PROBLEMS WITH THE PROBLEM-ORIENTED APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper subjects the problem-oriented approach to crime prevention to critical scrutiny. Though acknowledged as a theoretically coherent and potentially highly promising technique of crime control, questions are raised about the extent to which the ambitions of the approach are likely to be realised in the process of translation from the realm of ideas to the realm of action. In particular, three broad kinds of barriers are considered that may stand in the way of realisation of the approach's full potential: the problems of responsibility, of politics, and of identification. The paper draws upon empirical material from Britain but raises issues of international relevance.

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the background to the emergence of the problem-oriented approach, together with its basic assumptions. It then goes on to look at a range of factors that stand in the way of the realisation of this highly rationalistic model of crime control. Particular attention is given to how these factors affect notions of what is or is not to be regarded as a problem suitable to this approach. These factors must be constantly borne in mind and planned for by those developing this highly promising approach to crime control. It should be noted that problem-oriented crime prevention is not synonymous with problem-oriented policing (Goldstein, 1990), since the focus of the latter is wider than just crime.

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THE BACKGROUND

The sense of utilitarian optimism surrounding the capacity of the public sector to make good its promises of eliminating key social problems such as crime was shattered in the 1970s by the emergence of stinging critiques from both right- and left-wing constituencies, and an economic crisis that rendered the logic of such critiques irresistible. However, over the last two decades there have emerged two distinct phenomena that have augured well for both the emergence and future development of crime prevention. The first of these has been a preparedness to question the efficacy of many of public policy's "sacred cows," including, within the criminal justice domain, the "3 P's" of police, prisons and probation. In the long-distance race of crime control, this has enabled crime prevention to move up from the position of back-marker to one of the leading pack.

Following in the political and economic wake of the first, the second notable phenomenon of the past 20 years has been the emergence of the "new managerialist" paradigm. Definitions of this paradigm are varied and disputed, but the key point is that it has brought a new currency to public policies, which must now be justified increasingly according to the imperatives of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, or the general rubric of "value for money." Accompanying this development, and as part of a trend wherein public organisations have taken their cue from the most successful private ones (Peters and Waterman, 1982), the service user or consumer has emerged as a much more important player in the policy process, forcing organisations to pay considerably more attention to the questions of service and product quality.

Crime prevention has reflected this movement in many ways, most notably by enhancing the position of the victim relative to the offender or society as a consumer of criminal justice services. In particular, crime prevention strengthens the victim or potential victim's hand by replacing generic, undiscriminating and unfocused crime control practices with ones that are tailored and targeted toward the specific needs of specific groups. In the light of findings from numerous national and local victimisation studies, which demonstrate that the risk of victimisation is concentrated in specific geographical areas, social groups or even individuals, the prospects of crime prevention offering enhanced value for money and quality are generally good.

Targeting is the key mechanism here. Not only does it represent an enhanced consumer-responsiveness that is likely to bring positive evaluations of quality, it also acts as a means of rationing whereby scarce crime prevention resources can be focused where they are most needed, in the same way that means-testing acts as a selective rationing mechanism for social security benefits. Targeting, then, is simultaneously about economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, and as the economic imperative continues to dictate the pattern of public spending in the mid-1990s, it is essential that we spend our crime prevention budgets wisely and well.

THE PROBLEM-ORIENTED APPROACH

Although there is still a place for generalised publicity campaigns and the provision of specialist advice and information from police crime prevention officers, the now-familiar problem-oriented approach to crime prevention has begun to move to the fore as our major strategy, typified by the situational model of crime prevention pioneered by the British Home Office in the mid-1970s (Mayhew et al., 1976). The core of this approach is its dynamism and flexibility: it is problem- rather than practice-oriented, which means there are no preconceived notions of how best to tackle the specific crime problem under investigation. Instead, the object is to fully research all of the information available about the situation of a particular crime problem, drawing data from as many different agency sources as is both possible and necessary. From this research, a full picture of the crime problem should be possible, enabling those involved in the exercise to pinpoint exactly where, and often also when, a preventive strategy needs to be directed. Thereafter, it is a case of deciding what this strategy should actually be, and then implementing it together with a built-in monitoring system that can subsequently be used for purposes of fine-tuning and program evaluation. The process is quintessentially rational, with each step following on logically from the preceding one.

