

New Intervention

Novel Police Tactic Puts Drug Markets Out of Business Confronted by the Evidence, Dealers in High Point, N.C., Succumb to Pressure

Some Dubbed It Hug-a-Thug

By Mark Schoofs
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Page A1

HIGH POINT, N.C. -- For over three months, police investigated more than 20 dealers operating in this city's West End neighborhood, where crack cocaine was openly sold on the street and in houses. Police made dozens of undercover buys and videotaped many other drug purchases.

They also did something unusual: they determined the "influentials" in the dealers' lives -- mothers, grandmothers, mentors -- and cultivated relationships with them. When police felt they had amassed ironclad legal cases, they did something even more striking: they refrained from arresting most of the suspected dealers.

In a counterintuitive approach, police here are trying to shut down entire drug markets, in part by giving nonviolent suspected drug dealers a second chance. Their strategy combines the "soft" pressure from families and community with the "hard" threat of aggressive, ready-to-go criminal cases. While critics say the strategy is too lenient, it has met with early success and is being tried by other communities afflicted with overt drug markets and the violence they breed.

Overt drug markets -- street-corner dealing, drug houses, and the like -- constitute one of the worst scourges of poor communities. Such markets foment violent clashes between dealers, as well as robbery by addicts desperate for drug money. Property values suffer. Businesses and families move out -- or avoid moving in. Many residents who remain feel under siege. Police often rely on sweeps -- mass arrests of street-level dealers -- to eradicate drug-related crime. But those rarely provide more than short-term relief. In High Point, police believe that the combination of extensive investigation of the entire market and community involvement has helped solve the problem.

In May 2004, after accumulating evidence in the West End, police chief James Fealy invited 12 suspected dealers to a meeting at the police station, with a promise that they wouldn't be arrested that night. Encouraged by their "influentials," nine showed up.

In one room, they met with about 30 clergy, social workers and other community members who confronted them with the harm they were doing, implored them to stop dealing, and offered them help. The suspects, however, "were slouching in their seats and one guy even seemed to be dozing off," recalls Don Stevenson, pastor of a local congregation, the First Reformed United Church of Christ. "Their attitude was, 'This is just another program and it will blow over.'"

Then the alleged dealers moved to a second room where they encountered a phalanx of law-enforcement officials: police, a district attorney, an assistant U.S. attorney, and representatives of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and others. Around the

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room hung poster-size photos of crack houses that had been the dealers' headquarters. In front of each alleged dealer was a binder, laying out the evidence against him or her. There were even arrest warrants, lacking only the signature of a judge.

The law-enforcement officials made an ultimatum: stop dealing or go to jail. Several suspected dealers with violent records had already been arrested and were facing maximum charges. The same fate, officials emphasized, awaited anyone in the room who returned to dealing drugs. The district attorney promised to seek the maximum possible sentences, and the assistant U.S. attorney threatened to bring federal charges, which, he stressed, don't allow for parole. Police from surrounding areas warned them against trying to relocate operations, noting that their names were flagged on statewide law-enforcement computers.

Rev. Stevenson recalls that the alleged dealers "seemed to be paying a lot more attention."

The West End street drug market closed "overnight" and hasn't reopened in more than two years, says Chief Fealy, who was "shocked" at the success. High Point police say they have since shut down the city's two other major street drug markets, using the same strategy.

Police in neighboring Winston-Salem, N.C., as well as Newburgh, N.Y., have deployed the strategy with success, and word is spreading. Encouraged by the National Urban League, which wants to see the approach replicated nationwide, police departments in Tucson, Ariz., Providence, R.I., Kansas City, Mo., and elsewhere are gearing up to try it.

Some police and prosecutors object to the approach.

"Why not slam 'em from the beginning and forget this foolishness?" says Karen Richards, county prosecutor in the Fort Wayne, Ind., area. The Urban League tried to convince her and the Fort Wayne police to try the strategy, but Ms. Richards didn't support it. She draws a distinction between addicts, who she believes should get social support, and dealers, who she believes deserve incarceration. "Drug dealers are drug dealers," she says. "They won't have an epiphany and end up as model citizens."

In Winston-Salem, many officers at first dubbed the initiative "hug-a-thug," though few do so now that they've seen it in practice.

In High Point, the West End neighborhood had been a major drug market for almost 15 years, with 16 known crack houses operating at the start of the initiative. A traffic jam began almost every afternoon, as buyers, many destined for homes in the suburbs, converged on the area seeking crack, according to residents and police.

Charlie Simpson, who owns and operates a radiator-repair shop in the West End, says he frequently saw drug dealers "on all four corners, selling drugs out of their pockets." The dealing drove away business "because women were afraid to come, men didn't want to bring their wives, plus they didn't want to leave their car overnight."

The neighborhood of modest clapboard bungalows became the city's crime capital. Lucille Dennis, 89, who has lived in the West End for half a century, says that before the initiative, she suffered three break-ins within a year and a half, and she stopped sitting on her porch for fear of getting robbed.

