 7 days of assignment. All but two owners complied with the meeting request. After inspecting the property with a member of the City’s Code Compliance Department, the detective and property owner developed a plan to prevent future drug dealing. The detective then worked with the owner to ensure that necessary changes were made.

Several types of data were gathered for each of the 121 properties involved in the study. Police records provided (1) data on the individuals arrested during the enforcement action that triggered inclusion in the study; (2) information on crime and drug events at the sites for 3 months prior to the original enforcement; (3) crime and drug event information for 3 months after the enforcement; (4) crime and drug event information for five 6-month periods (30 months total) after the enforcement; and (5) a log of DART interactions with the property owners. Other data included owners’ responses to a telephone survey (about 45–60 days following assignment) about their management practices and how they handled the tenant involved in the initial police action as well as a physical description of each site and its environment. Finally, at least 45 days after the drug enforcement action, members of the narcotics unit attempted to buy drugs at each site to find out whether drugs were still available. Few places had evidence of drugs at or near the location.

Findings

Analysis of the data collected revealed the following:

- Drug offenders were most likely to be evicted in the “letter plus DART meeting” group.
- Crime decreased the most at the properties in the “letter plus DART meeting” group.

- In the first 3 months after enforcement, fewer drug and crime events occurred at those properties in the “DART letter only” group than in the control group.
- The difference in crime events between the control group and the “DART letter only” and “letter plus DART meeting” groups was most pronounced within 6 months after the drug enforcement action but disappeared after those first 6 months.

After 6 months, the number of crimes among the three groups was similar, but not because the properties receiving police intervention experienced a recurrence in drug and crime activity. Rather, the situation at the control sites also improved. It is possible that the telephone survey by SDPD to each property owner 45–60 days following the enforcement activity may have encouraged the place managers in the control group to address the problems on their properties. Thus, while the letters and meetings may offer no additional benefits in the long term, they do improve the quality of life in the community more quickly. Moreover, the decline had not eroded even 30 months after the initial police intervention: In all three groups, the number of drug and crime events at 30 months after the intervention was nearly the same as at 6 months after the intervention.

Policy implications

Police followup with landlords after drug enforcement on their property appears to reduce crime significantly. Compared with control properties, meeting properties experienced a 60-percent reduction in crime within 6 months.

Based on the detective’s meetings with property owners and the survey results, the researchers determined that many landlords have limited resources to manage and improve their properties. Full-time, onsite monitoring of rental properties is rare, and pre-rental screening of tenants is limited. Police departments that want to implement a similar intervention need to ensure the availability of staff resources to respond to any requests for assistance from place managers. Such assistance could include teaching place managers to recognize the signs of drug dealing on the property and supporting them in eviction proceedings.

The researchers hypothesize that the strength of the rental market may affect the efficacy of programs that target place managers. In a weak rental market, where the owners are on the verge of abandoning their properties, the police may have trouble enlisting their support. On the other hand, if the market is strong and rents are high, place managers need to maintain clean and safe properties to justify the high rents: They are likely to act without police encouragement. Thus, the types of intervention tested in this experiment may be most effective in marginal neighborhoods or those in transition.

This study’s results support findings that show the most effective ways of controlling crime need to involve people other than offenders and law enforcement officials. In communities with high crime rates and active drug markets, many of the residents are renters. Thus, place managers can have a pivotal role in improving public safety. This research has shown that the police can improve the effectiveness of place managers and that such efforts represent an important opportunity to solve community drug and crime problems.

This Research Preview is based on research conducted by John E. Eck, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Cincinnati, and Julie Wartell, M.P.A., Senior Research and Technology Associate, Institute for Law and Justice, formerly with the San Diego Police Department. The research was conducted with NIJ support (award no. 90–IJ–CX–K006) to the San Diego Police Department.

Copies of the final report—in manuscript form as received from the authors—are available for a photocopying fee, or through interlibrary loan, from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at 800–851–3420. For further reading about this research, see Eck, John E., “Preventing Crime By Controlling Drug Dealing on Private Rental Property,” *Security Journal*, forthcoming; and Eck, John E., and Julie Wartell, “Improving the Management of Rental Properties With Drug Problems: A Randomized Experiment,” in *Civil Remedies and Crime Prevention, Crime Prevention Studies*, vol. 9, ed. Lorraine Mazerolle and Jan Roehl, Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 1998.

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