In theory, the model appears ideal, facilitating the development of a range of innovative prevention strategies that are as varied as the crime problems they seek to tackle. Indeed, many who have followed its logic have scored spectacular successes in the fight against crime. However, as with all theories of rational action, the problem-oriented model has its limitations. As Max Weber (1978) so ably demonstrated, there are more forms of action than the purely rational, and there is more than one form

of rationality. To borrow from Weberian terminology, the problem-oriented approach is essentially an ideal type.

Consequently, the model is not always faithfully or unproblematically pursued. Starting at its end. for example, it has been noted that a lack of attention has sometimes been paid to both monitoring and evaluation—as if the implementation were the end rather than the means to the end (U.K. Home Office, 1986). Where this does occur, the impact of crime prevention strategies is often insufficiently understood, and this can prove to be both frustrating and problematic for those seeking successful replications elsewhere (Tilley, 1993). Indeed, even where initiatives are evaluated, such evaluations can be misread. As a good example of this. Pease (1994) offers cases where research into initiatives involving Neighbourhood Watch have been read as "theory failure" when a more diligent reading of the research would show clearly that, in fact, "implementation failure" was to blame. Elsewhere, a number of other studies have demonstrated the various practical, political and organisational influences that render policy formulation, and particularly implementation, a good deal less of an exact science than the rational model might sometimes suppose (Hope, 1985; Sampson et al., 1988).

This paper follows in the tradition of those that have sought to uncover some of the difficulties that can stand in the way of the realisation of the rationalistic problem-oriented approach to crime prevention. However, whilst most attention has hitherto been addressed to the end of the process, and particularly to implementation, the remainder of this paper switches attention to the very beginning of that process. That is, the concept of problem-orientation is itself taken to be problematic. For conceptual clarity, this paper is divided into three sections, each of which overlap a good deal.

THE PROBLEM OF RESPONSIBILITY

The literature on problem-oriented crime prevention—or whatever it is specifically labelled as—begins at the same methodological point. Thus. Clarke (1992) describes stage one as "the collection of data about the nature and dimensions of the specific crime problem" (p.5); Ekblom (1988) identifies it as "obtaining data on crime problems" (p. 6); and Berry and Carter (1992) begin with the assertion that "there should be a clear understanding of the problem being addressed" (p.27).

Behind each of these prescriptions lies the assumption that some crime phenomenon has indeed attained the status of a problem. It is an assumption that lies at the heart of academic research discourse, insofar as the crime being investigated is "the research problem." But one should not necessarily conclude from this that others share this sense of "problem," for it more usually may be taken to mean something that has become intolerable, and about which something more should be done.

In the crime control field, if we look at what is currently being done our attention tends to fall first upon the police. For a crime to be regarded as a particular problem in the latter sense, either the police or the public must elevate it to that status. Herein, however, lies the first difficulty, for in much the same way that neo-conservative governments continue to bemoan the alleged "dependency culture" bred by the institutions of the welfare state, so one could similarly bemoan a dependency culture in crime control, wherein both responsibility and expertise are deferred to the police.

This has happened in part because the police have succeeded in convincing the public of their professional status, in much the same way that doctors have. There is much difference between the two occupational groups. However, at least until comparatively recently, both have been able to circumscribe their own work as a consequence of having persuaded us of their expertise in tackling crime and ill health, respectively. There is nothing wrong with this so long as professions do indeed deliver what they promise, but it has become increasingly evident that this is not the case in the 1990s.

