

The distorted measurements of drugs policy risk harming the community

Daniel Bear argues that the reclassification of cannabis and the push for increased measurement of police activities has had alienating effects in the community.



Huzzah! Huzzah! The UN [Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking](#) is today! I know we're all looking forward to the [usual speeches](#) by politicians about the harms of drugs and the heroic efforts of law enforcement to stamp out this problem. Indeed, UK police officers spend an extraordinary amount of time on combating drugs, recording more than [212,000 drug seizures](#) in 2010/2011. Of that, more than 167,000 of the seizures were of cannabis, and almost all of those are small busts for personal use. This is more than double the number of seizures from 2002, and reflects a weird twist in the changing status of cannabis.

When cannabis was reclassified, the intent was to reduce the amount of time officers spent combating it so they could address larger harms to the community, and thereby increase the trust communities had in policing. When [polled in 2009](#), communities across London listed drugs (not just Cannabis, but all drugs) as only the 20th highest priority they felt the police should go after in their areas. A nationwide study just a few years before found that less than 1 per cent of people viewed cannabis as one of their top three policing priorities.

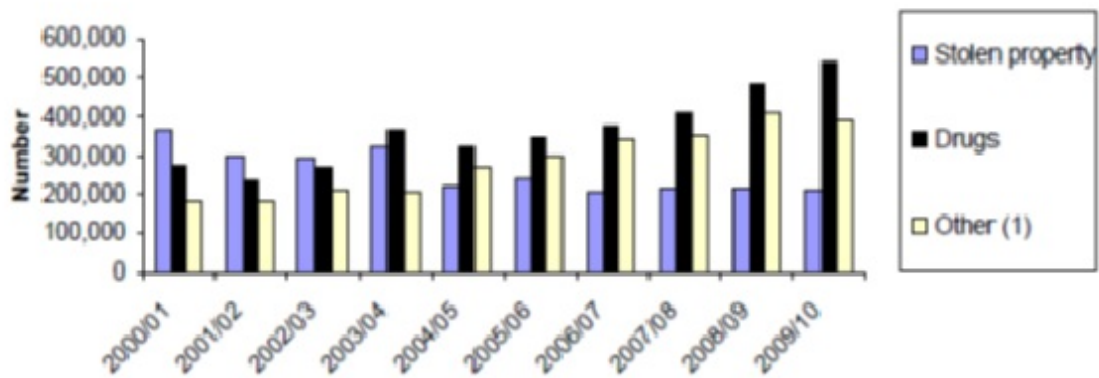
The new Cannabis Warning System implemented in 2004 allowed officers to write a warning slip to people who were over 18, hadn't been busted in the last 12 months, and admitted that what the officers had found was cannabis. This created a 'Sanctioned Detection' for an officer, something that would take up to 16 hours of work to achieve if they were arresting a shoplifter or burglar. With a Cannabis Warning, they got the detection in less than an hour.

This change in Cannabis classification happened to coincide with an increased focus on measuring the effectiveness of all public services. Suddenly, officers had to produce numbers to prove their capabilities on the job. Given that a Sanctioned Detection looked the same whether it came from seizing a single joint or arresting a young person with a knife (Ranked 11th highest priority), or a notorious burglar (Ranked 14th highest), officers were explicitly tasked with going for cannabis busts. Officers who reported that they would have previously not wasted time arresting someone with a joint now had the means and incentive to write the person a quick cannabis warning. Officers got their numbers, and reported that they weren't causing harm to citizens because they weren't actually arresting them and bringing the full weight of the criminal justice system down on them for a minor drug bust.

But this new easy source of sanctioned detections has warped policing. In the same poll in 2009, the 10 of the top 11 concerns voiced by the community were about how the police went about their job. Prominent amongst the concerns (ranked 6th overall) was the use of Stop and Search by the police. Increasing in use by [more than 25 per cent](#) between 2002 and 2008, Stop and Search practices have a [limited effectiveness](#) in reducing crime or catching perpetrators, and have fuelled distrust due to the high levels of disproportionality seen against BME populations.

Black or White, having an officer put their hands in your pockets very rarely has a positive effect on your view of policing. Stop and Search practices were cited as one of the [significant components](#) fuelling the August 2011 riots. Additionally, the types of searches also changed.

Figure 1: Number of Stop and Search by Reason in England and Wales, 2000-2010, excluding British Transport Police . Source: Povey et al 2011



1. Includes stops and searches for firearms, offensive weapons, going equipped, criminal damage and other.

The data is clear. Officers were searching for drugs, and in many areas had a hit rate of less than 7 per cent.

The change in cannabis regulations and the push for increased measurement of police activities created a scenario that has driven officers to go after drugs (a low community concern) by using tactics that are highly disconcerting to the community. The policy removed the discretion officers once had about how to handle cannabis, not because they lost the power to do so, but they lost any incentive to avoid bringing the person in to the criminal justice system. This increased focus on cannabis developed during a period of policing that touted itself as being responsive to communities' needs. If the community is to guide police priorities, then we need to develop stronger mechanisms to support that, and consider how we measure an officer's abilities to police. I would be hard pressed to find anyone who believes an officer's ability to seek out small amounts of cannabis is reflective of the overall skillset required of today's professional police force.

Have a wonderful UN Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, and as you enjoy a pint of beer with colleagues after work today, may I suggest a topic... The Law of Unintended Consequences.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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