Summary of the intervention’s aim
This report describes findings from the authors’ research on problem-solving undertaken by staff from the Home Office Policing and Reducing Crime Unit (PCRU). Questionnaire and interview findings indicated that, despite widespread support from the police for the concept, high quality problem-solving was rare in police forces (circa 2000). A range of factors militating for and against the successful adoption of problem-solving are presented, together with a ‘checklist’ against which to measure problem-solving performance.

(The information in this report and the broader Crime Reduction Research Series was designed to present research findings and guidance material relevant to practitioners involved in crime reduction at the local level, and particularly the local crime and disorder partnerships.)

Outcomes
Using data collated by the authors, the report identifies a number of initiatives as ‘problem-solving successes’ and translate their design into a series of recommendations of effective practice. These are briefly described using the established SARA framework (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment), and an alternative acronym ‘PROCTOR’ (PROblem, Cause, Tactic or Treatment, Output, and Result).

The researchers primarily used a questionnaire to understand approaches problem-solving initiatives across all forces in England and Wales (see the section ‘How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions’ below).
Of the initiatives returned only 42% were deemed by the force concerned to have been failures. The initiatives covered a range of problem types, the commonest targets for problem-solving amongst the initiatives returned were burglary, vehicle crime, drugs, and youth.

Only 5% of the 266 responses about initiatives involved the police as the junior partner. Nearly 40% were police only initiatives. The vast majority of the remainder were split between multiple agency efforts with shared responsibility (31%) and partnerships with a single other agency where the police were mainly or equally responsible (20%).

Analysis of the returned initiative questionnaires suggested that:

- Evaluation continues to be a major weakness, and raises doubts about the status of the self-assessed successes.
- Few evaluations are independent.
- Evidence is used selectively.
- Use of incident data, crime data and local authority data in defining and analysing the source and distribution of problems contributes to claimed problem-solving successes.
- Use of these data sources requires that provision be in place for relevant data exchange.
- There is little attention paid to how initiatives may have had their effects.
- Consultation of the established literature concerning previous efforts to address similar problems and implement similar measures is associated with higher rates of self-assessed success.
- There appear to have been improvements in the thoroughness of problem-solving since *Beating Crime* was published in 1998, though there is still a great deal of room for improvement.
- There was evidence of only a little quantitative analysis in the questionnaire returns, where respondents were given opportunities to show it.
- There is relatively little systematic evaluation. What did exist was considered generally weak.
- There is undue satisfaction with reduction as an indicator that the initiative was effective without attention to alternative explanations, or to possible side-effects.

The report describes three initiatives in detail; *methadone dealing and drug related deaths*, *youth disorder on a housing estate*, and *unruly children in a park*. The following general lessons for problem-solving emerge from visiting the projects:

- 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.
- Detailed analysis needs to be directed at ‘pinch points’, i.e. at the weakest necessary conditions for the problems to persist.
• Site specific analysis of problems is needed to select responses that are relevant to local circumstances.
• In selecting responses it is crucial to work out in detail how they are expected to produce their intended effects.
• 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.
• Problem-solving, especially for large-scale issues, is facilitated by the establishment of multi-disciplinary/multi-agency teams.
• 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.

Conclusions were also drawn regarding typical weaknesses in: identifying and analysing; working out what to do; partnership working; implementation; and in drawing lessons drawn from previous experience (see p. vii).

The research also identified factors seen to encourage and enable problem-solving:

• Presence of a committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and involved leadership
• Provision of practical help and advice in planning and doing problem-solving
• Provision of data, analytic software for analysis and competent analysts
• Provision of information, training and experience to inform problem-solving
• Development of methods to disseminate good practice
• Development of structures to encourage problem-solving
• Development of units or task-forces dedicated to specific areas of problem-solving
• Allocation of staff on the basis of their aptitudes
• Use of rewards to incentivise problem-solving

Alongside these factors are a selection of examples demonstrating ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ problem-solving (p.12 and 22). Reflecting on this range of recommendations, the report provides a checklist that can be used to identify points for improvement at a variety of levels (see p.37). The authors extend the insight into addressing practice by introducing a ‘pyramid’ model of comprehensive problem-solving (pp. 38-40).

**Summary of evaluation conclusions**
The report concludes that, despite the almost universal espousal of problem-solving by the police service, high quality problem-solving were 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.
While the research questionnaires suggested that many data sources were used, visits to forces and examination of individual initiatives repeatedly suggested that data are weak, and routine aggregate data sharing is exceptional and problematic. No police area was visited during the inspection where scope for improvement was not found and acknowledged. Analysts are thin on the ground, often used mechanically and for processing management information, and tend to be inexperienced, poorly paid, and with few qualifications for preventive analysis.

**How the evaluation gathered information for findings and conclusions**

The researchers implemented a mixed-methods approach to gather data by which to derive their findings. They distributed questionnaires about problem-solving initiatives to all forces in England and Wales. Forces completed a questionnaire asking about their overall approach to crime reduction and eight short questionnaires describing four successful and four unsuccessful problem-solving initiatives. An example of the questionnaire is not provided in the report.

Subsequently they were asked to fill in more extensive questionnaires in relation to their nominated 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.

Furthermore, 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.

The inspection team also undertook week-long visits to twelve forces, conducting interviews and focus groups at headquarters and three Basic Command Units (BCUs) in each of them. The forces and BCUs were selected to be broadly representative of their kind; they were not selected randomly.

Researchers from PRCU went to the headquarters of eight of the twelve forces visited for inspection, and to two BCUs in each of them. PRCU also interviewed those involved in two of the initiatives that had been deemed successful in each force visited, and one that had been deemed unsuccessful, examining the work undertaken in some detail.

In addition to looking in detail at selected initiatives during the eight force area visits, the PRCU team also 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.

The initiatives were not selected randomly. Information on initiatives contained in the questionnaires was supplemented by interviews with staff involved in the initiatives in the eight forces visited by PRCU.

**Further details about the SCS evaluation of this report are available on request. Please contact info@scsn.org**

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