The influence of drug activity on crime rates is independent of a neighborhood's stability and socioeconomic status, according to a recent UCI study.

"Communities with narcotics trafficking bring in serious, high-rate offenders, whose activities spill over into surrounding neighborhoods," said lead author Christopher Contreras, a doctoral student in criminology, law & society. "Residential stability and high socioeconomic status do not necessarily buffer [neighborhood] blocks against an increase in robberies and burglaries."

The findings are based on an analysis of 2010-2014 crime and census data from a heavily suburban area in Miami-Dade County with an average annual household income of $74,000 and 72.5 percent home ownership. During this time, the county was in the grip of a heroin epidemic driven largely by demand, since opioids were no longer easily accessible by prescription due to a crackdown by law enforcement and healthcare task forces on "pill mills."

With the aid of mobile devices, dealers no longer have to operate out of a fixed location. Drug markets are fluid, with business being conducted in public places such as fast-food restaurant parking lots. "When police put pressure on one area, drug activity is displaced to somewhere else, along with higher crime," Contreras said.

"Policymakers should not only address the issue through stronger law enforcement to get the supply of illegal narcotics off the streets, but also address the growing demand for opioids." John Hipp, professor of criminology, law & society at UCI, is co-author of the study, which appears online in the journal Justice Quarterly.


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