The professions are now under attack, but their defences are strong. In the context of crime control, for something to be regarded as a problem that might then usher in the problem-oriented approach, the police would have to recognise that existing strategies are not holding the line against crime. However, given the sensitive nature of law and order in British politics, for example, and the fear that each of the main parties has of the other holding the higher ground, the police have been largely successful in claiming that existing strategies can hold the line, given sufficient resources to do so. Consequently, until very recently the police have been successful in claiming extra resources to get "more bobbies on the beat," despite overwhelming evidence (Clarke and Hough, 1980) that this has a very marginal impact on crime.

The police, then, have been quite successful in defining crime control in their own terms. And since in Britain they are the only agency to carry

a statutory responsibility for crime prevention—one that played a major part in their bid for legitimation in 1829, and arguably continues to do so—they have been able to use the concept's definitional elasticity to encompass their own preferred ways of working. With a heavy emphasis on "reactive" methods, these ways bear only a slight relation to the original meaning of the term in what Reiner (1992) calls "the scarecrow function" of visible uniformed patrolling (calling for more bobbies on the beat does not necessarily mean that this is where they will be deployed), or to what we would regard as "true" crime prevention today.

The police are no different than any other modern large bureaucratic organisation insofar as they display Weberian tendencies of conservatism and resistance to change. Consequently, despite the many changes of form that have occurred over the past couple of decades, the content remains pretty much the same repertoire of traditional responses. Again, like most organisations, there is a tendency to satisfice rather than maximise—a tendency that the new managerialism has not yet successfully tackled. Hence, for example, the difficulties that officers have encountered when urged to make the cultural shift to problem-oriented policing (Goldstein, 1990). Often the requisite perceived need to change is not there.

One might argue that the development of specialist police crime prevention departments contradicts this point by providing a more focused concern with crime prevention and a greater willingness to change. However, the prospects of their inculcating a greater sense of responsibility within the police for use of the problem-oriented approach to crime prevention remains limited. As research by Harvey et al. (1989) has demonstrated, this is because crime prevention departments are largely "ghettoised" within the police. As Johnston et al. (1993) add, on the basis of their research in one London Metropolitan Police Division, "the delivery of this specialist crime prevention service was not coordinated with the rest of the policing service, nor was it necessarily planned to focus on the Division's main priorities for crime reduction" (p.5).

Furthermore, in some forces crime prevention officers are insufficiently equipped for their specialist tasks as a consequence of being untrained. Even where they are, a major difficulty remains in that forces with the highest crime levels have the fewest officers, whilst the general use of such officers tends to be focused upon those (typically middle-class) areas where they are least needed.

Therefore, when the public seeks to rely upon the police, the result is unlikely to be particularly conducive to the development of the problemoriented approach to crime prevention. Of course, not all of the public do so rely: the growth in the domestic security technology market, in vigilantism, and in the participation of volunteers in the criminal justice system (Mawby and Gill, 1990) all bear testimony to a growing public acknowledgement that crime is a problem about which something else needs to be done. However, whilst these are potentially significant resources to aid crime preventive effort, they are not normally harnessed into a concerted problem-oriented approach. For reasons that will be considered in more detail below, Pease (1994) suggests that just such a harnessing might profitably take place between victim support services and crime prevention.

The public, then, does not always take the responsibility for crime control that it could, and even when it does it is rarely well-directed (the best protected households are probably those least at risk). Private business interests, however, are no less culpable, frequently displaying a marked reluctance to invest in crime prevention. As Pease (1994) argues "[t]here is no doubt a threshold of cost above which simple crime prevention will come into play in commercial judgements, but that threshold is massively above the point at which the crime represents a significant social problem" (p.60).

