

**DRUG ALCOHOL FINDINGS** Your selected document

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► [Effect of drug law enforcement on drug-related violence: a systematic review.](#)



Werb D., Rowell G., Guyatt G. et al. [Request reprint](#)

**International Journal of Drug Policy: 2011, 22, p. 87–94.**

The update of the first systematic review of the impact of enforcement on violence cautions that heightened drug enforcement which fails to curtail the illicit market can generate drug-related violence, raising the overall level of violence in societies where markets are widespread and endemic.

**Summary** This review updates a report [previously analysed](#) by Findings. It comes to substantially the same conclusions based on research found in databases up to January 2011 rather than up to October 2009.

The review notes that research from many settings has demonstrated clear links between violence and the illicit drug trade, particularly in urban areas. While violence has traditionally been seen as resulting from the effects of drugs on users (eg, drug-induced psychosis), violence in drug markets and in drug-producing areas such as Mexico is increasingly understood as a way for drug gangs to gain or maintain a share of the lucrative illicit market.

Governments generally address increases in drug market violence with increases in funding for drug law enforcement to reduce the use and availability of illicit drugs, but little is known regarding the association between drug law enforcement and drug market violence. Given this gap it was decided to conduct a systematic review of all available English-language research on law enforcement's impact on violence related to illicit drug markets to assess whether increasing expenditure on, or increasing the intensity of, drug law enforcement really is associated with lower levels of violence.

A search was undertaken using [electronic databases](#), the [Internet](#) and article reference lists, from the earliest dates these facilities covered up to 24 January 2011. This yielded 314 reports of which 15 met [the review's criteria](#). Thirteen of the studies were from North

America and two from Australia. Contrary to expectations, across all 15 studies, 14 found that increasing drug law enforcement intensity was associated with greater rates of drug market violence; details below.

Eleven of the studies traced the link in different locations and over time between **indices** of the extent of drug law enforcement on the one hand, and records of violence, violent crime, or murder on the other. Each **attempted to adjust** for other influences in order to isolate the impact of enforcement levels. Ten of these 11 studies found statistically significant *increases* in violence as drug law enforcement increased. The remaining study found no relationship either way. Additionally, two studies used hypothetical data to model the potential impact of intensified drug enforcement; one model suggested decreased violence, the other increased. Finally, two Australian studies based their conclusions, not on statistical tests, but on the observations of researchers and interviews with people involved with a drug market or with its policing. They found that though enforcement persuaded some dealers to leave a market, others willing to take higher risks entered. The result was that street dealing interactions became more volatile, leading to more violent disputes which contributed to an increase in killings and non-fatal shootings.

The reviewers concluded that evidence to date suggests that increasing the intensity of law enforcement interventions to disrupt drug markets is unlikely to reduce drug gang violence. Violence may be an inevitable consequence of drug prohibition when groups compete for massive profits without recourse to formal, non-violent negotiation and dispute resolution mechanisms. Increasingly sophisticated and well resourced ways of disrupting drug distribution networks may unintentionally increase violence by removing key players, creating new financial opportunities for others to fill the vacuum. Additionally, 'target hardening', wherein vulnerable entities at risk of attack become increasingly militarised, has occurred amongst drug organisations facing increased enforcement. Citing other reviews, the review notes other serious unintended consequences of prohibition due its generating a massive illicit market, including corruption, the destabilising of entire countries, and providing funding for armed conflicts. These negatives have not, the evidence suggests, been counterbalanced by a meaningful reduction in drug supply or use in settings where demand remains high. Alternative models for drug control such as decriminalisation or regulated supply may need to be considered if drug supply and drug-related violence are to be meaningfully reduced,

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Caveats outlined in this summary are expanded on under the subheadings below. The unique value of this review and its **predecessor report** are that apparently they were the first to systematically evaluate research on the impact of drug law enforcement on violence. The review cautions that heightened enforcement which fails to curtail the illicit drug market may make that market more violent and raise the overall level of violence in societies where drug markets are widespread and endemic. Such warnings are already being taken to heart in parts of Britain's enforcement apparatus where **there is acceptance** that the aim should be to target the harms drug markets bring with them, not necessarily to target markets *per se*, and to ensure as far as possible that no new harms are created.

The link the review finds between the level of drug enforcement and the level of violence is enough to warrant such caution because this link *might* reflect an unwanted impact of enforcement. However, the review **falls well short** of proving this is the case. Insufficient detail is presented to enable an assessment of how methodologically sound the studies were. Also, the review's main explanation of how enforcement *as measured in these*

*studies* might have caused violence is questionable. It may also be that the [type of enforcement](#) is critical – that counterproductive impacts such as violence are limited to traditional police tactics focused on arrests and drug seizures, rather than tactics which target the underlying social and environmental factors which make an area conducive to illicit markets. Similarly, certain [types of markets](#) and market players may be more prone to react to enforcement pressure in ways which generate violence. Some may simply retreat in to known and trusted circles. [In Britain](#) the tendency is often to avoid attention-attracting and destabilising violence.

### A link yes, but did enforcement *cause* crime?

It is likely that the reviewers analysed the studies in considerable detail, but the published review does not critique each study or indicate the degree to which its methodology was capable of answering the question it addressed. A key issue, for example, is whether a study takes steps to eliminate the possibility that a link between enforcement and violence is due to the stepping up of enforcement to counter an increasing threat from drug-related violence – in other words, to eliminate the possibility that rather than enforcement having caused violence, the reverse was the case. It is big leap from observing that two things vary together to determining which (if either) caused the variation in the other. Making this leap is aided by a plausible explanation or 'mechanism' via which one might affect the other, in this case, an explanation for how increased enforcement might increase violence. The main one put forward in the review is that "by removing key players from the lucrative illegal drug market, drug law enforcement has the perverse effect of creating new financial opportunities for other individuals to fill this vacuum by entering the market". Crackdowns can it suggests disrupt a settled market dominated by a few players and split it in to competing fiefdoms, generating violence in the fight for the spoils. While [analysts agree](#) that this can happen, one problem with this explanation is that indices of enforcement intensity in the reviewed studies seem to bear little relation to the removal of key players. Numbers of drug arrests or seizures and spending on enforcement seem at least as likely to reflect generalised enforcement activity which affects drug users and low-level dealers rather than surgical operations targeted at major financiers and organisers.

