

Chapter 8

DRUG ENFORCEMENT IN PUBLIC HOUSING

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This chapter describes two police programs that tackled drug problems in public housing. The programs were fielded in housing developments in Denver and New Orleans, by special Narcotics Enforcement in Public Housing Units (NEPHUs) that were supported by grants from the Bureau of Justice Assistance. In both cities it was apparent that the police were not devoting sufficient attention to drug sale and use in public housing, and that they were not working in cooperation with the management of those developments or helping residents deal with their problems. This chapter first describes some of the difficulties involved in drug enforcement in the special kinds of "neighborhoods" created by large public housing projects. Then it describes the new NEPHU units, their tactical plans, and the difficulties they encountered in working with the communities and local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) to deal with drug problems.

THE SPECIAL COMMUNITY OF PUBLIC HOUSING

The drug problem takes on an added dimension in the special environment created by public housing. The people who live there are poor and vulnerable to exploitation by narcotics traffickers. Their community is difficult to defend, especially on their own. The government has special responsibility for protecting them, for it builds and manages the developments, decides who can live there, and plays a large role in shaping the quality of residents' daily lives (Weisel, 1990).

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Generally, the residents of public housing are very poor. Nonelderly public housing residents usually must be single, unemployed, and have children in order to qualify for public housing; in reality this means that the vast bulk of family heads are female, and they are disproportionately racial and cultural minorities. This pattern intensified during the 1980s, for Department of Housing and Urban Development (DHUD) policies have kept out all but the poorest new tenants.

In a period during the late 1950s and early 1960s the federal government also permitted the construction of high-rise housing for poor families. It was quickly obvious that the concentration of large numbers of young families under such circumstances had untoward outcomes, and by 1980 most public housing units for families (more than 75%) were in low-rise buildings of less than 5 stories. The remaining family high-rise developments are among the most notorious public housing projects in the country. However, while nationwide, slightly more than half of public housing developments are small (including fewer than 200 units), some can be quite large even if they are low-rise in character.

Too much public housing is also seriously deteriorated. Many developments were not well constructed at the outset, and financial constraints have prevented many local PHAs from properly maintaining their buildings. Despite two waves of modernization by DHUD during the 1970s and 1980s, many public housing developments are visibly decayed and marred by vandalism. Trash-strewn grounds and broken windows signal that the buildings are out of anyone's control, and invite troublemakers in. Few public housing developments were constructed with security in mind. They often were built in neighborhoods that were poor to start with and already had high rates of crime. Even highrise buildings were constructed with multiple access points, making them difficult to close to unwanted traffic; in low-rise units like those in Denver and New Orleans it is effectively impossible to keep out non-residents. Criminals can work with virtual impunity in the stairwells and breezeways; doors are often flimsy and windows easy to crawl through. Residents lack the capacity to defend themselves, be it against predators, gangs looking for revenge, or drug dealers engaged in turf wars or intimidation.

In many respects, public housing developments might be treated as residential neighborhoods. As such, it would seem to make sense to try to mobilize community residents to try to do things on their own to combat drug use and crime, and to cooperate with the police to regain control

over conditions there. Moore and Kleiman (1989) and others have called for involving communities in their own defense against drugs, anticipating the day that special operations teams move on. Uchida, Forst & Annan (1990) also have written persuasively about the need to involve the community in the war against drugs. "Indeed, without the community's own efforts at self-defense, it is hard to see how the police can possibly succeed" (Moore, 1989: 3).

However, it can be difficult to mobilize community participation in the challenging environment presented by public housing. Residents of public housing have few of the resources that seem to drive successful community organizing. Drugs are a potentially divisive rather than unifying issue. Drug users and their families, and to a varying extent those involved in the trade, are members of the community as well. In addition to potentially setting neighbor against neighbor, drug use also undermines community morale, reinforces gang activity, and draws youths into the fringes of the trade. The threat of violence cows more public-minded residents into submission.

It may be particularly hard to harness community energies using the police. Racial minorities and the poor often fear the police and resent the way they exercise their authority. They may be as interested in monitoring police misconduct and pressing for police accountability as they are in increasing police presence in their community. Many residents of poor and minority neighborhoods have had antagonistic encounters with the police. The police are another of their problems; they frequently are perceived to be arrogant, brutal, racist, and corrupt. Some of this tension dates to the period when racial rioting pitted African-Americans against mostly white police officers, and police were criticized by nonrioters for their aggressive actions. It also stems partly from bad service. Police officers often are suspicious, or even fearful, of project residents, and often enter PHAs only in armed convoys. When they enter the developments, "police encounter unwilling or absent witnesses . . . and face difficulties of physical access and lack of knowledge about the property. Officers, easily identifiable, often encounter . . . elusive dealers being assisted, whether voluntarily or through coercion, by nearby residents" (Weisel, 1990: 50).

