Can the Police Solve All Crime Problems?

TO REDUCE CRIME, YOU NEED PLACE **MANAGERS** TO DISMANTLE CRIME OPPORTUNITIES

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

What Is the Role of the Police in Reducing Crime?

We usually think of the police as the lead public agency for crime reduction. Although we also recognize that many institutions contribute to public safety, if crime surges and the public is fearful, it is the police to whom we turn. But consider these three case studies, two about police and crime and one about police and car crashes.

(1) For years, residents of the English village of Staining complained to police about burglaries, thefts, assaults, and arson. They pointed to a scrap yard as the source of the problem. Thieves, for example, stole vehicles and parts around the village and sold them at the yard. Police increased their patrols in the area, but this did not reduce crime. They tried to persuade the yard to change its business practices but were unsuccessful. Finally, they enlisted the support of an environmental safety agency. The agency inspected the yard and demanded alterations to stop oil and pollutants from seeping into the ground water. The owner closed the yard. Crime dropped in the village.[1]

(2) Police in Chula Vista, California, were handling many calls from motels. To understand why, the department's crime analysis unit investigated and found that a few motels accounted for most of the calls.[2] Negotiations with the hotel owners and operators failed to reduce the calls. In response, the city passed an ordinance requiring motels to keep their calls to police under 0.61 per room per year. Most motels could easily comply with this requirement, but the few high-call volume motels had to work hard to comply. One went out of business. Others were bought by new owners who changed business policies. The calls for police service to motels plummeted.[3]

(3) Three street segments in Cincinnati, Ohio, were responsible for a large proportion of vehicle crashes resulting in death. One was so notorious it had a nickname: "the kill zone." A new commander of the police traffic section (coauthor Dan Gerard) looked into these street segments. The deaths were on curves, usually at night, and frequently in wet weather. Skidding was the likely cause. Police, the city's roads department, and contractors investigated ways to reduce skidding. City contractors lightly roughed up the pavement on the curves to increase friction and, thus, reduce skidding. The deaths stopped.[4]

In each case, the public presented the police with a problem. In each case, others had created situations that led to harmful events. In each case, the police had responded in a traditional manner and had been unsuccessful. In each case, the police found ways to push the problem back onto the shoulders of the organization responsible. In each case, the problem was solved.

> **Justice requires that serious offenders be removed from society. But if we do not dismantle the opportunities these offenders exploit, other people will take these offenders' places.**

In none of these cases was the problem solved by deep social change.[5] In none of these cases was the problem solved by arresting people.[6] Instead, in each case, the police identified those responsible for the problem and compelled them to dismantle opportunities encouraging harmful events: closing the scrapyard that enticed thieves, compelling problem motels to change their business practices, and addressing the road conditions that led to fatal crashes. Police led these efforts, but the solutions only came once place managers acted.[7]

Behind these successful case studies are three important ideas. First, crime problems are often the byproduct of everyday decisions made by people and organizations who fail to understand the crime consequences of their actions. Second, those who create crime problems need to help solve them. Third, to solve crime problems, you need to dismantle crime opportunities. Dismantling opportunities that produce harmful events seems reasonable, but how does one do this in practice? The principal way is through situational crime prevention.

What Is Situational Crime Prevention?

Situational crime prevention (SCP) asserts that people make choices to offend based on how they perceive the conditions around the time and place (situations) of a possible crime. People's choices consider five conditions:

1. How much *effort* does it take? Effort includes both physical effort and effort to get the knowledge and skills to be successful.
2. How much *risk* is involved? Risk includes arrest and punishment, but it also includes other possible losses such as affection of others, jobs, and self-esteem.
3. How *rewarding* is the crime? Rewards include money, status, and anything else the person might gain from the act.
4. Are there *provocations* that encourage the act? Provocations include conditions that propel the offender to choose to act: insults, heat and noise, peer pressure, and so forth.
5. Are there *excuses* for the act? Excuses include stories the offenders can tell others or themselves that let the offender off the hook.

If these are five important contributors to crime, then removing one or more will stop crime. That is what situational crime prevention does. The first step in using SCP is to understand the who, what, where, when, and how of specific crime problems. Specificity matters. For example, reducing violence in general is extremely difficult but reducing repeated assaults in one parking lot of a motel is feasible. Some of the needed information may come from statistical information in police and other government databases, but much of the information comes from observing the places and interviewing those knowledgeable about the crimes (including possible offenders).

