

**Rochester SACSI Research**  
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**Guns, Disputes and Drug Sales:**  
**Focus Groups at Monroe Correctional Facility**

**A. Introduction**

During the week of August 3, 2001 the SACSI research team conducted three focus groups with inmates in the Monroe County Correctional Facility. The groups discussed a wide range of topics but focused on the data on homicide, guns, disputes and drug house robberies. The purpose of this paper is to report those discussions. Conclusions and implications of the data will be developed in a separate working paper.

**B. Group Selection**

The Director of Substance Abuse Services at the Monroe Correctional Facility invited inmates to participate in the focus groups. The treatment director gave interested inmates a one-page summary of the project. No invitees refused to participate. Invitees all shared the experience of participating in substance abuse treatment programs either currently or in the recent past. They also had a range of experience with drugs including long-term use and drug selling. All participants were serving criminal sentences. They reported criminal records that ranged widely but included property, drug and violent offenses. All participants were serving criminal sentences of less than one year at the facility.

The three groups we composed as follows.

1. Older drug users. This group of 12 included 6 Black males, 4 White males and 2 Hispanics and ranged in age from 22 to late 40s.
2. Young drug sellers. This group of 9 included 6 Black males and 3 White males all between 17 and 25 years old.
3. Female drug users and sellers. This group included 11 Black women whose age ranged from 19 to early 50s.

The focus group meetings each last approximately 2 ½ hours and were held around a conference table in group meetings rooms. Soda and chips or donuts were served. Researchers kept copious notes of the discussion. The meeting began with a brief presentation by the researcher on the SACSI project and the homicide data. The data on homicide were discussed, including city comparisons, demographic data, causes, weapons and locations. The three types of homicide that have emerged from the analysis thus far were also reviewed. The discussions with the groups then focused on guns, dispute related homicide and drug houses.

### **C. A Note on Method**

Focus groups can provide a useful way of gaining factual information as well as the opinions and attitudes of the participants. Focus groups also permit consideration of the dynamics of the group and the impact of those dynamics on the information. We approached our groups by arguing that we needed to consult them as experts in an area where we had limited information. The presentation of data supported our requests for their expertise. We then followed a general list of areas to guide the inquiry and discussion.

Each of the groups provided rich data with participants willing to discuss matters in an apparently frank and forthcoming manner. No one refused to answer any particular question or to discuss any subject. Occasionally one participant would make a statement that seemed to others to be untruthful or an exaggeration. In such cases the group would routinely question and cajole the speaker into providing what was seen as more plausible answers.

Our groups were composed of inmates serving local sentences of less than one year in the county jail. Their views and opinions should be regarded as reflecting that set of experiences they carried to the discussion. This is clearly not a random sample of residents of their neighborhood. Participants' views are best seen as deriving from their own experiences and behavior and that of their friends or of others with which they are familiar or believe they are familiar.

### **D. General Themes Emerging from the Groups**

Before discussing the specific findings of the focus groups we will review six major themes that ran through the groups and seemed relevant to the discussion of nearly every topic. These themes were widely shared among the group members and often framed the discussion of particular points.

1. **Dangerous World.** The group members held a view that they lived in a very dangerous world. They often noted that anything they owned, which could be regarded as "nice," was subject to being stolen from them. They believed that they were likely to run into conflicts at any time and that many or most people in their neighborhoods had experienced or were experiencing serious beefs with others. Furthermore, they expressed beliefs that weapon carrying and violence were common in their neighborhoods

This view of the world as dangerous appeared to be supported by the group members' own personal experiences. All of the 32 participants said they knew someone who had been murdered. All but 4 (3 women and 1 man) knew someone who had been arrested for murder. Fourteen of 21 males and 3 of 11 females said they had been robbed of money or drugs. None reported the robberies to the police. All of the participants were in agreement that carrying weapons was common and that the reason for most people carrying was protection. That reason has been associated with high degrees of participation in street crime in other research.

2. **In the life.** A second general theme to emerge from the group discussions was that many participants viewed themselves and others as being absorbed in a fast criminal life style.

They believed there were benefits to the lifestyle including excitement, respect, money and friends. And they saw violence, jail and prison as the cost, or negative side of living that lifestyle. The older male group members seemed to believe that these costs now outweighed the benefits, but younger men and women did not hold that view.

