Symbolic policing? Understanding targeted police operations/ 'crackdowns' on street-level drug markets

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ABSTRACT

The policing of local drug markets in England often takes the form of specific, high-profile, crackdown operations which themselves are a mostly generic periodic response to particular criminality. Drawing on Innes' (2004) concept of 'control signals' and Edelman's (1985) notion of 'symbolic policy', we argue that 'symbolic policing' relates to activity that is principally about achieving symbolic aims – 'being seen to be doing something' rather than preventing or solving crime. This article, focusing on police crackdown operations on drug 'dealers' in three English urban areas, considers the meanings of such operations, how they work, and in relation to local suppliers suggests they may in fact have counterproductive enforcement outcomes whilst still achieving symbolic objectives. It is concluded that generic crackdown operations at the level of local drug markets are unhelpfully insensitive to local conditions and that, in certain circumstances, they can be antithetical to more considered enforcement and public health aims.

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Introduction

We will not stop until the last drug lord, the last financier and the last pusher have surrendered or put behind bars. Or below the ground if they so wish. (Robert Duterte, Inaugural State of the Nation Address, July 2016)

This year, Philippine President Robert Duterte announced an escalation on the Philippines' war on drugs through a crackdown on drug users and 'pushers' with the aim to 'eradicate illegal drugs within the first six months' of his presidential term. Operation 'Double Barrel' draws on the concept of a gun to symbolise the firing of two shots in one squeeze of the trigger. As Chief Superintendent of the Philippine National Police, Ronald dela Rosa explains, the 'first barrel' is directed to those at the 'top', while the 'second barrel' is aimed at those at the bottom, resembling an approach which involves 'reforming drug users who want to get out of addiction' (The Philippine Star 2016). Police operations nearly always have names that signal intent. With an estimated 5000 people killed through extrajudicial police executions and government sanctioned vigilante attacks, along with a further 700,000 'drug suspects' having either surrendered or been arrested by police (Baldwin and Marshall 2016), Operation Double Barrel must surely be one of the most brutal and devastating drug crackdowns of our time.

While the atrocities of Operation Double Barrel have attracted condemnation from the United Nations, the media, and citizens worldwide, globally, police crackdown operations are employed regularly as a method of dealing with drug-related crime and disorder, largely unchallenged. Crackdown operations, just like Duterte's, commonly have specific symbolic operational names (e.g. Operation

'Nemesis', 'Hawk', 'Relentless', 'Granite Hammer') and involve 'sudden increases in officer presence, sanctions, and threats of apprehension either for specific offenses or for all offenses in specific spaces' (Sherman 1990, p. 1). In the UK, crackdowns on drug markets can range from those targeted at particular geographical spaces said to be blighted by acquisitive crime and anti-social behaviour, to those with more ambitious aims, dedicated to eradicating manufacturers and importers of illicit substances. An early famed example, 'Operation Julie' – a 1977 counter-drugs operation that aimed to demolish one of the world's most prolific LSD manufacture and distribution networks – used 800 officers from 11 regional forces to undertake surveillance through infiltrating the local community, going 'undercover' within the ring itself, and performing raids based on resulting intelligence. Operation Julie was a highly involved long-term intelligence gathering exercise that targeted key players over a protracted period. Many operations, however, are short-term measures with the aim of immediate impact.

At the local level, crackdown operations such as 'Operation Tibia' (Bristol, England) concentrate on geographic hotspots and are often bound up not only with drug-related crime reduction, but also with assuaging the public's fear of crime and perceived failings of enforcement. In an article entitled 'Dozens of Bristol dealers jailed after plaguing the city like a cancer' (The Bristol Post 2016), the operation's Senior Investigating Officer described the 'intimidation' experienced by residents as they negotiated the 'effects of drug dealers operating within their community'. The 'effects' alluded to in Bristol are in keeping with media depiction of drug market disorder and incivilities presented elsewhere in numerous articles and police press releases across the country (Sherman 1990). They typically include the occurrence of drug-related litter, fear of crime caused by local people witnessing drug-related anti-social behaviour around particular hotspots, and rises in acquisitive crime committed by drug users. Significantly, it is due to this propensity for drug markets to be associated with such signals of disorder (Innes 2014) that crackdown operations often have *multiple aims* that reach far beyond simply arresting individuals concerned in supply.

In this paper, we intend to critically assess these aims with specific recourse to both the meaning and the efficacy of the crackdown operation. Drawing on data from local 'drug market rapid appraisals' (DMRA) undertaken by the authors in Southend-on-Sea, Plymouth and Torbay, as well as media reporting of comparable crackdown operations in those areas, we aim to critically explore the nature of these crackdown operations and the ways in which they are employed as methodologies for disrupting street-level drug markets. This paper also charts the consequences of these enforcement events, both in respect to the lived experience of crackdown encounters by those who occupy such spaces, and also the resulting effects on the dynamics of those specific drug markets. In order to understand the crackdown operation theoretically, we aim to develop and fuse the political theory of Edelman (1985, 1988) and his notion of 'symbolic policy' with Innes' (2004, 2014) seminal micro-level exposition of 'signal crimes'. The value of drawing upon these conceptual vehicles lies in unpicking the communicative properties that are so integral to the perceived 'success' of crackdown operations. It is proposed here that the crackdown operation represents a policing strategy that signals that action is being taken, and assuages fear of crime through visibly negotiating the signs of illicit drug markets. Crackdown operations on drug markets thus largely manifest as a *symbolic* act as opposed to an evidence-based one, and by extension, it is argued their outcomes are irrational and contradictory, both from a policing and a public health perspective.

