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A CRIME PREVENTION APPROACH TO AN OPEN-AIR DRUG MARKET: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE ‘NAVET’ PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The ‘Navet’ project has extensively analyzed an open-air drug market at a local bus station in Sundsvall, a medium-sized city in Northern Sweden. Using a problem-oriented approach, the project aims to propose a crime prevention strategy based on the field evidence. We collected information on crime reported, interviewed drug users and key informants, including ex-bus drivers and social workers, and completed our knowledge of the area’s social environment through several months of ethnographic observation. Preliminary results show that the prevalence of crime reported is low. In 2016, Navet accounted for only 3% of crime committed in the city, of which 37% was drug-related crimes and 20% violent crimes. In a high proportion of the violent crimes, victims and offenders were acquainted. Three groups of suspected users with different social needs were identified as congregating at Navet: (1) a visible group that uses Navet as a place to meet, openly consuming alcohol and more discreetly using other substances (e.g. cannabis and pills), (2) a group more dispersed, socially isolated and much less visible to the public eye, who appear to have a wider age range and more basic needs as they are homeless and use charitable services to feed themselves, and (3) a highly volatile group, largely composed of youths of normalized appearance who occasionally congregate but leave the area immediately after they have met with specific males (i.e. suspected dealers) in a manner that suggests that they wish to steer clear of the stigmatization of drug use. Prevention strategies should target all of these groups and include making treatment and rehabilitation more attractive to long-term users as well as providing social support for those who are more in need, while at the same time averting the incorporation of new users to the market via addiction prevention programs in schools and neighborhoods. A market devoid of customers would soon fade away through a strategy that could become more cost effective for the criminal justice system than arrests and the imprisonment of vulnerable low-level users and dealers.
INTRODUCTION

It is quite common for retail-level drug markets to become established close to transport hubs, locations where a high volume of people in constant movement provides good camouflage for traffickers who can easily spot potential ‘customers’. The three factors of the crime triangle – motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the lack of capable guardians – (Cohen & Felson, 1979) find a convenient environment in such locations. Open-air drug markets represent a major challenge for the police and local authorities since they frequently disrupt public order and unsociable behavior frequently occurs (e.g. public urination, public drinking, loitering). Violent crimes are more likely to be concentrated around such locations (Weisburd & Mazerolle, 2000), which also increases the local population’s fear of crime. Furthermore, traditional police intervention usually has limited success. Trafficking and crime related to drug use quickly resumes after police crackdown operations, more or less independently of arrests and confiscations, while a certain level of crime displacement to the surrounding areas is also a likely outcome (Best, Strang, Beswick, & Gossop, 2001; Dovey, Fitzgerald, & Choi, 2001; Maher, & Dixon, 1999; Mazerolle, Price, & Roehl, 2000; Wood, et al., 2004). Coomber, Moyle and Mahoney (2017) suggested that police crackdown operations in drug markets might be a symbolic exercise (i.e. the objective is to achieve a symbolic effect, for example, making citizens feel that ‘something has been done’ rather than actually solving the problem) opposed to an evidence-based practice. Tough police intervention might even have perverse effects such as impacting the quality of drugs and enhancing the motivation for drug use (Galenianos, Pacula, & Persico, 2012), which would further complicate the problem for law enforcement and public health managers. In light of the above, it is clear that an increase in the likelihood of success in interventions directed at substance abuse and trafficking must incorporate tactics beyond identification, arrests and imprisonment of low-level players in the drug market. Beyond intelligence-led policing directed at heavy suppliers, different studies found that the best strategies for disrupting street drug selling utilizes problem-oriented methods instead of traditional hotspot policing or standard, unfocused police efforts (see Mazerolle, Soole, & Rombouts, 2006). Since drug markets operate in a similar way to legal markets – observe laws of supply and demand – (Wood et al., 2004), the development of a problem-oriented approach focused on the prevention, treatment and reduction of addiction problems, aimed at depleting the market of customers, might actually work. A market with no demand would soon fade away. Such a strategy would naturally require shared responsibilities among local authorities, public institutions, private sector and law enforcement, rather than being exclusively taken charge of by the police. In Sweden, collaboration among social partners is deemed essential within the new program of crime prevention recently developed by the government. Such a trend in policy might extend to other countries in the near future.

