Targeted approaches to crime and disorder reduction

Targeted and proactive policing can reduce crime and antisocial behaviour.

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Targeting places

The evidence tends to suggest that targeting the places that create the most demand for the police can be an effective crime reduction strategy. The evidence is more extensive for reduction of some types of crime, such as burglary. A systematic review concluded that hot spots policing – targeted policing activity in high crime locations – can reduce crime (Braga and others, 2019a).

Out of 78 tests of hot spots policing, 62 had a positive effect on crime. The review found hot spots policing was effective against a range of crime types, including violence, property crime, disorder and drug offences. The studies included in the review tended to look at the impact of problem-solving, an increase in directed patrol and crackdowns. Problem-solving was found to have the biggest impact on crime and was thought to yield positive benefits for police-community relations.

A study from the USA for example has found that while intensive police patrols in hot spots delivered short-term but unsustainable reductions in crime, the effect of problem-solving on crime was larger and longer lasting (Taylor and others, 2011) (**find out more about the impact of police numbers on crime rates**). A combined approach might therefore be most effective.

The evidence suggests that targeting residential areas where crime is concentrated automatically concentrates attention on repeat or prolific offenders. Even if the risk of a repeat offender being caught increases in their usual offending locations, they tend to be reluctant to offend elsewhere for reasons of familiarity (Weisburd and others, 2005).

Geographic targeting may also have an impact on one-time offenders, or people who might be tempted to offend, by reducing the opportunities for crime (**find out more about what stops people from offending**). In contrast with the traditional police view, the evidence also suggests that targeted policing activity in hot spots is unlikely to lead to crime simply moving around the corner or being displaced to somewhere else (rather than actually reducing overall crime).

Indeed, if anything, such activity is more likely to result in a diffusion of benefits to neighbouring areas (Bowers and others, 2011). A recent review by Braga and others (2019a) found that overall, hot spot policing led to a small but significant reduction in crime in areas immediately surrounding the hot spots targeted by the police, as well as in the hot spots themselves.

Targeting people

There is also evidence in support of the police focusing their efforts on individual victims and offenders who contribute the most to police demand.

Evidence shows that targeting repeat victims of burglary and their near neighbours can reduce both revictimisation and overall crime (Grove and others, 2012; Johnson, 2013). The most effective approaches to reducing repeat victimisation tended to be appropriately tailored and well-implemented situational crime prevention measures.

Focusing on those people who are most vulnerable to and harmed by antisocial behaviour may also be effective (Innes and Weston, 2010)(**find out more about how resources can be targeted**). By taking initial action against the most challenging problems, the police may encourage people in the local community to take more of a role in looking out for each other.

Targeting the small number of repeat or prolific offenders who are responsible for a disproportionately large number of crimes and causing the most harm can be an effective way for the police to reduce crime. However, these approaches need to be used carefully, as activities targeting individual offenders can sometimes backfire, inadvertently increasing reoffending.

Focused deterrence strategies designed to change the behaviour of prolific offenders through implementing approaches that blend targeted enforcement with the provision of targeted support from partner agencies and the community have been shown to be effective in reducing crime overall (Braga and others, 2019b).

Problem-solving

A review of evaluation evidence concluded that problem-solving was an effective – and possibly cost-effective – strategy for reducing a wide range of different crimes (Hinkle and others, 2020).

In total, 31 out of the 34 studies in the review showed problem-solving had reduced crime. When it pooled all the results of these studies, the review found that overall, crime fell by one third in areas that received problem-solving relative to areas that did not.

There was also some evidence of reductions of crime in nearby areas (a diffusion of benefits), but no evidence of crime being displaced elsewhere. The review also showed that problem-solving could be implemented in combination with other crime reduction strategies, such as hot spots policing.

Adopting a problem-solving approach typically involves the police following the four key stages of the SARA (scan, analyse, respond, assess) model (Clarke and Eck, 2003).

- Scan – identifying the most important problems to tackle from a range of issues.
- Analyse – using a range of data to understand the nature of these problems (what, where, when, who) and their likely root causes (why).
- Respond – implementing tailor-made solutions that seek to deal with the underlying causes of these problems.
- Assess – evaluating whether the responses have been successful (for example, using recorded crime, victim surveys, partnership data and/or community engagement) and if not, repeating the process until effective solutions are in place.

Problem-solving often requires the police to work in partnership with local people and other organisations (such as local authorities, criminal justice agencies, businesses and charities) to put in place sustainable solutions to problems (Bullock and others, 2006).

Engaging local communities in the process can be particularly effective as they can help to identify the crime and antisocial behaviour problems – the signal crimes and disorders – that affect people the most (Tuffin and others, 2006; Innes, 2014).

Partners can play a vital role in problem-solving because the police have limited resources, do not own all the remedies and do not have all the information to diagnose the problem. Coordinated action is also likely to require the involvement of partners. For example, tackling late-night violence in a town centre could require the local hospital to analyse its admission data, the council to review

its licensing decisions, pubs and clubs to introduce toughened drinking glasses, policing to change its patrol plans and volunteers to provide first aid in the town centre (see Maguire and Nettleton, 2003; Curtis and others, 2011).

While problem-solving can be an effective crime reduction strategy, it can suffer from being poorly implemented (Skogan, 2006). Problem-solving appears to be most successful when it is focused and when there is a strong organisational commitment to its principles (Read and Tilley, 2000; Bullock and others, 2006; Weisburd and others, 2008). Also, there is a tendency for the police to rush to solution without fully understanding the problem or thinking systematically about what might help resolve it (Bullock and others, 2006).

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