Policing models and drugs enforcement policing

With an aim to prevent crime, apprehend offenders and to serve the community (Collier 2006), UK police forces draw on a multitude of different policing models and tactics at local and regional levels. The crackdown operation has evolved to share affinities principally with community policing and 'problem-orientated policing' (POP) (Scott 2003), and the philosophy of these models have notable influence on the aims and characteristics of crackdown operations as they operate at street-level. In the UK, the emergence of the community policing model was first triggered by an

increasing frustration in the ineffectiveness of 'reactive', 'crime fighting' (Cordner 2014) authoritarian policing cultures dominant in 1970's Britain (Tilley 2008). Given the increasing crime rates and spells of civil unrest present in British society, an enlightened approach which recognised plurality and prioritised community engagement was deemed to be urgently required (Alderson 1979). Community policing has been referred to as a 'chameleon concept' and at its broadest, it can be usefully understood as representing an iconic style of policing in which the police are closely engaged with the public, know their concerns from regular everyday contacts, and act on them in accord with the community's wishes (Fielding 2005). The abolishment of policing authorities and the subsequent implementation and election of Police Crime Commissioners (PCC's) (2012) through the supplementary vote system, has only served to increase representation of the community voice (Wells 2016). The significance of this organisational shift has obvious relevance to policy and local policing priorities, namely, the potential for PCC's to simply endorse populist policies that will appeal to the widest audience (Loader 2013). Increases in opportunities for the public to shape the policing agenda at local level might be considered problematic in a number of ways; but as Muir and Loader (2011) have warned, perhaps most alarming is the potential for these partnerships to subject minority groups to populist crackdowns on crime.

While the values and ethos of community policing are bound up with assemblages of community, citizen focus and partnership working, in practice, community policing strategy tends to adopt models that have a geographic focus, an emphasis on prevention, and a 'face to face' approach (Cordner 2014). Much like the reassurance policing methodology, at ground level, neighbourhood policing favours 'face to face' methods and community patrol tactics which are also central to the realisation of the crackdown operation. Many of the specific actions pursued through crackdown operation depend on procedures highly visible to the community such as intensive enforcement, zero-tolerance policing (Wilson and Kelling 1982), hotspot policing, 'knock and talk operations', serving arrest warrants (and performing raids), 'buy and bust operations' (Dorn *et al.* 1992), and conducting street-level patrols (Longstaff *et al.* 2015). Crackdown operations can also function as part of a disruptive intelligence led approach, or a problem-orientated approach – reducing drug-related crime or the visibility of drug sales in a particular location (Scott 2003). In practice, the organisation of the crackdown operation can range from well-coordinated, precisely planned tasks in which officers know the operational objectives and perform their duties precisely, to loosely planned initiatives in which officers are given only vague guidance about objectives and tasks (Scott 2003). In line with the values of community and neighbourhood policing, a well-publicised, accessible and visible police force (Bullock and Sindall 2014) is considered as important as quantifiable crime reduction; in the context of the crackdown this can often mean that the strategic aim of the operation is sometimes little more than to 'get out there and make your presence felt' (Scott 2003).

A number of important studies have considered how enforcement agencies police the drug problem, exposing the politics of doing drugs policing at ground level. Dorn *et al.* (1992) provide an instructive and detailed insight into both the strategy and tactics of city drug squads in 'Traffickers, drug markets and law enforcement'. The authors brand police raids as 'violent demonstrations of police power' (p. 97), and stress the unselective nature of street 'sweeps', 'which target mid to low-level dealers', aiming to disrupt local drug markets simply by making it more difficult for sellers and buyers to make a deal (p. 100). It is more difficult to pinpoint research which locates how police themselves feel they fit within this world, yet Matthew Bacon's recent ethnographic study of specialist (drug) investigation units does just this, offering an insight into the everyday realities of policing the war on drugs. Bacon (2014) highlights that while the detectives in his study considered their basic function to be 'getting the dealers and drugs off the streets', they also willingly acknowledged the limitations of enforcement, describing it as a 'marginal activity' with limited capacity in 'arresting *all* the dealers or eradicating *all* the markets in their service area' (p. 121). Instead, Bacon suggests that police manage the demands of UK drugs policing by 'trying their best' to 'make sure it doesn't get any worse' and keeping the public happy (p. 122). While in-service police officers do their best to negotiate the pressures and frustrations of policing drugs,

there have been increases in voices of resistance. Organisations such as Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) emphasise the human cost of enforcing drug laws and aim to reduce the unintended harmful consequences resulting from the irrational war on drugs through advocating evidence-based policy and reform. Neil Woods, a former undercover police officer and Chairman of LEAP UK has recently described the 'seemingly fruitless battle' to win the war on drugs on Britain's streets (see Woods 2016). Most relevant here is Woods' indictment that undercover investigations often struggled getting past street-level dealers, and that while drug policing tactics are developed 'to catch gangsters', it is often the most addicted, vulnerable individuals who are punished.

The expression of crime and enforcement: signal crimes and social control

Analysis of the philosophical underpinnings (Cordner 2014) of policing models which shape aspects of crackdown operations reveal the importance of positive community partnership and the prioritisation of crime and disorder defined most problematic by the community. In seeking to understand 'why some crime and disorder incidents matter more than others', Martin Innes' (2004, 2014) concept of 'signal crimes' has made a significant contribution to the field, providing coherent theoretical exposition of the symbolic construction of social space (Bottoms 2012). Drawing on the interactionist tradition, Innes' (2014) formulation advocates that all social signals are possessed of three component parts: the 'expression' – that is the signifier or denotative aspect; the 'content' – what is connotatively signified; and an 'effect' – 'the change induced from the connecting of a content to an expression' (p. 3). Innes provides an example of how these components fit together by presenting the example of a person describing how they had been affected by a neighbours' burglary. Innes explains that the burglary itself functions as the 'expression' and the resulting 'effect' is that the individual 'felt anxious'. The content from the signal is signified by the individual reflecting on the expression and saying 'I actually did not feel safe' (p. 3). Data from Innes' empirical studies which explore signals and their effects across neighbourhoods suggest that drug-related crime and disorder have a fairly 'dominant position' in terms of shaping how people perceive levels of neighbourhood security, ranking at number one in three research sites and demonstrating associations with 'affective, behavioural and cognitive effects' (Innes 2014, p. 17). It is perhaps unsurprising that low-level drug crimes and drug use are understood as symbols of disorder or a threat to the social values of a community, and there is a wealth of academic literature that supports and elucidates the prominence of drug-related signal crimes.