After the West End initiative, violent crime -- defined as murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, prostitution, sex offenses, and weapons violations -- dropped. More than two years later, violent crime remains more than 25% lower in the area, according to police statistics. Since the initiative, there hasn't been a single murder or rape reported in the West End. "I don't know exactly how to phrase it," Mrs.

Dennis says, "but you just don't see as many people riding around doing nothing."

It isn't clear how well such an approach would work in big cities, which have much higher absolute numbers of crimes. High Point has about 90,000 residents and Winston-Salem has 190,000. In Kansas City, a city of about 500,000, Police Chief James Corwin says, "Will it work in Kansas City? I don't really know." His police department has almost finished the undercover investigation of a drug market it has targeted.

The initiative hasn't eradicated illegal drug use -- and it doesn't aim to. "This is not a war on drugs," says Chief Fealy. Rather, he says, the goal is to shut down overt drug markets because "street-level dope-dealing is what drives a significant amount of crime."

The police had been trying to drive dealers out of the West End for years. "We were actually doing a sting every month in [West End] making dozens of arrests," says High Point Assistant Police Chief Marty Sumner. "But the market persisted."

It's a pattern seen nationwide. In a report published last year by the American Enterprise Institute, authors David Boyum and **Peter Reuter** point to government statistics that show arrests per dollar of cocaine and heroin sold in the U.S. soared tenfold from 1981 to 2001. Moreover, the percentage of arrests that led to incarceration also shot up; in 2001 more than half the inmates in federal prisons were convicted of drug crimes, up from just 5% in 1981. Yet, during that same two-decade period, the street price of cocaine and heroin, measured in constant dollars, dropped by two-thirds, suggesting it isn't more difficult to deal. Indeed, the authors estimated that the risk of arrest per individual cocaine sale is less than one in 15,000.

When police do sweep in, Chief Fealy says, they often capture "targets of opportunity" -- dealers who are easy to nab. Hardened dealers expect dragnets, so they rarely conduct sales themselves or have significant amounts of drugs in their possession.

Drug dragnets can actually worsen the problem, because some residents resent the heavy-handed tactics, which can inflame racial tensions. Many community members "wonder whose side are the police on," says Janet Zobel of the National Urban League. Either out of a sense of futility or suspicion, many residents stop cooperating with the police.

The High Point strategy was the brainchild of David Kennedy, a 48-year-old professor at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. In the 1990s, when he was at Harvard University, Mr. Kennedy helped develop Boston's anti-gang strategy, a community-involvement approach credited with drastically reducing violent crime.

But the drug initiative was a much harder sell. Mr. Kennedy says he had been trying for more than five years to convince police departments across the country to try it. When Mr. Kennedy first approached Winston-Salem, "We all told him he was crazy," says Police Chief Patricia Norris. Mr. Kennedy says he would ask, "When do you think what you're doing now is going to start working?"

Chief Fealy took to the idea the first time he heard it in 2003. He came to High Point from Austin, Texas, where he had been assistant chief and commanded the security detail for then-Gov. George W. Bush.

Before his job interview in High Point, Mr. Fealy drove around the city and was struck by the open drug dealing. "It was just so blatant and in-your-face," he says. Poring through crime statistics, he saw "well over 60% of our homicides were directly drug-related, and almost 100% of our person-on-person robberies." He decided to give Mr. Kennedy's idea a try.

First, police crunch data to find the "hot spots" most plagued by violent and drug-related crime. Then they engage in months of undercover research to understand the local drug market and identify the players -- big and small. Police are accustomed to spending months undercover only to nab a major criminal, such as an organized-crime boss. "So putting three months' work into investigating 20 corner rock dealers" normally would be considered a waste of time, Assistant Chief Sumner says.

But there is a payoff. "A market is something that requires a large number of actors," says Mr. **Reuter**, who is an economist as well as an illicit-drugs expert. "If you can get all the actors out, you can disrupt the system."

Randy Dejournette, one of the alleged dealers invited to come to the second-chance meeting at the police station in 2004, says "everybody's gone" from the streets in the West End -- and that's one reason he says he doesn't deal now. "I'm not going to go out there by myself and sit on the corner and look dumb."

The High Point police knew who were the lookouts, the runners, the petty dealers and the big wheels. Analyzing the overall market led them to suppliers they might not have found otherwise. Assistant Chief Sumner points to Kevin Cotton, a six-foot-two man with a tattoo that read "thug life," who was a major source of drugs in a neighborhood targeted by police. An informant told them that he not only supplied dealers, but robbed and intimidated them. He "controlled the market," Mr. Sumner says. But because he didn't live in the area, "we probably never would have focused on him." Police made enough undercover buys to warrant federal charges, then arrested Mr. Cotton because they felt his record was too violent for him to be offered a second chance. He's now serving 20 years in federal prison.