3. **Fate.** A theme to emerge from the group discussions was the common view that the individual lives of the participants were directed by fate rather than conscious or deliberate choice. Many of the group members felt that their lives were not in their own control. Instead, they expressed the view that friends, family and neighborhood exerted powerful influences and that they were likely to continue in a life of crime and drugs. They reported the belief that chance encounters would pull them back into crime. Many participants seemed to see that the paths they were on were not healthy and were not likely to lead to success but they felt ambivalent, at best, about their prospects for changing those paths.
4. **Flash and Respect.** These two often interrelated ideas also figured prominently in the discussions. The participants spoke of flash as a sort of brassy style of presentation marked by bravado and such accoutrements as gold chains and expensive jackets and sneakers and in some cases, cars. Respect was the demand that someone be treated with respect or even fear in some cases. Excessive flash led to envy by young men and ultimately was seen as a way of not respecting other males. Too much flash is at the root of many conflicts and even some drug robberies. In those robberies, too much flash not only signaled a lot of money but also caused others to want to see someone put in their place. Claims of insufficient respect were at the heart of many disputes. Such disputes often occurred over seemingly trivial matters but raised underlying issues of respect. Participants reported that in some cases walking away from disputes would be perceived as disrespectful and would trigger a violent response.

The concept of respect also seemed relevant to the discussion of criminal justice sanctions. Participants viewed all sanctions as negative and undesirable. The strongest negative reaction, however, was to probation. Participants objected to probation officers working with police, and to home visits, and to being accountable for scheduled appointments. They generally found this demeaning but recognized the need for compliance in order to avoid other penalties.

5. **Endless Drug Demand.** The groups developed a theme in much of their conversation that suggested that much of criminal life is based on the apparent endless demand for drugs in the poor neighborhoods of Rochester. Members agreed that there was little competition for customers; there were plenty to go around: numerous drug houses could exist in close proximity to one another without reducing demand: and that drugs of differing quality were often sold suggesting demand limitation did not raise quality.
6. **Fear of the Police.** A final theme to emerge centered around the view that the police were generally effective at identifying drug houses and sellers and arresting them. The participants feared the police and believed the police would identify them as drug sellers and arrest them if they did not take some sort of evasive action. The common choice was to

change selling locations frequently. The group members believed police would eventually identify the locations and make undercover buys or use informants to do so.

In these discussions the participants were not indicating that they thought the police efforts were having an impact on overall drug use or sales but rather they believed the police were effective at recognizing and closing particular drug selling locations.

### **E. Reactions to the General Data**

All of the participants were surprised by the homicide data, particularly the high rate of homicide experienced by young minority men in the crescent area. Although they all seemed well aware that rates would be highest for their group, none seemed to anticipate the magnitude of the difference. The fact that that rate is 67 times the national average shocked all of the participants. The older men also seemed to find the figures depressing and appeared to believe that those homicide rates alone should convince others to change their lifestyles. But the younger males and the women did not share that deterrent value of the statistics. Members of these groups indicated that the homicide rates were simply the consequences of living a fast life- a risk taken by people who were involved in crime and drugs. The participants also expressed the idea that they did not feel they had the ability to make the decisions that would change their life and lead to lower homicide risks. The young men in particular argued that in their view chance and fate governed their lives. That is, the people they would run into and the situations they confronted determined the types of criminal behavior they would engage in, and also determined the risk being a homicide victim or offender.

The groups also reviewed the three types of homicide derived in this project from other analyses. Their discussion supported the view that the small number of innocent victim offenses and the greater number of disputes and drug rip-offs captured the major types of homicide events with which they were familiar.

### **E. The Discussion of Guns**

We began our discussion by focusing on guns since nearly 70% of Rochester homicides involved that choice of weapon.

**Extent of Gun Carrying.** In a discussion of the extent of weapon carrying, the groups all made very high estimates. They reported that everyone involved in the drug trade carried a gun or had ready access to one. They also indicated that guns have now spread out beyond the drug trade and that carrying was quite common for young men not necessarily connected with drugs. When asked how many out of 100 people on the street at 11 pm in crescent neighborhoods would be expected to be carry a gun, the groups estimates that 90-95% would, and they added that anyone not carrying would have easy access to one nearby. There was general agreement when one person explained, "in every group someone will be carrying a gun."

