

What works in policing to reduce crime?

Effective ways to tackle crime, based on the best available evidence.

First published 1 July 2021

Our what works in policing to reduce crime series provides a brief overview of the most effective ways the police can tackle crime, based on the best available research evidence at the time of publishing.

While these resources were originally developed to support the newly elected police and crime commissioners (PCC) in 2016, they are of relevance to anyone who works in or with policing. Due to their popularity, they were updated to coincide with the May 2021 PCC elections.

The resources provide evidence relating to four commonly asked questions.

- What is the best thing the police can do to reduce crime?
- Shouldn't we just have more bobbies on the beat?
- What about zero tolerance – isn't that how they reduced crime in New York?
- How should the police get a grip on demand?

The focus is on the police contribution to crime reduction – not on what might cause crime to rise or fall more generally, or broader long-term approaches such as cross-agency intervention with families at risk, or the wider criminal justice system.

The answers contain reasonably strong evidence identifying which general policing strategies are likely to be effective. However, there is currently more limited evidence on which specific tactics are likely to be successful in dealing with a particular problem in a particular situation.

What is the best thing the police can do to reduce crime?

Crime is highly concentrated – the evidence shows that most of it is associated with a small proportion of places, victims and offenders. This has important potential implications for the targeting of police resources.

- **Find out more about how resources can be targeted**

Focusing action on crime and anti-social behaviour hot spots, repeat victims and prolific or high volume offenders is an effective way to allocate resources for crime reduction. Understanding what is causing high volume offending or problems in hot spots and coming up with specific solutions – often in partnership with others – allows the police to drive down crime.

- **Read the latest evidence on targeted approaches to crime and disorder reduction**

As well as preventing crime and deterring offenders, the way the police treat individuals and communities day to day in any encounter (and historically over time) can also make a difference to crime.

The police can encourage people to co-operate with them and not break the law by:

- treating people equally
- making decisions fairly and explaining those decisions
- being respectful

- **Find out about what stops people offending**

In summary, the best thing that police can do to reduce crime is to target resources based on analysis of the problem and ensure the fair treatment of all those they have contact with.

Shouldn't we just have more bobbies on the beat?

Just having more people or responding more quickly to calls from the public (unless the suspect is on the scene) does not necessarily reduce crime or reassure people.

Patrolling on foot can reduce crime where it is targeted in crime hot spots. It also reassures the public when it sends out a signal that the police are taking action.

To cut crime and reassure the public, careful analysis is needed to make sure officers and staff are doing the right things (including patrol) at the right times and in the right places. The police also need to make sure they find out what matters to the public and why, and tackle these problems.

- [The impact of police numbers on crime rates](#)
- [The effectiveness of visible police patrol?](#)

What about zero tolerance – isn't that how they reduced crime in New York?

Crime came down in New York City during the 1990s by more than in other US cities. Unlike in those other cities, rates of imprisonment did not increase. The reasons for the decline aren't certain but police activity is thought to have played a part.

The New York police chief at the time has said that zero tolerance (blanket enforcement of all laws without targeting) does not describe what happened – community policing and an organisational focus on crime reduction and quality of life issues were key.

Regular performance meetings – called Compstat – were believed to have helped encourage problem-solving as well as a focus on crime hot spots.

- [Zero-tolerance policing](#)
- [CompStat](#)

How should the police get a grip on demand?

To get to grips with longer-term problems and deliver sustained reduction in demand, the police need to take a range of issues into account.

When planning how to reduce demand, the police need to consider:

- patterns and long-term trends (for example, how areas compare to other similar areas)
- whether and how the police currently respond
- what resources are involved in that response

When there is an increase in demand, further analysis is needed to determine whether it is the start of a new trend that the police or someone else should target, or a temporary spike that is unlikely to be affected by police action (for example, because it is due to an unexpected change in the weather).

Going beyond the raw numbers, it will be important for the police to prioritise incidents that cause the most harm, and identify and respond to any unmet needs (such as people at risk who do not come to the attention of the police).

Care will also be required to ensure that efforts to reduce demand do not have any unintended adverse consequences (for example, the public not reporting incidents to the police, or the police not recording them appropriately).

A range of data and information can be analysed to develop a detailed understanding of police demand (such as who it affects, what generates it and why, and where and when it is concentrated). Alongside police-recorded crime and intelligence, sources might include victim surveys and talking to local communities.

Analysis of these data sources can help the police and their partners to decide who is best placed to respond to a problem, and what is the best thing they can do to tackle its root causes.

A problem-solving approach is more likely to deliver sustained reductions in demand than a short-term increase in police activity on its own (Hinkle and others, 2020; Taylor and others, 2011).

Read more about demand management in these College resources.

- [Demand management](#)
- [National decision model](#)
- [Solving problems](#)

The following external resources may also prove useful (available online or through the [National Police Library](#)).

- Lauf J and others. (2020). 'Understanding the concept of "demand" in policing: a scoping review and resulting implications for demand management'. Policing and Society [internet].
- Sidebottom A and others. (2020). 'Problem-Oriented Policing in England and Wales 2019' [internet].
- Sidebottom A and others. (2020). 'Implementing and sustaining problem-oriented policing: A guide'. Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science, University College London [internet].
- Walley P and Adams M. (2019). 'An Evaluation of Demand Management Practices in UK Police Forces' [internet].

See also: 'The National Problem-Solving and Demand Reduction Programme Group' on [Knowledge Hub](#) (you will need to log in).

Useful links

- [Crime reduction toolkit: Problem-oriented policing](#)
- [Demand infographic](#)
- [Estimating demand on the police service](#)

References

Hinkle JC and others. (2020). 'Problem-Oriented Policing for Reducing Crime and Disorder.' Oslo: Campbell Collaboration.

Taylor B, Koper C and Woods D. (2011). 'A Randomized Controlled Trial of Different Policing Strategies at Hot Spots of Violent Crime'. Journal of Experimental Criminology, 7, pp 149-181.

Tags

Crime reduction