Once again, different notions of problem prevail: petty crimes such as shoplifting (Ekblom, 1986) can affect profit margins only marginally, but they can affect society more markedly by incurring significant public expense once the wheels of justice are brought into motion. Nowhere is this disregard of the broader costs of crime better demonstrated than in the credit card (Levi et al.. 1991) or the automobile industries, where, as both Clarke (1992) and Pease (1994) observe, there is little incentive at present to design out crime, despite the simplicity of the preventive measures. Whether changes to vehicle excise duty or insurance premiums can improve this situation remains untested, and it would be interesting to see whether the Home Office's recent decision to publish a detailed breakdown of thefts by vehicle type will spur vehicle manufacturers into action. As Clarke (1992) points out, the long term focus on crime control really necessitates a permanent in-house capability, and until this can be achieved the business sector is unlikely to become a prominent player in the problem-oriented approach to crime prevention.

In Britain, the establishment of the formally independent body Crime Concern in 1988 was in fact intended to help spread the crime prevention message into the private sector, although it has since broadened its remit

and there is as yet no research to suggest whether or not it has been effective to this end. One possible source of difficulty is that the body's independent status and need for finance drives it into the private sector in search of sponsorship more than practical commitment, thereby risking goal displacement from crime prevention to public relations. This area requires further research.

THE PROBLEM OF POLITICS

The problem of politics is closely entwined with that of responsibility insofar as it points to a range of attitudes and dispositions that are hindrances in the search for a problem-oriented approach to crime prevention.

Perhaps the most fundamental underlying assumption of the approach is that it requires a change, either by getting those who never thought of crime as their concern to take on a new responsibility, or urging those used to tackling crime in one way to think of an alternative, more effective way. Change is, however, never straightforward, not least because of the vested interests that support the status quo so long as it brings them tangible benefits.

There is little doubt that the problem-oriented approach to crime prevention has made significant headway since the paradigm-breaking publication of *Crime as Opportunity* in 1976 (Mayhew et al.), but even so there are some serious barriers to its development. It is, for example, unfortunate that the rise of this form of crime prevention has coincided with the rise of neo-conservativism. A central element of the latter movement has been the creation of a populist platform out of the law-and-order theme, which is considerably less interested in crime prevention than in the "get-tough" rhetoric of retributivism and in strengthening the hand of the police, despite the fact that both were implicated in the "nothing works" crisis of the 1970s. Consequently, support for crime prevention is not as strong as it could be, when vote-winning comes before problem-solving.

Since the mid-1980s the right has lost some of its grip on the law-and-order question, to the extent that the criminal justice credentials of the British Labour Party are now, if anything, more convincing, and thus more likely to attract populist support around the slogan "get tough on crime; get tough on the causes of crime." However, this has the potential to be equally detrimental to the future of the problem-oriented approach, as one

ideological lens is merely substituted for another. This time the preconceived diagnosis of fecklessness and indiscipline is replaced or augmented by one of deterministic liberal social reformism.

In many ways one can see this process already under way within the Home Office, which has become much more accommodating of what I have argued elsewhere (Gilling, 1994) to be the less exact science of social crime prevention within the nominally problem-oriented frameworks of such initiatives as the Safer Cities Programme. This shift may be attributed partly to Clarke's (1992) observation that some problem-oriented strategies have faced a cool reception, whereby incrementalist reformism has been misrepresented as, at worst, an Orwellian nightmare, and. at best, a would-be hero with the tragic flaw of displacement. It is also in part the consequence of the opening up of crime prevention, via a partnership approach, to social policy-type agencies that lack a clear problem-oriented sense of direction in this area.

Further difficulties exist at what may be termed the mezzo-level, where, as the above point implies, agencies that should have an interest in crime prevention are brought into the infrastructure of a problem-oriented approach but fail to make the necessary accommodation in their traditional roles. Traditional rather than rational action, for example, requires the probation service to be hostile to crime prevention strategies that appear to lack a "caring" face, or the police to be resistant to strategies that disempower them by making them superfluous. In contrast to the rational orientation of problem orientation, these traditional perspectives share different assumptive worlds and speak different languages.