The ‘Navet’ project

In Sundsvall, a medium-sized city in Northern Sweden, an open-air drug market has existed for many years at the local bus station, a location that is generally busy with citizens commuting to their work places/homes, and by many adolescents traveling to school in the morning and returning home in the afternoon. There is a publicly shared feeling that the location is unsafe and the local media has repeatedly published negative reports about drug use and crime in the area, strengthening the causal link between drug abuse and criminal activity, an effect that has already been reported in previous studies (Coomber, 2006; Taylor, 2008). Many citizens fear and avoid being at Navet as much as possible, consistent with the idea that “drug crimes and drug use are understood as symbols of disorder or threat to the social values of a community” (Coomber, Moyle, & Mahoney, 2017, p. 2). In 2016, at a public inquiry among the population, Navet was identified as a problematic area that should be dealt with by the police. Drug trafficking is believed to take place at a high frequency and uncivilized behavior by intoxicated people occurs. Within a preventive framework, the ‘Navet’ project has comprehensively analyzed the problem in order to propose an intervention strategy based on the best knowledge of the field. As Vito and Higgins (2015) pointed out, strategic
 thinking, planning and operations are required to address the sources of crime problems, both individual and systemic. In this sense, the collection of data and the compilation of evidence are essential for developing effective interventions. Beyond the drug trade and the players involved, the project aims to analyze the social and physical environment that could contribute to the public fear of crime in a more broader perspective.

METHODS AND DATA

Three sources of data were analyzed for the purpose of this paper: (1) Crime reported to the police over one year (2016) to identify the prevalence of different types of crime in Navet, starting with the belief that drug-related and violent crime such as robbery, assault and threats would be high. (2) Interviews with active users and key informants, including social workers engaged in active projects, and bus drivers, to gain a picture of the drug market from their perspective. (3) Ethnographic observation to identify patterns of social interaction and social activity in the area.

Crime reported was provided by the police, in a file that included type of crime and spatial-temporal coordinates.

Active users were contacted at Slink-In, a place that is operated by social services, which is aimed at socially excluded people. Snowball access, via word-of-mouth, also provided some participants. No reciprocal payment was made for their contribution. After confirmation of inclusion (i.e. daily use of drugs such as opioids, amphetamine, benzodiazepines, cannabis, etc.) and exclusion (i.e. insufficient language understanding and expression) criteria, participants were guaranteed confidentiality. Ten persons agreed to be interviewed.

The focus group interview was carried out with four voluntary bus drivers. Since all bus routes converge on Navet and bus drivers work in shifts they were all able to discuss topics concerning what they had witnessed and experienced in their job role in relation to the drug market on different days of the week, and at different times.

Individual interviews were also conducted with social workers who had a role in a project directed at young users and with a social worker with more extensive knowledge of drug use among youths in the city.

Interviews were transcribed and the data were coded and thematically analyzed, while the police file was analyzed using SPSS.

A certain level of discordance between the results obtained from the crime reported file, the information gathered from the interviews with drug users and the information from the interviews with key informants necessitated a further source of information that could permit triangulation. We therefore decided to go ahead with ethnographic observation. The field work took place between November 2017 and April 2018, included observations during working days and weekend, and observations at different hours from 07.30 to 23.30. Night observations were not possible but were also deemed unnecessary as the sale of drugs and social activity seems to occur almost exclusively during the day.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The specific weather characteristics in Sundsvall, with intense cold and a few hours of sunlight during the winter months (from November until late April), and the opposite conditions during the summer months, could impact the drug trade and social environment in the area. For example, during the winter, the waiting room located in a building alongside the bus stops was identified as
an important spot for conducting part of the drug trade, particularly during the afternoon and at
weekends. After all, standard winter attire consists of gloves and thick coats that prevent subtle
handshakes or the use of items such as newspapers to effect drug-money exchanges. Hence, during
the winter, the volume of trade that occurs in enclosed spaces (vs out in the open), and is therefore
more susceptible to police control, is possibly higher than during the summer. Hypothetically, this
may have a deterrent effect during the winter that might not be evident during the summer. Future
observations from April to November are necessary to complement the study. Thus, the results
offered in this paper are preliminary in nature.

Crime reported

In 2016, a total of 4,374 crimes were committed in the city of Sundsvall and the surrounding
neighborhoods, from which only a small percentage (3.6%, \( n = 159 \)) were committed at Navet. In
this part of the city, the types of crime that more frequently occurred were, as expected, drug-related
(i.e. use, possession and trade), which account for 37% of the total. Only 20.1% were classified as
violent offences (e.g. assault, robbery, threats, intimidation of public servants), in which a high
proportion of offenders and victims were acquainted.

