

POLICING AND PRAGMATISM

Enforcing demand reduction

Karim Murji

At their 1989 drugs conference chief police officers were said to have been shocked by apocalyptic warnings about the destructive power of crack cocaine delivered by a DEA Special Agent. A raft of initiatives followed, including the establishment of a special squad to target crack. Yet by 1994 the main theme of the same conference was drug legalisation and de-criminalisation. The shift from high profile enforcement in the 1980s to the public contemplation of drug licensing in the 1990s was viewed by many as a crisis point. Even the police now acknowledged the limitations of drugs enforcement, having recognised that supply and demand could not be stemmed and that it was time for a more pragmatic approach.

If there was a serious debate within the police about de-criminalisation it would have represented a startling shift. During the 1980s the drugs threat had been extensively talked up by police spokespeople. They campaigned for, and often succeeded in winning, increased legal and enforcement powers to combat drugs. Some developments that resulted include: The Drug Trafficking Offences Act 1986 which brought into law powers of asset seizure and forfeiture, International Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties with many governments which authorise mutual powers of search, seizure and mutual assistance between law enforcement agencies and the establishment of the National Criminal Intelligence Service from the former National Drugs Intelligence Unit and other intelligence gathering bodies. Drugs have also been paramount whenever the case for a national detective agency is made and a key element underlying the formation of Europol. Drugs have therefore stimulated developments in law enforcement that would have been regarded as unprecedented a decade earlier. By any measure the police have done pretty well out of the battle against drugs.

Changing the strategy

Even during the so-called 'wars' against drugs there are always voices and sources of opposition. Throughout the

1980s the limits of measures to stem the supply of drugs became more apparent. Interdiction stopped only a limited percentage of international drug trafficking. Strategies aimed at high level traffickers - the mythical 'Mr Big' - also foundered. Awareness of these limitations either coincided with, or led to an increasing emphasis on, demand rather than supply reduction. Support for focusing more on the demand side came from various quarters. First there was the argument that demand rather than supply acts as a vital force in the maintenance and growth of drug markets. The most ambitious proponents of this view even appeared to suggest that without demand there would be almost no supply. Even if policy only succeeded in producing decreases in demand that would still have the effect of making the business of supplying more difficult. Secondly there was pressure from so-called producer countries for the USA and western nations to pay more attention to stemming demand at home rather than punishing suppliers abroad.

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Ways and means

Demand reduction has conventionally been seen as the province of education and prevention programmes. But through low level drug enforcement targeted at the street or retail level of the market, policing can also be a means of reducing the demand for drugs. Targeting enforcement at drug users and user-dealers could, it was argued, dissuade novice users and buyers and/or seek to remove heavy users from the



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market place. Looking at the latter only, focused policing and mass arrest or 'sweep' programmes were identified as the means towards this end. Enforcement could have the effect of either driving regular users and buyers into 'early retirement' from drug use, and/or persuading or forcing them to enter treatment. Legal sanctions could be applied to prevent or restrict further drug use, in combination with a treatment condition. The 1991 Criminal Justice Act gave legislative support for such measures. If all else fails, in an echo of 'prison works', the argument runs that the most active drug users and buyers would be locked up so that at least they could not be committing any more crime, and using the money generated to buy drugs, while they are off the street.

There are case studies, mostly from the USA, which demonstrate that such strategies can be successful, though the effects have sometimes been short lived. A practical problem with street level enforcement is that it is likely to be less effective the more that drug markets and users are fragmented, diversified and there are many poly-drug users in

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the population. There is also a concern that low level enforcement may give the police a licence to go 'fishing' and that, in the process, heavy handed policing may exacerbate tensions between the police and inner-city and black communities.

A more common objection to low level enforcement is a feeling that the targets of police activity ought to be the 'top level' suppliers rather than drug users and petty dealers. This is sometimes linked to a view that drug users require treatment rather than punishment and that enforcement is therefore inappropriate. From this perspective, enforcement as a method for forcing users into treatment is an unjustified, and probably ineffective, use of compulsion. But whether the model of voluntarism that underlies this view of drug use and its cessation is valid or not is open to question.

