Can Gaming of Social Policy Issues Help Translate Good Intentions into Change?

James P. Kahan, Peter W. Greenwood, C. Peter Rydell, William Schwabe, Barbara R. Williams

Overview

There are several reasons to believe that social policy gaming—exercises where individuals and groups make social policy decisions in a realistic but hypothetical environment—could be an effective decision aid and training device for community leaders who must struggle with seemingly intransigent domestic problems. For decades, national security policymakers have made extensive use of gaming as a tool for exploring possible consequences of particular plans and decisions or for responding to crises. They value gaming for its strong educational value as well: players frequently find that exploring a problem in the context of a particular scenario helps them understand the issues more completely—or at least differently—than contemplating actions in the abstract.

In cities across the nation, public officials and private citizens are coming together to grapple with such persistent problems as drug abuse and drug-related violence. In addressing these problems, communities find that there is no dearth of good ideas, but that institutional barriers and other implementation obstacles make the task of introducing change a daunting one. It is possible that gaming could be a useful tool to help break down institutional barriers and to demonstrate the often unforeseen and sometimes dramatic steps that must be taken to translate awareness and good intentions into concrete change. In this issue paper, we describe an effort by the RAND Drug Policy Research Center (DPRC) to test this possibility in a game of community drug policy.

New Elsinore Comes to Miami

On the long weekend of October 23–25, 1992, Miami became the first community to participate in a new approach to solving the problem of drug abuse when it hosted the DPRC game. Under the auspices of The Miami Coalition For A Drug-Free Community, nineteen prominent citizens concerned with or actively combating the city’s drug problem assembled to formulate productive new strategies to reduce the magnitude of that problem. Although Miami is, acknowledged nationally as a leader in addressing the problems of drug abuse, the Coalition members believed that the experience of the game could help them capitalize on their progress to date and move toward even more effective programs.

The DPRC game is an interactive computer-supported exercise that portrays the drug-related problems of the mythical city of New Elsinore. Even though this type of exercise is called a game, it is serious business. The DPRC developed the game to help individuals and communities better understand the interactions among local organizations and policies that deal with drug problems. The game is also designed to demonstrate the often wide-ranging and unforeseen consequences of the decisions made by these organizations. In addition, participants have the opportunity to explore new ways to resolve drug problems and to reflect upon the roles that drugs and the fight against drugs play in their community.

Each participant is told to adopt the role of a prominent citizen of New Elsinore appointed by the city’s mayor to a team to help develop a community effort to combat the problem of illicit drugs. Participants are assigned to one of three teams respectively representing drug treatment, police, and courts and corrections. These assignments are made so that each team has a diverse composition: that is, a real Miami police participant may sit on either the New Elsinore police team or on another team. One additional team, the executive team, evaluates and attempts to integrate the proposals made by the other teams. Although each team has a specific area to consider, it is asked to take into account the problem as a whole and the possible actions of the other teams.

1Several previous runs of the game had involved RAND researchers, academicians, and policymakers from different parts of the country.

2See Kahan, James P., John Setear, Margaret M. Bitzinger, Sinclair B. Coleman, and Joel Feinleib, Developing Games of Local Drug Policy, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, N-3395-DPRC, 1992.
The exercise begins with a brief presentation of the rules of the game, followed by a description of New Elsinore’s geography, demography, politics, resources, and problems. Using maps, charts, and statistics, the game directors portray New Elsinore as a moderately sized city with a substantial drug problem. The specific characteristics of New Elsinore can be changed each time the game is played; for example, in the Miami game, the demographics (e.g., racial, age, and socioeconomic proportions), economic profile, and proportion of resources dedicated to the war against drugs matched those of Miami.

**NEW ELSINORE**

This sequence of deliberation-recommendation-evaluation is repeated for three annual policy decision cycles, after which all participants meet in a final session to discuss the lessons learned.