AQ6 As Coomber (2000) suggests, exaggeration, distortion, inaccuracy and sensationalism have all consistently been applied to the reporting of drug-related issues. Yet despite a 'quiet revolution' and **AQ7** move toward the decriminalisation of drug possession (Rosmarin and Eastwood 2014), 'problem' drug use and drug dealing are both still imagined and understood in populist, pejorative terms, with drug-addicted users and sellers often described in media narratives and popular culture as 'outsiders' (Taylor 2008), predatory 'pushers' (Coomber 2006) or as 'junkies' (see Lloyd 2010). Media imagery which frames addicted drug users as irrational, compulsive and generally 'prepared to do anything to get their next hit' (Coomber 2006, p. 90) strengthens the 'common sense' causal link between drug use and criminal activity (Taylor 2008). It also serves to solidify the power of the 'signal', so that the visible drug user and drug supplier communicates a threat or risk across social space, triggering an emotional effect in the individual. Moreover, Innes (2014) suggests that the 'cognitive effects' of signal crimes relate to when someone states that knowledge of an incident alters how they feel about themselves, others, or an environment. In practice, this might refer to 'labelling' groups of people or places as problematic or troublesome, or relatedly, when it leads to thinking that an area is degenerating in some fashion (p. 17). As Fitzgerald and Threadgold (2004) have suggested, drug use behind closed doors is rarely a matter for intervention, but when it moves to the public realm, it can be conceived of as 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966). Indeed, encounters with 'heroin using bodies' in communities not only induce fear, they represent danger, 'dirt' and are symbolic of the wider collapse of social order (Fitzgerald and Threadgold 2004).

But it is not only the criminal event that holds expressive power; using policing as a conceptual vehicle, Innes (2014) also explores the symbolism and communicative properties of social control. Drawing on empirical observations of police interventions in a housing estate in North West England, Innes details the police response in tackling drug-related crime and disorder in that space. The approach employed entailed a high visibility performance of 'spectacular' raids on suspected dealers' flats, where officers were in effect exemplifying the use of 'control signals' — sending messages through their actions. To the law-abiding community, the crackdown operation is said to signify 'that they were tackling the problem; and to those participating in the drugs markets, that they were closing in on them' (Innes 2014, p. 139). It is important to note however, that for Innes there also exist 'negative control signals'. Taking police raids as 'an example once again, he (2014) suggests that when police leave raids empty handed or are perceived as being affable towards the occupants of the raided flat, the tactic was perceived in a deleterious way. In this respect, police crackdown tactics also hold the potential to signal the failure of enforcement and the perpetuation of disorder.

Police and policing as 'Symbolic'

Innes' (2004, 2014) theory investigates the intricacies of signals of crime and social control at a micro-level, and while his analysis provides expedient observations of the material effects of tacit and explicit communication processes evident in crime and police interactions, broader conceptual considerations of the *symbolic* at policy level also hold considerable value in understanding the nature of crackdown operations. For instance, in his studies of politics as 'symbolic action' Edelman (1985, 1988) urges us to understand political behaviour through focus on creation and change in symbolic understanding of threats, pressures and responsibilities. Edelman frequently uses the term 'political spectacle' to describe his understanding of the political system. The 'spectacle' he defines is a 'partly illusory parade of threats and reassurances, most of which have little bearing upon the successes and ordeals people encounter in their everyday lives and some of which create problems that would not otherwise occur' (1988, p. 96). Meaning in the political spectacle arises dynamically between politicians' role-taking, spectators' interactive perceptions and a changing social and economic environment. The political spectacle does not promote accurate expectations or understanding, 'but rather evokes a drama that objectifies hopes and fears' (Edelman 1988, p. 96). Put simply, Edelman's framework contests that as far as the mass public is concerned, politics is a constructed world of conflicting meanings that involves its audience by arousing emotional responses in them, but generally has little influence on people's day to day action.

Just like the political field, the police and the practice of policing are deeply imbued with symbolic meanings and messages. In addition to the coercive power afforded to them, the police exhibit an 'invisible' symbolic power that has a deeper meaning (Bourdieu 1991). To the public, the police represent much more than their actual roles in society; their actions 'communicate meaning, not only about the police' and their function, 'but also about power and authority in society' (Loader and Mulcahy 2003, p. 43). In the context of everyday life, Bittner (1990) argues that the symbolic power of the police is bolstered by their authority to act in situations in which 'something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now' (p. 246). As Loader highlights (1997), the capacity to intervene, and to stick around until the immediate problem is resolved is what underpins the range of tasks the police are requested to perform. It is important however to highlight that the symbolism of the police as 'guardians' (Loader 1997) and bastions of law and order (Jackson and Bradford 2009) will not be realised for people across all social groups. Appeals for policing interventions toward low-level disorder in local drug markets often require attention to be directed at 'subaltern groups' (Loader 1997) such as marginalised drug users or suppliers. For the police and wider public, the targeting of low-level drug offences and offenders offers a discernible strategy for addressing these social disorders with the promise of firm, immediate action and quick, decisive results (Scott 2003). In this instance, while the majority

might symbolically associate these strategies with upholding cohesion, stability and order, for those experiencing these punitive interventions, the police may instead represent the inequitable priorities of the dominant social order, or even oppression (Jackson and Bradford 2009).

