

WORKING OUT WHAT TO DO: EVIDENCE-BASED CRIME REDUCTION

Briefing Note

Crime Reduction Research Series Paper 11
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January 2002

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Background

The aim of the report summarised in this briefing note is to help police services and local partnerships approach crime prevention and problem-solving in a coherent, informed and structured way, to improve prospects for real achievement. It distils principles for effective, evidence-based practice. Drawing mainly on research in the United States and United Kingdom, it discusses the application of six key concepts: aims, problem-specification, tactics, mechanism, context and replication. The examples used in the report relate specifically to situational crime prevention, for which there is the strongest research base, though the principles would be relevant also to other approaches to prevention.

Key concepts

Aims describe overall problem-solving or crime reduction aspirations, for example to reduce burglary. Problem-specification comprises a more detailed and evidenced statement of an aim e.g. reduce burglary by tackling repeat victimisation, having established that this is a major issue in the project area. Tactics describe what will actually be done to tackle the problem. Mechanisms refer to the ways in which tactics will bring about change. Context comprises the place, time, social organisation etc. within which the tactics will activate change mechanisms. Replication involves adopting and adapting approaches that have been found effective in one context, such that they will work similarly when implemented in another place.

Aim and problem-specification

Unqualified aims to reduce crime or tackle disorder are laudable but probably not deliverable. Research has demonstrated that presenting problems can usefully be

broken down to identify their specific and actionable attributes. For example we know that crime clusters on 'hot spots', 'hot victims', 'hot offenders', and 'hot products'; that low level disorder often encourages more serious problems; and that some circumstances, such as ready firearm availability, can facilitate crime. The development of local strategies can usefully begin with such frequently found patterns, checking whether they are also found in relation to the specific local problem being addressed.

Tactics and mechanisms

Once specific features of the local problem have been identified empirically, decisions on the focus of the crime reduction tactics to be used can take place. Much research has been conducted on situational tactics to reduce crime opportunity. Few situational measures make crime impossible. If they have an effect they do so in more subtle ways. Mechanisms describe the way in which measures might inhibit crime or disorder. Four main opportunity-reducing mechanisms that have been identified in situational crime prevention include:

- 'increase in perceived effort',
- 'increase in perceived risk',
- 'reduction in anticipated reward' and
- 'removal of excuses' in committing crime.

Provocation-reduction might comprise a fifth.

A variety of measures can be introduced to trigger each of these mechanisms. Clarke (1997) has developed a typology to describe sixteen situation crime prevention measures illustrated in Table 1. The measures used in any given situation will need to be chosen according to the nature of the problem in its specific context

Table1: Sixteen opportunity-reducing techniques of situational crime prevention with examples	
<i>A) Increase the perceived effort of crime</i>	
1. Harden targets	Steering column locks, anti-robbery screens
2. Control access to targets	Entry phones, electronic access to garages
3. Deflect offenders from targets	Bus stop location, street closures, segregation of rival fans
4. Control crime facilitators	Photos on credit cards, plastic beer glasses in bars
<i>B) Increase the perceived risks of crime</i>	
5. Screen entrances and exits	Electronic merchandise tags, baggage screening
6. Formal surveillance	Red light and speed cameras, security guards
7. Surveillance by employees	Park attendants, CCTV on double decker buses
8. Natural surveillance	Street lighting, defensible space architecture
<i>C) Reduce anticipated rewards of crime</i>	
9. Remove targets	Phonecards, removable car radios, women's refuges
10. Identify property	Vehicle licensing, property marking, car parts marking
11. Reduce temptation	Rapid repair of vandalism, off-street parking
12. Deny benefits	Ink merchandise tags, PIN for car radios, graffiti cleaning
<i>D) Remove excuses of crime</i>	
13. Set rules	Hotel registration, customs declaration, codes of conduct
14. Alert conscience	Roadside speedometers, 'idiots drink-and-drive' signs
15. Control disinhibitors	Drinking age laws, car ignition breathalyser, V-chip in TV
16. Assist compliance	Litter bins, public lavatories, easy library check-out