The crime rate presented a similar distribution on the different days of the week with the highest
peak on Friday (21.4%) and lowest on Sunday (7.5%). On working days, 63% to 81% of crimes
were committed during the day (between 08.00 and 19.00) while at weekends, the volume of crime
committed at night increased (43% to 67%).

Contrary to the researchers’ expectations, Navet could not be considered a hotspot for drug-related
crime nor for other types of crimes generally associated with drug addiction (e.g. types of robbery
in which the victim is unknown to the offender). Since several factors are known to impact the
volume of crime reported to the police, such as the willingness of victims to report, or, in the case of
use, possession or trafficking of illicit substances, reflect police activities, we decided to ask
different players who, through their lifestyle or work activity, have privileged knowledge of a
‘normal’ day at Navet.

Interviews with users who visit Slink-In

The participants who were active users varied in age from 21 to 42 years, were unemployed, largely
homeless and either had distant bonds or had completely severed their ties with family and friends.
Some revealed close relationships with partners who were drug users themselves. For them, Navet
was clearly associated with the supply of drugs (Subject 1: “I don’t want to be at the hub [Navet], but
you can get hold of anything [types of drugs]. Unfortunately, that’s how it is. It’s terrible, really, when you
think it’s so open [easy access]”) and alcohol too, since the liquor store is close by (Subject 3: “I wake
up at the shelter or at SJ [railway station] or something and then wait [until] 10 o’clock to go to the
Systembolaget [liquor store] and [...] buy some beer to get rid of the worst”). Navet is not a place to spend
time or to sleep at night. During the day they visit Slink-In to eat (i.e. have breakfast and/or lunch),
to rest if they had a ‘bad night’, and to shower. They also spend time in parks and other public
spaces in the city center but not at Navet itself (Subject 2: “I’m always at church on Mondays helping
them because then we get food there... yes, every Monday. Then I’m there from half past four to eight in the
evening”). Those who were homeless indicated that shelters, the railway station or public restrooms
around the town were places they used to sleep (Subject 7: “… now I’m sleeping at SJ like a tramp, but
not so ... But that-yes”).

To summarize, to active drug users, Navet is somewhere they go to buy drugs but not somewhere
they choose to be.

Key informants

A) Individual interviews with social workers
Social workers identified two different groups of substance users that are usually present at Navet. To their knowledge, the first group comprises around 15–20 persons from their late 40s to middle 50s who use alcohol as their main substance although it is likely they also use other drugs. They meet at Navet in small groups almost every day, very frequently around the liquor store and particularly in the morning. When they gather, they are noisy and rude but are general friendly towards each other. They form a distinctive group and are easily recognized by anyone passing by. They sometimes consume alcohol openly. They have been using drugs for a long time and have been in and out of treatment for a major part of their lives. Some of them, to a lesser or greater extent, have long criminal careers. The majority are Swedish natives and many of them receive welfare benefits, which allow them to pay their rent. Some of them keep in touch with their families, who live locally, in many cases.

The second group identified by the social workers overlaps with the people we had interviewed at Slink-In. They primarily use various kinds of drugs more than alcohol. They do not seek help from and refuse any contact with social services. Many of them are immigrants and some are awaiting deportation. They refuse contact with any other person than their suppliers and, in general, are non-violent.

From the social workers’ perspective, Navet is generally not a violent location and any violence that occurs is not a direct consequence of the drug market there. In their view, the violent incidents that have taken place at night originated in young men who had been drinking in nightclubs, where friction had arisen with other young men. Afterwards, they all converge on Navet to wait for buses to take them home. This is when they become physically violent towards each other, as a consequence of the various disputes coupled with the alcohol and drugs they have taken when visiting the nightclubs.

B) Focus Group interview with bus drivers

The bus drivers in the focus group interview agreed that there is a drug market at Navet although the exchange of drug-money is not easy to spot. However, a closer look at certain individuals reveals behaviors that raise the suspicion of drug-dealing activity (Subject 2: “You might not see it that often, but there are a lot of handshakes and such like”).

For the general public, there are no other activities at Navet beyond waiting for buses, so people have no motive to stay. Thus, they ‘flee’ from the place as fast as the buses arrive to take them home.