A genuine problem-oriented approach requires the sorts of collaborative relationships that do not square with the reality of organisational behaviour. His work may now be a bit dated, but Benson's (1975) conception of the inter-organisational network as a political economy ably fits the usual pattern of organisational defensiveness and mutual suspicion, especially within a general climate of resource scarcity. Pressure to develop a problem orientation often carries with it an implication that things have not been done well in the past—something to which organisations or occupational groups are understandably loath to admit.

There is also the issue of goal displacement, whereby the objective of getting agencies together to consider a problem-oriented approach is effectively relegated to a secondary consideration as agencies seek instead to take full advantage of the public relations value of being seen to be

contributing to a collaborative effort against crime. It most certainly happens, as once again populist political agendas get in the way.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the politics of the victim. A problem orientation is more feasible in regard to crimes with certain categories of victim, who are more likely to come to our attention than others. As Pease (1994) suggests, for example, victims of violence often lack the political influence of powerful propertied interests, whose economic muscle and lobbying potential are far more likely to succeed in drawing attention to their plight. In a similar vein, victimless crimes by their very nature have no victim lobby, and are consequently less likely to become the focus of a problem-oriented approach. However, in such cases the resource savings afforded to law enforcement agencies (as victims by proxy) might provide an alternative motivation for action. Drug misuse provides an obvious example.

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFICATION

The final area to be considered is perhaps also the most significant of the barriers that stand in the way of the realisation of a problem orientation. There is an assumption in the rational model that once participants are focused upon a particular crime issue, they should be able to rationally scrutinise and analyse the available data and come up with an accurate diagnosis of both problem and solution, although there is always scope for fine-tuning. However, as with the hope that people will take responsibility for crime prevention and that ulterior motives will not cloud their judgement, this is based upon a lack of appreciation of what can actually happen.

A good example of this, which has an obvious overlap with the problem of politics, is provided by Stanko (1990). In a short critique of crime prevention, Stanko questions the wisdom of some of the publicity-oriented elements of British crime prevention policy. Although recent improvements have been made in crime prevention advice and publicity in this area, Stanko points out that much of this advice is premised upon a misdiagnosis of the problem. That is to say, with regard to the issues of personal and sexual violence, much of the advice is based upon a stereotypical notion of an "external enemy"—the unknown stranger who is the object of so many of our fears. In fact, as a closer analysis of these crimes demonstrates, the majority of such offenders are "the enemies

within"—people who are known to their victims and who may often live with them. The sad irony is that protecting oneself from the external enemy can end up increasing one's vulnerability to the enemy within.

Stanko (1990) attributes such an oversight to a patriarchy-induced myopia regarding the true causes of violence against women, the elimination of which would lead to a clearer understanding of this kind of problem and the nature of potentially preventive solutions. This alerts us to the possibility of myopia existing elsewhere within general strategies of crime prevention, and two further examples spring to mind. The first relates to thefts from retail premises, which are often assumed to emanate from the depredations of customers, when in fact the heaviest damage is often wrought by the employees of such premises. Preventive solutions directed in the wrong place because of commonsense assumptions are potentially highly wasteful.

A second example may be found in the numerous estate-based crime prevention projects that are oriented to the improvement of security and surveillance against outsiders. There is a failure to acknowledge that the potential offenders may live amongst the victims, and may indeed be one and the same person on occasion. Crime analyses have to make allowances for such possibilities, as was the case with the Kirkholt Project (Forrester et al.p 1988), where the preventive measures that were introduced allowed for the possibility that some of the large number of cash meter thefts could indeed be "own goals," as police slang so prosaically puts it.

In all these examples, misdiagnoses of crime problems can result from the failure to research the characteristics of crimes in sufficient depth, although this is not always possible anyway given the limitations of data collection in the crime field. More importantly, the examples demonstrate that the data does not speak for itself—it requires interpretation, and in the act of interpretation a series of preconceived stereotypical notions about the nature of criminal victimisation can come to the fore. This leads us to a closer consideration of how we gather our information about crime.