The women reported that gun carrying has become more common among women and that as many as 60% of women on those streets at that time could be expected to be carrying weapons. While

these estimates may seem high for men and women they may very well reflect the experiences and expectations of the focus group members.

Participants also discussed stashing guns. They indicated that it was common for gun carriers who might be going to a bar, or other closed-in setting, to leave their weapons at nearby houses with friends. The guns thus remained accessible but the carrier was protected in case of being stopped by the police.

**Reasons for Gun Carrying.** Participants also reported that the main reason for carrying a gun was "for protection." For the men that protection was from a general, non-specific threat. They felt a gun offered protection from robbery or unspecified beefs with other males that may explode into violence on the street. These respondents tended to view their environments as generally dangerous. One person stated that having a gun didn't mean "you were caught up in something (the drug trade or beefs)." A telling response followed: "Who do you know that don't have a beef or don't hustle?"

The women indicated that they and other women also carried guns for protection but that they were more likely to want protection from a specific person- usually another woman with whom they had a preexisting conflict.

Other research in Rochester by Terrence Thornberry provides general support for the material above. Thornberry reported very high levels of criminal involvement among youth who said they carried guns "for protection." Our respondents suggest the other side of the coin- high levels of carry guns for protection among those with high levels of criminal involvement.

**Where the Guns Come From.** One common view of this was that "guns just pop up." They are available everywhere and these group participants and others like them run across guns frequently. When asked about the sources of illegal guns the first and most frequent response was that they often were purchased out of corner stores. This answer was given by men and women from across the crescent area. Some guns sold this way were used guns and others were new in the box. Participants estimated that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all the stores were "dirty" in that they sold guns and/or drugs. They also reported that in order to buy a gun a person would need to be established as a criminal type in that neighborhood or be vouched for by someone the store operator had dealt with before. Several participants said they believed the police knew these shops were dirty and they saw this as evidence of police corruption.

A second commonly mentioned source of guns was "fiends." These heavy drug users would often come around and sell anything for drugs including guns. Suburban users were also mentioned as good sources of guns that were presumed to be reported stolen or were actually stolen from parents or neighbors.

Several women also reported that they knew of women who had purchased guns in Florida and Georgia for resale in Rochester. Working as "mules" for males, these women used the necessary drivers licenses to purchase large numbers of guns (37-50) and then returned them to Rochester in a number of separate cars. They believed that women doing this were less likely to be suspected than their male counterparts.

Maybe the most telling point made by the participants was that anyone who wanted a gun in their neighborhoods simply had to tell a friend or acquaintance that they needed a "tool. " They would, in short order, be taken care of or referred to someone who would get them a gun,

**Project Exile.** All of the participants knew of Project Exile. They had all seen the billboards. Some even quoted Johnny Cochran's commercial. Most described the program with a high degree of accuracy. About 1/5 reported knowing someone who had been sentenced under the program. Everyone thought the penalties were severe and some reported that ordinary sentences for guns were not severe enough. They said that there was fear of Exile among people with felony records. But most participants did not think the penalties were certain. Many knew cases they thought would have gone to Exile but did not. They, therefore, thought the program was generally arbitrary in its application. That was the basis for most people saying that it did not serve as a deterrent, although some felt that a relatively naïve criminal might be deterred. The most common position was that the streets were dangerous and protection was necessary and that outweighed the deterrent value of Project Exile in its influence on gun carrying by these and similar offenders.

**Other Gun Programs.** When asked whether they thought anything else might be done to reduce gun carrying the participants could not come up with other options. Some did suggest gun buybacks but also said that a considerable amount of money (in the area of \$500) would be needed for them to give up a gun. However, everyone also admitted that they would simply acquire another

## **F. The Discussion of Disputes**

The case reviews and other analyses have shown that disputes are at the heart of a large number of Rochester homicides. We discussed this problem with each of the groups.

**Frequency of Disputes.** All of the participants were familiar with disputes and arguments that they viewed as having the potential for becoming lethal. They argued that such disputes are common especially among young men. Most were also concerned about the ability of anyone, including themselves, to avoid such disputes. They noted that the potential for getting in potentially lethal disputes was a side effect of a life of hustling. As one young man noted, "Everyone is out there hustling, everyone is bumping heads."