Arresting violent offenders is one key to making the initiative work. It removes the dominant actors in the market and sets a powerful example. But the other key is that police refrain from arresting suspects who haven't become hardened, violent criminals. These are often young people -- Mr. Dejournette, for example, was 19 when he was invited to the second-chance meeting. For them, police try to implement a communitywide intervention, choreographed to send three clear messages: If they return to dealing, they'll go to jail; their community will help them turn their lives around but won't tolerate drug crime any longer; and the police and community are working together to combat dealing.

At the second-chance meeting, police lay out their evidence in a deliberately theatrical way. The Winston-Salem police edited hours of undercover surveillance footage into a short video that showed each suspect making at least one sale. "Raise your hand when you see yourself committing a felony," the prosecutor told the suspects, according to two people who were there. They started raising their hands, and "that was a thing of beauty," police captain David Clayton recalls. "They knew we had 'em."

Alleged dealers are told that they have been put on a special list. "Every one of my assistants has your name," the district attorney told the suspects at the West End meeting. "And if they don't prosecute you as aggressively as they can, I'll fire 'em." Even the public defender -- who would likely represent them in court -- warned that the cases were so tight there would be virtually nothing he could do to help them.

Immediate enforcement bolsters that message. The three suspected dealers who didn't attend the West End community meeting were arrested the next day. One person who attended the meeting but tried to sell drugs days later was also arrested. Police and community groups advertised the arrests by posting fliers throughout the neighborhood with pictures of the suspects.

The threat of going to jail is coupled with a message of support from locals. Jim Summey, pastor of the West End's English Road Baptist Church and a leader in the community's anticrime crusade, sums up the message: "We are against what you're doing, but we're for you."

Mr. Dejournette recalls, "We wasn't expecting that....It did make an impression on me."

So did something deeply personal: the fact that his mother, Annette Dejournette, was, in her words, "disappointed," "ashamed" and "hurt" by her son's actions. She convinced him to attend the meeting even though he had been afraid it was a ploy to arrest him.

Ms. Dejournette works as a clerk in a thrift shop. Money is tight, and often the electricity or phone will get cut off, her son says. "Momma be sitting back crying and stressing, and that make me want to go back outside [on the streets] and really do something to stop my momma from crying, but she the one who talks me out of it."

The fact that the police are giving nonviolent dealers a second chance has encouraged community cooperation. West End residents have been increasingly calling police to report minor offenses, such as truancy or drunkenness. Ms. Dejournette says she went up to several police officers and city officials and "thanked them for trying to help my son."

The Winston-Salem neighborhood where the approach was launched last year has proved tougher. The area, centered on the Cleveland Avenue Homes housing project, has fewer community institutions, such as churches, than West End does. Turnover in its public housing is extremely high. Mattie Young, 78, president of the Cleveland Avenue Homes residents' council for almost 18 years, says the initiative eradicated open drug dealing during the first four months. But since then, she says, it has begun to creep back, especially at night.

Police captain David Clayton says that much of the new dealing may be due to one "very dangerous individual" recently identified by residents, whom police are seeking. Still, comparing the year before the initiative to the year after, major property crimes, such as robbery and burglary, dropped by 35%, according to police figures.

In the three neighborhoods where High Point has implemented the initiative, a total of 40 alleged dealers attended the second-chance meetings. Since then, six have been arrested for dealing. Another 10 have been arrested for various other crimes, from robbery to possession of marijuana. The rest -- 24 out of 40 -- have stayed clear of the law, police say.

After a dispute with his boss, Mr. Dejournette lost a job with the city parks department. Now, he says, "I fill out applications, but I never get that call back." He works odd jobs, many through a brother who does construction, but he doesn't make the \$200 a day he says he made running errands for dealers. In April, Mr. Dejournette was arrested but not charged for a nondrug offense, so he is "teetering on the edge," as Assistant Chief Sumner puts it.

Latisha Fisher, 32, of Winston-Salem, says she had been dealing drugs on and off since she was 15. After going to a community meeting and seeing herself on a police undercover videotape, she took her second chance. Her first job was at a fast-food restaurant. The pay: \$6.50 an hour. "I toughed it out" for eight months, she says. "My church and family helped me." This summer, she landed a job on an assembly line manufacturing earth excavators, making \$8.50 per hour.

Yon Weaver, a High Point city employee who helps ex-offenders or suspects find jobs, says only 10 to 15 companies in the area are willing to hire people convicted of a crime. Of the 40 suspected dealers called in to the community meetings, about 10 contacted his office for assistance. He knows three have found jobs. Some suspected dealers have simply dropped out of sight. Police say they don't think dealers merely relocated, because no new drug hot spots have emerged since High Point's three markets closed.

Rev. Stevenson says the alleged dealers "are still God's people, and I want them to do well and have productive, law-abiding lives." But noting that two murders took place within a block of his church before the initiative, he doesn't gauge the effort's success by whether dealers turn their lives around.

"It sounds a little ugly," he says, "but my first priority is the community."