Do Solutions to Crime Need to Be Complicated?

Cities can reduce crime by focusing on problems and dismantling crime opportunities.

BY SHANNON J. LINNING, TOM CARROLL, ICMA-CM, DANIEL W. GERARD, AND JOHN E. ECK

This is the first in a series of six articles about crime reduction.

The Importance of Crime Opportunities

German motor vehicle safety legislation once taught us a big lesson about crime. Between 1976 and 1985, Germany's federal government rolled out laws requiring all motorcyclists to wear helmets. Their intent was to reduce harm to motorists if they were involved in a crash.

But something unexpected happened once they passed the laws; thefts of motorcycles plummeted. The laws also had no impact on other motor vehicle theft.[1] Why?

Before the government passed the laws, thieves could ride away on stolen motorcycles without looking suspicious. But once the helmet legislation took effect, non-helmet riders stood out and faced an increase in their risk of getting stopped by the police. Drivers of other vehicles, like cars and trucks, did not stand out because they are not expected to wear helmets.

Many thieves stole motorcycles for joyriding. Thieves seldom went about their lives carrying around helmets on the off chance they would feel the urge to steal a motorcycle. So their options became (a) steal a motorcycle without a helmet and risk getting pulled over by the police, or (b) stop stealing motorcycles. Many would-be thieves chose the second option.

This motorcycle theft example illustrates three facts about crime. First, people are more likely to commit crime when it is easy. Researchers consistently find that when easy crime opportunities exist, people commit more crimes. Second, you are more likely to reduce crime when you influence how a crime is committed (the opportunity) as opposed to why the crime is committed (the motivation).

Third, small and simple changes can have a big impact on crime. Researchers have found that when people problem-solve on a small scale and dismantle crime opportunities, they have the biggest impact on crime.

But if solving crime can be so simple, why don't we do it more often? One reason is that most people think about crime incorrectly. They think crime is complicated and that reducing crime requires changing major societal conditions. As city managers, you've probably heard the public's demands following a significant crime: You need to address the mental

health crisis! You need to end poverty! You need to increase drug enforcement! You need to legalize drugs! You need to hire more police officers! You need to defund the police! You need to get rid of guns! We need more guns! And nothing changes. Then another significant crime occurs.

If you're fed up with repeated crime crisis management, we have some evidence-based alternatives for you. This article is the first in a series dispelling common myths about crime. The first myth is that solutions to crime are complicated. The purpose of this article is to help you see through this myth so you can reduce crime by solving problems. Subsequent articles will deal with four other myths that often prevent local government officials from reducing crime. Our last article links the five myths and introduces a tool that identifies failure-prone crime strategies.

How Should You Think About Crime? Focus on the Problem

People tend to make two mistakes when thinking about crime. Their solutions are either too big or too small. Cries for action from politicians, the media, and the public are often too big. They usually center on solving major societal issues, such as homelessness, poverty, the opioid epidemic, the mental health crisis, and the like. To address these, you need widescale cooperation from bureaucracies and immense resources to tackle them.

The other mistake is the reverse; people tend to think too small. We often observe this in police departments whose strategy is either responding to 911 calls or putting "cops on dots" of a crime map. These are calls to address immediate troublesome events: a man yelling in the street, a woman overdosing in a park, a shoplifter stealing clothing from a store, or a thief breaking into a car in a parking garage. Simply responding to these requests makes officers feel like hamsters in a wheel running endlessly from call to call. Hiring more officers to chase these calls doesn't prevent future events either. Police must keep going back.

