

FORTIFIED DRUG HOUSES

A PROBLEM SOLVED

EDMONTON POLICE SERVICE, ALBERTA, CANADA, 1994

- THE PROBLEM:** In the city of Edmonton, residential houses were being fortified to facilitate drug trafficking. Drug houses were attracting heavy pedestrian and vehicular traffic in otherwise quiet neighbourhoods. Drug addicts and prostitutes were frequenting the houses alarming and outraging residents, community groups, and schools.
- ANALYSIS:** Police stops of people leaving suspect locations failed to turn up drugs. The customers were consuming their drugs in the houses. Relying on a network of informants, the police executed search warrants and discovered nearly all of the houses had fortified doors and windows. Suspects would dump any existing drugs into bleach buckets to destroy the evidence before the police entered the houses. Most of the drug houses were rentals. Many of which were in a state of disrepair.
- RESPONSE:** The police formed a Special Multi Agency Response Team (SMART) with other government agencies. The efforts of SMART resulted in closure of a small number of houses classified as unfit for human habitation and forced landlords to rectify deficiencies or voluntarily close their properties. The Downtown Drug Project Team executed warrants, seized drugs, and used innovative techniques to reduce the drug supply and cultivate users as witnesses against the dealers.
- ASSESSMENT:** The last drug house was closed in 1993. Many of the dealers are now in custody. Residents of the neighbourhoods have reported less drug activity and discarded syringes.
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SCANNING

Edmonton, Alberta is a city with a population of about 600,000. The city has the usual policing problems associated with a major centre. Edmonton's drug problem is typical for a city its size.

Any one involved in drug investigations knows that drug traffickers are continually changing their modus operandi to thwart police investigations and avoid arrest. In mid 1993, drug traffickers in Edmonton's inner city area developed a seemingly

new and, foolproof method of peddling their wares—fortified drug houses.

Almost unnoticed by police, a number of houses in otherwise quiet, residential areas were modified by the traffickers. In most cases the modifications to the houses were not visible from the outside.

Windows were boarded and braced on the inside, doors were strengthened and re-hinged to open outwards and bracing systems put in place to make rams almost useless. Some houses had steel mesh secured over accessible windows, which were also boarded over. Peepholes were placed in doors or

windows so the occupants of the houses could maintain surveillance outside the houses and check out potential customers to control admittance. “Six men” or lookouts, watching for Police, became the norm.

Soon these houses were frequented by large numbers of prostitutes and drug addicts. The sudden influx of these people to normally quiet communities attracted the attention of the residents who were naturally outraged by the undesirable traffic.

Community groups and inner city schools expressed concern over what they perceived to be a threat to the safety and integrity of their communities. There was considerable concern about the proliferation of discarded syringes and condoms arising from the “new population” attracted to the drug houses.

The media was quick to report on the situation and closely followed any developments.

Fortified Drug Houses, while unusual in most jurisdictions in North America, were not unheard of in Edmonton. For about a decade, the Edmonton Police Service had been dealing with a heavily fortified rooming house—The Fortress. The Fortress catered to the inner city’s demand for cocaine, Talwin and Ritalin.

While it seemed that any problems presented by the Fortress were being controlled (by Police) apparently other drug traffickers considered that it represented a successful method of operation and in no time there were more than a dozen fortified drug houses plying their trade.

The entire city seemed to be aware of the problem and many citizens were loudly demanding a solution to the problem. The community looked to the Edmonton Police Service for the solution.

Edmonton’s first experience with fortified drug houses came in the mid 1980s when a career criminal, then on day release from prison, began fortifying a rooming house he owned in the inner city. It was evident from the first observations of the renovations being made to the house that it was being designed as a place to sell drugs and keep the

Police out. A sign identifying “The Fortress” was placed by the front door.

Over the years the fortifications to the Fortress became quite incredible. It has been rumoured that the bullet-proof glass in the windows cost about \$8,000. The front door was reinforced with steel and all the doorjambes and windows were framed inside and out with 2 by 6s bolted through the walls and steel grid work placed over them.

