



Cuckooing: Home Takeovers of Vulnerable Tenants

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Executive Summary

Home takeovers by drug gangs are a type of crime whereby a vulnerable individual is befriended by a drug dealer who then takes over the individual's home in order to conduct illegal drug activity. Home takeovers are also termed "cuckooing" in reference to the cuckoo bird that invades another bird's nest. The drug dealer rarely takes possession of a home by force but instead feeds on the vulnerabilities of the victim by supplying them with drugs in exchange for use of the home. The drug dealer will then bring in other gang members to help with the drug business. Gang members will exert and maintain control over the victim through violence.

While it is known that these situations occur in Canada, literature on the subject is limited. Most research on cuckooing has been done by homelessness groups from the United Kingdom and is quite useful in shedding light on this subject. In Ottawa, it is the experience of the police that drug gangs usually target crack cocaine addicts or recovering addicts (usually their own clients) but other groups that are vulnerable to cuckooing include those with mental health problems, the developmentally disabled, isolated elderly people, young people, and ex-homeless individuals. These groups are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of support systems and feelings of loneliness and isolation.

The victims of cuckooing are reluctant to inform others of their situation for a number of reasons. First, the victim may fear that police involvement will end the supply of drugs feeding their addiction, leading to withdrawal. Second, the victim may fear eviction from their residence. These situations are complex in that the victim is a "complicit victim"; while drug dealers have targeted them, they have also accepted drugs and are allowing illegal activity to go on in their homes, which typically results in eviction. Third, the gang inhabiting the home will resort to violence to prevent the victim from testifying against them or speaking to police.

In Ottawa, these situations occur most often in high-rise buildings and can create a general sense of insecurity, intimidation, cause an increase in property crime, and create noise nuisances. Police are usually notified of these situations through cooperative efforts with landlords or superintendents. Ottawa Police Service's Direct Action Response Team working together with the guns and gangs unit has used community-based policing methods to try to deter and prevent cuckooing. However, the police and groups in the U.K agree that dealing with these situations requires inter-agency cooperation and sharing of information, and for early recognition of vulnerable tenants so that they may receive support.

Introduction

This report has been commissioned to explore the existing literature pertaining to “cuckooing”, or the coercive home takeovers of vulnerable tenants by drug dealers and gang members. The use of the term “cuckoo” in this context is in reference to the cuckoo bird that takes over the nest of other birds. A vulnerable tenant is befriended by a drug dealer who then takes over the tenant's home and establishes illegal drug activity from within the home. Despite this simplistic definition, these situations are very complex both morally and legally – the tenant knowingly permits illegal drug activity within his or her home and is responsible for the behaviour of guests and yet he or she is also victim of a predatory drug gang. These victims have drug addiction and mental health issues or may have been previously homeless. These characteristics make them prime targets for drug gangs who manipulate tenants through the use of drugs and varying levels of violence.

While it is known that cuckooing occurs within Canada, literature on the subject is particularly limited. A 2009 Toronto Community Housing report alludes to the fact that within Toronto's public housing there exist “... vulnerable tenants whose homes had been taken over by drug dealers and pimps, or became crowded by homeless people” (Davis & Appleby, 2011). Similar situations occur in Vancouver's public housing and apartment takeovers have also been identified by police as a problem in Ottawa (Tomlinson, 2012; Palermo, 2012). However, the most comprehensive research on cuckooing has been conducted in the United Kingdom by projects and charities on homelessness.

These groups believe that cuckooing emerged in response to the successful efforts to rid Britain of crack houses (Ellery, 2006). Legislation introduced in 2004 gave new powers to social landlords to seek injunctions against unlawful uses of their premises and allowed the police to permanently close down crack houses after they were raided (City of Westminster). It has been argued the subsequent rise of cuckooing demonstrates that the success of this legislation in shutting down crack houses did not end a problem but simply displaced it, with dire consequences (Sankey, 2011). Drug gangs are now targeting people with mental health problems, the developmentally disabled, re-housed homeless people, people with drug abuse problems, vulnerable older or young people for apartment takeovers (Bellamy, 2012; Ellery, 2006). Homelessness charity Thames Reach reports that of their 1, 000 clients, they see over thirty cases of cuckooing a year (Thames Reach Noticeboard, 2007).