Police drug enforcement in public housing thus takes place in an emotionally charged and potentially volatile environment. Even if they are conducted in strictly legal fashion, street sweeps, aggressive stop-and-frisk operations, car stops, apartment searches, and other enforcement

tactics involve abrasive contacts between development residents and police. They take place in a context in which people too frequently believe that they are already not getting fair treatment by police, and where the police often come expecting trouble with residents.

THE DENVER AND NEW ORLEANS PROGRAMS

The goal of the Denver NEPHU program was to reduce the availability of narcotics in public housing areas, and reduce levels of crime and fear. The program's goals included an increase in drug arrests in public housing and reductions in both violent and property crime. Denver's NEPHU also proposed to conduct drug awareness programs within the developments; one of their goals was to "educate citizens in . . . tenant responsibility, crime prevention, and drug identification and suppression." The unit was to meet regularly with Tenant Councils in the developments to improve community relations, and they operated a special telephone drug hotline. They also planned to cooperate with the Denver Housing Authority in a variety of programs, including an accelerated eviction program.

The New Orleans program also had as its goal the reduction of violent crime and narcotics dealing in public housing. The unit hoped to increase the sense of security among public housing residents, increase the risk of apprehension among potential offenders in and around the developments, and increase residents' understanding of the severity of the narcotics problem and the ability of the police to tackle it. The unit planned to seek resident input into their program through Tenant Advisory Councils that represent each development. They also advertised a special drug hotline, to encourage information sharing by the community.

However, we quickly observed several realities facing the NEPHUs. They were pledged to pursue program strategies which proved to be incommensurate: (a) visible and active community-oriented policing and (b) undercover, enforcement-oriented narcotics operations. They could not do both, given the resources they had at hand, and their community outreach efforts came to a quick halt. Both units also continually ran afoul of interagency and intra-agency obstacles, and found it impossible to work with the management of local PHAs.

THE PROGRAMS IN ACTION

Relations with Community Residents

There has been a great deal of interest in the role that voluntary efforts can play in dealing with drug and crime problems. The community policing approach to prevention emphasizes collaboration between the police and neighborhood residents. It assumes that the police cannot effectively deal with crime on their own; rather, voluntary, organized community efforts to control drug abuse must work in with parallel official programs. However, efforts by NEPHU in Denver and New Orleans to involve the community—or even the few council members representing them—never got off the ground. Both teams chose traditional policing tactics, and could not conceive of a role for the public to play in their activities. Fearful that public involvement would compromise their undercover work, detectives felt that civilians only “got in the way.” Civic involvement by members of NEPHU also seemed to run counter to their undercover orientation. The units focused on making drug purchases in order to justify subsequent warrant searches. Since informants were not always available, the detectives themselves frequently conducted undercover operations. This seemed to rule out participation in high visibility public relations efforts in the projects, for a choice had to be made between maintaining the anonymity of undercover officers and their public “unmasking.”

In Denver, team members fitfully attended Resident Council meetings at the projects that were involved in our evaluation. There they sat in silence or answered a few desultory questions about drugs. Our site monitor attended one Central Resident Council meeting where a team leader was asked to make a presentation; he began his speech by berating the residents for not using NEPHU's telephone hotline to report drug dealings. This did not seem to help the already strained relationship between the police and the residents.

New Orleans' NEPHU also originally envisioned a community outreach effort; the unit planned to seek resident input into their program through the Tenant Advisory Councils that represent each project. But this never happened. At the beginning of the evaluation period, they met with some project managers and Tenant Council leaders in the three developments chosen for the evaluation. However, they felt that residents and some Council members were uncooperative; did not return

their messages or respond to requests, and did not show up for appointments. They also reported a high degree of cynicism among Council members, who had seen other programs come and (quickly) go without living up to their promises.

