

Endangered species

While by no means extinct, the traditional drug squad officer is one of a dying breed. **Matthew Bacon** spent two years with two drug squads studying the changing landscape of drug law enforcement.

Drug squads are specialist detective units mandated to police drug markets and drug-related criminality. They have been a key element of drug law enforcement since around the 1960s, when media and political uproar about the taking of drugs by young people prompted a dedicated and specialised police response to the novel and increasingly notorious ‘drug problem’. As half of the first full-time two-man drug squad in the north-east of England, Malcolm Young has subsequently written that he was ‘tasked with defining and dealing with the new social aberration of “flower power”, “the counter culture”, and the “psychedelic trip”’. Up until this point in the history of drug control, drugs had been policed in a relatively routine and haphazard manner, as and when police officers stumbled across or were called upon to do something about suspected drug offenders in their area. As drug problems worsened in the 1980s, an era when ‘war on drugs’ rhetoric was reverberating on both sides of the Atlantic, the enforcement approach came to dominate drug control policy, accounting for at least two-thirds of the spend. Although they differed significantly in terms of their organisation and operations, by the late 1980s, all of the police forces in England and Wales had drug squads in place.

Over the past decade or so, however, there has been a substantial decline in the number of drug squads operating at both force and district level. To further investigate this largely unreported sea change in drug policy, I set out to

examine the culture and daily activities of plain clothes drug detectives working in two contrasting constabularies: one metropolitan area in the south, which I call ‘Metropolis’, and a small town in the north, ‘Smallville’.

Before fieldwork commenced in Metropolis, I learned that the drug squad had become the firearms squad a few years earlier, and while the detectives employed in the squad remained the primary drug law enforcers of the district, their focus was now on firearms offences. Towards the end of the fieldwork period their mandate changed to gang-related criminal activity and the firearms squad was rechristened the gang squad. As for the situation in Smallville, plans were put into motion to disband the drug squad as my research project was coming to a close, with the intention of merging the separate squads of the proactive investigation department into a generalist crime squad.

The Smallville detectives did not react terribly well to the pending demise of the drug squad. It provoked them into questioning the motivations and competencies of their supervisors and chief officers. Signs of anger and frustration were regularly displayed as they told me about how management ‘didn’t have a clue’ and would ‘end up regretting their decision’. The detectives were convinced that drug dealers would take advantage of their newfound freedom and in turn there would be more drugs on the streets and more drug-related crime. They truly believed in

the importance of their work, so not only did the decision to disband the squad deprive them of their territory, it also challenged their sense of mission and made them feel devalued and dejected. From their perspective, the police service no longer considered the control of drug supply to be a priority and this was a huge mistake. The Metropolis detectives said they remembered reacting similarly when the drug squad became the firearms squad, but they soon accepted the decision and the need to concentrate on dealing with the most harmful criminal elements of the drug trade, seeing as ‘it is impossible to deal with them all’.

This downgrading of drug policing can probably be attributed to a combination of three factors: resources, results and realisation.

At the organisational level, police managers have to decide how to prioritise the deployment of limited resources to enforce the law and perform other policing tasks. Within this constraint – common in many policy realms – further decisions about the appropriate use of the law and the suspects against whom it should be used were made. ‘Drugs have always been and will always be a priority,’ the police frequently assured me. Yet albeit an official priority, during fieldwork it was found that drug law enforcement had been unofficially deprioritised and was downplayed when there were deemed to be more serious and pressing issues to deal with. In the words of the senior officer who made the decision to

refocus the detectives of Metropolis onto firearms: 'If all other crimes somehow go down, if we can get rid of all the serious crime, all the shootings and stabbings, the terrorist threat, then maybe drugs will become a priority again.'

Police managers regularly asserted that they struggled to justify using their limited resources to enforce drug laws when there were victims of crime in need of police services. In addition, they told me that, since the Updated Drug Strategy of 2002 had removed drug offences from the national performance indicators, it had become practically impossible to continue to prioritise drugs and meet targets. During interview, one Detective Inspector from Metropolis said: 'We could choose to ignore drugs if we wanted to, because it's victimless and isn't performance managed anymore... In the police there's a saying: "you only have a drug problem if you look for it". The more we police drugs the more problems we find, and management don't want us to go out and find any more problems – just look outside, we've got enough work on.'

Furthermore, the officers I studied acknowledged that their efforts could only ever have a marginal impact upon the drug trade, whether they were to police drugs through routine police work alone or in combination with a specialised response. This much is evident in the following quotations from both areas studied:

'One thing you quickly come to realise in this job is that no matter how many dealers you put away there's always someone out there selling.'

Detective, Smallville

'The fact of the matter is millions of people commit drug offences every year – what are we supposed to do about that?! Apart from the ones that cause people harm, I'd say no one expects us to do anything.'

Detective, Metropolis

These findings can be interpreted as being connected to the pragmatic dimensions of police culture and the need for managerial efficiency. They also suggest that drug law enforcement is more of a symbolic police priority than an actual priority, which represents their values and sense of mission rather than their true objectives and practices.

So what are the more important implications of the study?

The decline in the number of drug squads and the deprioritisation of drug law enforcement strongly suggests that



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both the government and the police have started to move away from the heroic but quixotic drug war towards a more realistic management approach to dealing with drug-related problems. If anything, the recent public sector budget cuts will force them to walk even further down this path and become even more minimalist in their interventions.

The aforementioned changes might, on the one hand, result in enforcement initiatives being aimed solely at reducing the most socially harmful problems that are caused by and associated with drug

distribution. Such an approach would lead to a reduction in the number of people entering the criminal justice system for relatively harmless supply and possession offences. On the other hand, seeing as officers carrying out routine patrol and response tend only to encounter users and street dealers, it could equally lead to the over-policing of the lower levels of the market. Whatever happens, the CID will continue to investigate drug dealers and uniformed officers will continue to police drugs in their neighbourhoods. Devoid of drug squads, however, the police will inevitably mount fewer investigations, from which one can infer that dealers – especially closed-market retailers and middle-market distributors – are at less risk of being detected and arrested.

Taking a selective approach to enforcement can be criticised for flying in the face of the rule of law and to some extent condoning the buying and selling of certain drugs in certain contexts. But if one works on the assumption that the drug trade is a constant and that policing is a marginal activity, there are few alternatives if drugs remain situated within a criminal law framework. Given that drug law enforcement is under-resourced and the drug trade is increasingly under-policed, it is time to seriously start thinking about alternative policing methods and policies for dealing with drugs.

■ **Matthew Bacon** is a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Sheffield.

In 2011, the UK Drug Policy Commission published *Drug enforcement in the age of austerity* based on a survey and workshop covering both regional constabularies and local command units.

The key findings were:

- Drug-related policing expenditure and activity is expected to decrease and there is a perception that it is faring worse than other police activities
- Proactive work related to the detection of drug supply is expected to decrease. Activities such as covert surveillance, test purchasing and other intelligence gathering work were most often mentioned as likely to decrease. This of course, undermines the restricting supply strand of the 2010 strategy which sought to 'make the UK an unattractive destination for drug traffickers by attacking their profits and driving up their risks', although another finding of the UKDPC report was that those drug-related activities that could be income-generating, like asset seizure, could increase.
- Finally, survey respondents believed that in a time of financial squeeze, the police would focus on 'core business' and be less inclined to engage in partnership working at a local level. Ironically, back in 2009, before the real impact of the financial freefall on public services was felt, the UKDPC published a report about refocusing drug-related law enforcement to address real-life community-felt harms. In that report, they said, 'partnership working is vital to maximise the effectiveness of action to reduce drug market-related harm'.