

Police Drug Diversion in England: Reducing punishment, or widening the net?

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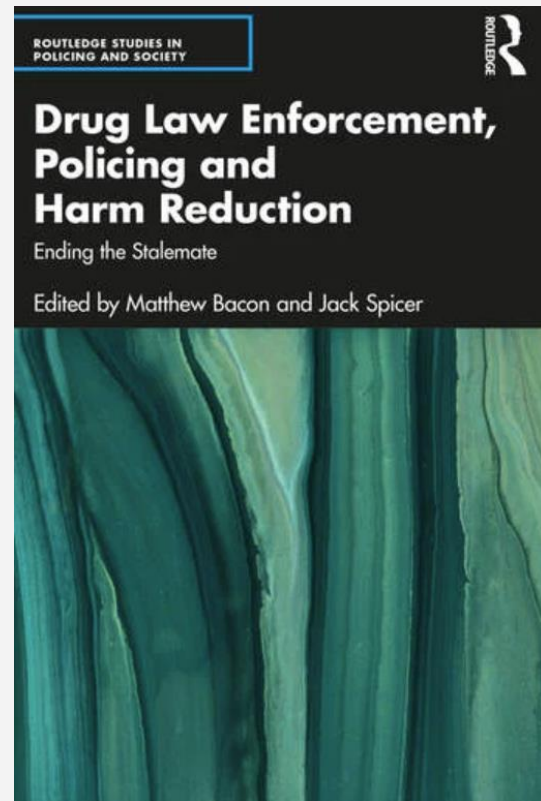
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This presentation

- Police drug diversion (PDD) as potential 'police harm reduction'.
- Dangers of diversion:
 - Net-widening?
 - Mesh-thinning?
- Who gets policed for drugs?
- Who gets diverted?

Police harm reduction

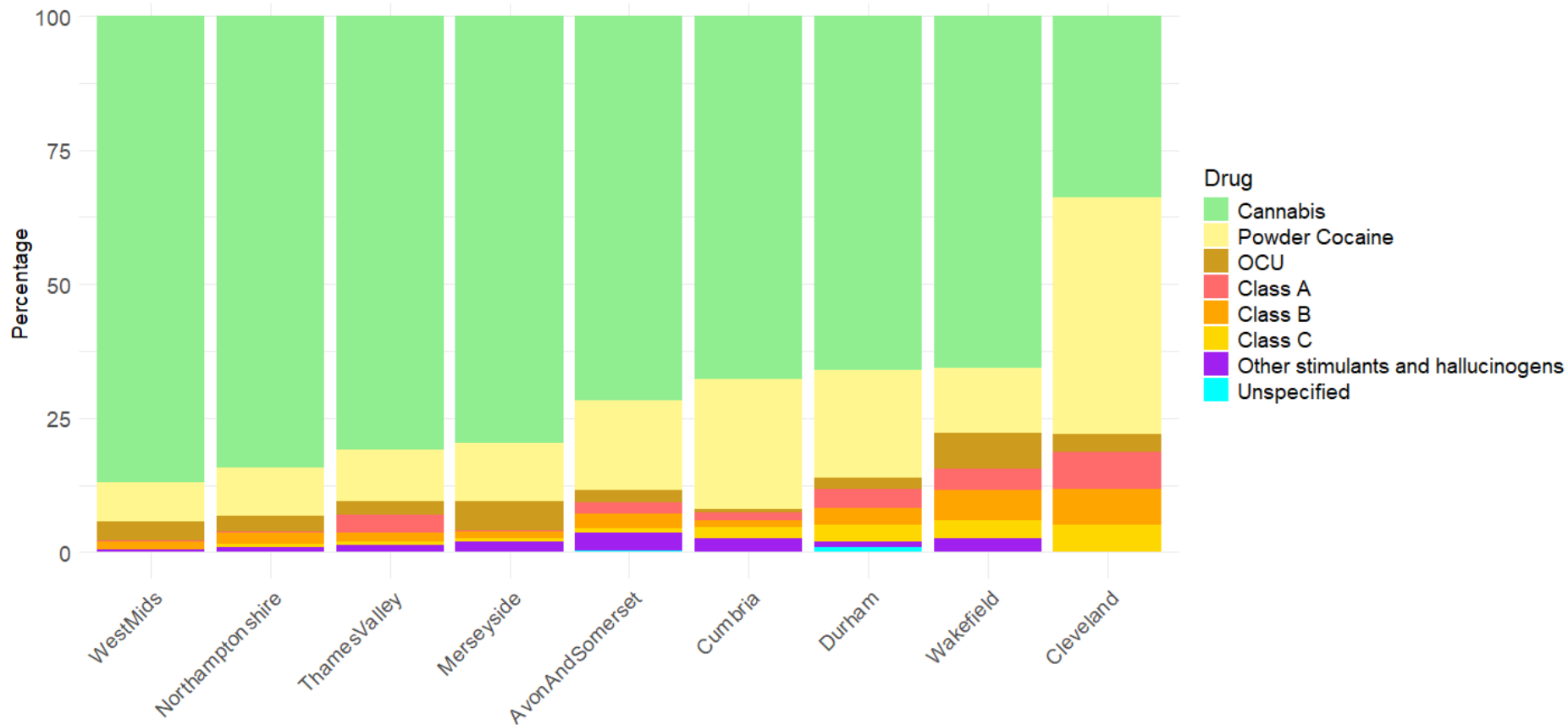
- Drug harm reduction:
 - Harms related to drug use can be reduced, even as drug use continues.
- Police harm reduction:
 - Harms related to policing can be reduced, even as policing continues.
- See collection edited by Matthew Bacon and Jack Spicer.