People who loiter only do so because they have a role in the drug market. They form part of a mixed group of people – some use drugs, others use alcohol while some are homeless – and can be easily identified from their attire (Subject 2: “Those who are addicts are the ones who may turn up [...] in very little clothing, wearing a thin jacket when it's -20°C outside). These persons, labeled by the bus drivers as ‘typical old addicts’, start appearing at Navet after the rush hour, around 9.00–10.00. During the day it is always possible to spot one or more of them around the place. From 19.00 to 20.00 they start to progressively disappear and then the young people take over the place.

Navet is not perceived as a dangerous place by the bus drivers [Subject 2: “… it’s a bad place [but] it’s not a dangerous place”] although, together with the general public, they share a feeling of insecurity in the area due to a perception of the unpredictability of the social environment rather than genuine threats or the use of violence.

To summarize although the drug trade is not evident there are clear signs that it is taking place. There is no other activity at Navet beyond waiting for buses so the general public uses Navet for this purpose only. People seen loitering at Navet conform to a group of mixed people that could be related to drug or alcohol use but who could also just be people who have no other place to go. The
general feeling of insecurity is attributable to a certain unpredictability regarding the behavior of people who are intoxicated or are suspected of using drugs.

**Ethnographic observation:**

For a better understanding of the social environment at Navet, and for research purposes, we divided the results of the ethnographic observations into two groups of individuals: those we perceived as having a role in the drug trade and those we perceived as not having a role in the drug trade. Within these groups, we made a new subdivision, resulting in seven groups.

**A) People with no role in the drug trade**

In relation to those who appeared to not have any role in the drug market, we identified four different groups.

Firstly, Navet is busy for parts of the day, especially during the morning from around 08.00 to 09.00 and in the afternoon from 16.00 to 17.00 by people using the bus to travel between their work places and homes and by teenage school children commuting between school and home. For many bus users, this is the only reason for being at Navet and they are only there for the time it takes to board the bus.

Secondly, we identified a small group of people who appeared to have an immigrant background, men and young women with their young children who used the place to congregate and visit the two restaurants in the area that are run by persons apparently from a similar immigrant background. Neither the visitors nor the restaurant owners seem to be part of the drug trade.

Thirdly, is a group of beggars, immigrant men and women, who sometimes congregate at Navet. Some of them store their possessions in nearby locations. When they disperse, some of them stay close to the doors of the surrounding stores while others take buses to places where they beg.

A fourth group of people that appear to have no connection with the drug market is made up of a few isolated individual men and women both young and old, who usually make no verbal or eye contact with anyone. They just sit at the bus stops as if they were waiting for a bus but don’t ever board any bus. Their neglected appearance and lethargic behavior gives us reason to suspect that they suffer from some type of mental disorder. They stay for a while at Navet without any evident purpose and then just disappear.

There is no contact between these four groups. Although beggars and suspected mentally ill individuals appear to not take part in the drug trade or display violent behavior, they could contribute to the feeling of insecurity revealed by the general public and reinforced by the stereotypes.

**B) People who appear to have a role in the drug trade**

In relation to the group of individuals who appear to have a role in the drug trade (i.e. sellers and/or drug users), we identified three different groups that occasionally interact, but the clusters are clear, in any case.

The first group overlaps with one of the groups already identified by social workers. It comprises individuals with an average age of around 50 years, who appear to be Swedish natives and who are predominately men. The few women that were seen, some of them younger, some of them in the same age range, were always accompanied by men of this same group with whom they appeared to have a close relationship. Individuals in this group start gathering at around 10.00 waiting for the liquor store to open, which makes us think that alcohol may currently be their main substance of use although their physical appearance suggests long-term drug abuse problems. Thus, the normal concomitant use of alcohol and drugs cannot be ruled out. They all appear to know one another and use Navet as their ‘social network meeting place’. More than just a place to buy or sell drugs, Navet is a ‘living room’ where friends can meet. Sometimes, some of these individuals consume alcohol openly and, on a few occasions, the smell surrounding them suggested they were smoking cannabis. Some of them looked as if they might be taking pills. Occasionally, some of them acted as if they were intoxicated, demonstrating uncivilized behavior, such as swearing at each other, speaking loudly and throwing empty beer cans or trash on the ground. As already stated by the social workers, these individuals do not seem to be homeless, most likely because they receive welfare benefits or, alternatively, selling drugs allows them to have their own accommodation.