There are, of course, [other explanations](#) for such a link, prime amongst which is that intensified enforcement raises the price of illicit drugs by constricting supply and because dealers raise prices to compensate for heightened risk. In turn, greater rewards lead to greater violence in order to secure those rewards. Such a mechanism is thought to account for [the relationship](#) between heroin prices and total or drug-related killings in the USA and several European countries and regions. The prime difficulty with this argument is securing evidence that intensified enforcement has actually led to an increase in price. Indeed, the [predecessor report](#) highlighted the *decrease* in illicit drug prices in the USA – where most of the studies it reviewed were conducted – as proof that intensified enforcement since the 1990s has not curtailed supply.

The review also notes that the illegality of the market closes off formal dispute-resolution mechanisms like the courts, professional discipline, or reputation-damaging publicity, leaving arguments to be settled by force. While this may be the case, it seems a result of prohibition *in itself*; it does not explain why the vigour with which it is enforced would influence the extent of resort to force. Yet another possible mechanism is that if police really do focus on what in some countries is a huge illicit drug market, this would significantly detract from the focus on other crimes. Analysis of crime trends suggests this has been the case for property crime in [Florida](#) and [Portugal](#); a similar effect may extend to violent crime. Another mechanism is that corruption generated by drug money undermines the effectiveness of enforcement and prevents the imposition of deterrent penalties. As the review comments, stimulating a defensive 'arms race' is also a well known and counterproductive impact of intensified enforcement which might increase violence if (for example) market participants arm themselves and threaten potential witnesses and informers to avoid capture. Similarly, undercover tactics and the recruitment of informers could undermine trust between market participants and fracture the market in to tight antagonistic

cliques which compete rather than cooperate.

Neither should we assume (and the review does not) that drug market participants resort easily and naturally to violence. A [small study](#) based on interviews with convicted drug traffickers and law enforcement personnel found this was generally not the case in Britain. As long as those who might countenance violence are making money from a well functioning market, "not only is there no need for violence ... it is to be positively avoided" because it risks police or internal market reactions which are "'bad for business'". The study did however agree that overt as opposed to implied or threatened violence might be a result of market dysfunction and instability. In so far as enforcement contributes to that kind of dysfunction and instability, and if there are no mitigating counter-measures, the effect may be tip the balance from violence being bad for business, to it being seen as a way to retain or incorporate bits of a fragmented market and to regain a kind of fraught stability.

### Maybe it depends on the *type* of enforcement, not just the amount

Possibly the *type* of enforcement is critical to whether the result is a drug market of much the same size which simply becomes more violent, or a market which – along with related crime – has been sustainably suppressed. Indices of enforcement intensity (such as arrests and seizures) in the reviewed studies seem most likely to reflect traditional policing which reacts to drug markets with 'crackdowns', raids, undercover operations, saturation patrolling and/or stop-and-search policing. Generally these tactics on their own are ineffective, effective only in the short-term, or simply displace the market to other locations or other forms ([1 2 3](#)). For a discussion of the benefits and limitations of these approaches see these [Findings notes](#).

But there are other and, from the research, more effective ways to counter illicit markets ([1 2](#)). These involve partnerships with community bodies and local people initiated on the basis of an analysis of the underlying problem and intended to alter the social and/or physical environment to make it more resistant to illicit drug markets. Tactics include persuading or forcing landlords to secure and maintain buildings used for drug transactions and to control their tenants, community policing which socially and physically integrates police with the neighbourhood, the mobilisation of local residents and businesses, changing the physical environment by for example eliminating hiding places and removing rubbish and abandoned vehicles, and offering routes out of the market through treatment and reintegration services.

Deploying these or similar tactics alongside conventional law enforcement may mitigate the risk of aggravating violence. Such tactics can also be used to 'secure the ground' cleared by enforcement crackdowns and saturation patrolling. Their impacts are [more appropriately measured](#) not in terms of numbers of arrests or seizures, but the improved quality of life of residents and decreased drug-related problems including violent crime. However, [implementation involves](#) a much more complex and failure-prone process than straightforward policing, one which requires both the willingness and ability of other groups and services to cooperate – for example, the ability of treatment services to rapidly absorb dependent users who decide to leave an increasingly difficult market.

### Maybe it depends on the nature of the market too?

What the review does not (and given the nature of the evidence, may have been unable to) address is whether all types of illicit drug markets are equally likely to become more violent as law enforcement intensifies. For example, 'open' markets which do not rely on sellers and buyers being known to each other have been known to react by becoming more closed. Semi-open (pub- and club-based), closed, 'dealing house', social network and prison-based markets might also respond differently. The drug(s) being marketed may be associated with these different types of markets and different types of market players, so markets in for example, opiates, stimulants, 'dance drugs' or cannabis might also respond differently to enforcement pressure.

*This entry incorporates comments from Tim McSweeney of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at King's College in London on the [Findings analysis](#) of the predecessor report. Thanks also for their comments to Dan*

*Web of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS in Canada. Commentators bear no responsibility for the text including the interpretations and any remaining errors.*

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