While major societal issues and immediate troublesome events are problematic, they are not problems. To reduce crime in your community, you need to find the goldilocks zone between these two categories: problems.
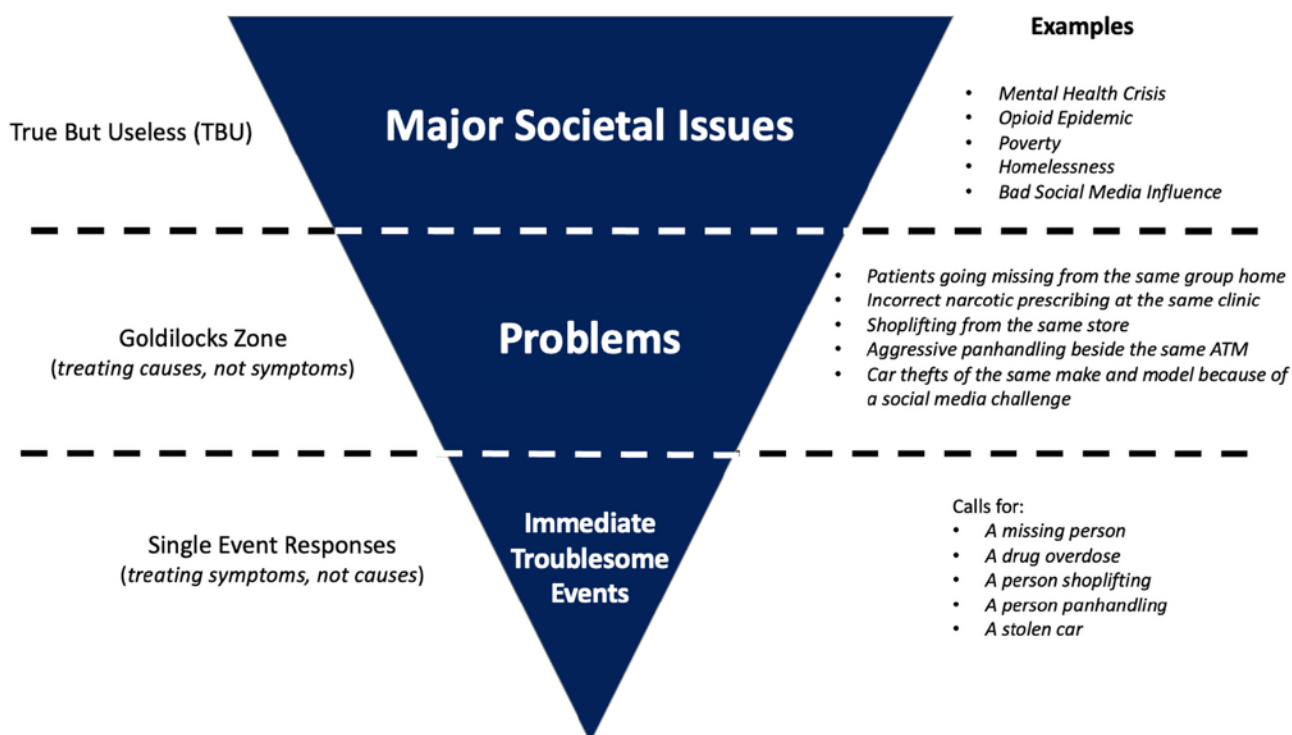
Problems are a collection of unwanted or harmful events that need solving. Problems are patterned, not random, so they must recur and do so in a predictable manner. If there is no pattern, there is nothing to be solved or prevented. The patterns themselves reveal the true causes of problems. Problems are troublesome circumstances bigger than individual events, but smaller than bad socioeconomic conditions.

Figure 1 shows three ways you can think about crime. They are depicted in an inverted triangle to represent the scale of each issue. If you focus on problems, you'll see faster progress and generate long-term results. These successes will also give you momentum to continue your problem-solving efforts.

Finding the goldilocks zone requires a little thinking. To illustrate, consider a

Figure 1.

Figure 1 content:

True But Useless (TBU)

Major Societal Issues

Examples
- Mental Health Crisis
- Opioid Epidemic
- Poverty
- Homelessness
- Bad Social Media Influence

Goldilocks Zone
(treating causes, not symptoms)

Problems

- Patients going missing from the same group home
- Incorrect narcotic prescribing at the same clinic
- Shoplifting from the same store
- Aggressive panhandling beside the same ATM
- Car thefts of the same make and model because of a social media challenge

Single Event Responses
(treating symptoms, not causes)

Immediate Troublesome Events

Calls for:
- A missing person
- A drug overdose
- A person shoplifting
- A person panhandling
- A stolen car

concern that cities/counties consistently deal with: shoplifting. Motivations for shoplifting vary and epitomize several major societal issues. Some people steal because they have little money (poverty). Others steal because they need cash for drugs (the opioid epidemic). Others may shoplift simply for the notoriety (social media). While we are in favor of eradicating poverty, the opioid epidemic, and bad social media, as international development practitioner Jerry Sternin says, these solutions may be "TBU: True But Useless!"[2] No police officer, mayor, city/county manager, or citizen will be able to accomplish them alone, and especially not quickly.

Shoplifting materializes as an immediate troublesome event every time retailers call the police. If a store experiences a single shoplifting event, no action is needed. But if a single store experiences many shoplifting events, you have a pattern. A common strategy is for police to simply respond to the immediate troublesome events every time they receive

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a call. But if you've identified a pattern, it also means you have identified a solvable problem. If you solve the problem, the officers will not have to keep going back.

Crime analyst Michael Zidar and his team identified a problem when analyzing shoplifting patterns in Paducah, Kentucky, a Midwestern U.S. city of approximately 25,000 residents. Looking at police reports, Zidar discovered that the city's two Walmart stores represented 15.1% of all police reported crimes and 67.4% of

all shoplifting reports in the city. So, in theory, if they could eliminate shoplifting at only two stores in the city, they could reduce shoplifting in the entire city by two-thirds.[3]

There are many ways to reduce shoplifting in a store. Stores who choose to install self-checkouts are at a higher risk of shoplifting, for example. A store can choose not to install them or remove them if present. Similarly, retailers can install locked display cabinets for high-value goods. They can also install a register next to the goods requiring customers to pay for high-value goods immediately instead of waiting until they get to the front of the store to buy them.