Context

Features of the situation which give rise to problems are relevant to both the nature of those problems and the potential of specific measures to reduce them. Changes in perceptions of risk, effort and reward that are potentially brought about through the crime reduction measures introduced, and their effects on decisions by those who might otherwise offend, depend on circumstances. Significant features of context in relation to a specific situational measure and the mechanisms it might trigger could include, for example, the attributes of the offending population, levels of publicity, community attitudes, the physical lay-out where the measures are introduced, the plausibility of back-up and so on. For example, certain social conditions are relevant if alarms are to activate a burglary reduction mechanism through the active intervention of interested neighbours. There have to be nearby neighbours, the neighbours have to care about the crime committed, and they mustn't be too frightened of recrimination by offenders to do anything. Thus, if alarms are to trigger a burglary reduction mechanism, a 'committed, close and confident community' context will be needed.

Replication

Replication is clearly important as it is through this process that successful interventions are disseminated more widely. However, replication is more difficult than it may appear at first sight. Too often it is expected that the same measure will automatically produce the same outcome in a different place. It won't. Both common sense and research findings agree on that. Many efforts to replicate past programmes fail because of inattention to the mechanisms that need to be activated, and their dependency on local context. Translation of past successes into future programmes involves understanding how and why they have worked, what it is about them that needs to be reproduced and the conditions needed for similar effects to be generated. This is the major reason why tactics, mechanism and contexts need to be spelled out.

Checklists for effective evidence-based problem-solving

The following checklists may help in developing effective programmes. The first is for police agencies and local partnerships to check that they are set up to deliver effective evidence-based practice. The second is for those trying to address problems, to check that what they are doing makes sense.

Table 2: Checklist for police agencies and partnerships	
Key issues	Dealt with?
Is there access to up-to- date research findings about crime and disorder problems?	
Are personnel in post with knowledge of the established research literature about the nature of crime problems? Do they have the opportunity regularly to update their understanding?	
Is there easy access to online sources of information about crime problems, such as that from the Home Office and NIJ?	
Are crime and disorder relevant data collected, recorded, and stored in ways that facilitate their analysis for problem-solving and preventive purposes? Is flexible analytic software available to test hypotheses about patterns? Do staff have the skills to make best use of the data and analytic software?	
Are personnel in post whose job it is to identify local, evidence- based crime and disorder patterns?	
Do staff have a grasp of the research literature on crime and disorder change mechanisms, on the contexts in which they can be activated, and the means of activating them?	
Do staff have a grasp of the research literature on the potential unintended consequences of crime and disorder change methods, and the contexts in which they are likely to be brought about?	
Are staff encouraged to think laterally about ways of applying crime and disorder prevention principles in new situations?	
Do staff have the ability, knowledge, and motivation to think critically about alternative intervention options?	
Is there provision for identifying and applying levers to those whose behaviour needs to change if crime and disorder problems are to be addressed effectively?	

Table 3: Checklist on problem specification and tactics for problem-solvers	
Key Questions	Answered satisfactorily?
<i>Regarding problem specification:</i>	
Has reputable research been consulted concerning the typical attributes of the problem? What is it?	
Has local research been undertaken to find out whether these attributes exist in your particular circumstances? Summarise it.	
Have local data been analysed to find out whether there are special conditions particular to your problem? Summarise it.	
<i>Regarding tactics:</i>	
Have reputable studies of similar problems been traced and read? List them and summarise their main findings.	
Have potential change mechanisms, that have successfully been activated elsewhere, been identified? What are they?	
Have potential means of triggering these mechanisms been identified? What are they?	
Has the local context been analysed to determine whether these measures are likely effectively to activate the change mechanisms? What are the key features of the context?	
Has the possibility of triggering mechanisms producing unwanted side-effects been considered in the local problem's context? What evidence is there that they can realistically be expected? What are they and what effects might be expected? How might they be avoided?	
Has the possibility of triggering mechanisms producing beneficial side-effects been considered in the local problem's context? What evidence is there that they can realistically be expected? What are they and what effects might be expected? How might they be enhanced?	
What specific intended and unintended effects are expected, at what time, for which groups as a result of the proposed tactics?	

This project was supported by grant number 1999-IJ-CX-0050 awarded by the National Insitute of Justice,
Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice

Reference

Clarke, R. (1997) *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies*, Second edition, New York: Harrow and Heston.

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