

NPIA research briefing

The impact of information about crime and policing on public perceptions: the results of a randomised controlled trial

The National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) carried out a randomised controlled trial to test the impact of crime maps and policing information. The public's reaction to information about crime and policing was positive; a large majority thought it was informative and trustworthy. Importantly, the study was able to challenge the myth that sharing information with the public would increase the 'fear of crime'. In fact, information was found to improve people's perceptions of their neighbourhood and of the local police. The results of the study suggest that crime and policing information is a promising intervention in terms of improving the views of the public and, potentially, enhancing police accountability. The evidence, therefore, indicates that an investment of police resources in making information available to the public is worthwhile, particularly when integrated within a broader neighbourhood policing approach.

- The NPIA carried out a randomised controlled trial to test the short term impact of web-based crime maps and policing information on public perceptions to a high standard of evidence. The purpose of the study was to assess whether the investment of police resources in providing information to the public would deliver benefits.
- The trial involved giving a large and nationally representative sample of people crime maps and/or policing information for their local area. Their views about the local police and the area where they lived were then compared to an equivalent group of people who received no information. In total, 7,434 members of the public participated in the trial.
- While the trial tested the information that was made available by police forces in England and Wales in 2009, its findings remain relevant because of the extension of crime mapping down to street level by January 2011.

- Overall, the public reaction to the crime and policing information was very positive. A large majority thought the intervention materials were trustworthy and informative:
 - 89 per cent trusted the policing information and 86 per cent found it informative.
 - 83 per cent trusted the crime maps and 77 per cent found them to be informative.

These results are important if information is to deliver wider benefits in the future, such as enhancing transparency and police accountability.

- The results suggested contextual information helped people to make sense of the crime data. A higher proportion thought crime maps were informative when they also received extra information about policing in the local area. Thus, crime maps should continue to be supplemented with details about the neighbourhood team and, potentially, crime prevention advice as well.
- Importantly, there was no evidence to suggest that any harm had been caused in terms of worry about crime. The findings of the study, therefore, challenge the myth that sharing information with the public would increase the 'fear of crime'.
- Overall, information provision was found to have a positive impact on some public perception measures (see summary results table, p4):
 - Crime maps and policing information had a modest positive effect on the perceptions of neighbourhood policing. People were slightly more likely to think the police understood their concerns and dealt with the things that mattered.
 - Crime maps had a small positive impact on perceptions of the crime rate. People were slightly less likely to think crime was going up locally.
 - The policing information and a combined package of the crime maps and policing information also led to a slight increase the proportion of people who thought it likely they would be a victim in the next 12 months. This result should not be seen as negative outcome given that worry about

crime was not higher overall. A small rise in perceived crime risk was perhaps inevitable as the information was likely to remind people that crime sometimes did occur. Moreover, a specific policy aim was for crime and policing information to help the public manage risks better and to take preventive action.

- The size of these effects was expected. Given that no attempt was made to change people's lived experiences of crime or the local police, it is notable that information was able to alter attitudes even in a small way. A more sustained flow of information might have a bigger effect in the longer term.
- Subgroup analysis also showed that some people, particularly those more 'exposed' to crime (e.g. victims of crime or residents in higher crime areas) were reassured by the crime and policing information. In addition, exploratory analysis indicated that the information also potentially helped reinforce pre-existing positive views.
- This finding underlines the need to target information, and to tailor its presentation and content towards the needs of different audiences. For example, particular consideration should be given to providing advice on effective and easy-to-implement crime prevention measures – specific to problems in the local area – to help foster reassurance and encourage behaviour change.
- In conclusion, the study suggests crime and policing information is a promising intervention in terms of improving public attitudes and, potentially, enhancing police accountability. It also indicates that the investment of police resources in making information available is worthwhile. Information provision should be regarded as integral to neighbourhood policing rather than a standalone initiative, particularly as it may enhance the impact of neighbourhood policing and provide reassurance.

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Summary results table: mean response scores and effect sizes

Outcome (response scale)	Intended effects	Mean response scores				Effect sizes (coefficients and standard errors)		
		Control	Crime maps	Policing info	Combined intervention	Crime maps	Policing info	Combined intervention
Perceptions of the local police								
The local police perceived to be community-oriented (1 to 10)	↑	5.09	5.22	5.25	5.22	↑ 0.13* (SE 0.06)	↑ 0.16** (SE 0.06)	↑ 0.13* (SE 0.06)
The local police perceived to be effective (1 to 10)	↑	5.44	5.47	5.46	5.51	0.03 (SE 0.06)	0.02 (SE 0.06)	0.07 (SE 0.06)
Confidence in the police (1 to 4, negatively scored)	↑	2.39	2.37	2.36	2.35	-0.02 (SE 0.03)	-0.03 (SE 0.03)	-0.04 (SE 0.03)
Perceptions of the local area								
Crime perceived to be a problem in the local area (1 to 4)	↓	1.15	1.13	1.17	1.16	-0.02 (SE 0.02)	0.02 (SE 0.02)	0.01 (SE 0.02)
Crime perceived to be increasing in the local area (-2 to +2)	↓	0.08	0.03	0.06	0.06	↓ -0.05* (SE 0.02)	-0.02 (SE 0.02)	-0.02 (SE 0.02)
Perceptions of personal safety								
Perceived likelihood of being a victim of crime (1 to 10)	↑	3.38	3.42	3.54	3.53	0.04 (SE 0.07)	↑ 0.16* (SE 0.07)	↑ 0.15* (SE 0.07)
Worry about being a victim (1 to 4)	No ↑	2.48	2.49	2.52	2.51	0.01 (SE 0.03)	0.04 (SE 0.03)	0.03 (SE 0.03)

This summary table provides an overview of the full results tables set out in the main report.

Statistical significance: *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.01.

Note: Effect sizes should be interpreted with reference to the relevant response scale. An effect size can also be expressed as a percentage of the response scale (e.g. a coefficient of 0.13 on a 10-point response scale would equal an effect size of 1.3 per cent).