Methods and data

Between 2011 and 2014 three Drug Market Rapid Appraisals (DMRAs) were carried out by the authors in Southend-On-Sea (2011), Plymouth (2014) and Torbay (2014) (UK). The DMRA employs a mixed-methods rapid appraisal (RA) approach (cf. Rhodes *et al.* 1999) – a form of research that aims to quickly gather information regarding a particular (often local) issue in order to make an assessment on how the issue might be addressed in an evidence-based manner. Specific aims of the DMRA in all three sites were to map the key illicit drug market ‘hot-spots’ of the local area, to describe the nature of the drug market/s in terms of the basic supply/transactional activities, and to map the various perspectives on what the local drug market is thought to look like by drug users, service professionals and local enforcement. The mixed-method RA involved direct ethnographic observation, examination of extant and bespoke data sets (arrest records; forensic analysis of seizures); semi-structured key person interviews, and semi-structured interviews with local problem drug users and recreational drug users – a number of whom had also been involved in various aspects of supply (Please see Coomber (2015) for detailed overview of this methodology). In Southend-on-Sea, Plymouth and Torbay respectively, 36, 30 and 29 ‘problem drug users’ (i.e. dependent/ recovering heroin/crack users and suppliers) were recruited and interviewed to provide first-hand insight into the nature of the local problem drug market. Drug using/recovering respondents were nearly all recruited through a variety of trusted local agencies providing substance use treatment and support (e.g. walk-in facilities, training/education/advice). Some snowball access, via word-of-mouth and other respondents, complimented this strategy. As is common with this type of research, respondents were offered a reciprocity payment (£10) for their contribution (Ritter *et al.* 2003). A further 35 interviews were carried out with local (professional) key respondents from a range of agencies, including youth workers, police officers, treatment providers, local/national police intelligence/data providers and youth service safeguarding providers. Interviews were transcribed and the data were coded and analysed thematically using NVivo9 software.

Findings

The key aim of this article is to analyse the meaning and efficacy of police crackdown operations. The media play an important role in shaping and projecting images of policing, and as Innes points out, police activity is often ‘explicitly choreographed for the mass media’ (p. 137). In order to understand the meaning underlying crackdown operations, we have also included a range of media reported statements by senior police on the considered aims, rationale and successes of the crackdown as supplementary thematic data. We counterpose the framing of the police crackdown operation with data acquired from drug market rapid analysis (DMRA), and most importantly, the voices of local drug users. We choose to focus on drug users rather than police officers as we aim to understand the experience of those who are *subject* to these crackdowns. In what follows, we initially choose to focus on undercover test purchase operations as a quintessential example of a police crackdown tactic. Following this, we explore the targets and tactics used in police crackdown operations, contrasting the presentation of crackdown aims with anecdotal evidence from the drug users that experience them, and reference to police arrest data. While police statements via media stress the aim to concentrate enforcement on organised criminal groups, the findings also show the ways in which crackdown operations also focus on ‘drug activity’, consequently scooping up the usual-suspects – namely low-level, visible street dealers. Drawing upon Innes (2014) and Edelman (1985), we show how police crackdown on particular ‘signals’ of disorder, at the same time communicating reassurance messages through ‘signals of control’. Whilst acknowledging the value of approaches that

appeal to feelings of security, findings finally attend to the unintended and sometimes counterproductive consequences of these operations, both at an individual and community level.

Symbolic policing methodologies: undercover test purchases

In crackdown operations, undercover policing and test purchasing provide a popular method for making multiple 'countable' arrests and eliminating the visible signs of drug markets (see Woods 2016). In Southend-on-Sea, for example, Operation Rasp (2012), saw police pose as drug users in order to gain intelligence on the seaside town's drugs trade, while in Torbay, as part of Operation Tucker, nine men and a woman were arrested as part of a police operation against street drug dealing in Torquay. In the latter, *The Western Morning News* (2010) reported covert officers going into town centres aiming to infiltrate the drug scene in order 'to seek people and establish contacts'. As a result, it was suggested that 'people gave the information, pointed them in the right direction' and supplied them drugs. Interviewees in all three locations provided analogous accounts of police targeting *visible* local users, runners and user-dealers. Respondents indicated that typically, rough sleepers, known drug users (often with a track record of acquisitive offences) and Big Issue sellers (an independent magazine sold on the streets by homeless, marginalised or disadvantaged people) were commonly approached by undercover officers as they were believed either to use drugs themselves, or be capable of gaining access to heroin and crack cocaine:

These coppers they used to go up to people doing the Big Issue because they're desperate, they're trying to get money to get their fix and they say 'I'll buy you bag if you go and get me one' and that's how they trick them. (Jake (35), heroin and crack user, Plymouth)

It is improbable that a genuine, non-drug using commercially orientated seller would be enticed by such an approach and non-drug using runners will be less obviously detectable. The bulk of people likely approached in this manner in an area such as Southend-on-Sea or Plymouth where most sales are through commercial dealers (or their runners) will therefore be visible users hanging around the streets in known areas where users congregate. One drug user in Plymouth described an encounter with two individuals he believed to be undercover officers on the day of his interview:

I had two of them today, 'Oh do you know where Callum lives?' Like 'Do you know where Callum lives?' And I was like, 'No.' They was like, 'Can you score for us?' And I was like, 'No.' ... and then they asked, 'can you score for us, we're really ill?' And like they were pretending they were ill; they were like just scruffy and stuff ... Pathetic, isn't it? (Sam (25), heroin and crack user, Plymouth)

In Southend-on-Sea and Plymouth, undercover operations and test purchases had resulted in large numbers of street users and sellers being arrested in undercover sweeps and stings. Highlighting the willingness of local users and runners to engage in small opportunistic acts of supply as a means of funding their habit, an interviewee from Southend explains how many fellow drug users and low-level suppliers were drawn into undercover test purchase operations:

... I mean the police have just finished like an undercover operation; there're quite a lot of people in Chelmsford Prison at the moment, pending further charges, to go in front of the court, for actually getting drugs and selling them to the police. Not actually being *the dealers*, but being the sort of middle man where they've come along, the police undercover has come along, and said, 'Oh, can you get us a bit of crack, mate?' And they're thinking, 'Oh, I might be able to make a bit of crack myself, like a couple of pipes, or make a quick £10.' 'Yeah, I can get you some crack.' Get it? And then what the police have been doing is saying to them, 'Well, here you are, look, you can use my phone, I've got plenty of credit on it ... And then that's how they're all getting busted. (Geoff (51), heroin and crack user, Southend-on-Sea)

