

The Real Impacts of Enforcement

What the scientific literature says about police crackdowns

The literature examining police crackdowns in drug markets has produced highly consistent findings. In summary, the literature demonstrates that while police crackdowns can succeed in reducing the visible aspects of street drug markets, “success” in this case tends to be temporary, superficial, and associated severe public health consequences.

The Impact of Police Crackdowns on the Health of Drug Users

- ❖ Reductions in the number of syringes exchanged
- ❖ Increases in syringe sharing
- ❖ Displacement of drug users and the creation of informal and unsafe shooting galleries where risk behaviour is common
- ❖ Increases in unsafe injection (e.g., injecting too quickly)
- ❖ Increased displacement from health services and service providers

The Impacts of Police Crackdowns on the Drug Market

The scientific literature has consistently demonstrated that while the visible aspects of drug markets can be reduced, drug markets adapt quickly, become more complex and sophisticated in operation. Some common outcomes include:

- ❖ Drug dealers move into nearby areas, including suburbs, and more public areas such as malls, where the exchange of drugs can be conducted in a covert fashion;
- ❖ Drug dealers and drug users quickly adopted risky storage and transfer practices (e.g., nasal and oral storage and transfer);
- ❖ Increases in fraud, volatility, and violence resulting from disruption in the market.

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The Local Evidence

Incarcerating drug users is not a solution and often leads to further harm. Evidence from a recent study involving the Vancouver Injection Drug Users Study (VIDUS) demonstrated that recent incarceration was one of only three independent predictors of HIV infection among local injection drug users.

Preliminary findings from a study conducted by the British Columbia Centre for Excellence for HIV/AIDS has demonstrated the futility of enforcement practices prior to the recent increase in enforcement:

- ❖ 60% of the 209 people interviewed reported, that in the last six months, they had rushed when injecting due to police presence.
- ❖ 67% reported that they have had their drugs confiscated by police and/or were forced to dump their drugs by the police.
- ❖ Of these individuals, 75% reported that they immediately left the scene and scored more drugs following their interaction with the police.
- ❖ 7% of these individuals reported, unprompted, that they first committed a crime before scoring more drugs, and 6% reported that they “did a trick/date” before scoring more drugs.

“The primary response to the public health and social emergency resulting from illicit drug use has been to intensify law enforcement in an effort to limit the supply and use of illicit drugs in the Downtown Eastside. While funding to police in the Downtown Eastside’s district has increased from \$6,713,702 in 1995 to \$11,207,734 in 2001, the drug problem has not improved, and the neighbourhood continues to be plagued by high levels of drug use, and high HIV and overdose incidence. This sad reality is perhaps not surprising given that previous studies have found no evidence that law enforcement affects the price, purity, or perceived availability of illicit drugs.” - Wood et al., British Columbia Medical Journal, 2003