



Briefing Paper No 19

What works to reduce crime? A summary of the evidence

Introduction

In October 2014 a [report](#)¹ was produced by the Justice Analytical Service in conjunction with the Scottish Government, which examined the evidence that had been collated in response to the question on what works to reduce crime.

The summary of collated evidence was not intended to be a definitive solution on what works to reduce crime but was aimed at providing a foundation upon which new and exciting research evidence may be added in the future.

The evidence review identified three key primary prevention approaches:

- Targeting the underlying causes to reduce the desire or need to offend
- Deterring potential offenders by ensuring that the cost is higher than any benefit realised
- Increasing the difficulty of offending by reducing the opportunities to commit a crime

A fourth area which identified the risks of recidivism was not included as it was the subject of a separate review of literature on reducing reoffending.

Methodology

The process used logic models to set out potential approaches that could be utilised within the three primary preventative approaches and aimed at identifying key messages in support of the Building Safer Communities [Programme](#) and informing assessment on frameworks for future evidence.

Addressing the Underlying causes of Crime

The report examined both distal and proximal factors for offending and provided evidential support on a wide range of underlying causes that contribute to crime. The factors discussed within the research identified not only biological predisposition toward offending but also examined parental input and emotional awareness; school and community roles within education, strong social relationships, the reliance on substances and the impact of offending. Although it is assessed that biological drivers such as genetic, hormonal and neurological issues are recognised as contributing factors the report identifies that it is highly likely that these contributors are moderated by other situational or environmental conditions which are contained in the report.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0046/00460517.pdf>

² <http://www.buildingsafercommunities.co.uk/>

The report examines the evidence provided from multiple projects and academic studies looking at the effects of improved parenting on early years development, the establishment of self-control and social-psychological development and its impact on offending. The report identified that despite genetic factors and social environment, awareness of self-control from an early age was not only important in preventing offending, it was also a factor which would improve wider life chances. Through early years interventions self-control could be developed resulting in more positive outcomes.

The evidence identified that community and school were also key areas where behavioural boundaries were set and learnt. The report identifies school, communities and parents as a source of informal control, without which there is a negative effect on offending. The report clearly illustrates that early years intervention with schools reduces offending, however despite the numerous studies conducted there is no clear assessment of the crime prevention effectiveness of community mentoring.

The need for young people to have the ability to visualise something from another's perspective is emphasised and is often referred to as "emotional intelligence". Findings suggest that emotional intelligence is a strong contributory factor in reducing the risk of offending, which when combined with the development of cognitive behaviour, social learning and empathy can reduce anti-social behaviour and offending.

Evidence collated within the report identified that abuse and neglect affect self-worth, self-control and societal links; negatively affecting offending behaviour. This evidence emphasises the need for social relationships and a strong child protection system.

Through the use of longitudinal evidence offending was often attributable to alienation, lack of social commitment and lack of neighbourhood and community attachments. This is often exacerbated by low levels of parenting supervision, erratic, threatening and harsh discipline, weak parental attachments and issues at school. There is little to deny the importance of parenting skills, however the report found that if this lack of social commitment was not addressed in the early years it could undermine community bonds and result in a greater risk of offending and anti-social behaviour.

The impact of alcohol and drugs is a contributory factor which has been identified in the evidence with high number of offenders admitting to being intoxicated at the time of the offence. While others offended to fund a misuse issue. The research identified that alcohol was a cause of crime whereas drugs were a symptom of crime. Both areas provided analysis which identified that improved early interventions and improved guidance would reduce the risk of misuse and would reduce offending behaviour.

In addition to emotional development the need for community involvement through employment and opportunities was investigated. It was identified that those at the greatest risk of offending were either in low paid work or unemployed; yet there were

questions around high inequality areas where low expectations, few chances of employment and a lower perception of the cost of offending if caught all affected the hypothesis behind offending and employment. Evidence from a range of programmes identified three themes which reduce the risk of offending; subsidised employment, short term training, inclusive residential programmes for life and vocational skills.