A fundamental obstacle to their community involvement strategies was that members of both units generally believed that public housing residents were not really interested in halting the drug trade. Rather, they believed that many residents have friends or relatives who are involved in trafficking and they do not want to see them go to jail. They believed that some residents have found ways to profit from the trade; for example, by subletting their apartments to dealers, or acting as runners. They also recognized that many residents lived in terror of well-armed and dangerous dealers, and that they could not effectively protect them. NEPHU members reported occasional evidence of community resistance to their enforcement efforts. In the Fischer development in New Orleans, for example, crowds more than once formed to shout at patrol units and throw firecrackers at police in protest during large “busts.” In the St. Bernard development, other dealers would fire into the air to distract police while they were making arrests. Rather than seeing the developments as communities that needed to be defended, NEPHU members saw them as hostile territory. They never went there except in teams, and with backup cars on hand.

In both cities, NEPHU pointed to drug hotlines as the preferred form of community input into their operations. The New Orleans unit advertised a special drug hotline, to encourage information sharing by the community. They distributed leaflets describing the hotline and they asked Tenant Council members to support the program. During the course of the evaluation period, New Orleans television stations highlighted drug problems in the city, and this seemed to increase the flow of information to police via the various drug hotlines that were being advertised. Some calls came directly to NEPHU's own hotline, but the Housing Authority and the department's Narcotics Division also forwarded calls which came to them concerning public housing. A listing of the hotline calls made or referred to NEPHU between January and May, 1990, indicates that of the 79 calls, 62 seemed worth following up. Of this group, 26 did not lead to much, 8 led to arrests, and 28 were still on the unit's active list a month later. NEPHU reported that by the end of 1990 the information that they received from hotlines was increas-

ingly specific and useful, but that virtually everyone who called continued to remain anonymous.

Aggressive action against tenants involved in drug activities was not universally popular in Denver's developments, at least among some vocal residents. Denver's Quigg Newton Homes manager was a champion of get-tough tactics. When she was assigned to her development, she vowed to re-establish security in the development. Her reputation as a tough manager spread quickly when she evicted blatant lease violators. In support of her actions, the Denver police increased the frequency of their patrols in the area and introduced limited late-night foot patrol in the development during the summer months. The Gang Task Force and Motorcycle Patrol Units also assigned several officers to the area. As her interventions took hold, heartened residents joined to form a stronger Resident Council. They established and staffed their own office in one of the apartments, where they organized a food and clothing bank.

This effort was not without cost, however. Threatened by the apparent success of the Resident Council in galvanizing resident concern, and frightened by the manager's no-nonsense approach, several residents already facing eviction mounted a hate campaign against the Resident Council officers and initiated a petition drive to oust the manager. Quigg Newton was a divided camp; some residents sided with management and others were determined to destroy her authority. Within four months, the two most active members of the Resident Council received enough death threats to drive them from the development, and the manager was transferred to another PHA position in order to quiet things down.

An important factor precluding community involvement by the NEPHUs was that, while they were pledged to undertake visible and active community-oriented policing, their hearts lay with undercover narcotics operations. They could not do both. NEPHU officers in both cities also generally felt that residents of public housing *were* the problem rather than a solution to it. NEPHU members in both cities believed that PHA residents were not interested in halting the drug trade, although black officers in New Orleans (who made up half the unit) expressed a great deal of compassion for the plight of children in public housing and with the problems facing residents with whom they dealt. Denver's NEPHU was unable to secure the assignment of any of the city's painfully few black officers to their unit, which greatly limited its effectiveness.

In the end, the only sustained community involvement we observed in Denver was directed at, rather than on behalf of, public housing

residents. In October, 1989, the neighbors surrounding a PHA-owned 9-unit "dispersed site" building successfully banded together to demand that it be closed because it was a notorious crack house. With some help, a neighborhood organization was incorporated to purchase the unit from the PHA and use it as a day-care center. For these neighbors, the development and its inhabitants were the problem, and success was registered when they were forced to move out.

Relations with the PHAs

While the proposals submitted by both cities envisioned close cooperation between NEPHU and local PHAs, they did not get along at all. The obstacles to their cooperation were multiple and complex.

Both PHAs were plagued by internal organizational problems. During the evaluation period Denver's Housing Authority was a besieged institution. Its Director was forced to resign after media investigations revealed widespread mismanagement and favoritism in hiring. The mayor replaced him with an extremely political appointee, and DHA employees were fearful and off balance during much of our evaluation. One of the new Acting Director's actions was to eliminate security operations and lay off the security director and his staff. The field managers of individual developments often disparaged their own top administrators to NEPHU members. To work with NEPHU, they sometimes had to conceal their actions from the central administration. Denver's NEPHU had continual problems scheduling meetings with PHA staff (who on key occasions failed to show up for them), and found the staff attorney uncooperative when they tried to mount an eviction program.