Police-led drug diversion (PDD) in England (UK)

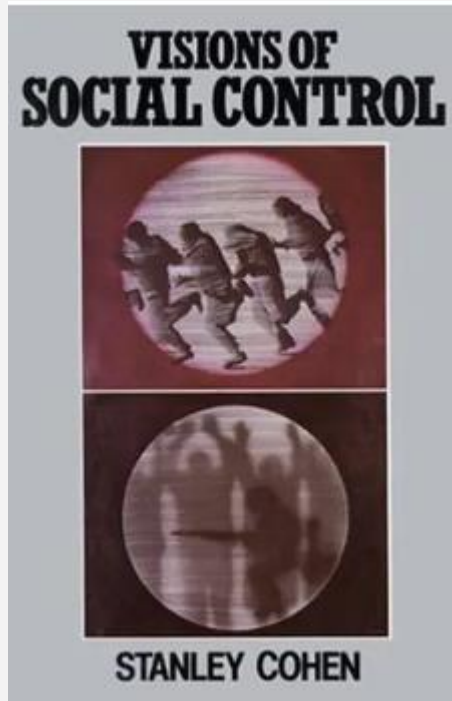
- Targets people who are caught in possession of controlled drugs
 - And related offences (in some police areas), including theft, assault, and criminal damage.
- Deliberately avoids criminalisation
 - No punishment, no criminal record.
- Diverts people towards:
 - One-off drug educational sessions, or...
 - Individually tailored one-to-one support.
- Police practice is highly variable:
 - E.g. consequence for non-completion range from no further action (unless caught again) to prosecution for original offence.
 - E.g. types of drug possessed...

Drug that led to a diversion by police force (2021/22)