Women also reported that disputes among men were common. Disputes among women are growing in frequency but are less likely to erupt unexpectedly. Disputes among women are more likely to involve some longer-term problem between two antagonists.

**Generational Differences and a Changing Climate.** Participants agreed that disputes were primarily a phenomenon among young men. Older males were less likely to take offense as

quickly as the young and were less likely to resort to lethal violence once offended. Younger men were seen as more envious of one another than older men were.

The general view, expressed in each group, was that many young men are out of control. They are quick to anger and likely to resort to lethal violence. Where in the past, physical fights would occur, today gun violence is more likely among these young men. One participant noted “the stickup kids are the worst.”

**Participants.** All young men seemed to be eligible candidates for these disputes. They could occur between friends or among complete strangers who happened to bump into one another. They seemed to be less frequent and less spontaneous among women.

The participants indicated that any dispute between young men could have the potential for violence. They did note, however, that some young men are more likely than others to get into disputes and to resort to serious violence. These young men have reputations for violence or being “out of control,” and they are often supported by friends and associates. A reputation as “out of control” is earned by repeated incidents of violence, especially in the presence of others. The participants also noted that, in many cases, these combatants are also believed to have serious criminal records that include violent crimes.

**Causes of Disputes.** Disputes arise out of many situations. Trying to leave prematurely with winnings in dice games, unsatisfactorily resolved deals over drugs, complementing another person’s girlfriend (“stepping to her”), insulting another person’s girlfriend, stealing another’s property or showing off one’s own possessions were all mentioned as proximate causes of disputes.

While none of these seem to be unusual events in the lives of young men each was discussed as triggering a heightened concern over respect. That concern was described as the main and most frequent cause of potentially lethal disputes. Throughout the discussion the focus was the view that the cause of disputes often lay in one party’s being embarrassed and the perception that they had been “disrespected” as in having their manhood, machismo or sense of power insulted.

**Dynamics of Disputes.** The participants distinguished between arguments that were resolved quickly and disputes that lasted over some period of time. Disputes begin with someone taking offense over some perceived insult. A fight may or may not ensue. A party may lose a fight and return with a gun. Even if one party simply chooses to walk away and not engage the other, it may be perceived as an insult and thus demand retaliation. Some participants spoke of disputes in which one party “tried to rock [another] to sleep” and then would come back with violence when the adversary least expected it. Other disputes were discussed in which hostilities would exist between two people but would break out in the open when a chance meeting would occur. In other disputes, friends and associates of the parties would egg them on until a confrontation was forced.

Although these disputes center on claims of respect and honor, these apparent virtues do not often seem to have a place in the resolution of the disputes. There seems to be no sense of the value of a fair fight or of a measured response. The insult of being disrespected seems so powerful and so personal that retaliation though overpowering means such as shooting, and through tactics such as

sneak attack, often results. Those tactics, however, do not appear to be seen by others as unfair or unmanly.

**Outsiders' Roles.** Participants indicated that outsiders often play important roles in disputes. The disputes are frequently widely known among friends of the involved parties and sometimes are well known in the neighborhood. They become known in three ways. Either the parties “tell others their business” or friends egg the parties on by spreading the word, or both of these occur. Either way it seemed that the most volatile disputes were ones that were known by friends and others in the neighborhood. The fact they are known seems to be both an effect and a cause of excitement that increases the pressure on parties to resolve the matter through violence.

**Gangs.** Almost all of the participants agreed that Rochester did not have a gang problem that resembles the way such problems are often portrayed on television. Rochester does not have large established gangs with complex organizational structures that recruit members into them. Instead, Rochester has many cohesive groups of young men who are friends who grew up together and hang around together and who engage in criminal conduct together. They collaborate in such crimes as robberies and drug sales and they provide the peer pressure that leads to the violent resolution of some disputes.

The women we met with also indicated that women are increasingly finding a leadership role in these quasi- criminal organizations. They indicated that, as males were getting arrested and imprisoned, women were playing a more active role, particularly in drug sales. The women would do usually work for men (often boyfriends) but they were increasing in importance in the enterprise.

One young male argued strongly that Rochester had significant gangs and pointed to his own involvement with the “Outlaws” in North East Rochester. He argued that the influence of this group spread across a defined territory and that the group functioned for him much as a family would.