With specific details known, problem solvers can craft tailored solutions. The solutions increase effort and risk and decrease rewards, provocations, and excuses. Ronald V. Clarke identified 25 techniques that solve problems (Figure 1). In this brief article, we cannot elaborate on each of the techniques. Fortunately, there are free resources that explain them.[8]

The problem solvers select relevant techniques for a specific situation, adapt the chosen techniques to local conditions, find the people and organizations who can apply the techniques, and then they implement them.

Does Situational Crime Prevention Work?

Situational crime prevention is the opposite of a generic, off-the-shelf, program. It provides guidance to locals who tailor-make interventions. Because the interventions are small-scale, they can be adapted to precise local conditions. Because they are hyper-focused on crime hotspots, these small-scale solutions can have big impacts. John Eck and Rob Guerette's review of 149 SCP studies revealed that 77% effectively reduced crime. Another 11% produced mixed findings while 12% provided ineffective or inconclusive results.[9]

But doesn't crime just move somewhere else? Sometimes SCP can cause displacement, but usually it does not. The question of displacement has received considerable scientific attention. Since the mid-1990s, none of the four reviews of the evidence found displacement overwhelmed crime prevention gains. Usually, no displacement was detected when researchers looked for it, and if they found some, it was inevitably less than the total improvement in safety. Further, SCP frequently produces positive unexpected benefits, which are referred to as the diffusion of crime control benefits. Diffusion of benefits occurs when prevention spreads beyond intervention sites. So dismantling crime opportunities is often far more effective than anticipated.[10]

Who Can and Should Dismantle Crime Opportunities?

Police can promote SCP, and many do. However, when they dig into a problem, they almost always discover that to dismantle the opportunities that make crime likely, place managers need to make changes. The owner of the high-burglary apartment complex is the place manager that needs to install lights, improve the locks, and control access. The owner of the high-violence bar is the place manager that needs to change alcohol serving practices, exclude repeat offenders, and reduce crowding. The public agency operating a drug-infested park is the place manager that needs to install lights, trim trees, and set opening and closing hours. The agency that controls the street with a high number of vehicle fatalities is the place manager that needs to modify the street.

We have an impulse to call such problems *police problems,*

but they are not really police problems. They are problems created by others. The police do not create the crime opportunities that offenders take advantage of. Other people and organizations create these problems. We send the police to handle them, but it's only the place managers who can dismantle the opportunities.

What Is the Role of Police in Cities?

The principal agency of local government responsible for fighting fires is the fire department. But the number and severity of fires does not decline because of better firefighting tactics. The principal agency of local government responsible for attending to medical emergencies is emergency medical services (EMS). Yet, improvements in the public's health are not due to improved EMS services.

> **The police reduce crime when they shift the burden of crime reduction onto the people and organizations who create the crime opportunities.**

The principal agency of local government responsible for addressing crimes is the police department. Nevertheless… well, you get the picture.

We send local police to handle events that no other public entity does. But just because we send them does not make these events police problems. Problems roll downhill and the police are always there to catch them. Relying on police to use their criminal justice authority to address crimes creates additional problems for cities. It increases costs to the public, who pay for the police. It shunts people into the criminal justice system who do not need to be there. To be sure, justice requires that serious offenders be removed from society. But if we do not dismantle the opportunities these offenders exploit, other people will take these offenders' places.