Drawing from work done in the U.K on cuckooing, and various other resources, this report seeks to answer the question: what are home takeovers, otherwise known as “cuckooing”? In order to provide a response, this literature review will explore the methods employed in a takeover, including how control of the tenant is obtained and maintained, the characteristics of the victims, the reluctance of victims to inform authorities of their situation, the impact of home takeovers on the community, how authorities are notified of a takeover, and what has been done to deter and prevent home takeovers.

Defining the Issue: What is Cuckooing? How do these Situations Occur?

In its simplest terms, cuckooing is a type of crime whereby a drug dealer befriends a vulnerable individual who lives on his or her own. The drug dealer then moves in, takes over the property, and turns it into a drug den (BBC Inside Out, 2008). In actuality, these situations are much more complex than this definition. Initially a drug dealer (usually of crack cocaine) will seek out vulnerable clients and offer him or her free drugs in return for use of the client's home to conduct a few drug deals. As the comfort level rises between the drug dealer and the tenant, the drug dealer will bring in several more gang members to conduct more transactions and to establish the drug business. At this point the gang has taken over the home entirely, controlling the phone line (if available), and is living in the home. According to one victim, “boundaries get crossed...these assets do get taken over...you'll find yourself sleeping the front room on the floor while people are using your bed...so you find yourself being completely moved out of your house and into one part of it” (Spine Television, 2012).

The drug dealers are predatory and manipulative; they hardly ever take over the home by force. Instead they feed on the vulnerabilities of the victim, usually their drug addiction. A victim describes the takeover in this way,

They've already bought their way in, they've come in with a smile... they've said they're going to do you a favour, you bought the line, you know it's your fault, you know you've let them in, it's not like they've kicked your door in and said right we've got to start serving up... it never happens like that. They come in as friends. They're going to look after you, they're going to make life a little bit better, you ain't gonna wake up sick every morning... this is how they get in. They're your friends. And you know they're not but they've got all the power. (Spine Television, 2012)

Case Study

In this case study from Britain, fifty-five year old Clarence Spencer has been a victim of cuckooing. He had always been able to maintain a job and a home but once his support system, his sister, left Britain to go back to Jamaica, his life began to fall apart. He turned to crack cocaine and drug dealers soon moved into his home, plying him with cocaine to feed his addiction and secure their position in his home. Clarence reports, "I ended up with seven dealers living in my house. There was prostitution, robbery, mugging, murder... all kinds of things were happening for them to get their money". Clarence ended up with an expensive crack habit and he felt that going to the police was not an option.

The police subsequently raided Clarence's home and he was made subject to an Anti-Social Behaviour Order. He lost his home and spent six months in a homeless shelter. Once he was completely clean of drugs, he moved into a shared home and has started to rebuild his life (BBC Inside Out, 2008).

Controlling the Victim

Once residency is established drug dealers then have a discreet location out of sight of police from which to conduct their drug business. At first control is exerted and maintained through quiet tactics such as pacifying victims using drugs. Once the high wears off and the victim wants the gang members to leave so that he or she may sleep or have privacy again, intimidation levels can escalate to the use of threats and violence (Palermo, 2012). Some incidents can take place over a long period of time and the intimidation can intensify to forcible confinement and forced sexual acts.

Victim Characteristics

The victims of cuckooing are vulnerable individuals that have drug and possibly mental health issues and are usually known to community services. They are often crack cocaine addicts or recovering crack cocaine addicts and are usually clients of the drug dealers that have taken over their home. These victims may lack the resources to sustain their drug habit and so the idea of free drugs from a drug dealer in exchange for housing can be alluring.

Some victims have their homes taken over by drug gangs because they lack support systems. These groups include the developmentally disabled, older people, young people, and the ex-homeless (Bellamy, 2012; Ellery, 2006; Robinson & Flemen, 2002).