**Possible Mediators.** Group participants argued that there are a variety of responses when people learn about ongoing disputes. In many cases friends and associates would egg parties on toward confrontation. In cases where the parties had reputations as highly violent, many others would distance themselves from the disputes, aware that serious problems were likely. In a few cases, however, older males would serve to temper disputes and encourage resolution without violence. These males were often themselves involved in criminal matters and would council disputants as to the possible negative consequences of violent resolution to conflicts. However, in cases, when these males were viewed as “still out there hustling,” they would not be respected as mediators.

The group also reported that there are others in the community who could play such a mediator role by virtue of the respect they command. These people were described as older males who were now successful in legitimate enterprises but who have past histories of significant criminal conduct including violence.



African American Ministers from neighborhood churches were also seen as potential mediators of disputes. The participants noted that this group was generally well respected. In some cases, some young men might not listen to the ministers but they would respect them enough to leave them alone. What seemed to matter was that potential mediators were adult males connected to the neighborhood and that they would spend time on the streets. Walking the streets and dealing openly with young men was critical to having the respect of people who might find themselves in disputes. Willie Lightfoot and Rev. Sam McCree were mentioned as examples of people who had filled that role.

### **G. The Discussion of Drug Houses and Drug House Robberies**

The case reviews and other analyses also show that a significant number of Rochester Homicides fall into the category of drug and drug house robbery/assassinations. We discussed this problem with each of the groups.

**What kinds of drug houses are there?** There are a wide variety of drug houses. A small number sell a variety of products including marijuana, crack and heroin. Most specialize. Marijuana houses are the least lucrative but most stable. Crack houses are the most lucrative but least stable.

There are also a variety of crack houses. There are “smoke houses” which rent space for smoking but may or may not sell drugs. The group participants had little regard for these places. They were unclean and unsafe, made little money and were mostly frequented by fiends.

There are also “open houses.” These houses have no external security. Customers simply walk in to buy drugs. They are the easiest to open but are regarded as unsafe from robbers and from the police. There are also “secure houses” in which transactions occur through a slot in the door or a slightly opened window. These are regarded as the safest. There are fiends who work as carpenters and specialize in securing the premises of these houses. That includes bolting the doors and windows on the first floor and cutting slots or limiting window openings. Participants estimate that about half of all crack houses are open houses and half are secure. Some operate as open house during the day but limit entry in the nighttime.

There are also houses that specialize in selling “weight” (large amounts) and others that do retail. Retail houses are regarded as more dangerous.

**How many are there?** The group participants all agreed that their neighborhoods supported a large number of drug houses. It was not unusual to have four or five houses on some streets particularly in more run down neighborhoods. Each of these houses would be making money. Big dealers would tolerate small dealers in their immediate vicinity because the demand was large enough. Big dealers would tend not to tolerate others if their business got too large and it started cutting into profits.

**Why do sellers pick some houses?** The participants reported that drug dealers selected properties for a variety of reasons. Run down neighborhoods were seen as desirable for two reasons: 1) they

have a ready supply of fiends and prostitutes as customers and 2) the dealers feel that neighbors will not oppose their presence and are less likely to call the police than in better neighborhoods. In better neighborhoods opposition would lead to police intervention more quickly than in bad neighborhoods.

Participants also discussed several other criteria. One important issue involved selecting settings where the volume of customers would not be obvious. Some said sellers prefer side streets rather than main streets so they can monitor traffic carefully and so that the volume of traffic coming to the house wasn't obvious from main roads. They also said that properties with paths through the back yard, where customers would not be seen, were desirable.

Group members also discussed features of the houses that provided safety. The same features were viewed as providing safety from robbers and from the police. Second floor locations were seen as desirable, especially if the first floor could be boarded up to limit entry. Additional boarding up of second floor entries and easy access windows was also desirable. Little lighting was preferred. That disguised the volume of traffic but did increase the danger from robbers.

Participants also indicated that an area where the police had recently closed a drug house would be seen as a desirable location. Those areas already had a built in customer base and pent up demand.

**Why do buyers pick some houses?** The primary criterion used to select a location to buy drugs is the quality of drugs for sale. Quality apparently varies significantly from location to location and even over time at the same location. Among drug users the word gets out about where the best quality is and that becomes the main criteria for selection of a retail outlet. Quality may change frequently so there is an active effort to locate and buy the best drugs. There seemed to be little sense of customer loyalty.