Figure 1. The 25 Techniques of Situational Crime Prevention

INCREASE EFFORT	INCREASE RISKS	REDUCE REWARDS	REDUCE PROVOCATIONS	REDUCE EXCUSES
1. Target-harden • Multi-factor authentication • High-security locks	**6. Extend guardianship** • Neighborhood watch apps • Buddy systems	**11. Conceal targets** • Secure lockers for deliveries • Tinted car windows	**16. Reduce stress** • Comfortable seating at transit hubs • Air conditioning in transit	**21. Set rules** • Rental agreements • Public transport codes
2. Control access • QR code building access • Gated entries	**7. Assist natural surveillance** • Video doorbells • Improve lighting	**12. Remove targets** • Cashless payment on transit • Mobile payment incentives	**17. Avoid disputes** • Mobile ordering at cafes • Fixed taxi/cab fares	**22. Post instructions** • "No smoking" signs • Emergency procedures signs
3. Screen exits • Exit barriers at events • Bag checks at stadiums	**8. Reduce anonymity** • ID for workspace rentals • Cameras in transit areas	**13. Identify property** • Microdot tagging of electronics • GPS tracking	**18. Reduce arousal** • Ban offensive symbols • Regulate bar noise	**23. Alert conscience** • "Shoplifting is stealing" signs • Roadside speed display boards
4. Deflect offenders • Street closures • Benches away from stores	**9. Use place managers** • Parking lot attendants • Sports arena security staff	**14. Disrupt markets** • Detect suspicious e-commerce listings • Monitor black markets	**19. Neutralize peer pressure** • Anti-bullying campaigns • Allow one teen shopper in store at a time	**24. Assist compliance** • Easy checkout • Trash cans in busy areas
5. Control tools/weapons • Airport luggage screening • Monitor spray paint sales	**10. Strengthen formal surveillance** • Drones at events • License plate readers	**15. Deny benefits** • Tamper-proof labels • Smartphone kill switches	**20. Discourage imitation** • Rapid repair of vandalism • Avoid publishing security flaws	**25. Control drugs/alcohol** • Alcohol-free zones • Allow consumption of alcohol only bought on premises

Modified from the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, popcenter.asu.edu/content/situational-crime-prevention-0

The police reduce crime when they shift the burden of crime reduction onto the people and organizations who create the crime opportunities. We saw this in the three examples opening this article.

The notion that the role of police is to help crack open and change the immediate facilitators of crime and other troubles is more than 45 years old. Herman Goldstein proposed it in 1979.[11] Since then, two things have occurred. First, researchers and practitioners have created a thick body of guidance about how to solve problems, situational crime prevention being one of the most important. The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing (popcenter.asu.edu) is a repository of this information. We have mentioned several others in our previous articles. Second, researchers have tested problem-oriented policing and found it is successful and outperforms enforcement-oriented patrolling.[12,13] It has been adopted by police agencies around the world.

Although many police agencies have applied problem-oriented policing and situational crime prevention, most do not or do so inconsistently. If police are reluctant to take the lead in investigating and dismantling crime opportunities, some other arm of local government could do this. This arm would need police assistance, but they would also need the assistance of other arms of local government. An office of crime opportunity dismantling, reporting to the city manager, could coordinate crime problem solving efforts. It even might

be better positioned than the police to shift the burden of crime reduction from the shoulders of the police to those who created the crime opportunities.

Conclusions

The title of our article asks a question: can the police solve all crime problems? Our answer is no. If you expect the police, using standard police tactics, to improve public safety, you will be disappointed. Instead, ask yourself, *how can we dismantle crime opportunities?* Standard police tactics usually only temporarily disrupt crime opportunities. To dismantle crime opportunities, situational crime prevention is necessary. The only people and organizations who can apply SCP are those with control over the situation (e.g., property owners, product manufacturers). Police can play a vital role in identifying these people and organizations and in suggesting solutions, and so can other branches of local government. City managers whose departments collaboratively dismantle crime opportunities will increase public safety more than city managers who do not.

In our series, we have identified five principles you can use to construct effective crime reduction programs. We have provided these five principles to help you overcome five fallacies about crime. These fallacies are often embedded in misguided proposals to reduce crime. Next month, we will provide you with a simple tool you can use to identify misguided ideas before they become practice: the SCRAP test. **PM**

Other Articles in This Series

Part 1: "Do Solutions to Crime Need to Be Complicated?": icma. org/articles/pm-magazine/ do-solutions-crime- need-be-complicated

Part 2: "Is Crime Widespread?": icma.org/ articles/pm-magazine/ crime-widespread

Part 3: "Do Residents Matter Most in Reducing Crime": icma.org/articles/ pm-magazine/do-residents- matter-most-reducing-crime

Part 4: "Do More Arrests Reduce Crime?": icma.org/articles/ pm-magazine/do-more- arrests-reduce-crime

ENDNOTES AND RESOURCES

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