

**Former Dealer Focus Group:
Gaining Perspectives about the Best Way to Approach
and Engage Drug Dealers**

April 2014

Working Paper #2014-14



Pedro Vazquez
Research Assistant
pov7221@rit.edu

John Klofas, Ph.D.
Director
(585) 475-6386
jmkgcj@rit.edu

Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology

Overview

Rochester Drug Free Streets Initiative (RDFSI, also known as the INSPIRE Initiative standing for **I**nvested **N**eighbors **S**eeking **P**rogress, **I**nspiration, **R**estoration, & **E**mpowerment), held a focus group in October 2013 with former drug dealers. The objective of the meeting was to obtain information on the best way to approach and engage active dealers with service providers and a restorative community approach. The focus group included two former dealers, a RDFSI staff member (Community Engagement Specialist), and a Pathways to Peace staff member. The RDFSI used this focus group to help build on strategies to approach and engage dealers in the Conkey and Clifford Avenue neighborhood in Rochester, NY.

According to its staff members, the Rochester Drug Free Streets Initiative (RDFSI) is dedicated to educating and advocating for a systemic change in dealing with low-level open-air drug markets in Rochester, New York. They acknowledge that open-air marijuana markets have plagued residential neighborhoods in the City of Rochester, impacting the quality of life and health of residents in these communities. These markets increase the perception and fear of violence, hinder the development of the community, and increase stress amongst residents. The RDFSI coalition is committed to improving the quality of life in residential neighborhoods that have been affected by open-air drug sales.

Introduction

The Rochester Drug Free Streets Initiative (RDFSI), also known as INSPIRE to residents, held a focus group with two former dealers on October 17, 2013. The meeting was conducted as part of the RDFSI's information-gathering session on the best ways to approach and engage dealers in the restorative components of the program, including service provision to assist them

in stopping to sell drugs. Participants provided information in group discussion. The RDFSI staff member informed participants that their discussion would be recorded and then were provided consent forms. The form clarified the intent for the recording and its further use. All participants, including staff members, signed the consent form, which allowed RDFSI to record the discussion. The participants were also given an explanation of RDFSI and what the initiative is trying to organize in the Conkey and Clifford Ave. neighborhood.

The discussion was designed to gather information from former dealers in regard to the following outcomes:

1. To understand better ways to *approach* drug dealers who are selling on the street corners.
2. To understand better ways to *engage* drug dealers who are selling drugs on street corners.
3. To understand individuals' reasons for selling.
4. To understand dealers' reasons for involvement in the drug game and reasons for leaving the drug game.

The focus group started with an ice breaker question, followed by a question about their personal experiences as drug dealers, and it finished with questions about whether things were different for them now than they were when they were selling. Each former dealer had the opportunity to answer each question. This paper is a summary of the overall outcome of the focus group, using the recording provided by RDFSI and my observations of the focus group. This paper concludes with my recommendations.

Participant Demographics

As stated above, only two former dealers took part in the focus group. One former dealer was 28 years old; the other did not state her exact age but stated she was a teen. Both were African-American and lived in the inner-city of Rochester. Both former dealers were employed

with community outreach organizations and had identified goals for their lives. Both former dealers have been involved in the criminal justice system.

Outcome of the Focus Group Questions

Purpose: To understand the reasoning for selling

What's your story?

Each former dealer was asked to share their life story and how they got involved in dealing drugs. To break the ice, the Pathways to Peace staff member started the discussion by informing the former dealers about his life story. The following details the stories of the two former drug dealers, as this was the focus of the group. For consistency and anonymity, each participant will be indicated by a number: "Former Dealer 1" and "Former Dealer 2".

Former Dealer 1 grew up in the area RDFS is targeting their approach. Before getting involved with selling drugs, he attended a private school and went to church with his family. He acknowledged that his family was known to be part of the drug game. His father was known as the biggest drug dealer in the in the area he grew up in. Growing up, he felt he had to involve himself in the game (dealing drugs) to get his father's attention. Therefore, by the age of 12, he found himself selling drugs with his friends, starting with marijuana. He stated that due to the money earned from selling he was able to buy a house with some of his friends in their teenage years. Once he and his friends got the house, they started selling out of the house. The former dealer said, "Nowadays dealers do not make money out their homes like me and friends did back then."