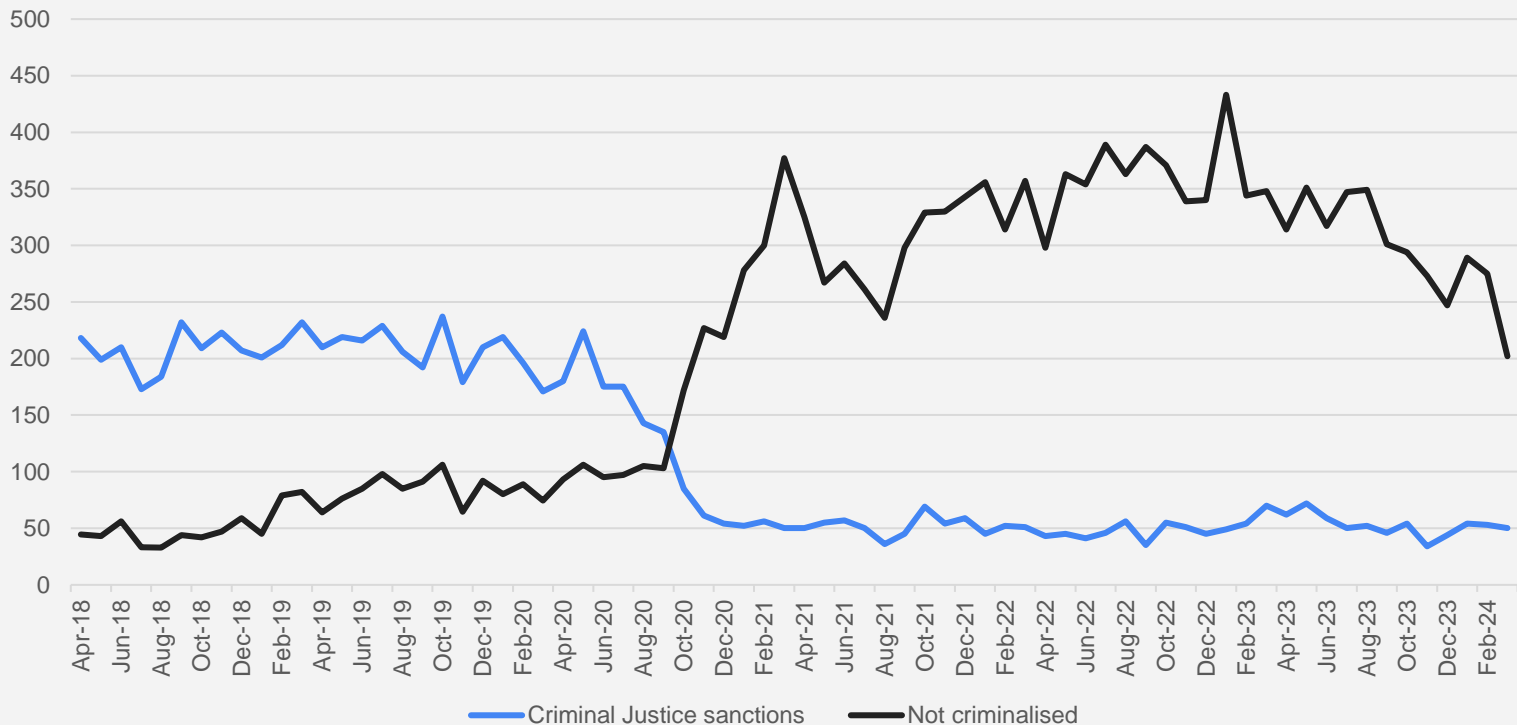


Stan Cohen's warnings

- Cohen warned that 'alternatives' to incarceration often lead to...
- "Net-widening":
 - More people get caught up in the net of social control.
- "Mesh-thinning"
 - It gets harder for people get out of the net of social control, as more conditions are imposed on them.