In research based with user-dealers elsewhere (see Moyle and Coomber 2015), we suggest that, when given the opportunity, heroin and crack cocaine users often choose involvement in small-scale dealing as an alternative to what they perceive to be more harmful, morally shameful income generating acquisitive crimes such as shoplifting, burglary and theft. User-dealers suggested that involvement in small acts of supply felt more like an 'extension' of their drug use, and in this respect,

involvement in user-dealing provided a convenient, easily accessible and 'instinctive' option (see Moyle and Coomber 2016) to support their dependency. To illustrate how all of these factors can effectively combine and lead to problematic outcomes for local drug users, a local online news site covers an illuminating court case of a 'prostitute drug addict mum' who was arrested as part of the Operation Bugatti's undercover sweep in Plymouth (This is Cornwall 2009a). The defendant, arrested for supplying three £10 bags of heroin weighing between 0.144 and 0.160 grams had been addicted to heroin for 15 years and would ordinarily have financed her addiction through sex work. Yet, having been approached at her flat, she had taken the opportunity to arrange deals having being approached by the undercover officers on two separate occasions. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984) stipulates that legally, an undercover officer cannot force or 'persuade' someone to commit an offence and the Court should reject such cases which would not otherwise have been committed without the officer's encouragement. However, an undercover officer is allowed to give someone an *opportunity* to commit an offence by asking them to sell or buy drugs on their behalf. If someone agrees to this and engages in these acts then the law stipulates that this is *not* entrapment (Release 2016; see also Brooke 1999).

Police crackdown operations as sweeping 'low hanging fruit'

Targets and tactics

A recent development in the English heroin and crack drug market relates to the propensity for drug suppliers – often members of organised crime groups (OCG's) – to travel from cities like London to provincial locations to expand their dealing business. The success of this so-called county lines model (where sellers travel beyond county, and thus police, boundaries) relies on the exploitation of local drug users at the target location, who are sought as customers, recruited as drug 'runners' or are 'cuckooed' (the practice of gangs taking over a vulnerable person's property for the purpose of selling illicit drugs) (see Coomber and Moyle, forthcoming). Southend-on-Sea is just 40 miles (or 45 minutes to an hour by direct train or car) from London, and drug market rapid analysis (DMRA) shows it is serviced mostly by commercially orientated 'county lines' suppliers from this area (see Moyle and Coomber, 2012). In contrast, at the time of research, Plymouth (2014) and Torbay (2014) both located around 200 miles away from London had far fewer of these. Instead, these spaces were found to exhibit a supply landscape with high proportions of 'user-dealers' (see Coomber and Moyle, 2015) – typically local drug dependent individuals who sell small amounts in order to maintain his or her own drug habit' (Moyle and Coomber 2015).

Bacon (2016) found evidence to suggest that officers in his ethnographic study saw the principal role of proactive drug investigations as targeting the most harmful elements of the drug trade. In many of the media reports depicting police operations, local police forces also communicated this aim, stressing their intention to use crackdowns to target OCG's managing drug supply from urban areas rather than focusing enforcement on low-level offenders recruited and often exploited by nature of their addiction. Having recently experienced an increase in county lines activity in Southend, and with a number of high-profile cases in Plymouth, Senior Police Officers in both locales emphasised strategy that prioritised 'reducing drug related violence' and 'minimising the impacts' of out of town OCG's on local communities (see The Echo, 2016). In a number of articles observed, forces spoke directly to county lines dealers via media statements, and in practice, these messages generally took the form of high ranking officers using online platforms to stress their zero-tolerance approach to such groups. For example:

To the next crew that comes along and believes that they can step into the void, the word of warning is that we are out there. (Acting Ch Supt Chris Singer, Plymouth Police Commander, BBC News 2013)

Interestingly, in conjunction with demonstrating a proactive and certain response to these out of town urban crime groups, Police also publicised their role as *protectors* of vulnerable populations

who may be exploited by county lines drug supply methodologies such as drug running and cuckooing.

At the forefront of our minds is the vulnerability of the victims of cuckooing. We will look to secure the safety of the individual, by getting them moved, using partner agencies or employing other tactics. They are often vulnerable, by the nature of their addiction, and we try to tackle that head-on as well. (Inspector Dave Richards, Operation Raptor, Southend Standard 2016)

Through publicly prioritising the enforcement of gangs and offering support to the adults and children exploited by urban crime networks, regional Police Forces are exhibiting an acknowledgment of how vulnerable populations can be actively targeted by gang members (NCA 2016). Yet while the messages presented stress protection, as we shall see, further investigation of arrest data and media reporting of supply enforcement activity indicate that in reality, police crackdown operations are routinely scooping up the addicted, low-level drug users and dealers actively recruited by OCG's with the intention to take over their flats (cuckooing), or to undertake high risk drug running in their targeted satellite markets.

The usual suspects? Arrest rates and anecdotal evidence

Violence and predatory dealing practices such as cuckooing were commonly connected to specific ethnic groups. In Southend-on-Sea, discussing the characteristics of the perpetrators involved in cuckooing, Sergeant Ash Holland conceded that the perpetrators had come from outside the local area:

Many of them, if not all of them, gave a London address, or Hertfordshire. We believe many of them to be from the Bush Boys (a gang predominantly of Somali decent hailing from Shepherd's Bush, London). I would be lying to say they were all involved in gangs, but they were all involved in drug using or dealing activity. (Basildon, Canvey and Southend Echo 2014)

While OCG groups are purported to constitute police enforcement priority, police arrest data for Southend extracted from 2007 to 2011 showed that 66% of total supply arrests ($n = 105$) were indigenous sellers and classed as 'white European', whilst in Plymouth, 94% of sellers in the period 2009–2012 were indigenous (Coomber 2015). Without data on drug using status, it is difficult to state definitively that this group is made up of low-level addicted drug users and suppliers. However, the arrest record did concur with accounts from respondents who commonly described the ethnicity of commercial dealers in Southend-on-Sea as 'black' or pointed to the high representation of indigenous (white) user-dealers:

I: A prominent picture being painted by others is that the London dealers stand out for various reasons. If you were to give a proportion of the ones coming up from London compared to those from Southend, would it be 50/50, or would it be 60/40?

R: I would say it's about 70/30.

I: And when they get here, then, do they use local runners?