In Zidar's Walmart case study, the two stores were unwilling to implement any of the evidence-based suggestions the police provided to reduce shoplifting. So, the police department implemented an online crime reporting system for any non-violent/compliant misdemeanor shoplifting cases at the two stores. The police department would no longer send officers to the stores when

a customer tried to shoplift goods worth less than $500. This shifted the financial burden of crime prevention from taxpayers to the stores themselves. This strategy led to a 45.2% reduction in shoplifting that the city had to deal with: an annual savings of about $27,000 in police time.

Say CHEERS to Your Problems!

We have advocated for focusing on problems, but how do you know when you have a problem? One way to identify crime problems is to use a modification of the CHEERS criteria, created by crime scientists Ronald Clarke and John Eck.[4] CHEERS is an acronym that represents the six components of crime problems (Figure 2).

First, the concern being described must occur in the community. It cannot be a concern solely for local government administrators, such as police officers not wearing their hats. Second, there must be something harmful happening: death, injury, taking or destroying something that belongs to someone else, or even fear of using public space. It cannot be just a state of being, such as homelessness or something that makes people uncomfortable, such as teenagers standing on a street corner as you pass by. Third, there must be some expectation among some members of the public that local government must be involved.

Fourth, all problems involve events, such as break-ins, threats, or transactions. It cannot be general states such as poverty or racism, or other general conditions like stupidity or declining morals. Fifth, the events need to repeat or have a high likelihood of repeating. If something is unlikely to recur (like a meteor strike), then

Figure 2. Use the CHEERS Criteria to Identify Crime Problems

Criteria	Must	Cannot	Good Example	Bad Example
Community	The difficulty must affect the public	It cannot just be a concern to the police	Break-ins to cars parked along a street block	Police cars scraping each other in the police station parking lot
Harm	There must be a tangible harm	Cannot just be a dislike	Death; injury; theft; psychological trauma	Discomfort with teenagers on sidewalk
Expectation	Some in the public must see this as something for the local government to handle	Cannot be something completely outside local government mandate	Traffic crashes; burglaries; and fights	A pandemic
Event	Discrete incidents make up the problem	Cannot be a general state	A prostitution transaction; a terrorist bombing	Homelessness (is a state, not an event)
Repeat	Events must recur, or are likely to	Cannot be a singular event with little chance of recurring	A building with frequent burglaries; reports of aggressive panhandling at an ATM	A train derailment with injuries; a bridge collapse
Similarity	Events must share important characteristics	Cannot be an arbitrary collection of unlinked events	Crimes occurring at the same address; shootings between two rival gangs; wallet thefts from elderly men	A car crash, burglary, report of a loud teen party, and theft all in the same week on the same block

Modified from Clarke & Eck (2005)

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

[1] Mayhew, P., Clarke, R.V., & Elliott, D. (1989). Motorcycle theft, helmet legislation, and displacement. *The Howard Journal, 28*(1), 1-8.

[2] Sternin, J. (2002). Positive deviance: A new paradigm for addressing today's problems today. *The Journal of Corporate Citizenship, 5,* 57-62. https://www.jstor.org/stable/jcorpciti.5.57

[3] Zidar, M. S., Shafer, J. G., & Eck, J. E. (2017). Reframing an obvious police problem: Discovery, analysis, and response to a manufactured problem in a small city. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 12*(3), 316-331. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pax085

[4] Clarke, R.V. & Eck, J.E. (2005). Crime analysis for problem solvers in 60 small steps. US Department of Justice. Retrieved from: https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/RIC/Publications/cops-w0047-pub.pdf

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there are no future events to prevent. Finally, these events that repeat must have something in common, a basis of similarity that indicates a common set of causes. They cannot be an arbitrary set of unconnected, albeit unfortunate, events.

Anything that does not meet all six CHEERS criteria is not a crime problem, in the technical sense. But if all six criteria are met, you can consider it a crime problem and begin your problem-solving process to understand why crime is occurring (covered in our next article).

Conclusion

We titled our article with the question, do solutions to crime need to be complicated? Our answer is *no*.

If you focus your efforts on major societal issues,

you probably won't get very far, and you'll likely waste a lot of time and money. If you focus your efforts on immediate troublesome events, you probably won't get very far either. Your police department will spend their time responding to 911 calls that simply address symptoms of underlying problems. They'll keep having to go back to the same places about the same concerns.

Instead, ask yourself, *what is the problem?* Solving problems in your city/county will reduce crime. And as we will demonstrate in our next article, these problems will repeatedly occur at a tiny fraction of your city's properties. If you can dismantle the crime opportunities at those few places, you will reduce your crime rate. **PM**

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