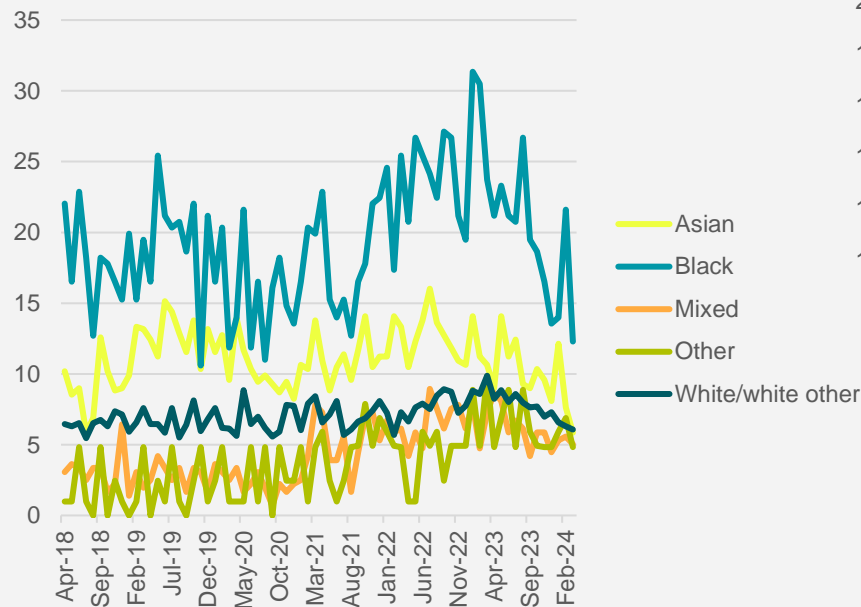
Monthly use of sanction for drug possession in West Midlands, 2018-2024



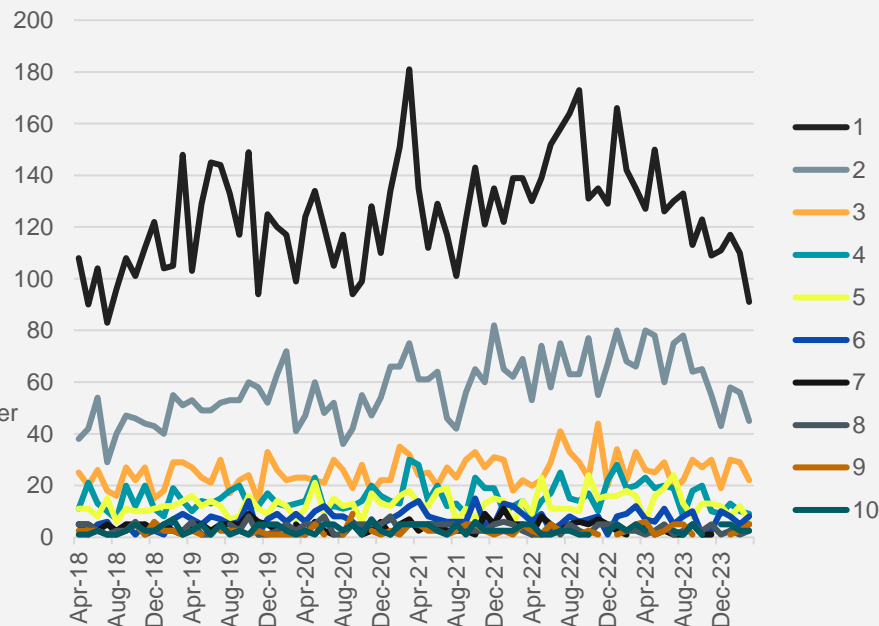
Who gets police for drugs (data from West Midlands)

Drug possession offences by ethnicity...

