

# Defining police problem solving

Problem-oriented policing or problem solving – what it involves and how it works.

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Problem solving is a structured approach for tackling persistent problems. It involves four stages.

1. First is the identification (or scanning) of recurring problems that affect the community and which the police are expected to handle.
2. Second is a detailed analysis to uncover what might be causing the problem and what might be done to reduce it.
3. Third is the implementation of tailored responses based on that analysis.
4. Fourth is an assessment of whether the problem has reduced because of the implemented responses.

Problem solving requires the police to:

- conduct systematic inquiries into the nature and patterns of problems
- prioritise prevention
- work with partners
- favour responses that do not rely solely on the criminal justice system
- evaluate whether what they have done has had the desired effect

Problem solving is effective policing. Extensive evidence shows that when done well (Sidebottom and others, 2020); (Scott M, 2000), problem solving can lead to significant reductions in a wide range of problems, including serious violence. Simply put, in an era of evidence-based policing, the evidence we have tells us that problem solving is one of the best methods for reducing crime (Hinkle and others, 2020).

- [Read about the history of problem solving policing](#)

Examples of problem solving applied to knife crime are limited (Examples of problem solving projects applied to knife crime can be searched for at the [US Centre for Problem-Oriented Policing](#) and the [UK Knowledge Hub](#)). This guide seeks to change that. Produced in collaboration with the College of Policing and the [NPCC](#), and through consultation with 24 police forces and Violence Reduction Units in England and Wales, this guide provides practical and evidence-

informed advice on how a problem-solving approach can help you reduce your local knife crime problem.

## What problem solving involves

The SARA process was devised to translate Goldstein's ideas into police practice.

- Scanning – the identification of persistent problems that cause harm and call for police attention.
- Analysis – the systematic study into the causes of or conditions that lead to or enable problems to persist.
- Response – the development and implementation of measures to try to reduce or eliminate the problem.
- Assessment – evaluation to determine whether the response has worked out as intended and whether the problem has been removed, reduced or unintentionally aggravated.

[Find out more about the SARA model](#)

## Does problem solving work?

There is a strong body of evidence to show that problem solving is highly effective at reducing a wide range of crime and public safety issues.

A recent systematic review concluded that although problem solving was not successful on every occasion, overall, it had tended to produce significant reductions in crime and disorder. The College of Policing cite problem solving as 'one of the best-evidenced policing strategies'.

## Will a problem solving approach reduce knife crime?

Problem solving is not prescriptive. It doesn't tell you what will work to reduce your local knife crime problem. Knife crime is too complex and too multifaceted for one specific intervention or a series of interventions to work effectively in all places and at all times.

What problem solving does do is to provide you with a process – a tried-and-tested series of steps to both guide and structure efforts to reduce crime and disorder. There are many case studies where problem solving has been used effectively to reduce serious violence. This guide seeks to build on those examples and show how problem solving is applicable to reducing knife crime.

# Tags

Knife crime