R: Yeah, they use a lot of local runners, and for some reason, I don't know how they do it, but a lot of the black guys that are dealing, like the Somalians, whatever, and the ones that come down from London, whatever, they don't use themselves. But it seems to be like the old school white people, whether they're in the area, or they come down from somewhere else, Westcliffe, London, wherever, they're sort of users, trying to support their own habit, and make a few quid on the side. But the black ones (from London) seem to be just doing it for the money. (Jack (51), heroin and crack user, Southend-on-Sea)

And:

In the operation I got arrested as part of there were 40 odd people arrested ... I would say that out of those 40 odd people myself and two others were actively involved in selling drugs, the rest of them were convinced to go and get some drugs on behalf of ... so they were really on a very, very low level supporting their habit. And I actually spoke to a couple of officers ... I said to them ... you've caught all these people, but the people who were supplying me and the people who were supplying all these other people ... and don't you want to go after those? And

they would quite openly say trying to do that takes too many resources and we don't have a good enough success rate of prosecutions. (Tony (43), heroin user, Plymouth)

Analysis of enforcement activity reported by the media is also suggestive of the notion that it is low-level users and user-dealers rather than out of town gangs that are being swept up by these operations:

Since the start of Operation Booth 26 people have been arrested for drug offences and 12 warrants have been executed at six properties within central Southend. Three properties have been secured through partnership working with South Essex Homes after they were targeted by dealers. More than 250 wraps of heroin and crack have been recovered by police and others have been flushed away before police could intervene. (The Enquirer 2014)

Arguably, the recovery of 250 wraps of heroin and crack cocaine between 26 people (averaging at about 10 wraps per person) is redolent of fairly low-level dealing practices and certainly below the quantities gangs are now understood to be working with (NCA 2016). In this respect, while there may have been one or two low-level gang members caught up in the operation, it is far more likely that those caught up in Operation Booth were low-level user-dealers or just users, rather than commuting or cuckooing gang members. Supporting this evidence of comparatively mediocre enforcement gains, in interviews many respondents also revealed frustration with the enforcement outcomes of crackdown operation type methods, with one Plymouth-based respondent bemoaning the high proportions of commercial dealers from Liverpool and highlighting the predilection for the police to bust 'all the Plymouth boys and not them'. As Woods (2016) argues in his recent memoirs charting a career of undercover policing in the UK, 'busting low-level user-dealers' is much more straightforward than 'hunting down real gangsters', and these easy arrests also fulfil force crime targets (p. 305). In many ways, it might be argued that the crackdown patterns in Plymouth and Southend-on-Sea, with their focus on street-level sweeps and test purchases, serve a similar purpose.

'Signals of control' and 'signals to control': crackdowns on 'drug activity'

As Innes (2014) suggests, there is a difference between 'signals of control' and 'signals to control' (p. 153). While crackdown operations in Southend-on-Sea demonstrate variable levels of responsiveness to tactically policing 'travelling dealers' and protecting vulnerable street users, Devon and Cornwall Police's Operation Bugatti provides a confronting example of a street sweeping operation with the explicit aim to 'purge the city of the menace of hard drugs' through a bottom-up approach to enforcement (This is Cornwall 2009b). Buy bust operations are perhaps the most renowned enforcement tactic utilised in drug market policing (College of Policing 2016); yet media coverage of specific court cases, and police statements like those offered above show that crackdown operations in all three research areas were frequently combined with other aggressive (Scott 2003) 'hot spot policing' tactics such as stop and search, surveillance, vehicle checks, and visible raids on premises. In Operation Booth (2014), police capitalised on intelligence to stop check vehicles believed to be concerned in the supply of drugs at the same time as 'taking positive action' at addresses through the use of forced raids in Southend-on-Sea (Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex 2015). These police tactics can be understood as constituting 'signals of control' (Innes 2014) where the visibility of house raids, vehicle checks and 'spectacular' undercover arrests of street-level user-dealers constitute the signal 'expression', sending a message to the wider community that action is being taken. Much like 'signal events', Innes argues that signals of control are always followed by an 'effect', namely a 'sense of progress' or an acknowledgement of a local improvement (p. 133). In Plymouth, the closure of a notorious 'crack den' was deemed a success since it had eliminated a site of anti-social behaviour. The resulting 'effect' documented by the media is that residents 'felt safer' and were now 'allowing their children to play in the park' located close to the address (Plymouth Herald 2016). In keeping with Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic policy, it could be argued that

these enforcement victories have useful illusory value, appealing to our emotions through reassurance, rather than holding any capacity for long-term reductions in crime.

Along with signals of control, findings across all drug market sites also highlighted evidence of what Innes (2014) describes as 'signals to control'. In his analysis of signal crimes, Innes (2014) highlights the dominance of drug-related crime in shaping how individuals consider the safety of their neighbourhood (p. 17). Analysis of local media stories of drug-related crime highlight an undercurrent of anxiety relating to the visibility of drug users and sellers. In Southend-on-Sea for example, local 'decent people' were contrasted to 'druggies' and 'scum' said to be present in the local area (Lucas, 2016), while in Plymouth, a local prosecutor likened local user-dealers 'to rats running around the streets of the city' (This is Devon 2011). Manning (2004) argues that drug enforcement acts as a 'ceremony that celebrates the interests of the powerful segments of society and their views of appropriate levels and kinds of drug use, proper lifestyles and occupations, the correct place to live, and moral commitments' (p. 254). Operation Bugatti's crackdown narrative is in keeping with this 'ceremony', appealing to aggrieved residents through promises to reduce the 'enormous damage' heroin caused to the community (This is Devon 2011). Ultimately, to achieve these aims, Devon and Cornwall Police enacted a crackdown operation which targeted visible 'drug activity' or more precisely, all actors involved in the purchasing or supply of heroin:

Many of those arrested and prosecuted have been at a very low level, but the drug supply business relies on them.' DCI Colwell said police would 're-visit and re-deploy' in the area, adding: 'Operation Bugatti was never intended to deliver a one-hit wonder. *'Arresting the street dealers frustrates the activities of the suppliers and makes their operations more risky,' he said.* (Our emphasis, This is Cornwall 2009b)