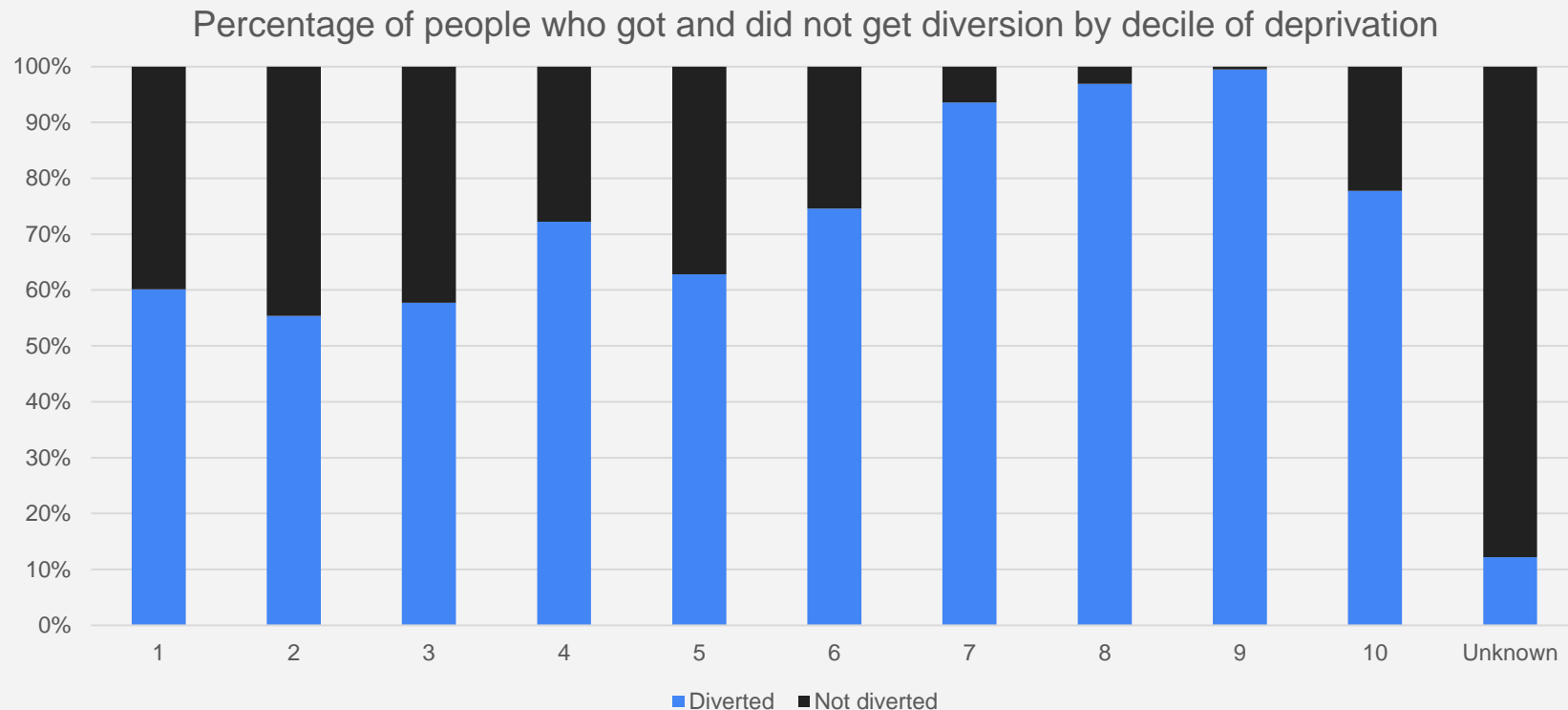
(rate per 100,000)



... and by socio-economic deprivation
(by decile: 1 is the most deprived)



Who gets diverted? (Data from West Midlands)



Who gets diverted (odds ratios in 15 English police forces)

| Ethnicity | Model 1 (unadjusted) | Model 2 (adjusted for age, sex, drug) | Model 3 primary analysis (adjusted for age, sex, drug, police force) |
|-----------|-------------------------|---|---|
| White | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) | 1 (ref) |
| Asian | 0.79 (0.72, 0.86) | 0.53 (0.48, 0.58) | 1.36 (1.20, 1.54) |
| Black | 0.83 (0.75, 0.92) | 0.59 (0.53, 0.66) | 0.80 (0.70, 0.91) |
| Mixed | 0.95 (0.84, 1.09) | 0.86 (0.74, 0.99) | 0.91 (0.76, 1.08) |
| Other | 1.70 (1.40, 2.05) | 1.17 (0.95, 1.43) | 0.97 (0.76, 1.23) |

Conclusions

- Police-led drug diversion can reduce the harms imposed by policing on people who use drugs.
- There is some evidence of ‘net-widening’: more people coming into formal contact with the police for drug possession.
- There is little evidence of ‘mesh-thinning’: PDD schemes are not very hard to get out of.
- We observe continuing ethnic and class inequalities in who gets policed, and who gets diverted.

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Thank you

