

English summary

Police efforts to combat drug offending. Their extent, character and effects

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The police have become an increasingly central actor in the context of society's work to reduce drug abuse. The Government Commission on Drug Issues has noted that control measures largely based on work carried out by the police have now come to dominate anti-drug work. Care and treatment based measures and preventive work have by contrast undergone extensive cut backs and have been given a much lower priority over the course of the 1990s. It is therefore important to chart and evaluate the anti-drugs work carried out by the police, not least in order to see whether the resources involved are being used in a rational manner.

Increasing numbers of police officers working to combat drug offending

The police continue to devote a growing level of resources to work focused on combating drug offending. Annual reports published over recent years show that six per cent of the police service budget is devoted to combating drug crime. This represents double the corresponding figure for the 1980s. One contributory factor underlying this increase is found in the tightening of the legislation in this area, and in particular in the criminalisation of personal consumption and the subsequent raising of the sanctioning tariff in 1993. The introduction of the zero-limit for drugs whilst in charge of a vehicle (in 1999) has also contributed to the increase.

The area of police anti-drug work that has increased most since the beginning of the 1990s comprises efforts focused on activities towards the end of the chain of drug abuse. The consumption of drugs by the individual, i.e. minor drug offences, constitutes the crime type responsible for the single largest increase in the statistics. The level of offences of supplying or selling narcotics, which is often regarded as neither a minor nor an aggravated offence, has fallen during this same period. The level of convictions for aggravated offences has remained more or less constant.

The greatest change in the work conducted by the police to combat drug crime relates to the fact that police officers who did not previously work directly with anti-drug crime activities are now doing so. Uniformed officers who often come into contact with drug abusers and with young people who have taken narcotics or other intoxicants constitute one example of this. Traffic police who intervene against individuals driving under the influence of drugs constitute another. On the other hand, the numbers of police personnel whose primary task involves anti-drug work, first and foremost members of the so-called drug squads or their equivalents, have not increased to any major extent.

The fact that new categories of police personnel have been incorporated into work to combat drug offending has placed substantial demands on education and training within the police service. In this respect the police have on the whole been successful, in the sense that the majority of police officers who work with the public have received training in the signals and symptoms of drug use. The police have been less successful in reducing the (large) proportion of the youngest group subject to testing on suspicion of having taken drugs, who do not then produce a positive test result. The proportion of negative test results among those aged fifteen to nineteen lay at slightly over 40 per cent in 2002. Thus a substantial proportion of those youths whom the police suspect of having taken drugs are found to be innocent.

Drug abuse is on the increase

Drug abuse is on the increase in a number of respects. The number of young people experimenting with drugs is rising, although there has been a tendency towards a slow down in this increase over recent years, as is the number of so-called serious drug addicts. There has been a more or less continuous expansion in the numbers recruited into this category over a number of years, although there are regional variations. The consequences of this drug abuse may also be seen in a rise in drug-related deaths.

The background to these increases is very complex and is related to changes that have taken place within society since the beginning of the 1990s, such as reduced levels of welfare and increased internationalisation. None the less, Swedish drug policy is based to a large extent on the use of the criminal law. In other words, responsibility for resolving these problems has come to an ever increasing extent to be placed on the shoulders of the police and other elements of the justice system.

Police measures produce some effects

The effects of the police's work in this area have been analysed on the basis of, amongst other things, differences between different police authorities over time. The pattern that emerges is one where the anti-drugs work conducted by the police has a limited effect on trends in drug abuse. This was not unexpected, however, and is explained by the complex nature of the drug abuse phenomenon. Drug seizures, however, constitute one factor that does seem to follow the trends in particularly heavy drug abuse at the regional level. In those counties where drug seizures have increased, drug abuse, if not actually declining, has at least increased at a slower rate. This is most apparent in smaller counties. A cautious interpretation would be that these seizures have succeeded in disturbing the trade in drugs in these areas, thus reducing the supply of narcotics.

A time-series analysis of the most recent decades also indicates the existence of a relationship between a reduction in the experimental use of drugs by young people during the 1980s and a clear prioritisation of the offence of drug dealing. It is possible that the police focus on these offences, may have led to an increase in the time it takes to locate and acquire drugs. This may in turn lead to fewer young people coming into contact with drugs.

On the other hand, the work of the justice system in general appears to do little to interrupt drug abuse careers. The majority (56 per cent) of those convicted of drug offences reoffend in drug crime within three years. The reoffending frequency is high (46 per cent) even among the youngest age-groups, i.e. those aged fifteen to nineteen. It is likely that these high reoffending frequencies are a result of the fact that those convicted of these offences are firmly established in criminal lifestyles and are to a large extent already known to the police (90 per cent have previously been convicted of offences, among which drug offences are common).

One popular conception among police officers is that by focusing work on drug abusers, it is possible to reduce levels of theft offences, and particularly car crime (thefts of and from cars), since drug addicts are assumed to be responsible for a substantial proportion of these offences. The analyses indicate that there may be some grounds for this assumption, at least at the local level. The cross-county comparisons show a tendency whereby those counties that have concentrated their efforts on combating drug offending have also recorded a reduction in car crime. This reduction is of a temporary nature, however, and does not occur automatically. There is much to suggest that the police's work to combat drug crime is in this instance a strategic means of getting at and disrupting a well-known group of clients.

Reducing the supply of drugs is undervalued

The goal of Swedish drug policy is a drug free society. This is to be achieved by

- reducing new recruitment into drug abuse
- inducing more drug abusers to stop using drugs
- reducing the supply of drugs.

Recently, the police have come to focus on the first of these three objectives – the reduction of new recruitment into drug abuse, and particularly among the young. This is done in part by means of measures directed at youths, and in part by extensive interventions against drug use and petty possession of drugs among established and known drug addicts. The reason is that this group is assumed to contribute to the further spread of drug abuse. It is difficult, however, to find any effects produced by this work, not least because the drug use of young people is to a large extent affected by other circumstances. To take one example, young people in different countries are tending to become increasingly similar to one another, which for Sweden means an increased curiosity in relation to drugs. In this regard, however, it might be claimed that the police have expanded their efforts in line with an increase in the level of experimentation with drugs. It cannot be ruled out that this has contributed to the fact that the proportion of young people who have tried drugs in Sweden remains relatively low by comparison with that in other countries.

As regards the second objective – inducing drug abusers to stop taking drugs – the police are faced with a difficult task. The analyses presented in this report show that relapse into drug crime is strikingly common among those convicted. As a result, the substantial increases in police interventions against known drug abusers witnessed over the last decade have not resulted in a reduction in the size of the addict population. Instead, the number of heavy drug addicts has increased dramatically and according to the available data lies at a level that is more or less average for countries in Europe. This indicates that even if the repressive measures employed may affect the level of experimental drug abuse, they are not as effective in reducing levels of recruitment into heavy drug abuse.

The third objective – reducing the supply of drugs – is of course very much a task associated with the police. This target has not been the principal focus of the increased anti-drugs work conducted by the police however. The analyses show nonetheless that it is precisely in connection with expanded efforts to combat drug trafficking and to make more drug seizures that relative reductions in levels of drug abuse may be observed – at least at the regional level. Thus it is possible that this form of police work has been undervalued in relation to attempts to achieve the goals of Swedish drug policy.