Media coverage of the sweep suggests that in the case of Operation Bugatti, 43 arrests were carried out in the course of 3 months, with 34 of those arrested being charged with 145 drug supply offences (This is Cornwall 2009c). While the larger sister operation, Operation Glendale, is reported to have led to the seizure of £20,000 worth of heroin in two busts, Operation Bugatti was concentrated almost entirely on street supply. Providing comment on the operation in local news, Devon and Cornwall Police state that 'there is clear evidence' they made an impact on the street supply market in heroin in Plymouth city centre' and that they have 'probably taken out most – if not all – of the individual, day-to-day street supply in Plymouth' (This is Cornwall 2009c). Operation Tucker in Torquay also harboured similar aims to Operation Bugatti (Plymouth) in the respect that it aimed to deal with drug market-related issues such as 'anti-social behaviour and street troubles'. Defendants indicted as part of the operation included 'six dealers, addicts and go-betweens' and in mitigation for three of the defendants, solicitor Andrew Cooper held that they were 'heroin users, simply go-betweens in the sale of drugs', and were 'relatively small fish' (This is Devon 2010). The arrests of small-scale suppliers in Plymouth and Torquay might have some value in short-term disruption of supply in these areas (Aitken 2002). However, the propensity to crackdown on low-level disorder also provides an opportunity for the removal of 'dirty' 'heroin using bodies' (Fitzgerald and Threadgold 2004) from public spaces such as city centres, therefore controlling signals of disorder, and reinforcing notions of what is and is not acceptable in the local community (Innes 2014).

Unintended and counterproductive outcomes of police crackdowns

Changes to drug market dynamics

By sweeping user-dealers or those we would have to describe as essentially just users from the streets some intended and desired outcomes are achieved by police, including assuaging local fear and promoting feelings of security. In practice however, the implementation of these controls signals (Innes 2014) can have unintended and even contradictory outcomes. The NCA's (2016) Intelligence Report on 'county lines' drug dealing highlights that a typical commuting drug dealer methodology involves identifying and then establishing a base in a developing market (most notably in a provincial location). In line with wider research (Maher and Dixon 1999, 2001), it is argued that removing

essentially non-commercial *user-dealers* from a market context has the potential to shift the spatial organisation of the market (Aitkens *et al.* 2002). In doing so, it can create a vacuum or opportunity for travelling urban dealers with more aggressive and expansionist selling strategies to gain the monopoly of that space, replacing the largely harmonious and closed supply systems of local user-dealers (see Moyle and Coomber 2015). Moreover, commercially orientated dealers, in addition to increasing aggregate levels of general violence and intimidation to an area (Coomber 2015), may also bring other forms of specific intimidation or violence such as cuckooing and/or other related activities where there are safeguarding concerns. The increased potential for Plymouth to be targeted as a possible satellite market by commuting urban gangs is acknowledged by Police in Plymouth and reported via the Plymouth Herald in 2015 in an article entitled: 'Big city drug gangs targeting Plymouth and coastal South West towns, claim police'. Similarly, as more recent reporting of drug market dynamics in Southend-on-Sea highlight, like Plymouth, the dynamics of the drug market appear to have changed since the commissioning of our research in 2011. At this time, by far the most cited aspect of drug market violence experienced by our respondents was associated with robberies and assaults on younger drug runners who were targeted by problem drug users. Fast forward to 2014 and the media conveys a considerably different scene, punctuated by two fatal stabbings and the shooting of a young man with an air gun. Adding to these high-profile incidents of drug-related violence, police statistics convey prominent levels of what Goldstein (1985) might consider as 'systemic' drug market violence:

There were 605 more violent crimes recorded between December 1, 2013, and November 30, 2014, compared to the year before – an increase of 21%. Serious violent crime, which includes grievous bodily harm and murder, is now up by 10.2%, with offences rising from 141 to 128 in the last year. (The Northern Echo 2015)

It is impossible to assess precisely how far the experience of violence has accelerated for local drug users and vulnerable populations without follow-up drug market analysis; however, analysis does provide some indication of a change of pace in regard to violence in Plymouth and Southend-on-Sea. We might therefore surmise that there exists a possibility that targeted police enforcement directed toward 'drug activity' has started to repeal the protective effects of a dominant low-level indigenous dealing population in these spaces. In Torbay this is yet to take place, but operations have been fewer and the impact on the local user-dealers less.

Paradoxical public health and criminal justice outcomes

Notwithstanding the effects of crackdowns on individual and community harm, there are further unintended consequences relating to criminal justice outcomes for those arrested under police crackdown operations that can be mentioned. Focusing on buy and bust entrapment type pursuits where an undercover police officer asks a *visible* drug user to access drugs (often under the pretence that they are new to town and don't have easy access), it is unclear 'who' exactly is being entrapped in such scenarios. Almost any addicted drug user if approached and promised a small return (either a small amount of the drugs bought or some small monetary payment) on helping to access or purchase drugs for another drug user will likely do this (see Stewart 2016), and as illustrated previously, they will more readily do it a second or third time once they 'know' the person asking. In attempting to deter supply through crackdown operations (Sherman 1990), the intensive policing of drug users and small-scale suppliers can effectively prompt a switch to alternative forms of criminality (Coomber 2015). In Torquay, this displacement was acknowledged by local police when interviewed about the local drug market/s whereby the roll out of 'test purchases' was known to result in switches to other forms of income generating criminality. As such, when planning drug crackdowns, it was suggested that the force 'have to judge whether you want acquisitive crime to go up' (personal communication, Devon and Cornwall Police 2014). These themes are supported in wider literature, which recognises the knock-on effects of cracking down on user-dealing populations, particularly as they relate to the encouragement toward other forms of acquisitive crime (Grapendaal *et al.* 1995, Maher and Dixon

1999, May and Hough 2001). Effects on public health are of course also relevant here since police enforcement approaches or crackdown operations are known to increase adverse public health outcomes, particularly around the risk of blood borne disease such as HIV and Hepatitis B (Wood et al., AQ17 2004). Respondents in Plymouth, Southend-on-Sea and Torbay described feelings of anxiety and
 605 ▲ 'paranoia' following undercover crackdown operations; research has suggested that in periods of intensified police presence, it is the affective experience of these emotions that can trigger injecting
 AQ18 in riskier environments, discourage safer injection practices, and increase unsafe disposal of syringes
 AQ19 (Small et al. 2006, Kerr et al. 2005, Aitken et al. 2002).