Customers who frequented the Fortress to obtain cocaine or Talwin and Ritalin accessed the rear porch door and admissions were monitored through a one-way Plexiglas, steel reinforced portal window. The outer and inner series of doors were of a quality surpassing most cellblocks, as were the locks, which were electronically operated from the inside. To access the area where the drugs were stored it was necessary to pass through a series of three such doors. Customers rarely saw the actual drug traffickers; instead the transactions occurred through a steel drawer system.

The Fortress gained notoriety and was often the subject of high profile raids by the Edmonton Police Service. Entry to the premises was always forced and on a good day, took as long as 20 minutes if the occupants didn’t relent and open the doors. Gaining entry to the Fortress was no small task—no sledgehammer or crow bar would open the doors. Over the years, the Fire Department’s Jaws of Life, Carbide steel saw and oxyacetylene torches have been used to attempt forced entry to the house.

Most of the arrests at the Fortress were of customers as they left the premises in possession of drugs. Occasionally people were arrested inside the Fortress but usually evidence was destroyed in toilets, the garburator or even burned before Police gained entry.

The owner of the house was undaunted by the notoriety of the Fortress and himself. He eventually acquired the adjacent rooming house, and equally fortified that. He connected the two house’s basements by means of a four-inch sewer pipe. This house was dubbed “Twin Manor.” It was a simple task to push drugs, money or other contraband through the pipe to the other house. The pipe was

protected from above by a concrete pad between the houses, which became a dog run for a couple of mangy German shepherd dogs.

Eventually, Twin Manor burned to the ground (not by Police). The owner of the Fortress further fortified his remaining house by removing the original wooden back porch and rebuilt it with poured concrete, heavily reinforced with steel. He also poured similarly reinforced walls around the entire main floor of the house. The Fortress would likely withstand being attacked by a D9 Cat.

While the clientele it attracted directly affected only the residents in the immediate vicinity of the Fortress, the media were well aware of the situation and delighted in making the whole Community aware of this problem. The sporadic raids on the Fortress were often televised and made excellent local prime time news items. Even a four-year jail sentence imposed on the principal operator of the Fortress, for drug and property charges, failed to close the house.

ANALYSIS

Between June and July in 1993, reports began to filter in of other drug houses attracting heavy pedestrian and vehicular traffic in quiet residential neighbourhoods elsewhere in the inner city. Schools and Community groups complained to the Edmonton Police Service and the media. People were worried about their safety and that of their children. There was also the perceived health risk from the syringes and condoms. Volunteers collected syringes and condoms from school grounds to protect the kids.

Police stopped and searched people when they exited suspect locations. Almost without exception, they were not found in possession of drugs and it became clear that the customers to these new houses were consuming their drugs in the houses. It seemed the users were laughing at Police as they walked into the houses and there seemed to be a perception that Police were powerless to deal with this phenomenon.

Downtown Division, where these new drug houses were springing up, was inundated with complaints about the drug house problem and soon instituted a

“quick fix” approach. A team of five Constables were assigned to tackle the problem. These Constables soon developed a network of informants and were able to identify several drug houses and execute search warrants. Their findings came as a shock. All the houses had fortified doors and windows. Many had doormen who were monitoring the approaches to the houses, admitting only people they knew. Inside, the houses were set up solely for distribution and consumption of illicit drugs.

Cocaine was preloaded in one cc syringes and customers were provided tourniquets, swabs and water to facilitate their injection. Customers came in droves to these houses, which had a constant supply of drugs, to enjoy their drug of choice in comfort.

Usually the houses had a seller’s room, which housed the actual drug trafficker. That room was also fortified and typically was operated by one or two Asian males and contained boxes of new syringes, cocaine, money, score sheets, and other paraphernalia. Another unique feature common to all the fortified drug houses was the bleach bucket—a container of bleach or similar solution into which cocaine was dumped if a Police raid occurred.

While at the start of the enforcement initiative the investigators often seized large numbers of cocaine filled syringes, as the enforcement continued the traffickers learned to keep fewer syringes on hand and dumped any loose cocaine into the ever-present bleach buckets.