Left and right

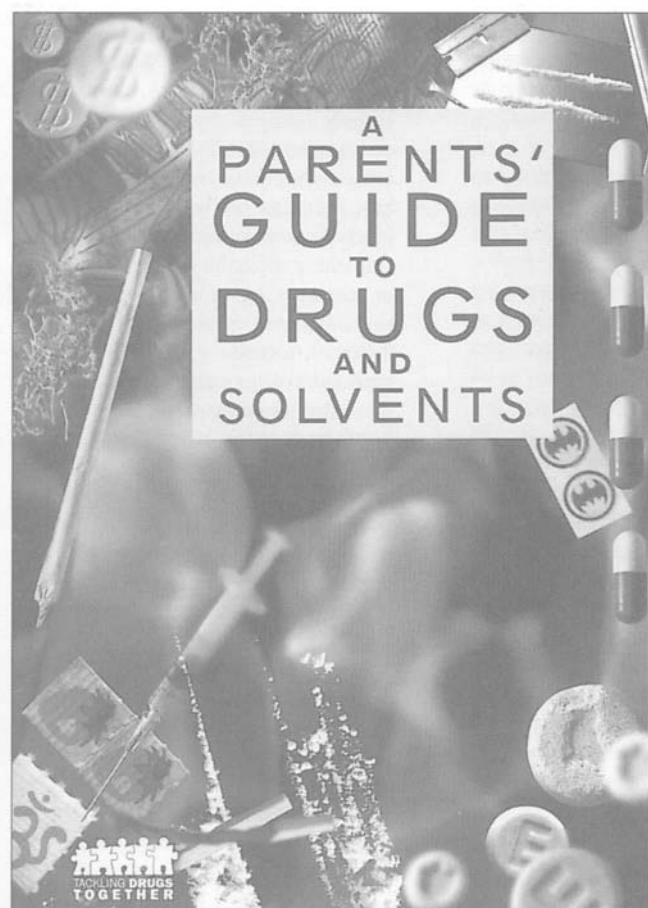
Advocacy of focused enforcement and

street level policing is usually seen as the terrain of the right wing. But it is not difficult to see how and why the rationale for such measures could be shared by the political left. Demand reduction through enforcement could be justified on health grounds where it is seen as a means of helping users to enter treatment programmes and/or receive counselling. There are also social justifications for street clearance enforcement programmes. For example, a multi-agency initiative to improve an area or the environment could entail an effort to remove the stigma that some places have acquired as a centre for drug dealing and availability. Even if enforcement only means moving drug sellers on (and displacement need not mean that there is a one for one replacement) it may have the effect of giving residents and businesses a break from the consequences of the drug trade, as well as create a space in which environmental and social policies might be given some room to operate. Examples of multi-

agency efforts directed to these ends have already been tried in relation to both drugs as well as prostitution. In some areas, there has been a partnership between local agencies to effect change. In others, local communities have sometimes taken direct action to prevent street level drug dealing and prostitution.

The use of enforcement to reduce the demand for drugs provides a common ground where the realisms of both right and left meet. There are objections to such measures, as I have mentioned above. However the shift in policing strategies indicates the capacity for flexibility and innovation in enforcement. It also demonstrates that the discussion about drug control need not veer between the two poles - a virtual 'all-out war' or 'nothing works' - that often seem to characterise debates about drugs.

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RESOURCES

- A Parents' Guide to Drugs and Solvents has recently been produced by the Health Education Authority.
- Useful sources of advice given in the pamphlet include: The National Drugs Helpline - Tel: 0800 77 66 00

Other sources of help and information include:

- The Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA), Waterbridge House, 32-36 Loman Street, London SE1 0EE. Tel: 0171 928 9500 which is the independent, national coordinating body for drug services. It provides specialist advice on local services and best practice information on drug treatment and care, prevention and education.
- ISDD, the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependence, at the same address, which provides information, and publications, conducts research, and has a unique library. Tel: 0171 928 1211.
- Release which offers a 24-hour confidential helpline providing advice on drug use and associated legal matters. Useful if someone has been arrested for a drug offence. Phone 0171 603 8654. Its 'Drugs in School Helpline' offers advice, information and support for those concerned with a drug incident at school. Phone 0345 36 66 36 - 10.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday.
- Lifeline which produces a range of drugs education publications featuring the now-famous Peanut Pete cartoons. Lifeline, 101-103 Oldham Street, Manchester M4 1LW. Publications: 0161 839 2075. Advice and Counselling: 0161 839 2054.