


Seattle's Radical Approach to Drug Crimes Is Working

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Back in 2011, the city of Seattle launched an experimental drug enforcement program that has been compared, if somewhat unfairly, to the infamous "Hamsterdam" episode of HBO's *The Wire*.

Fans of the show of course remember the story: Major Howard "Bunny" Colvin, tired of fighting a losing battle, single-handedly decriminalizes drugs in a deserted corner of Baltimore and then brings in social workers to pass out needles and condoms.

On *The Wire*, the extralegal drug free-zone dubbed "Hamsterdam" was eventually discovered and shut down. But today in Seattle, something like a sanctioned version of Hamsterdam actually exists, and a new study suggests it works better than the traditional criminal justice system at preventing crimes.

Researchers at the University of Washington followed 203 participants in Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, or LEAD, over varying lengths of time—anywhere from six months to nearly three years, depending on when participants joined the program. When the researchers compared them with a control group of 115 people who had been arrested, jailed, and prosecuted in the usual fashion, they found that the LEAD participants were 34 percent to 58 percent less likely than their counterparts to have committed new crimes since the original arrest.

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The findings paint a bright picture of Seattle's experiment. Like *The Wire's* Hamsterdam, the LEAD experiment was confined to a single geographic area when it launched in 2011. In that neighborhood, Belltown, the open-air drug trade was so out of control that at one point residents circulated a petition asking the Washington State Patrol to intervene. For years, the city had clung to the usual methods of combatting the problem—arrests, jail, prosecution, prison time. None of it did much good. A cop who arrested someone on Thanksgiving could usually count on seeing the suspect back on the streets by Christmas.

Today, the officers who patrol Belltown have another option. Say a cop catches someone selling a packet of crack cocaine by the bus stops on 3rd Avenue, or injecting themselves with heroin beneath the Alaskan Way Viaduct. The officer can then arrest the suspect and haul her off to jail—the traditional approach. Or, after making the arrest, he can choose to permit her to forgo jail time and prosecution in exchange for a promise to take part in a special social service program.



A mural in Belltown. ([Flickr/panchenks](#))

Seattle's LEAD program, which has received more than \$5 million in funding from private foundations and the city of Seattle, was the result of a collaboration between natural enemies—police and prosecutors on one side, and civil-rights attorneys and social workers on the other. A decade ago, the two sides deeply distrusted each other. Lisa Daugaard, then the head of a special unit of attorneys and researchers at the Seattle Public Defender Association, had spent years filing motions against the police over charges of racial profiling. In Seattle, as in most places in the United States, black people were getting arrested and going to jail for drug crimes far more often than whites, despite evidence showing they were no more likely to use or sell drugs than anyone else. Daugaard was determined to hold the police accountable.

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Unsurprisingly, cops didn't take kindly to this. Steve Brown, a former captain of the department's narcotics unit, said he took Daugaard's accusations "very personally."

"I don't go to work thinking I'm going to violate somebody's civil rights," he told me last summer, when I interviewed him for a [feature story](#) on the program. "That is insanity."

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The police fought hard against Daugaard. But after four years of enduring her exhausting and costly depositions, Brown finally agreed to meet with her to brainstorm possible solutions. Over the course of about a dozen conversations at a downtown coffee shop that

roasted its own beans (this was Seattle, after all), the longtime foes developed a rapport. Brown didn't acquiesce to Daugaard's charges of racial profiling—he still refuses to accept that his officers were prejudiced against black people. What he agreed to, instead, was a fundamental change to the way the officers working under him dealt with low-level drug dealing, drug possession, and prostitution. When he retired from the department three years ago, Daugaard gave him a box set of *The Wire* as a token of her respect.

Measuring recidivism is just one way to gauge the success of a police strategy. Evaluating overall crime rates is another. According to statistics published by the Seattle Police Department, crimes related to the drug trade declined sharply between 2011 and 2013, the most recent year for which data is available, with drug abuse violations falling from 1,475 to 1,247 and prostitution-related offenses dropping by more than half, from 443 to 206. Even so, these numbers don't tell the whole story. According to the University of Washington researchers, future studies will examine whether the program has improved the overall quality of life for people who have joined, and on whether it is less costly to taxpayers than the traditional approach.

Some cities are already so frustrated with the status quo that they aren't waiting around for these results. Santa Fe, New Mexico, has adopted its own version of LEAD, and Albany, New York, is expected to follow suit later this year. Seattle, meanwhile, has expanded the program to an area more than twice the size of its original confines. It's still too soon to know whether such policies would work on a national scale. But the early signs from Seattle suggest that *The Wire* may have been onto something.