



research into practice brief

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Tackling cannabis markets in residential settings

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Introduction

The Australian Institute of Criminology's second Research into Practice Brief (Willis 2010) outlined the types of police interventions found to be the most effective in addressing street-level cannabis markets. Specifically, the most effective interventions were those that were proactive (rather than reactive) and included, for example, problem-oriented and community policing approaches.

Problem-oriented and community policing approaches are underpinned by the identification and analysis of underlying crime and disorder issues, which are then factored into suitable policing responses. As such, there is greater emphasis placed on analysing and understanding aggregate crime events to develop a response, than on arresting individual offenders during or after the commission of a crime (Ratcliffe 2008). The distinction between problem-oriented and community policing is somewhat blurry, although community policing emphasises police partnerships with non-police agencies and groups who then assist police in developing appropriate responses to crime and disorder problems.

This Research into Practice Brief describes how problem-oriented and/or community policing may be used by police to remove or minimise cannabis markets operating in residential settings, which, at the consumer level, is where the majority of cannabis is distributed in Australia (Willis 2008). The emphasis of this paper is on cannabis dealing, rather than the cultivation of hydroponic cannabis in 'hot houses'. The issues and suggested steps raised in this brief are considered to be of particular relevance and use for police analysts and managers.

Why are cannabis markets in residential areas a particular problem?

Cannabis and other drug markets operating in Australian residential settings are often found in low socio-economic areas, with apartment complexes and other rental properties frequently a focus of drug activity in metropolitan locations (Jacobs et al 2007). Aside from the drug dealing itself, other related behaviour that impacts negatively on a residential community's quality of life may include, for instance: loitering, drug use, unwanted additional traffic (including pedestrian traffic), property offences, and dealing in stolen goods. As such, police interventions that effectively address the drug dealing, will also mediate other criminal or unwanted behaviour (Sampson 2001).



What factors contribute to the problem?

There are a number of conditions that make apartment complexes and other rental properties susceptible to cannabis and other drug dealing. These include, but are not limited to:

- property position (for example, in a high risk/crime location);
- physical conditions at and around the property that facilitate dealing (such as access issues, lack of lighting, obscuring vegetation, and so on);
- little or no property oversight (such as apartment or house inspections);
- lenient lease conditions; and
- the failure of property owners to promptly deal with tenants who are found dealing in drugs, such as through eviction.

While it may not be possible for police to address these problems directly, it is possible for police to work with property owners and others (such as city councils, government housing authorities and other local agencies) to ameliorate them (see below).

Why understanding the problem is the first step to an effective police response

Asking the right questions and undertaking robust analysis is vital to understanding the precise nature of a given drug market and assists police to tailor an appropriate response. Police need to understand a range of things to be able to develop effective strategies and responses. Aside from understanding how the market operates (for instance, dealer/buyer behaviours), key questions that police need to know the answers to may include (for example):

- who owns the property and is the owner aware of the problem?
- how is the property managed and what methods (if any) are used to prevent and address drug dealing and other illegal activity on the property?
- if an apartment, what is the visitor policy?
- is the property owner well intentioned, but requires guidance to address the problem, or is the property owner intentionally overlooking (or participating in) the problem?
- what do calls for service reveal about the problem?
- what information do other agencies have about the problem (for instance, history of poor management)?
- are there physical conditions at and around the property that facilitate dealing that could be modified (Sampson 2001)?

The types of data and information that may be useful for understanding residential cannabis markets include police administrative data (such as neighbourhood arrest and crime/disorder data, citizen complaints to police, and calls for service for crime and disorder problems in and around the residential location of concern) and intelligence from informants and nearby residents. The latter is particularly important for gaining specific knowledge about dealer practices in closed drug markets, such as those operating in residential settings. For instance, knowledge about the time frame of illegal activity (for instance, the time of day it usually occurs and any specific peaks in activity in supply and demand), the identity of dealers, and how users contact dealers would be key considerations. Importantly, these same types of data and information can later be used by police to measure the effectiveness of their interventions in addressing the drug problem.

The importance of developing positive relationships with property owners (and other third parties)

As noted above, a community policing approach emphasises the importance of developing close relationships and partnerships with a range of non-police agencies and groups. These include developing relationships and partnerships that increase place management or



‘guardianship’ at and around problem locations, and that also assist to address problematic physical conditions and behaviour. Strong guardianship and a physical environment that makes dealing and buying drugs less attractive will help to minimise or prevent criminal activity, such as drug dealing, from occurring (AIC 2003).

Policing strategies designed to reduce local drug problems and that include community policing approaches are gaining credence in Australian police jurisdictions. For example, Victoria Police’s Illicit Drug Strategy includes guardianship arrangements as one of its guiding principles and officers are encouraged to develop strong links with (for instance) drug treatment services, local housing authorities, city councils and small businesses to work together to reduce local drug-related crime and disorder problems (Victoria Police 2009). One example where this is occurring is in the Melbourne suburb of Collingwood, where two-thirds of residents live in an apartment, and where drug crime and drug-related problems are of major local concern. In this suburb, police and housing departments have established a set of partnership practices to address the problems (Jacobs et al 2007).

The premise of community policing is that, to be effective, police need to consider a suite of interventions using the combined efforts of a local community. This contrasts with the traditional drug law enforcement approach that focuses on monitoring and arresting dealers and buyers.

How to build positive relationships with property owners

There are any number of ways that police can go about improving or building relationships and partnerships with property owners, agencies and other groups. In relation to property owners, engaging with owners and advising them of the potential negative consequences of not addressing a problem is helpful. Negative consequences may include (for example):

- costly property damage;
- a bad reputation that puts prospective tenants off; and
- reduced property values.

Providing guidance on how to better manage a property is also a useful way to build confidence and trust with property owners. Guidance could include advice on:

- the warning signs of drug activity;
- applicant screening processes that assist to identify problematic people;
- rental agreement approaches that strengthen the property owner’s ability to evict drug dealing tenants; and
- how to maximise local police cooperation.

Regular follow-up with property owners, especially those who are slow to act, also assists to improve property management practices.

Important considerations

While they can be extremely effective and produce a range of positive outcomes, relationship and partnership building is not always easy (especially in the establishment phase) and requires motivated staff to sustain the relationship/partnership, particularly in the face of busy workloads. It is critical that there is a common understanding of the problems that require attention, as well as negotiation and agreement on the types of interventions that are needed. Each relationship or partnership will almost certainly require a slightly different approach. For example, the steps needed to engage a local housing authority, and the types of interventions available, are likely to be very different to those in relation to a private apartment owner. Other important considerations for successful relationships and (particularly) partnerships include:

- setting attainable goals and objectives;
- participants having a shared stake in the process;
- having a flexible approach to problems;

- ensuring clear lines of responsibility;
- a willingness to accept responsibility for both successes and failures;
- respect and trust between those involved in the relationship/partnership building;
- where relevant, including a broad cross-section of participants;
- recognition of each party's needs; and
- a willingness to compromise (Jacobs et al 2007).

Summary

This paper has described several key issues to do with the policing of local cannabis and other drug markets in residential settings, particularly in rental accommodation. In particular, it highlights that problem-oriented and/or community policing approaches are effective in addressing this problem.

A number of issues are outlined, including:

- why certain residential settings are susceptible to cannabis and other drug dealing;
- what police need to know about these residential settings if they are to develop an effective plan of action; and
- why it is important to build positive relationships with property owners.

Finally, the paper outlines a few tips on how to start building positive relationships with property owners, including some of the main hallmarks of successful relationships and partnerships.

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