610 Discussion

Drugs won't be tolerated and people will be brought to the police. It's not just about stopping people but sending the message out to the public that we are out on the streets and taking action. (Sgt Chris Chilcott, East Cornwall Neighbourhood Team, Plymouth Herald 2014)

615 The quote above offers a revealing soundbite of a policing strategy which can be considered symbolic in its aims since it is primarily concerned with 'sending a message out' and 'taking action' on drug activity. Police statements and media coverage presented here suggest that community level stigma and common-sense assumptions regarding the nature of drug users and low-level suppliers are integral to the push for visible action against drug use and drug-related activity. In the context of
 620 drug markets, and in line with Edelman's (1985) ideas on symbolic policy, it seems that the meanings of police crackdowns are more tied up with threats, assurance, and the cleansing of drug market spaces, than with providing a considered policing strategy that is problem-solving in its aims. Media narratives in all three locations not only provided messages regarding firm, decisive enforcement successes; importantly they also enabled 'impression management' (Innes 2014), offering
 625 important reassurance that the visible signals (Innes 2004) or markers of drug markets will not be tolerated. In all three spaces, order maintenance was prioritised, with such operations symbolically enforcing 'disorderly use of public space' and defending the 'edges of society' (Manning 1980, Maher and Dixon 1999) from dangerous outsiders (Taylor 2008). In his review of crackdowns, Sherman (1990) suggested 'it is possible for well-intentioned efforts to make things worse' (p.
 630 35). In a similar vein, we acknowledge the existence of thoughtfully planned and executed drug market policing, and recognise the appeal of, and requirement for street-level measures that target anti-social behaviour associated with drugs. Yet, despite the good intentions, the data presented here largely provides evidence of a policing strategy that is built upon the symbolic power of 'taking drug dealers off the streets' rather than having any long term or meaningful
 635 impact against the drug trade. In the absence of alternative drug market policing approaches, drug market analysis indicates that it is vulnerable low-level users and suppliers whom are most likely caught up in an enforcement and prosecution machine. In the three locations studied, there is for example, plentiful evidence of sweeps, undercover test purchases and house raids, which inevitably tend to capture the most visible, low-level players in the drug market – buyers and users who are most often 'pre-disposed' (see Brooke 1999) to becoming caught up in such
 640 offences.

In terms of the *impact* of these methods, police tended to justify sweeps in Plymouth and Southend-on-Sea by suggesting that crackdown operations have tangible value in disrupting the overall functioning of a criminal organisation's supply chain. However, aside from the 'initial deterrence effect' (Sherman 1990), there is little evidence in the research literature supporting the existence
 645 of any more than a transitory change in drug markets or simple displacement (May and Hough 2001, Aitken et al. 2002). Focusing enforcement efforts on drug market players who are considered to be less culpable than dealers proper, both in research (Moyle and Coomber 2016) and in UK sentencing guidelines (2012), not only represents a regressive policing response, but at a practical level it has the capacity to push some drug users into more harmful acquisitive criminality. Data also highlighted that at the community level, crackdown operations on low-level actors may also have
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contradictory effects on a local drug market since urban/rural areas with high proportions of user-dealers generally experience *less* violence in the drug supply setting than those where a clearly commercially orientated market predominates or dominates (Coomber 2015). In this respect, strategically, it may also not be in the interests of law enforcement to always undertake operations that seek to reduce the proportions of user-dealers active in their area.

Conclusion

Drawing on research on three distinct drug markets and thematic analysis of media reporting on police crackdown operations, this paper outlines the nature of police crackdown operations and the effects of such operations on those who occupy the targeted spaces. While the limitations of drugs policing have been discussed elsewhere, central to this paper is the conceptualisation of the *meanings* of these crackdowns operations. Building on the theory of Innes (2004, 2014) and Edelman (1985, 1988), we prefer to use the conceptual framework of 'symbolic policing' to show how policing operations in these locales are more concerned with responding to the markers of drug markets and providing reassurance to fearful residents than making meaningful arrests. We have chosen to utilise the term 'symbolic' as we believe it both encapsulates and elicits more of what is going on in the police operational space than the notions of signal crimes and social control can suggest. The signals crime perspective takes a micro-level approach to understanding the social semiotic processes evident in criminal events and the broader normative messages social controls can send (Bottoms 2012). The core principles of this theoretical position provide considerable explanatory power, but the signals crime perspective concept does not easily lend itself to wider application. Therefore, we advocate that the melding of these ideas with Edelman's (1985) 'symbolic policy' offers broader theoretical currency for understanding approaches to criminal justice provision, such as policing. Exploring drug markets through the conceptual vehicle of 'symbolic policing' has exposed the limits of police crackdown operations in regard to their propensity to scoop up low-hanging fruit and to provide a space for more harmful dealing operations to flourish in rural locations. Given that the UK Definitive Sentencing Guidelines (2012) identifies 'addiction' and 'coercion' as mitigating factors in drug supply offences, a more progressive approach to policing drug markets might entail disregarding 'symbolic policing methods' such as test purchases and undercover policing operations that target 'all drug activity' and aim simply 'to get something done'. While police are beginning to recognise the vulnerability of women recruited as cuckoos and young people recruited as runners, moves away from symbolic reactionary measures might mean that the vulnerability of *all* addicted drug players might be recognised. For instance, rather than seeing user-dealers as culpable drug dealers who enable the activities of gangs, effective practice would entail police recognising user-dealers as vulnerable problem drug users, and although relative culpability may vary, they would instead be considered as actors exploited by OCGs to shield them from the police/criminal justice system. Whilst not reducing supply per se or having the same capacity to instantly assuage public fear, in the long term, targeted policing that aims to reduce the amount of violence in specific drug markets may be more beneficial to the community as a whole (Coomber 2015).

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