The New Orleans PHA faced continual charges of mismanagement, and its board was unable to find a management team that could capture control of the agency. During the evaluation period, federal authorities forced them to hire an independent management team, following new revelations of managerial incompetence. That team then came under fire from DIUD, and was in turn replaced. Venality was endemic among the PHA's highly politicized administrators, and shortly after our evaluation began the agency's Deputy Executive Officer for Management was indicted for cocaine trafficking.

Not surprisingly, none of this endeared PHA management to NEPHU members. They had difficulty explaining their mission to other police officers, who assumed that they worked for the Housing Authority and

would not trust anything associated with it. The Housing Authority had been calling for help from the police for almost a decade, and the unit was welcomed by the Board's Executive Director. However, he believed that NEPHU would fall under his supervision, and refused to cooperate with the unit once it became clear that it would be administered by the police department. The PHA Board was upset when they learned that NEPHU would conduct investigations without consulting them first. The security director of the Denver PHA was a former local police officer, but NEPHU members still found ways to dismiss his opinions and information, and believed that he had lost touch with "real police work."

Denver's NEPHU also never worked out their relationship with the resident managers of the PHA developments. NEPHU officers were extremely reluctant to give advance information to any civilian about their activities, but instead of explaining how their intelligence gathering activities kept them from discussing their plans, the officers simply failed to communicate with managers. Embarrassed managers often received their first word about major raids from residents, and no one from NEPHU answered their phone calls. They were supposed to quickly rid their developments of known drug dealers, but could not initiate criminal eviction proceedings without NEPHU's full cooperation—which they did not get.

Finally, there was a conflict in the eyes of many PHA employees between their mission of providing low-cost housing for the poor and the expectation that they would become involved in enforcement activities. In Denver, this was compounded by the fact that federal requirements were read to require high monthly occupancy rates in order to justify rent subsidies. Development managers who moved against drug and gang-involved leaseholders risked higher vacancy rates as a consequence. Less dedicated managers emphasized keeping their units full, at the price of winking at lease violations. This posture may have contributed to the large variance that we observed in the frequency with which development managers complained to NEPHU about specific drug problems.

One widely discussed housing management strategy is to improve tenant screening and management, but we saw how difficult it can be to implement this resolve. New Orleans officials attributed their reluctance to evict residents to the belief that public housing was their last resort before homelessness. They took a narrow legal position—that only actual

leaseholders who were themselves convicted of drug offenses could be evicted—to forestall taking action. Convicted drug users, residents who sold drugs elsewhere, and family members or people other than the lessee who sold drugs from a PHA unit, all were exempted. Very few residents were evicted in New Orleans once the rules became widely known. Denver was somewhat more successful in taking action against tenants whose units were involved in drug activities, but this was due more to the resolve of individual development managers than the PHA's attorney charged with monitoring this policy. Further, the adverse reaction by a vocal faction of residents to attempts by Quigg Newton's activist manager to take the initiative against drugs in that development illustrates how intensely political this kind of management tactic can be. In the end, she was "booted upstairs" and out of the development, and her chief supporters among the residents fled the development in the face of threats to their lives.

The reality of life in many public housing developments also makes it difficult to impose draconian tenant management policies. It is hard to monitor exactly who is living in the units, which in New Orleans often are overcrowded with long-term "guests." In addition, while tenant rosters indicate that the bulk of the adults living there are single women, there appeared to be no shortage of males in and around the housing developments we monitored, either in Denver or New Orleans. This floating population of undocumented quasi-residents makes it more difficult to affix responsibility for drug involvement in the developments. Arrest data from New Orleans made it clear that many, and perhaps most, adults involved in the drug trade there did not live in the developments at all; rather, they commuted home on their off hours.

To deal with these problems, there have been efforts to regain control of the apartments and corridors of PHA buildings using "sweeps." Sweeps involve locking all exits to a building and conducting unannounced warrantless searches of apartments. Then, while the building remains interdicted, new security doors and fences are thrown up, guard booths are erected in the central entrance area, legal residents are photographed and given identification cards, undocumented residents are evicted, and a special pass system is put in place to ensure that outsiders cannot stay in the building past midnight. However, sweeps assume a style of physical design which does not characterize most public housing for poor families. PHA buildings in Denver and New Orleans are more typical; they are low-rise, the apartments have separate front and back doors,

and they sprawl over large areas intersected by streets and parking lots. Research by Newman and Franck (1980), a modest evaluation of an early access control experiment in Chicago's Cabrini-Green development (Chicago Department of Planning, 1978), surveys by Burby and Rohe (1989), and related research, lead us to believe that one of the most significant sources of the breakdown of social control in public housing is in fact its "public" character; anyone can enter, and no one has any particular legitimacy to challenge their presence. In this light, sweep-and-secure programs speak to a real problem. However, short of creating huge walled compounds within which poor families must live, we cannot envision how they actually apply to most family public housing developments.