In Canada, the Federal Health Protection Branch Laboratory receives and analyzes all drug exhibits and their advice was sought respecting cocaine in bleach solution. The lab advised that cocaine would be slowly destroyed by bleach or similar solutions but analysis was possible. Edmonton Police began seizing these solutions and charging the traffickers for Possession of Cocaine for the Purpose of Trafficking.

Subsequent analyses of the solutions often showed cocaine or derivatives of coca, such as nor cocaine and N-Formyl cocaine. The lab reported that while cocaine in bleach was not unheard of, Edmonton was the only location in Canada, which was experiencing this type of ongoing problem.

RESPONSE

The Edmonton Police Service recognized the “quick fix” was not enough and meetings took place to discuss alternative approaches to this perplexing problem. It was decided a coordinated joint effort of Drug Control Unit and Downtown Division should continue a heavy enforcement approach while also looking for other innovative methods to solve the problem. One Detective and three Constables were assigned, full-time, to the task, known as the Downtown Drug Project (DDP) team.

At the same time another approach was gaining considerable support within the Police Service, the Community and the Media—SMART (Special Multi-Agency Response Team).

In the course of the drug house investigations it was found that many of the houses were in a considerable state of disrepair. Many had non-functional plumbing, old electrical wiring, wet basements and apparent structural problems—not traditional policing problems. Without exception, the drug houses were rental properties, often maintained by management companies for absentee landlords.

Another common finding in the investigations was that the drug traffickers were typically receiving some kind of social benefits while profiting from illegal activity. A number of the traffickers were also found to be recent immigrants to Canada with Landed Immigrant status.

It was felt that many of these avenues could be explored and other Agencies called on to back up the Police effort. A number of Agencies came on board, including, the Fire Department, Board of Health, Planning and Development Department, Bylaw Enforcement, Tax Department, Probation Branch, Social Services and Canada Immigration. The new team was named the Special Multi Agency Response Team (SMART).

The efforts of SMART resulted in closure of a small number of houses, which were classified as unfit for human habitation. When confronted by a host of Municipal and Provincial representatives, landlords quickly rectified any deficiencies in their properties

or voluntarily closed them. The response by these agencies was extremely positive and in principal SMART is alive and well and its members are available when a cooperative effort is again required.

Another avenue, which was explored, was that of Anti-Drug Profiteering. Anti-Drug Profiteering laws and investigations are in their infancy in Canada, but it was hoped that investigations would show at least some of the drug house owners were actively involved in drug trafficking and their properties might be seized as proceeds of that activity. However, it was found most landlords had no idea their properties were being used for illegal purposes and those who did quickly resolved the situation to avoid publicity or investigation.

Enforcement efforts continued with search warrants being executed whenever possible. Tactical Unit was always used to conduct entries to the Fortified Drug Houses for a number of reasons: firearms and other weapons were often present, patrons were often under the influence of drugs and many were wanted for other offences. Additionally the psychological effect of the Tactical entry, sometimes utilizing “flash bangs,” and always dramatic, was greater than an untrained team could hope to achieve.

On a number of occasions members of the DDP team, were able to make undercover drug purchases. These buys were usually followed by search warrants. In these cases, team members were able to give unarguable evidence as to the accused participation in the operation of the Fortified Drug House. The Fortress was finally shut down in November 1993, after two members, in an undercover capacity, were admitted and made a purchase of cocaine. The occupants of the Fortress were arrested and it has remained closed since.

An extremely effective strategy, which resulted from the undercover approach to the Fortified Drug Houses was that after an operator had been admitted to the house and made a purchase, he could generally return there. On several occasions the return visit was used to facilitate the Tactical teams entry to the premises.

As the undercover operator approached the house, or as he exited following a buy, Tactical members

would employ a stealth approach and gain entry as the door was opened. Some significant seizures were made as a result of this technique. This method proved particularly effective on 96 Street Exchange, a fortified storefront operation. 96 Street Exchange was second only to the Fortress in fortifications and after each raid by Police improved its fortifications. On a couple of occasions a tow truck was used to rip down the fortifications.