**Miami Comes to New Elsinore**

Each cycle of the Miami game was different, as players learned from observing a year’s consequences of their recommendations, delved deeper into the causes of New Elsinore’s drug problem, and gained a better understanding of the nature of that problem.

**Day One: Business as Usual**

Miami is considered by many to be a leading community in combating illicit drugs, and in the first day’s deliberations, each of the teams constructed variations of programs already underway in Miami, making minor adjustments to take into account their perceptions of the differences between Miami and New Elsinore. For example, the police team recommended lobbying for state legislation such as exists in Florida authorizing drug-free zones around schools, parks, and public housing, enforced by minimum mandatory incarceration. The treatment team recommended increasing outpatient drug-free treatment slots, by raising more money and by replacing outpatient detoxification clinics. The courts team recommended a drug court to divert out of the jail system offenders who were promising candidates for treatment.

The executive team believed that the recommendations were not specific enough and were not likely to be effective. In their view—and as the other teams eventually agreed—many of the Miami programs that served as prototypes for the recommendations had been of limited effectiveness; the hard data on such programs were not as optimistic as the early impressions. Moreover, some of the recommendations were already in place in New Elsinore. And some of the recommendations of the different teams were not consistent with one another. For example the police team’s program for mandatory incarceration conflicted with the court team’s program for diversion from jail.

**Day Two: Reaching the Boundaries**

The second day began with the game directors’ picture of New Elsinore one year hence, with a concentration on the consequences of the first day’s recommendations. In most cases, only minor changes had occurred. To forestall a repetition of the “more of Miami” strategy, the participants were told to assume that any programs used in Miami already existed in New Elsinore. The teams were asked to attempt to find more innovative ideas and to be more specific on (1) the rationale for recommendations, (2) the source of funding, and (3) measures of the recommendations’ effectiveness.

The participants responded positively to the critiques of the executive team and game directors. Delegates from different teams held consultative meetings during deliberations to

---

3The model has been implemented as a system of spreadsheets that can be run on either a Macintosh or IBM personal computer. A complete model run estimates policy consequences in annual increments up to nine years into the future.
prevent working at cross-purposes. Suggested programs were wider in scope as players freed themselves from the (self-imposed) constraints of their team identity. For example, the police team recommended an interagency enforcement task force in a belt around New Elsinore to better coordinate different policing agencies. To move beyond traditional police activities, they recommended a number of community-oriented programs involving the schools, the business community, and a proposed new city office to coordinate all drug-prevention efforts. Similarly, the treatment team expanded drug treatment beyond care facilities into the workplace and seconded the proposal for a central office for prevention. The courts team attempted to establish a comprehensive evaluation program to classify offenders, as well as to focus more on children at risk. As with the other teams, the courts team programs went far beyond the traditional criminal justice system mechanisms of incarceration, parole, and probation.

The executive team and the game directors evaluated the second day’s recommendations as responsive to the request for innovation. However, while the ideas looked good on the surface, their potential success could only be evaluated with more specification of how to implement and evaluate the programs.

**Day Three: Breaking the Boundaries**

To start the third day, participants were provided with the executive team and game directors’ evaluations of the second day in the form of a picture of New Elsinore yet one year later. For this last cycle, the participants were told that they no longer represented any particular agency or interest, but were instead three groups working in parallel to each do what they could to make a major improvement in the illicit drug problem by attacking its root causes.

The participants responded to this challenge with enthusiasm. Each team independently concluded that to address the root causes of drug abuse problems, communities need to be rebuilt. And each team independently concluded that—under the auspices of a community-wide program—the focus had to be on particular neighborhoods. For example, the former “police” team suggested establishing a pilot concentrated community service center in a major problem neighborhood in New Elsinore. This center, whose purpose would be outreach to households, would engage the people who lived in that neighborhood in the center’s planning, implementation, and direction. Following guidance from the game directors, the team stated explicitly what indicators of achievement it would use to evaluate the center. Similarly, the former “treatment” team saw the need for a neighborhood-based concept of treatment that empowered the community. Moreover, in order that the neighborhood residents would want to involve themselves in any such program, it needed to be a long-term commitment instead of a “demonstration.” The former “courts” team created a detailed program that embedded an approach to drug abuse within a major commitment to the security, social, and educational needs of a single small neighborhood. All of the teams saw the need to begin with small neighborhoods so that the programs would be feasible from both cost and logistic perspectives.