A second group of individuals observed by the researcher overlaps with those who were interviewed at Slink-In. Socially isolated, they are less visible to public view than the individuals in the previous group.
They do not use buses or any other means of transportation; they just walk everywhere. They have been seen at Navet waiting to meet their suppliers. On some occasions, their restlessness is clear, suggesting a certain level of drug withdrawal, although during the registered observations no violent incident on the part of these persons occurred. Their suspected suppliers appear to be socially connected to them and they spend some time talking, especially in the mornings. They frequently search through trash bins and collect bottles that they can exchange for small sums of money. Their gaunt and dirty look, and their unseasonal attire makes us suspect that they are homeless, which is consistent with the information provided by the interviewees at Slink-In. Many of them appear to have an immigrant background, which could explain their social isolation. They are younger than the individuals in the previous group, and their social needs are perceived as being more basic.

A third group identified during field observation comprises male and female youths, the majority from an apparently immigrant background, although some are clearly Swedish natives. A number of them appear to be very young, of compulsory school age (i.e. below 16 years) while others appear to be young adults in their 20s. The very young ones are spotted at weekends but not as much on weekdays. Those who loiter on weekdays may have dropped out of school when compulsory school attendance finished in 10th grade. Some of them are seen wearing expensive brand clothing, shoes and accessories, clearly suggesting that they have a substantial source of income, probably through the drug trade. Individuals in this group come and go from Navet all the time and are very coordinated in their meetings through their use of cell phones. They don’t spend more time at Navet than is required to complete a drug transaction and then they quickly disappear, as if into thin air. They never arrive from the same direction and they also leave via a different route. Some of them appear to have a personal relationship but any interaction is always brief. They were never spotted using drugs in situ, most likely because they wish to steer clear of the stigmatization of drug abuse.

During the field observation, no violent incident has been witnessed at Navet by the researcher. The private security personnel employed by the municipality who patrol the location from 09.00 to 18.00 appear to stifle the unsociable behavior of intoxicated people but have no deterrent effect on the drug trade. The police mainly patrol in cars, which is no deterrent to the drug trade, either.

**PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION**

Navet has a complex social environment that brings together people of different ages and from multi-ethnic backgrounds. The open air-drug market coexists with normal transport hub activity in a relationship of total lack of ‘capable guardianship’ in the context of the routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Informal surveillance that might be provided by persons who do not appear to have a role in the drug trade has no deterrent effect and the formal surveillance by private security personnel and the police is not effective at all.

Users and sellers do not comprise a homogeneous group, which could easily be targeted by, for example, hotspot policing. On the contrary, the market seems to be supplied by multiple sellers who address different groups of users and do not show the traditional hierarchical pyramidal organization that was common to the drug trade in the 1990s. Police intervention on these low-level traders would most likely cause only a minor, temporal disturbance, easily resolved by the redistribution of the supply and relocation of trade to adjacent streets, as has occurred in the past (Best et al., 2001; Dovey et al., 2001; Wood et al., 2004). Beyond situational prevention, individual programs to users directed at the addiction problem and their social needs are required. Striking the market from the bottom with the objective of ridding it of customers is an alternative intervention. In this sense, beyond policing, the intervention of the social and mental health services is deemed to be essential in order to shut down the market, avoiding even further social exclusion for some users.

The preventive work should also target youths. Any disruption to the supply of drugs in places like Navet could have the negative effect of increasing the motivation to use drugs (Galenianos et al., 2012) and promoting darknet drug purchases primarily by young people who have more access to and greater knowledge of the web environment and cryptographic processes.
To summarize, from a crime prevention perspective, the best strategy for striking the retail market for illicit drugs at Navet would be to work on three levels: (1) through intelligence-led policing work to cut the supply at the source, before the drugs arrive on the streets, (2) through the social and health services, motivate those people with a more or less extensive history of abuse to have treatment. This should be individualized and aligned with the individual’s specific needs, and (3) develop drug prevention programs for adolescents in schools and in neighborhoods with the aim of reaching those who have dropped out of non-compulsory education (+16). The conjoined efforts of various social partners will most likely be a more cost-effective and certainly a more responsible solution (Ekblom, 2011) than the use of law enforcement on its own.

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An integral version in Swedish can be downloaded at: [http://www.regeringen.se/49550c/contentassets/d0b212f61d0d49828e5e257f47e892ad/tillsammans-mot-brott----ett-nationellt-brottsforebyggande-program-skr.-201617126](http://www.regeringen.se/49550c/contentassets/d0b212f61d0d49828e5e257f47e892ad/tillsammans-mot-brott----ett-nationellt-brottsforebyggande-program-skr.-201617126)