Elderly individuals who live alone and generally do not have the support of family and friends may experience feelings of isolation and loneliness and look for friendship in any form, including drug dealers who take advantage of them. In one case from the U.K, a lonely, elderly man became a victim of cuckooing after moving into a new home and had to be relocated and given counseling,

Friends of friends came round, and after a while it was a crowd. They started using heroin at my house... They started stealing my things. With some people it was easy to say 'go away', but others threatened me and even started looking for things to steal from my flat. One guy [...] started to change all the rules in my flat, telling me who could and could not come back. He assaulted me. One day I refused to do what he said, and the next thing I knew I woke up in hospital. The doctor told me that I had had a violent overdose of heroin. I don't take heroin. I went home and found that I couldn't get in as all the locks had been changed. (Ellery, 2006)

Without support, drug gangs can easily exploit young people, especially those with mental health issues living independently for the first time, and the developmentally disabled. Again, drug dealers may be seen as a 'friend' and the victim may not even be aware of the drug activity going on in their own home or they may not understand that they are being taken advantage of (Bellamy, 2012; Ellery, 2006). 'Mate crime' or 'tricky friends' are terms that are used by some organizations to make it clear to victims with learning disabilities that cuckooing is when

... a bully pretends to be your friend when they really have a plan to take advantage by stealing from you, using your home for parties or for illegal activities like dealing drugs, storing stolen goods or prostitution, and abusing you physically, sexually and emotionally. (Bellamy, 2012)

Young people who are targeted by drug dealers can include those being housed independently for the first time and also former crown wards (Robinson & Flemen, 2002). Once they leave foster care, they receive little support and are vulnerable to the approaches of drug dealers (Ellery, 2006). They are especially at risk of homelessness or drug use, or failure to cope in unsupported tenancies because of their age, the technical difficulties of accessing housing, benefits, education and employment, and the issues surrounding their admission to foster care which likely still need resolving (Robinson & Flemen, 2002).

An ex-homeless individual may feel isolated and lonely allowing him or her to be easily befriended by a drug dealer. The victim may enjoy the attention and gifts (such as money and sex) he or she receives, perceive it as friendship and even enjoy the company (Thames Reach Noticeboard, 2007). In some instances, the victim may not even realize that their home is being used for drug dealing. Once they become aware of this and try to remove the gang, the situation can turn violent (Doward, 2010). For example, one ex-homeless individual was rehoused by homeless charity Thames Reach but with a history of alcoholism, he was targeted by crack dealers. He was befriended by a man and woman who asked if they could move into his apartment for a week. He consented and before long, the couple he trusted turned out to be drug dealers who then terrorized him and threatened him with violence when he asked them to leave (BBC Inside Out, 2008).

Often these vulnerable groups do not report their situations because they may find it difficult to identify appropriate sources of support and so they suffer in silence (Bellamy, 2012; Robinson & Flemen, 2002).

Reluctance to Inform Others

In most cases, the victim is afraid to talk to police or others about their situation and are unsure of what support is available for them (Robinson & Flemen, 2002). The reasons are manifold. First, it is not so much the fear of drug charges as their dependency on the crack cocaine that may prohibit the victim from speaking with police. Because the victim is being supplied with the crack that feeds their addiction, he or she may fear the withdrawal they will experience as a result of police interference.

Second, the victim may also fear eviction from their residence. In these situations the victim can be considered a "complicit victim", meaning that while they are a victim of targeting by drug dealers for the use of their residence, they have also taken payment in the form of drugs or other gifts and have knowledge of illegal business taking place in their homes which are grounds for eviction under normal circumstances.

Third, the gang inhabiting the victim's home is most often intimidating the tenant through violence. The gang will use whatever means necessary to maintain control over the victim so that they refrain from talking to or testifying for the police. This can mean physical and sexual violence to silence the tenant and threats of physical and sexual violence to children or other family members that also live in the home (Palermo, 2012).

These situations incur high levels of trauma, which need to be attended to in the aftermath of a home takeover and the removal of drug dealers. Victims require support for the abuses they have suffered and help with their drug addiction or relapse. In some instances, the victims must be relocated and perhaps enter a witness protection program. This is so that the victims will feel safe enough to provide testimony to police since police must rely on victim testimony to procure convictions of gang members from subsequent prosecutions.

Effects on the Community

In Ottawa, the majority of cuckooing occurs in high-rise apartment buildings. Police have encountered gang takeovers of apartments in many different areas of Ottawa in both public and private housing facilities.

There is very little information on the impact of cuckooing in high-rise apartment buildings on surrounding neighbours and the community but it is possible to see how the effects of home takeovers by gangs for illegal drug activity would be similar to, and typical of, how drug houses affect communities. These effects are magnified in close settings such as those in high-rise apartment buildings where tenants live in close quarters. Residents feel a general sense of insecurity and potentially notice an increase in property crime including break and enters, thefts, and general mischief (Edmonton Police Service, 2012). Nuisances such as loud partying and other noises, large numbers of people coming and going at all hours, and drug paraphernalia littering hallways can also be problematic (Thames Reach Noticeboard, 2007).

