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Report

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NOT ROCKET SCIENCE? PROBLEM-SOLVING AND CRIME REDUCTION

Briefing Note

Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 6
Tim Read and Nick Tilley
July 2000

Background

This report describes the results of an examination of problem-solving in crime reduction conducted by the Home Office Policing and Reducing Crime Unit (PRCU). Information for the study was collected as part of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) thematic study of Crime Reduction, 'Calling time on crime'. It involved responses to questionnaires and visits to police forces.

For each of the 43 forces in England and Wales, HMIC collected together a range of documents relating to their policies and provisions for crime reduction. Forces completed a questionnaire asking about their overall approach to crime reduction and questionnaires describing four successful and four unsuccessful problem-solving initiatives. The initiatives questionnaire asked for information about the focus of, participants in, methods used in, management of, and results achieved from individual problem-solving initiatives.

The HMIC inspection team undertook weeklong visits to twelve forces, conducting interviews and focus groups at headquarters and three Basic Command Units (BCUs) in each of them. Researchers from PRCU went to the headquarters of eight of the twelve forces visited for inspection, and to two BCUs in each of them. The PRCU team discussed problem-solving with headquarters and local area staff. The aim of this part of the inspection was first, to identify the level and nature of support for and participation in problem-solving and second, to find out more about significant enablers and inhibitors of rigorous problem-solving. In each force visited PRCU also interviewed those involved in two of the initiatives that had been deemed successful, and one that had been deemed unsuccessful, examining the work undertaken in some detail.

Research findings

Analysis of the returned initiative questionnaires found that while the initiatives covered a range of problem

types, the commonest targets for problem-solving were burglary, vehicle crime, drugs, and youth. While there appear to have been improvements in the thoroughness of problem-solving since HMIC's 'Beating Crime' inspection (published in 1998), there was still a great deal of room for improvement. In particular, there was little evidence of quantitative analysis in the questionnaire returns, and evaluation continues to be a major weakness.

The report identifies a number of initiatives as problem-solving successes. Three are described in detail; methadone dealing and drug related deaths, youth disorder on a housing estate, and unruly children in a park. On the basis of what was found visiting initiatives that were deemed successful, the following general lessons for problem-solving emerge:

- 1 Detailed analysis is needed to help define problems in ways that open them to creative responses. Traditional police definitions of problems are not always the most helpful.
- 2 Detailed analysis needs to be directed at 'pinch points', i.e. at the weakest necessary conditions for the problems to persist.
- 3 Site specific analysis of problems is needed to select responses that are relevant to local circumstances.
- 4 In selecting responses it is crucial to work out in detail how they are expected to produce their intended effects.
- 5 Community consultation and involvement is important to identify interventions that will elicit the co-operation and involvement of residents that is often needed if measures are to be effective.
- 6 The establishment of multi-disciplinary/multi-agency teams facilitates problem-solving, especially for large-scale issues.

7 It is not always in the interests of those best placed to make changes that will reduce problems to do so. It may be necessary in those circumstances to find and apply incentives or levers.

More generally, the following are needed to encourage and enable problem-solving: -

- A committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and involved leadership
- Practical help and advice in planning and doing problem-solving
- Data, analytic software for analysis and competent analysts
- Information, training and experience to inform problem-solving
- Methods to disseminate good practice
- Structures to encourage problem-solving
- Units or task-forces dedicated to specific areas of problem-solving
- Staff allocated on the basis of their aptitudes
- Rewards to incentivise problem-solving.

The report also identifies a number of unsuccessful problem-solving initiatives. Amongst the factors associated with problem-solving failure were weaknesses in identifying the problem, in the analyses of the problem, in working out what to do, in work with partners, in implementation, and in drawing lessons from previous experience.