Former Dealer 2 also got involved with the drug game because of family members. Her father was a one of the biggest drug dealers on the west side of the City of Rochester. After

realizing that her father was making money, she would steal some money from him to buy her own marijuana to smoke. She stated that they were poor, and, growing up, she had to fight a lot because other people would bully her and her siblings. She got tired of being poor and not having anything and further said, "Once you get tired, you do whatever." She had to find a way to make money so she could look better and not get into fights due to looking poor. She ended up stealing drugs and started selling to make money for herself. She never pictured herself selling marijuana, but from watching other family members, she felt she could do it as well. Once she started getting money from selling, she did not want to stop. After a while of selling marijuana, she got tired of selling and started robbing people.

After selling marijuana for a while, Former Dealer 1 and his friends graduated to selling crack. Soon, they found an addict to help them cook 62 ounces of crack. Due to selling crack, the former dealer informed the group that by the age of 16 or 17 he was making \$5,000 a day. The game of dealing drugs gave this former dealer recognition from others in his area. His father ended up going to prison for nine years for dealing drugs. The focus group participant stated that he was on probation for other issues he had with the justice system. He was involved with gangs, distribution of drugs, and guns. He had been arrested by law enforcement numerous times when dealing drugs. Being around his father who sold drugs and other family member who sold drugs, he concluded that selling drugs was the family business. He felt that he could overcome the police and the F.B.I. because he saw himself as a perfectionist and could be like the big-time drug dealers on T.V.

Former Dealer 2 informed the group that once she started robbing people, she noticed that she was getting more money doing that than from selling drugs. She stated that the reason she started robbing people was out of anger she had towards her mother. She ended up getting

other friends who also liked to rob people, and they would all go down to the University of Rochester at night and steal from people's cars. She ended up getting arrested because she stole from an undercover police car. Being a teen, she was sent to a detention center. After a few months there, she was sent to another detention center. While there, she struggled to get money to buy food, but she stated that because of being the youngest person there, others helped her out. After serving some of her time, she was afraid to go back home because of her mother's drug addiction issues. She also felt that no one cared about her because she did not get any letters or money from her loved ones. She got out and ended up robbing an older lady.

Questions Regarding Personal Experience: Getting in and Leaving the Drug Game

What got you into the game?

Former Dealer 1's father was the major influence and reason he got into dealing drugs. Not only was his father one of his influences, but the money and the attention he was receiving from others in the area had played a major role in why he sold drugs. The participant informed the group that getting involved with the drug game was also a cry out for attention from his father. Former Dealer 2 stated that she already had family members who were involved in the drug game and a mother who was addicted to drugs. Being poor and not having anything were the prevalent motivators for her selling drugs; for the same reason, she began robbing people to make money.

What kept you in the game?

Both participants stated that the money was the key motivator to keep selling drugs. However, Former Dealer 1 also felt that the attention also kept him in the game. He was able to

get into nightclubs with his older friends and was able to drink alcohol underage. Former Dealer 2 also added that her mother's addiction to drugs and her father being in prison also had played a part, being that they were not there to support her.

What pushed you to change?

Both participants stated that being arrested and then incarcerated helped push them to change. Former Dealer 1 was arrested and sentenced to six years in state prison. Going to prison is what helped push him to change his life, as well as his children that he stated he had while being involved in the drug market. According to Former Dealer 2, she got tired of looking at four walls all day in detention. She realized that she did not want to be incarcerated her whole life. Obtaining employment after being incarcerated was another motivator that helped her change.

Where were you five years ago, and where do you see yourself five years from now?

Former Dealer 1 explained that five year ago, he was being transferred from one prison to other and had 8 months left to serve. While in prison, he obtained his GED, associate's degree, and his license to minister. He felt as if he was on fire while in prison. He said, "I could not wait to get out and change the world." Since he had been through so much in his young life and was around all different types of individuals in prison—many of whom would never get the chance to go back to their communities to make a change—he felt he had all the weight on his shoulders to do the right thing when he got out.

He also informed the group that people think that individuals in prison learn how to become better criminals, but he stated this is not the case. Individuals in prison pushed him to do positive things. While in prison, he wrote down short-term and long-term goals for when he got out. Due to things that happened to him in his life, he felt that it was time for him to help others.

While in prison, he was told that he will never be able to run a non-profit or work with children because of his criminal record. He is proud now because he did what they said he could not do. He is now running his own non-profit organization and working with an organization that works closely with people in the community, which is something he loves.