Beyond quality, buyers often have interests that seem at odds with the interests of sellers. Many buyers prefer locations they regard as safe. That may mean good lighting and no winding paths to a darkened back door. They prefer easy access to clear and open streets. Buyers favor areas where they have minimal fear of being ripped off from fiends who are waiting in nearby bushes and alleys to rob them of money and drugs. Fiends, however, have little regard for safety and will buy anywhere they can.

Focus group participants also reported that some buyers will also select a drug house by the reputation of its proprietor. Sellers with reputations for violence or being out of control will be avoided by many, except of course, not by those regarded as fiends.

**Drug House Operations.** In their discussion the participants made it clear that the operations of drug houses ranged greatly. Below, however, are some generally agreed upon points.

1. **Customer Base.** Most crack houses (secure or open) will have a customer base of approximately 50 –100 customers. As discussed below these numbers may increase at certain times.

The vast majority of customers (85-90%) will be from the neighborhood immediately surrounding the crack house. Only a small group is not from the neighborhood and a much smaller portion (5%) is believed to be suburban white buyers.

Those white suburban buyers are prized by sellers because they buy in weight, often spending \$3-6 hundred dollars a day. As such they are protected from fiends who might rob them going in or out of the drug house.

White suburban looking customers will not automatically be sold to. They will need to be vouched for and will often need to establish themselves as legitimate customers by smoking crack in the sellers presence and or by securing the services of a crack house prostitute.

Participants said that about 40% of customers were more or less casual drug users who held jobs and pursued a range of other interests. About 60% of customers could be characterized as “fiends.” Fiends are heavy drug users whose life revolves around getting and using drugs. A small group, perhaps 10% were described by some as “crack-heads.” These people were extreme fiends and had little or nothing in their life besides the pursuit of crack.

2. **Drug Supply.** Participants reported that there seemed to be no limit to the demand for drugs but that supply was often a problem. At times good quality drugs could be obtained and at times lower quality was all that was available. A small number of drug houses would close rather than sell inferior product but most would not. At times the supply would run out entirely and houses would close until more drugs became available.
3. **Pricing.** Drug prices do not seem to vary with supply. With constant demand, drug supplies often run out at particular locations. Customers are told approximately when drugs will be available. These temporary shortages do not affect price.
4. **Hours of Operation.** Many drug houses are open around the clock (24-7) until they run out of drugs. Some drug houses are open more limited hours. These are usually houses that sell weight or sell only to a select group of acquaintances. They tell their customers their hours of operation. They close in an effort to control the volume of traffic that approaches the house. Those sellers want to want to avoid calling too much attention to themselves. The most lucrative hours of operation are from 9 pm to 3am.
5. **Interior Design.** Group members described a range of interior layouts for drug houses. These depended greatly on the type of house. In some cases drugs were sold from fully furnished homes. For the most serious enterprises, however, sellers preferred minimalism in interior design. “A chair and a gun” was all that a “good drug house” should have in it according to one respondent. The explanation for this was that other accoutrements diverted attention from the main task and thus created opportunities for the police and for robbers. Business oriented sellers preferred to stay focused on the business.

6. **Security.** All drug houses have guns in them. Armed sellers are the principle form of security in most locations. Open drug houses will have no other security. In open houses guns will be readily at hand whenever anyone approaches the house. Secure houses will have physical barriers preventing speedy entry. Pit bulls were also mentioned as common in secure houses. Customers are discouraged from bringing guns with them to drug houses. Sellers will usually see entering an open drug house with a gun as a threat.
7. **Personnel.** Here too there was variation according to the type of house. Some houses were operated by as few as two persons. Open houses with two sellers were considered dangerous. Appropriate staffing of an active house was considered to be between four and six. Of those, two would work in the house managing the sales. One or two would be on the street in front and the same number in the rear yard of the house. These workers would provide security against fiends robbing customers on their way in or out, they would watch for signs of surveillance by police, and they would steer prospective customers to the house.
8. **Gross Revenues.** Reports of revenues varied somewhat. Revenues of \$1000 between 9pm and 3am were considered good for a busy house. Others reported that a “good house” could produce \$4000-\$5000 in income a day when it was busy and had good drugs.