**The Role of the Computer Model**

Throughout the game, the computer model analyzed the policy actions produced by the game directors in response to the participants’ recommendations. This analysis took a number of forms. During game moves, the model helped answer team questions. For example, the model was able to use the data on drug treatment to help the game directors provide an estimate of the average cost of treatment per day and the average length of treatment. In this way, the model helped sensitize the participants to the value of looking carefully at their own data.
As discussed earlier, the model also provided information to the game directors to help them construct a picture of New Elsinore that fed back to the participants the consequences of their recommendations. At the end of the first day, the model estimated that the teams' recommendations would result in only small reductions in drug use. This was at first surprising and later disappointing to the participants, who expected larger effects than the model yielded but upon consideration agreed with the plausibility of the model's results. Overall, the participants accepted the game directors' policy implementations as reasonable projections of the consequences of the policy recommendations. Between the second and third days, the model showed the larger effects of the second day's more radical policy recommendations.

Finally, the model was used by the game directors to show participants the limitations of expanding any single approach such as drug treatment. To do this, the game directors presented the computer model's projection of nine years of providing drug treatment for every user in the community; this massive program would reduce drug consumption by about only one-third.

Return to Miami

Immediately following the third day's recommendations, all the players met together to consider what they had learned from the gaming experience. After discussion of how New Elsinore's problems might be improved, the game directors led the discussion to a consideration of how the New Elsinore experience might help them better address the problems of Miami.

The thrust of that discussion had a quality of déjà vu for observers who had experienced social programs, such as Model Cities, during the 1960s and 1970s as the participants gained a consensus on an approach that coordinated many different social agencies within a single community. This might have been seen as reinventing the Model Cities program except that the participants went beyond Model Cities in at least two respects: First, in the original Model Cities, law enforcement agencies were rarely full participants; in Miami, the police team (and indeed, game participants from different law enforcement agencies) took the lead in developing the concept and saw the need for police to change certain practices. For example, instead of asking for military-like equipment to attack crack houses, the police requested assistance from social workers in assessing drug-related domestic violence incidents. Second, the participants saw the need for building a sustainable program, rather than providing yet one more demonstration program that might vanish after a year or so. Both of these differences were believed to be important to gain acceptance from the affected communities and to provide the residents of those communities with the incentives required to make such programs successful.

Postscript

Two months after the game, a meeting was held in Miami to reconsider the benefits of the experience. Over half of the participants were able to attend. Although the specifics of the game were, in retrospect, only vaguely remembered, the impact of the lessons learned was still strongly felt.

The consensus of that meeting was that The Miami Coalition For A Drug-Free Community had made great progress in its first efforts at increasing awareness of the drug problem, promoting community-wide efforts at drug prevention in the schools and workplace, and in instituting major data-gathering efforts. But to substantially reduce Miami's drug problem, more profound changes were needed. A new approach emerged from the game—namely, building a concentrated and coordinated program to address both the drug problems and the problems unrelated to drugs of a single, small Miami neighborhood, embodying the principles of full coordination of services, empowerment of the residents, and sustainment of the effort that emerged from the game. The major issue was then how to begin to implement this approach.

Following the meeting, a committee was formed within the Coalition to begin to implement the plan. In the subsequent months, the committee decided to focus on a small housing project in one of the worst areas of Dade County to implement the recommendations made by the police team in move three. As the work of the Miami participants continues, the inventors of the DPRC game will follow closely their efforts and achievements.

---