

For over a decade many US states have mandated especially severe penalties for **drug dealing near schools**. Just as the UK is embarking on a similar strategy, the only US study of its effectiveness has found it did nothing to drive dealing away from schools.

In Britain the Drugs Act 2005 now obliges courts to treat drug supply as a more serious offence when it occurs on or in the vicinity of school premises and within an hour either side of that school being in use. Since 1989 Massachusetts has enacted a similar but more specific provision in relation to dealing within a thousand feet of a school. In three of its cities, researchers mapped these school zones and superimposed the location of drug dealing incidents dealt with by the courts. **i** Had the law deterred school-zone dealing, offences should have been thicker on the ground outside the zones. In fact, the reverse was the case. This was because dealers tended to do business near their homes which also tended to be near schools, both concentrated in the densely populated poorer areas of the cities. Even a conscientious dealer would have found it difficult to tell if they were inside or outside the often overlapping zones.

Though the best evidence to date of the impacts of such laws, the detail of the laws in the UK and Massachusetts and the judicial systems differ substantially. In particular, the prevalence of plea-bargaining in the USA meant the most common impact of a school zone charge was to persuade defendant and prosecutor to agree to a guilty plea to a less serious drug supply charge, especially if the offence involved cannabis rather than heroin or cocaine.

i Brownsberger W.N. *et al.* "An empirical study of the School Zone Anti-Drug Law in three cities in Massachusetts." *J. Drug Issues*: 2004, 34(4), p. 933–950 