The report also looked at the provision of qualifications, a factor that equipped young people with skills to improve legitimate access to opportunities. The focus was on changing the classroom instructional and management practices to enhance the climate or educational process for children. The studies identified a relationship between offending and educational attainment which could be mediated by other underlying factors such as self-control, which when lacking was identified as a driver in offending behaviour.

Deterring Offending by Ensuring the Cost Outweighs the Benefits

The second area of evidence highlighted that the primary responsibility of deterrence lay with the criminal justice system, its strength in developing cultural norms and encouraging compliance were key. The evidence showed that offenders are often disassociated and neutral, and that preventative measures using cognitive behavioural theory promoted emotional intelligence and reduce offending. Adopting a cognitive behavioural approach was reported as effective amongst those who committed serious crimes but had little success with perpetrators of minor crimes such as shoplifting and property damage.

The report identified that compliance was often relative to the authority that the justice system portrayed, the degree of fairness present and the level of trust gained. The greater the possibility of discovery and the knowledge that high sanctions will be imposed does affect offending behaviour in some.

Examining the community and its guardianship of young people the report provides examples of how community cohesion, a collective efficacy to reduce crime, community guardianship and a defined condemnation of criminal behaviour all reduce the risk of offending. Community guardianship and public space control lessens the opportunities to offend, whilst residential instability, density and economic inequality are predictors of offending. The report recorded that by fostering collective efficacy and empowerment community cohesion, instability is prevented.

The report shows how, despite a positive attitude to preventing crime, the environment often dictates the level of crime. The “broken window” theory has shown that areas of neglect are perceived to be more lawless and often attract more crime, which perpetuates the issue. Removal of the signs of disorder is a positive step to reducing crime and the alteration of the perception of crime.

The report examines the formal method of social control which looks at how offences are punished, risk of detection identified and celerity of punishment awarded. One of the key issues identified is that policies often have no deterrent effect unless they alter potential offender’s belief about the risk of sanction. The higher the belief the

lower the chance of offending. The evidence identified that the most effective results stem from deploying police officers to target hot spots at key times. The certainty, severity and swiftness of the legal process were examined and despite a lack of definitive evidence it was clear that the severity of punishment would impact behaviour.

Reducing the Opportunities to Offend

The third section of the evidence paper identifies aspects that could reduce offending by the denial of the opportunity to commit the crime. This is divided into many specific sections which examine a wide range of prevention methods and considerations.

Situational crime prevention hypothesises that crime occurs when there is a cluster of motivated offenders, opportunity to offend and the absence of a guardian/deterrent. The report evidenced that opportunity-reducing prevention is effective only with offences such as property and robbery, but not with expressive offences such as murder and violence. Situational crime prevention techniques include using technology, improved public space design, greater physical barriers, reducing access to the tools of crime and reducing provocation.

A report is included on the Kirkholt Burglary-Reduction Project which utilised a number of initiatives to reduce the levels of offending in an area, through a prevention based strategy over three years. Details of this project can be found at: <http://www.popcenter.org/library/scp/pdf/71-Kirkholt.pdf>

The evidence around preventative measures that have resulted in changes to perception of safety include secure by design improvements in public spaces which design out the ability to offend. The report also examines the effect of technological improvements which have resulted in more secure doors, windows and locks. Offending such as vandalism has also shown evidence of reduction as a result of young people diversionary projects and better designed public spaces.

The report identified that through better design vehicle crimes have reduced with immobilisers, GPS tracking and electronic security all making vehicles a less attractive option. As a gateway crime to further offending the report highlights how this technological deterrent has helped to reduce offending numbers amongst young people. Technology has also affected offending against businesses within deprived areas as basic physical security measures, silent alarms and forensic traps have all been introduced. The reductions were not only in housebreakings and robberies figures; there were also reductions in credit card fraud.