**Drug Houses and the Police.** The discussions with the focus groups indicated that drug sellers are very concerned about detection by the police and about subsequent arrest. In fact, the participants agreed that the police were very likely to identify any drug house and close it through arrests. Their view on this was so strong that it included the belief that drug houses only stay open as long as the police allow them to. Participants believed that drug houses were very likely to be reported to police by neighbors. They indicated that sellers were constantly concerned that too much traffic and activity by customers would bring police surveillance. They also viewed the police as very efficient and effective at making undercover drug buys or using “rats” to make buys on their behalf. This contributed to a great mistrust of all unknown customers.

Drug sellers’ opinions that the police are very effective also influence the way drugs are sold. Sellers believe that police response to an active drug house is almost inevitable. They respond to this belief by moving drug houses frequently within the same neighborhood. Active drug houses may typically be open only a month or six weeks in a location before moving to a new nearby location. Sellers thus try to keep their local customer base while avoiding arrest.

**The Natural History of a Drug House.** Focus group participants described the operation of a drug house as a process influenced by a variety of external factors. Their description can be summarized as a series of steps or stages that a house goes through.

1. **Opening.** Drug houses open fairly quietly with sales to people the sellers know personally and then to people who are vouched for by friends and acquaintances.
2. **Good Drugs.** New houses often have the best quality drugs. That helps attract customers. Houses may also offer free samples or two-for-one deals so customers spread the word to others. Such promotions are regarded as especially beneficial with white, suburban customers who can bring in large volumes of business.
3. **Control Efforts.** “Smart sellers” will make real efforts to manage their business. They will worry about the level of traffic on the street, where people park and the volume of customers coming to the door. They will attempt to tell customers where and where not to park and they will encourage customers to exit the area quickly. Some will close during the day to avoid looking too busy.
4. **“Poppin.”** Word will spread in the neighborhood if the drugs from a house are of good quality. With that, a house will start “poppin,” that is it will become very active or “hot.” New and unknown customers will come to the house and fiends will constantly be around. The house will not be able to close for certain hours and the street will be “jammed” with drive-up and walk-up traffic.
5. **Loss of Control.** “Smart sellers” will see a poppin house, or a house that gets hot, as increasingly difficult to control. They will see the house as an increasingly risky enterprise because they feel more vulnerable to robbers and to the police. But they will also like the increased revenues resulting from being a hot house.
6. **Response.** The perceived increase in risk will prompt many sellers to respond. Some will respond by closing the house and opening a new one down the street in an effort to maintain the same customer base. Others will hire young and inexperienced sellers to man the house while the original sellers open a second location. They thus transfer the risks to the novice employees.

Group members also reported that, in some cases, landlords assist in moving drug houses. Several participants reported knowing of cases where landlords had been informed by the local NET office or city officials that their property was suspected of being used to sell drugs. Landlords then informed the drug sellers of this and assisted them in relocating to another property owned by the same landlord. In some cases this was repeated several times.

**The Dynamics of Drug House Robberies.** The focus groups also discussed the problem of drug house robberies directly. All of the members were familiar with locations that had been robbed. All of the young men and 5 of the 11 women said they had been in houses during a robbery.

The group members regard drug house robberies as very dangerous, high-risk activity for both the “spot robbers” and their victims. The obvious presence of a lot of guns makes these robberies very volatile. They also reported that most drug house robberies are highly organized activities, usually committed by teams of four or more robbers who are often hooded and heavily armed.

The participants reported that robberies were most likely to occur at houses that were “hot” at the time. These places were easily identified by “spot robbers” and were likely to yield significant quantities of drugs and money. Sellers who openly displayed wealth (flossing) were also seen as likely candidates for robbery.

Spot robbers have several means of identifying targets. They may know locations from their own drug purchases or that of friends, they may follow “flossing” sellers, and they will also use fiends to tell them where the hottest houses in a neighborhood are.

Once a possible robbery target is identified, spot robbers will often study the location closely. They may purchase drugs there themselves or have female accomplices purchase drugs and even smoke in the house while they case it for the robbery. Secure houses that cannot be easily entered may discourage robbers.

The robbery itself is sudden, quick and organized. Most robberies do not involve assaults or shootings but all have a high potential to. The group indicated that they believed that robbers that are not masked are more likely commit homicide in the course of the robbery or that homicide might result if victim’s were reluctant to give up the money and drugs.