Notifying Authorities

Generally speaking, it is landlords and superintendents that play a primary role in notifying the police about home takeovers in their buildings. Rarely will tenants provide information to landlords about illegal activity in their building. Often there is a certain sense of comradery between tenants in high-rise buildings and neighbouring tenants can be reluctant to report their neighbour's troubles to either landlords or police because they fear that their neighbour will be evicted or that they or their neighbour may suffer retaliation at the hands of the drug dealers. However, landlords usually do not advocate for eviction, as they know that the tenant has been taken advantage of and they only want the criminal element out of their building.

Dealing with Cuckooing

Currently there are no standard practices set to handle or prevent situations that involve cuckooing. In Ottawa, Ottawa Police Service's Direct Action Response Team (DART) works actively to build rapport with landlords and superintendents to encourage and facilitate the sharing of information. This team operates in tandem with the guns and gangs unit of the Ottawa Police Service to provide a proactive street presence addressing gang-related crime. This relationship ensures the cooperation of landlords in contacting police when they become aware that drug gangs are taking advantage of a vulnerable tenant.

Detection and Deterrence

DART has taken a proactive, community-based policing approach attempt to detect and deter home takeovers in high-risk apartment buildings. This approach includes: conducting foot patrols by walking stairwells and halls, monitoring individuals with judicial release conditions, checking up on vulnerable tenants such as the elderly and recovering addicts, and encouraging law-abiding tenants to aid in identifying problem areas and suspicious activity (Palermo, 2012). DART recognizes that they are one part of a possible solution that also requires help from services in the community.

Prevention

It is also clear in the research from the U.K that inter-agency sharing of information and cooperation, and an increase in support services available to tenants is necessary to detect and prevent apartment takeovers. The Thames Reach project, a charity that helps homeless and vulnerable people (including those with mental health and drug issues) to find homes and build supportive relationship by providing temporary hostels and social housing projects, has found that partnering with police, local authorities, landlords, and Drug Action Teams is necessary to combat cuckooing (Thames Reach 2012; Thames Reach Noticeboard, 2007).

Ensuring that support services are available to tenants should be a priority for landlords and housing groups. Potentially vulnerable tenants need to be recognized before they are placed in social housing (Robinson & Flemen, 2002). In-depth interviews at the time of placement can aid in identifying the support needs of vulnerable tenants. This allows tenants that have drug addictions and mental health or other issues to be linked with support services such as local community groups or voluntary agencies early on and be housed in areas according to their needs (Robinson & Flemen, 2002). Without support, tenants can be targeted by dealers, evicted or ousted, and then end up on the street again (Ellery, 2006).

Conclusion

Drug gangs have found an inconspicuous method of conducting their illegal drug activity that involves preying on vulnerable individuals and taking over their homes. Most victims in Ottawa are crack cocaine addicts or recovering addicts that are targeted by their drug dealers, or 'befriended', and offered drugs in exchange for a place to continue drug operations. This presents a moral and legal dilemma for the tenant: they are a victim of the drug dealer but also involved in the drug gang's illegal activity. Furthermore, since the victim is usually receiving a supply of drugs from the dealers, they are afraid to go to the police or others for fear of being suspected of involvement in drug dealing, which could lead to their eviction. This reliance on drugs and reluctance to tell others forces the tenant to suffer in silence. Victims that do decide to inform their landlord or the police, or whose situation is revealed for them, will experience physical or sexual violence at the hands of the gang.

Research in the U.K has found that other vulnerable populations are also susceptible to cuckooing. Individuals with mental health issues, the elderly, young people, the developmentally disabled, and the ex-homeless can all be targeted. This is because they lack the support systems that can alleviate isolation and loneliness, and because they lack awareness of where to turn to when they need help. Police, service providers, landlords, and other community agencies must all be mobilized to detect and deter home takeovers from occurring. Since members of these groups may be unaware of the support that is available to them, landlords and service providers should work together to identify the potential support needs of vulnerable tenants in order to help them maintain independent living.

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