

Focused deterrence strategies

Using support services to deter repeat offenders.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall reduction	 Very strong	 Low	 Very strong	 Strong	No information

Focus of the intervention

Focused deterrence strategies (FDSs) – also known as pulling levers approaches – are strategies that target prolific or repeat offenders. These strategies combine strict enforcement with improved access to support, sometimes called a carrot and stick approach.

A relatively small number of offenders are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime and these offenders are often involved in gangs and criminally active groups.

FDSs involve analytical work to identify key offenders, communicating directly with those offenders and developing a range of support options. These include access to services, community engagement and criminal justice processes, with a view to reducing offending behaviour for specific crime types.

This narrative is based on one meta-analytic review covering 24 studies, including 12 programmes targeting criminally active gangs or groups, nine targeting open-air drug markets, and three

targeting high-risk individual offenders. Twenty-three studies were conducted in the USA and one in Scotland.

[See also problem-oriented policing.](#)

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that focused deterrence strategies have reduced crime.

The meta-analysis found that FDSs led to an overall statistically significant moderate reduction in crime with all three target groups.

The strongest decreases in crime were found with programmes designed to reduce serious violence generated by ongoing conflicts among gangs and criminally active groups, followed by programmes targeting high-risk individuals.

The smallest crime reduction levels were seen with drug market intervention (DMI) programmes. Nineteen of the 24 primary studies (79%) found a statistically significant crime reduction effect on a targeted crime problem.

There is also some evidence of the diffusion of crime control benefits to neighbouring areas and socially connected groups (ie, there was evidence that reductions in crime spread outside of the target area or group).

Research design was found to influence effect sizes, with weaker research designs leading to more positive outcomes.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The evidence is taken from a systematic review covering 24 studies. The studies demonstrated a high-quality design in terms of having a transparent and well-designed search strategy, sufficient consideration of risk of bias and various elements of validity, featuring valid statistical analysis, and using separate coders to ensure the accuracy of information collected.

Mechanism – how does it work?

FDSs are assumed to reduce crime by seeking to change offender behaviour by better understanding why individuals are committing crime and what conditions sustain recurring crime problems.

In response, a multi-agency package of police, community engagement and social services is implemented.

- Targeted communications are used to increase offenders' perceived risk relating to their offending, using messages around increased enforcement for target crimes or individuals, and therefore increased risk of arrest or charge.
- Social control tactics are used, for example, using direct family members and community figures to voice clear disapproval or shaming.
- Social services interventions and general support are offered to offenders, for example, job training, employment, substance abuse treatment and help with housing.

However, the review is uncertain which of the mechanisms were most important in reducing offending.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review included primary studies examining the effects of FDSs with three specific target groups.

There is good evidence that the effectiveness of focused deterrence varies by context.

Strongest decreases in crime were found in strategies focused on violence by gangs and criminally active groups.

Moderate reductions were found in FDSs targeted at high-risk individuals and small crime reduction levels were seen with DMI programmes. These also tended to suffer from the most implementation difficulties – centred on securing the necessary community engagement.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The authors reported that FDSs, especially DMI programmes, were likely to suffer implementation problems and that these had contributed to a reduction in their effectiveness.

With DMI programmes specifically, implementation challenges included securing community engagement, unclear definitions of the drug market areas to be targeted, and a lack of opportunity and resources available to target low-risk dealers.

Successful FDS programmes tended to tailor the approach to the specific crime problem. Local research on specific crime problems should be used to customise a response that fits local communities and contexts, and operational capacities relating to criminal justice, social services and community-based organisations.

Success also hinged on establishing a network of capacity, developing productive relationships with the various partner agencies.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not provide information on the costs or benefits of focused deterrence initiatives and no formal economic analysis was provided.

General considerations

Most studies included in the review were conducted in the USA (23 of 24 primary studies). Caution should be taken when applying these findings to other geographical contexts.

Most of the studies did not examine which programme elements and mechanisms were most important in terms of achieving reductions in crime and criminal behaviour.

Summary

There is evidence that FDSs lead to a moderate reduction in crime overall.

FDSs are assumed to change offender behaviour by better understanding why individuals are committing crime and the conditions that sustain recurring crime problems. These mechanisms do however need further exploration.

The strongest decreases in crime were found with programmes addressing serious violence in gangs and criminally active groups, followed by those targeting high-risk individual offenders and DMI programmes.

FDSs, especially DMI programmes, were likely to suffer implementation problems and these contributed to a reduction in their effectiveness.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- Braga Anthony A., Weisburd David and Turchan Brandon (2019) [**Focused deterrence strategies effects on crime: A systematic review**](#). Campbell Systematic Reviews 15 (3) e1051

Summary prepared by

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