Other technology such as CCTV has been attributed to the displacement of offending in public areas; however alcohol related offending has not been deterred by the use of CCTV. Natural surveillance, such as improved street lights, was identified as having an effect on offending with the perception of crime and fear of crime reducing even in areas where the levels of offending did not change.

When examining physical security and access, the report provided a detailed examination of the benefits and issues around access and exit control measures and

concealing and strengthening measures, such as protective glass and screens around bus drivers. The evidence identified that unlike street lights the fortification mentality has a negative effect on the perception of safety. Other prevention methods included rail, bus and telephone cards which reduced the carriage of money have all had positive effects on offending. Restricting access to money has been effective, however the report identified that restricting access to the tools of crime is more complex and there is no specific data or project which has evidenced this.

The evidence collated on reducing provocation has identified that there is a higher threat of provocation when alcohol is present in a group of males who do not know one another and have little room to manoeuvre. Other factors like confined open air markets are perfect for opportunist crime which could simply be prevented by the widening of aisles which the evidence suggests reduces incidents.

The report provided evidence collated from a wide range of initiatives which were aimed at preventing situational crime. Housebreaking, property theft and vehicle theft were all examined and campaigns were shown to be most effective when they were localised. There were reported reductions in housebreakings in areas where specific anti-housebreaking and property theft projects were in operation which included property marking, door to door visits and public awareness raising. The evidence on situational crime prevention initiatives did express concerns that these initiatives may cause displacement of crime. The areas of displacement were assessed as location, time, target and type of offence the offender and offence. Despite the concern the threat was assessed as limited.

The final aspect of the report examined approaches that extended beyond situation offending and looked at access to weapons, alcohol and diversionary opportunities. Restricting access to weapons examined the impact of stop and search, amnesties, education and mandatory sentencing on offending. There has been some public criticism on the use of "stop and search" with evidence showing that the policy is a deterrent, which when combined with education such as "No Knives, Better Lives" the number of carried weapons does fall. The report also identified that issues such as mandatory sentences will only act as a deterrent if the risk of detection is high and there is a commitment to enforcement.

It been established in all three sections of the report that alcohol is a factor in early years development, is a contributor in offending and punishment and there is an inference that by restricting access incidents will fall. The evidence in the report examines how initiatives such as minimum pricing and changes to the age of consumption have had positive effects in other countries. The World Health Organisation is quoted as stating that "There is substantial evidence showing that an increase in alcohol prices reduces consumption and the level of alcohol related problems"; whilst the European Union reports that increasing the minimum age of alcohol and access through fewer outlets reduces consumption and crimes fall.

The final approach to restricting the ability to offend is through diversionary recreational opportunities which looked at a number of projects and initiatives and their effect. The analysis concluded that although the idea has met success in some areas there was a "lack of credible empirical evidence on the impact of recreational

activities on offending due to the short term funding associated to projects". The benefit in conducting short term recreational projects is that they act as a "hook" upon which to layer a developmental approach combining social support, positive role models and other protective measures can be placed.

Conclusion

Across the report the conclusions identify the importance of parenting, the establishment of boundaries and emotional control and the importance of a robust and effective punishment system backed by community engagement and leadership. This would then be expanded by introducing more intelligent design of public spaces to reduce crime, increasing awareness of displacement and the reduction of access to key drivers such as alcohol through age restrictions and pricing. In addition the final section concluded that despite the lack of robust evidence to quantify the effect that diversionary recreation activities have, the benefits in engaging with young people and providing more positive outlets, providing greater social support and role models can only help to reduce offending.

The report is a comprehensive catalogue of the evidence collated to address the issue of offending and what works to reduce crime. By dividing the research into the three sections the publication clearly links the effort of early years interventions, the challenges behind a robust and effective punishment system and the prevention of offending by removing the attractive targets and prime drivers of crime. This publication provides a base from which further evidence can be collated and helps to focus on the primary issues around crime and what works to prevent it.

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