

People and places – how resources can be targeted

Targeting crime prevention activities can reduce crime and the public's demand for policing services.

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Overview

There is very strong evidence to suggest that crime and antisocial behaviour is not evenly distributed, but rather is highly concentrated. Some neighbourhoods, streets and people are much more likely to experience crime than others, and more regularly. Similarly, some offenders are more prolific than others and commit higher volumes of crime.

The research findings on how crime is concentrated have important implications for crime prevention. They suggest the police can reduce crime – and the public's demand for policing services – by focusing resources on, and targeting crime prevention activities towards, the people and places that experience most crime or contribute most to the problem.

Places

Official figures tend to show that crime rates are higher in city centres and other commercial and industrial areas, and also in residential areas with levels of high social deprivation (see Bottoms, 2012; Weisburd, 2015).

Studies have also shown that crime is significantly clustered at a much smaller geographic level in crime hot spots.

Sherman and others (1989) for example, found that half of all calls made by the public to the police in Minneapolis came from less than 4% of addresses. These hot spots tend to be small in size – micro places like street corners, transport hubs or shopping parades – and much smaller than the geographic units around which police forces tend to be organised (for example, neighbourhoods and divisions).

There is also evidence to suggest that crime hot spots can persist over long periods of time (Braga and others, 2019; Weisburd and others, 2017; Braga and Weisburd, 2010). In their study of Seattle, Weisburd and others (2004) found that the concentration of crime in hot spots was very stable year to year – with 5% of street segments accounting for 50% of all crime over a 14-year period.

One implication of the research on crime hot spots is that if the police focus their attention on higher crime neighbourhoods without local targeting, they could inadvertently ignore longstanding hot spots in lower crime neighbourhoods that nevertheless make a notable contribution to overall crime.

Victims

Evidence suggests that some members of the public are also at greater risk of crime than others. Systematic review evidence has shown that overall, 5% of victims experience 60% of all crime (SooHyun and others, 2017).

Furthermore, once someone has become a victim, their risk of revictimisation increases. In other words, they become much more likely to be a victim of crime again in the near future. In 2019/20 for example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales showed that 34% of domestic violence victims, 27% of acquaintance violence victims and 14% of stranger violence victims were repeat victims.

Most repeat victims are not victimised again. But the risk of revictimisation tends to increase with each subsequent experience of crime, so a small core of chronic victims develops over time (Farrell and Pease, 2003; Bottoms and Costello, 2010; SooHyun and others, 2017).

The reasons for repeat victimisation vary and are important to understand if the risk of further victimisation is to be reduced. For example, a systematic review (Ørke and others, 2018) has shown that the risk factors for repeat intimate partner violence are different for women who have been repeatedly victimised in just one relationship and those repeatedly victimised in multiple relationships.

Research on repeat victimisation has also suggested that in the short term, crime risks can increase for near neighbours as well as the original victim (Bowers and Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2013). Thus, after a burglary has happened, the burgled household and those nearby both have a greater chance of being targeted.

The reasons for repeat burglaries and near neighbour repeats include the original offenders returning to familiar locations, other offenders connected to the original offenders also targeting these locations and these households being generally attractive to all offenders (Lantz and Rubeck, 2015).

There is also evidence to suggest that people who experience antisocial behaviour are more likely to suffer repeatedly than victims of personal and property crime (Davenport cited in Bottoms, 2012). Some people are likely to be particularly vulnerable to antisocial behaviour, such as young people and households with children, those living in less affluent areas and rented accommodation, and people in poor health and/or with disabilities (Innes and Weston, 2010).

The extent to which victimisation is concentrated has important implications as it enables the police to target crime prevention efforts towards those people who suffer the most harm. Reductions in repeat victimisation can contribute to overall reductions in crime. For example, the latest estimates suggest 52% of violent incidents involved repeat victims, compared to 74% in 1995.

Offenders

The majority of people who break the law commit just one or two minor offences. However, a small proportion of offenders go on to commit a large proportion of crime (Prime and others, 2001; Wikström and others, 2012; Martinez and others, 2017).

The Home Office (2001) estimated that 10% of active offenders are responsible for 50% of all crime committed. Similarly, Farrington and others (2006) found that 7% of males account for around 50% of convictions.

There is evidence of offending concentrations for specific crime types. For example, research has identified that the majority of repeat and near neighbour domestic burglaries are committed by the same perpetrator. Repeat offenders also tend to be the more prolific burglars (Pease, 1998; Bernasco, 2008; Lantz and Ruback, 2017). These findings suggest the police targeting of prolific domestic burglars could have a significant impact in crime hot spots.

Farrell and others (1998) found that crime fell by 60% in an area where the police targeted prolific burglars and carried out target hardening of homes (for example, the fitting of locks). The study

suggested the reduction in crime could be attributed to the crackdown and that the number of prolific burglars in the area almost wholly determined how many burglaries took place.

Most prolific offenders do not want to continue committing crime when they get older and start to mature. Offending rates tend to decline significantly in adulthood, as their relationships, physiology, self-identities and attitudes change (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Farrington and others, 2006; Rocque, 2014).

Prolific offenders who are more likely to stop have strong relationships with partners and family who do not offend, and feel and show concern and empathy for others (Maruna, 2011; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011). Desistance is also likely to be affected by the influence of peers, who can have positive and negative influences (for example, Davis and others, 2013).

There is evidence from the Diamond Initiative in London that many will voluntarily accept offers of help from a multi-agency group (including the police) designed to assist them to lead non-criminal lives (Dawson and Stanko, 2011). Evidence from the same initiative, however, suggests that short-term gains from such approaches can be hard to deliver, because they try to change people's long-term patterns of behaviour.

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Tags

Crime reduction