Five years from now, he sees himself being elected as an official for the city. He wants to make a change so that his children and other children can live better lives. He talked about how dealers today do not respect the police like his group did back in the day. He also hoped that if the government legalized marijuana it would have an impact on crime.

Former Dealer 2 stated that five years ago, she was still locked up. She was also getting into problems with other individuals and law enforcement. Five years from now, she stated that she does not know where she will be. One goal that she had was to become a motivational speaker. For now, her short-term goal is to complete Job Corps and to stop smoking weed. She wants to get involved with a construction trade through Job Corps. She stated that someone told her that she could not be a motivational speaker because she smokes weed. In her past ways, she would have gotten mad, but now she feels that no one can stop her from building herself.

If Things Were Done Differently: To understand better ways to approach drug dealers who are selling on the street corners and to understand better ways to engage drug dealers who are selling drugs on the street corner.

Could anyone have said/done something to get you out of the game?

Former Dealer 1 explained that he may have gotten out of the game if someone said they had a job for him and was persistent about it as well. Former Dealer 2 felt that only someone offering a higher paying job would have gotten her out the game. She stated that a job is the only thing that would have opened her eyes while selling. She elaborated after being asked that she still would have given everything up for a job that required her to follow rules.

What advice do you have about engaging young people?

Being involved with community outreach, Former Dealer 1 has regularly engaged young people and others in the community. He suggested having cookouts in the community to give information out to members in the community. Former Dealer 2 suggested approaching the “hard” person in the group and “putting a bug in his/her ear” about the program. She went on to say that if she was trying to engage someone, she would inform the dealer about her own life story and how she has changed. Furthermore, she will let the individual know the opportunities that are available and be persistent with the dealer about the program.

The discussion then shifted to outreach methods. As stated before, when doing outreach, the individual conducting the outreach with dealers has to be consistent with the dealers on the street. The former dealers informed the group that most dealers are looking for a job and really do not want to be selling. The former dealers stated that the person conducting outreach with dealers on the street should invite them somewhere out of the area. By getting the individuals out the area of where they sell, they are no longer in their comfort zone. Former Dealer 1 stated that when he does outreach, his goal is to identify the “big timer” of the group. By doing this, it is possible that others in the group to follow him if he changes. He also stated that successful outreach occurs when there is a group of two or more doing outreach, and it is not successful if only one person is doing outreach. They also talked about “the power of one,” which means that it only takes one person to change to make a difference in the community.

Researcher’s Observations

The focus group was conducted in a meeting room with food for participants. I noticed that the two former dealers who took part were delighted in telling their stories because it made

them feel their experiences were important and valuable. The staff members made sure to keep the focus on them and made the participants feel comfortable by telling their own stories as well. Staff members also complimented the participants on their success.

Even though some of the questions that were asked by staff were beneficial for the project, I noticed that not every planned question was asked. Most of the questions asked the former dealers why they got involved in the game. Only three questions were focused on approaching and engaging drug dealers. It took 41 minutes for the focus to get on track and obtain the information the staff was actually looking for. It felt like it was unfocused and not structured correctly, but the dealers answered all the questions when asked about their stories. By the end of the focus group, the staff members as well as the dealers got off the key subject. Nonetheless, valuable information, as discussed above, was obtained.

Recommendations

The first and most obvious recommendation is to get more former dealers involved in the focus group. By having more dealers, the staff members can gain more information from a wider variety of perspectives. Having both former dealers who have been incarcerated as well as former dealers who have not would be beneficial, as both of these participants felt much of their personal change occurred while in prison or detention.

The second recommendation is that because staff members asked broad questions that overlapped with each other, the dealers essentially answered every question when answering the first question, "What is your story?" Questions should have been tailored to the information they wanted to obtain and not so much on the participants' backgrounds. Third, there should be an ordered process for the staff member who is running the discussion. The questions should be

asked in order from most important to least important. Overall, the questions should be structured to get at the heart of the information that is being sought.

Conclusion

Even with minor flaws, the focus group helped RDFSİ members obtain some important information on how to approach and engage drug dealers in the Conkey and Clifford neighborhood, even when they got off the main subject. They learned that consistency and offering employment opportunities are the most important things to help dealers stop dealing. They learned that incarceration was a primary motivator for change for these particular individuals and that they started dealing largely due to family influences and wanting or needing money. Overall, the former dealer focus group benefitted RDFSİ in constructing their outreach work with active dealers.