The following factors were deemed to obstruct problem-solving:

- Weaknesses in analysis and shortage of analysts
- Limitations in data sharing and data quality
- Inadequate use of crime reduction specialists
- Inadequate time set aside for problem-solving
- Exclusive focus on local, low level problems
- Crudely operated performance management arrangements
- Inattention to, and weakness in, evaluations of problem-solving efforts
- Inadequate involvement of partnerships in problem-solving

Overall the report concludes that, despite the almost universal espousal of problem-solving by the police service, high quality problem-solving is still exceptional. Promising examples of small area crime and disorder problem-solving could be found in most forces, yet even here high quality, dependable outcome evaluations were rare. There was little broad-based problem-solving. Most took place at the 'sharp end' of operational policing, and tended to focus on the offender. Similarly there was only a little anticipatory problem-solving. The report concludes with a 'problem-solving checklist' to enable forces to assess their current performance.

Problem-solving checklist

Problem identification/Scanning	Y/N
Are repeat calls for service and repeat crimes routinely scanned?	
Are efforts to identify and analyse past and emerging problems routine?	
Are simple emerging problems allocated to individuals for their response, either on their own or in conjunction with other agencies?	
Are more complex emerging problems identified/prioritised in routine discussion amongst partners?	
Do partnerships routinely try to anticipate and forestall future problems?	
Causal analysis/Analysis	
Are adequate data collection and sharing arrangements in place to be used in problem identification and analysis?	
Are local analysts available who are familiar with relevant theory, crime reduction literature, and analytic techniques to identify and analyse problems?	
Do analysts have the hardware and software they need to do their job?	
Do analysts have a competent source of advice and supervision for their analytic work?	
Do analysts work in partnership with same agency colleagues responsible for dealing with problems, and with those in other agencies and their analysts?	
Do staff in supervisory positions have training and experience in analysis?	
Tactic or treatment/Response	
Do partnerships addressing agreed problems have sources of informed advice on possible promising responses?	
Do members of partnerships have a joint budget to implement or pump prime responses to agreed problems?	
Are members of partnerships adaptable in their service delivery patterns where doing so may comprise a promising response to a problem?	
Do those allocated problems have sources of informed advice on possible promising responses?	
Are external sources of advice in problem-solving being drawn on when needed?	
Output monitoring/Assessment	
Are all problem-solving efforts within the BCU/authority area systematically monitored?	
Are initiatives adjusted in the light of monitoring?	
Is an evaluation strategy in place?	
Are reputable independent evaluators used where significant resource allocation decisions turn on evaluation findings?	
Is care taken not to give unqualified support to extending initiatives that have not been subject to independent competent evaluation?	
Are provisions in place to conduct 'light' in-house or student evaluations where only suggestive findings are needed?	
Incentivisation/enablement	
Do members of partnerships encourage their staff routinely to participate in problem-solving?	
Are individuals allocated problems given training in their analysis and in forms of response?	
Are individuals allocated problems given reasonable time to address them?	
Are specialist skills being drawn on and used in problem-solving?	
Does the partnership provide a forum for mutual leverage in problem-solving?	
Does the partnership have agreed ways of applying leverage where necessary to third parties in implementing responses to problems?	
Is the work of the partnership monitored regularly and members held to account for their problem-solving?	
Are individual agencies being performance measured for their local problem-solving work as well as their attention to national priorities?	
Do supervisors help subordinates with problem-solving and monitor their problem-solving work?	
Are staff oriented to problem-solving, with selection, training and rewards to encourage and enable them?	
Do senior members of agencies know of and understand the problems being addressed	
Problem-communication to and from other levels	
Is day to day problem-solving monitored and are efforts made to identify broader problems?	
Are problems identified within the area that may reflect broader problems passed 'up' for analysis and attention at 'higher' levels?	

Related RDS Publications

Problem-Oriented Policing: Brit Pop, Crime Prevention and Detection Series Paper 75.

Getting the Grease to the Squeak: Research Lessons for Crime Prevention, Police Research Series Paper 85.

Brit Pop II: Problem-Oriented Policing in Practice, Police Research Series Paper 93.

Burglary Prevention: Early Lessons from the Crime Reduction Programme, Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 1.

“The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).”

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