It was particularly frustrating to find this location operational within hours of search warrant investigations. Many undercover buys and arrests were made and investigations resulted in the principal operator, an Asian male, being arrested on a number of occasions—he is currently awaiting sentencing. On the last occasion a search warrant was executed at 96 Street Exchange all the fortifications, including several steel doors, were seized as evidence.

Where there was insufficient evidence (or time) to obtain a search warrant for a suspect location, a “knock-and-talk” technique was used. The full team approached the location, proper identification was made and the function of the team explained to the occupants with a full explanation of what the occupants could expect in the future if drug activity was occurring or continued. On many occasions, drugs and drug paraphernalia were seized, but because seizures under these circumstances are not well received by the Courts here, charges were not laid.

“Knock-and-Flush” is a similar approach and is very effective at active locations. The DDP team operates a maroon van, which is as obvious as any marked police vehicle to many of the downtown area drug traffickers. Simply driving up to a known location and approaching the premises prompted the occupants to dump or flush their drug supply and often close down for a few days. The occupants had no way of knowing if the police had a search warrant or not.

Typically these methods do not result in jail time, however they do have a great impact on drug trafficking. Business slowed down as the suppliers lost product (supply), which was no longer available

to the customers (demand). Some locations were closed down entirely by these methods alone.

As the enforcement efforts were maintained at a high level a number of changes occurred in the methods used by the drug traffickers:

- Initially most of the houses were supplied and operated by Asians. They were not impressed when they were arrested and soon became just suppliers, hiring addicts from their customer base to operate the houses. Typically these people were paid in drugs.
- Houses would be open on an intermittent basis, often staying closed for several days then opening for a day or two, or only for a few hours.
- Some houses alternated the location of the sellers room so that police would not know which location to “hit” first when a warrant was executed, giving the trafficker more time to dispose of evidence.
- Many dealers took to hiding their supply of drugs outside the house to attempt to disassociate themselves from the drugs.
- The houses operated with increasingly smaller amounts of drugs. A typical supply was found to be one-eighth ounce of cocaine restocked as required.
- Some locations increased their fortifications after each police investigation.

As the Downtown Drug Project team gained experience and gathered momentum, information regarding Drug Houses started flowing in from an increasing number of sources, including individuals in the Communities where the houses were located and customers of the houses who were sick of their own addiction and of the people who encourage and profit from their addictions.

When the addicts who were employed to operate the drug houses were arrested they complained loudly that they were victims of the circumstances of their addiction and were being harassed by the police.

DDP members made a point of explaining that they were in fact victims of the drug suppliers. They seemed to accept that fact and provided information about the suppliers.

The media—television, radio, and newspapers—gave positive coverage on a regular basis, keeping the community at large aware of the progress. The Police Service Media Relations Unit kept the media constantly aware of the Police action.

Many landlords and managers of properties that had become Fortified Drug Houses willingly cooperated with Police in efforts to clean them up. Others found the addresses of their rental properties published in the newspapers or featured in television news which prompted them to get involved in the clean up process, even if only to avoid public embarrassment.

One location was found to have a number of unlicensed pit bull dogs so Bylaw Enforcement officials were invited to participate in an investigation. They levied penalties totalling \$6,000 and seized the dogs.

The DDIP team developed a system of evidence seizure to increase the likelihood that suspects would be convicted of trafficking charges rather than simple possession charges or dismissals. Everything was seized which might in some way be associated to the distribution of drugs, including samples from the bleach bucket, plastic baggies or condoms which may have contained cocaine, mirrors and razor blades used to cut up cocaine, score sheets (often ripped up and thrown in bleach or garbage), syringes, lottery ticket forms (commonly used in Edmonton to make folds for cocaine), pre-made folds and money. In addition to obtaining positive cocaine analyses from bleach solution, positive results were also obtained from these other items. Careful notation of the location of suspects in the house was also made, to tie them to the evidence.