The dispersed, low-rise character of the family housing that we observed might provide a better fit with elements of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) theories of crime control. A crime prevention program for public housing areas could involve the physical redesign of buildings to enhance their security by improving opportunities for surveillance and intervention, and to control access to the building by nonresidents.

However, more fundamental problems of deterioration dominate the construction budget of most PHAs. Afflicted with buildings that often were poorly built and frequently have been ill-maintained, it would be difficult to convince many PHAs to invest in subtle redesign efforts. In light of their generally deteriorating character, it can easily seem more important for them to respond to vandalism and disrepair in timely fashion. Living conditions in New Orleans' developments are deplorable. In some of the developments targeted by NEPHU, 50 percent of the apartments stand gutted and uninhabitable. In those areas virtually every building is at least partially abandoned, while at the same time the remaining apartments are grossly overcrowded with undocumented residents. The buildings are marked with graffiti and the lawns around them have been destroyed. Metal window frames have been ripped from the vacant units and carried away for resale, and when apartments fall empty they are quickly stripped of their fixtures and appliances. Gaping holes have been ripped in the walls at ground level so that anyone can gain access to crawl spaces beneath the row-house apartments. More than 10 percent of the city's population lives in nine large housing complexes like these.

Moreover, it is not clear how much effect physical redesign plans

might have, compared to other forces that are at work in public housing areas. Even Newman and Franck concluded that most of the explained variance in measures of tenant victimization, fear, and residential satisfaction among public housing residents was accounted for by their economic and family status rather than management or building design factors; in the end, the fact that PHAs frequently are the source of housing of last resort for the poor predominated. For all of the problems in the PHA's top management structure, the developments that we observed in Denver were manageable at the local level. They were well laid out and well maintained; they were small (none had more than about 400 units) and the units had solid doors and visible security arrangements. Broken windows got fixed, and there were not many of them because leaseholders had to pay for such repairs. Residents were required to take care of their lawns. The density of the developments approximated that of many private residential areas of Denver, and development managers generally were aggressive in enforcing rules of conduct and keeping people who were not listed on the lease out of the apartments. However, at the same time our surveys in Denver found that 70 percent of residents thought it was fairly easy or very easy to find a drug apartment in their development. In the end, our experience in Denver leads us to be uncertain how much of a difference management policies can make, absent more radical approaches to crime control.

CONCLUSION

The NEPHUs in both cities failed in their plan to mobilize PHA residents to act on their own to combat drug use and crime, and to cooperate with the police to regain control over conditions in the developments. There were a number of reasons for this: (1) the proposed plan to combine visible and active community-oriented policing with undercover, enforcement-oriented narcotics operations failed to recognize that the two strategies are incommensurable; (2) many officers believed that the residents were not really interested in halting the drug trade, because of their own involvement; (3) residents distrusted the police and had been disappointed with special programs in the past; and (4) residents were reluctant to get involved for fear of retaliation by the drug dealers. These factors were compounded by the inability or unwillingness of the two Housing Authorities to get involved; this is of special significance because they are the "landlord" for these special

communities. Renters generally participate less often in crime prevention programs, but in these two cities the home owner did not either.

Even though public housing residents lack some of the characteristics that seem to drive successful community organizing (in addition to ownership, these include long-term residence, nuclear family organization, and education), it is our judgment that the NEPIHUs in both cities could have achieved some success had they been persistent and more caring. Attending one or two meetings, as NEPIHU officers did, fell far short of what it would require to organize even the ideal community. We also feel that a change in the officers attitude towards the residents could have made a difference. It may be true that some residents are part of the problem but our surveys suggest that *most* residents are law-abiding citizens who want to live in a drug-free environment. Our analysis of neighborhood surveys in several cities, including Houston, Newark, Baltimore, Oakland, and Birmingham, suggests that public housing residents are not much different from residents of "ordinary" poor and minority neighborhoods; they are just as committed to their community and to their neighbors as people elsewhere (Skogan and Annan, in press). This suggests that community-oriented policing could have been more successful than it was in Denver and New Orleans, if it had been given a chance.

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