The Federal Department of Justice, which prosecutes all drug cases, and the Judiciary came on board in response to public outrage over the Drug House situation. Several operators of the houses, many with no prior drug record, received sentences of up to 4 years imprisonment. Past experience of the Edmonton Police Service showed it was difficult to

convict "six men" or lookouts that are an essential pan of many drug trafficking operations. The experience of the DDP clearly demonstrated that "six men" were an important part of a team effort and their evidence resulted in doormen receiving jail sentences similar to the "hands on" drug traffickers.

The media and the DDP members made the public aware of the Courts approach to sentencing the Drug House operators and slowly but surely, with continued enforcement, the number of houses diminished. It became clear that the addicts who had been attracted to the houses as sellers or doormen by promises of free cocaine, were no longer prepared to take the risk of three or more years in jail.

Another effective tool in the DDP armoury was having bail conditions placed on accused persons. Conditions as detailed as "Not to attend any Drug House", "To abstain from use of drugs or alcohol" or as simple as "Be of good behaviour and keep the peace" became powerful tools. The people who operated the houses were, for the most part, drug addicts and when DDP members conducted subsequent investigations they often found previous "customers" in breach of the conditions of their Recognizance. Several such violators were sentenced to thirty days imprisonment for the breach. The news travelled quickly in the drug Community and soon, repeat-violators became scarce.

ASSESSMENT

In an effort to avoid police attention the dealers tried to open new houses out of the inner city. A number of suspects effectively invaded other people's homes, by preying on desperate drug addicts. The addict was lured by promises of free cocaine and rental payments. Soon the addict's apartment or house was taken over by the trafficker. Neighbours in these normally quiet residential areas soon noticed drug house activity and advised the police. The new locations were quickly identified and most were shut down before they became effective.

The last Fortified Drug House location identified in Edmonton was closed in January 1994. The business potential is still there: the suppliers are there in great numbers as is the demand. The Edmonton Police

Service is not so naive to believe that the Fortified Drug House problem has been fixed so can now be forgotten. In Edmonton, the Downtown Drug Project will continue, combating the street level drug traffickers in whatever new approach they take. In September the team may be expanded to six members.

Most of the people who were involved in the Fortified Drug House trade in Edmonton are now in custody, waiting to go to jail or peddling dope some other way. They are looking over their shoulders though, watching for that maroon van.

At a meeting of Community groups, in June, it was reported that there has been a marked decrease in the number of syringes and condoms being dumped in the school grounds. A Community Group is negotiating to take over the Fortress as a refuge for prostitutes.

In September 1994, the Edmonton Police Service hosts the American Canadian Drug Conference. On the agenda is the topic Fortified Drug Houses. Edmonton will share its experience with Police Agencies throughout North America.

In dealing with the long-term problem presented by drug houses, Municipal and Federal authorities continue to address the situation. In April 1994, a member of the Parliament submitted proposed amendments to Federal Legislation addressing Fortified Drug Houses. Municipal politicians continue to consider ways to control potential drug trafficking locations.

Edmonton's Fortified Drug House problem seemed to be almost insurmountable when it was first identified. Yet, a small group of Police Officers, supported by the Community and in cooperation with a wide variety of non-Police Agencies, confronted and ultimately triumphed over the

problem—the drug traffickers. This is an outstanding example of a community rallying together to win another battle in the war against drugs.

NOTES

To address the Fortified Drug House problem a combination of drug expertise and knowledge of the affected area and its inhabitants was required. That blend was found in the team of:

- Detective Joe Marshall, Team Supervisor, is 38 years old and a 17-year member of the Edmonton Police Service. Joe has had a varied career including 3 and half years walking the Beat in the inner city and one year as a Patrolman in Downtown Division. Since 1989 he has been a Drug investigator and has considerable knowledge in that field.
- Constable Dean Boyer is 41 years old and a 5-year member. Dean initiated the problem solving approach to the Fortified Drug Houses. He works in Downtown Division and has spent a considerable part of his service on undercover assignments.
- Constable Glen Dennis is 35 years old and has 13 years service. Glen has spent most of his career in Downtown Division including 5 years walking the Beat. He also has experience in Crime Prevention and has been involved in undercover work.
- Constable Orest Popowich is 48 years old with 28 years service. Orest has spent a considerable part of his career in Downtown Division.