The principal sources of data are police statistics which, as is by now well-known, depend heavily upon what victims and others choose to report to the police, and what the police then subsequently choose to record. They are artifacts of a social process rather than an objective representation of a range of actions that are classified as crimes in a given place at a given time. What the statistics indicate as a problem, and what really is a problem, may be two different things.

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Underreported crimes, such as some crimes of violence and many minor uninsured property offences, represent a case in point here. These crimes may often be excluded from consideration as preventable problems because there is no available data on them. Victimisation studies can give us some idea as to their prevalence, but they cannot provide us with the sort of precise information upon which the problem-oriented approach is predicated. Moreover, since these crimes are underreported, it would be exceedingly difficult to discern the effects of any preventive activities upon them. And given the primacy of the need to demonstrate effectiveness, one can understand the reluctance to focus upon underreported crimes. The retort that such crimes cannot be regarded as real problems if they are not reported is unacceptably glib.

It is, however, important to recognise that the vagaries of reporting behaviour can significantly impair the functioning of the problem-oriented approach, which is evidently suited to crimes with the highest reporting rates. Indeed, when Heal and Laycock (1986) suggest that situational crime prevention is not appropriate for violent crimes, which do not appear so clustered in time and space as property offences, this is in effect the very point they are making. However, as Clarke (1992) rightly points out, this does not actually mean that situational techniques cannot be effective for such crimes.

Moving on, there remain many more difficulties associated with the identification of crime problems. The data that the police possess essentially facilitates the identification of crime "hot spots," represented most crudely by pins in a map. In some areas there will be relatively few pins, whilst in others there will be many—it is unclear at precisely what point, or at how many pins, an area is ascribed a problem status. The implication is that there is a threshold beyond which crime can no longer be regarded as tolerable, although such a threshold is presumably arbitrary. This can be awkward, and is not necessarily the most effective way of determining priorities. A parallel can be drawn with urban policies that seek to divert resources to the most deprived areas but in so doing deny resources to equally deprived people living outside such areas.

The work of Farrell and Pease (1993) on repeat victimisation elaborates upon this point. They argue that crime prevention resources are rarely focused upon those most in need—repeat victims—but that such a focus would prove to be the most effective and socially acceptable means of rationing scarce resources. This is because of a clear statistical pattern across a number of different crimes that show a disproportionately high

number of offenses as repeat victimisations, most of which are likely to reoccur within a relatively short time of the initial victimisation. Consequently, victimisation is the best predictor of future risk of victimisation, and this is therefore where crime preventive effort should be concentrated.

At present this is not usually the case because of a basic misapprehension in the use of the problem-oriented approach. As Farrell and Pease (1993) point out, crime prevention is difficult in comparison to other areas of public policy by virtue of the fact that its object of concern is not present states but future risk. Police statistics, however, measure past and present states, and in so doing often convey the erroneous assumption that it is areas at risk, and not individuals. As a result, much crime preventive effort is wasted, again as a result of a sort of myopia stemming from a lack of appreciation of the full complexity of crime patterns.

SUMMARY

The object of this paper has been to draw attention to a range of difficulties that can lie in the way of the realisation of the rationalistic problem-oriented approach to crime prevention. It is not intended as a criticism of the problem-oriented approach per se. On the contrary, it is evident that the potential of the approach is enormous, and that there have already been many examples of successful practice. Followed correctly, this approach provides the best opportunity of making a significant and lasting impact upon the growing levels of crime that have been a characteristic feature of most of the post-war developed world, and thus it offers liberation from the "nothing works" pessimism that still lies beneath the surface of crime control discourse. However, given its tenuous position as a relatively new paradigm, the problem-oriented approach cannot afford to underestimate the strength of the opposition manifested in traditional perspectives, alternative agendas, and the limitations of existing data sources and interpretative frameworks. There is a considerable amount of pressure being exerted on the problem-oriented approach to be stretched in a particular political direction (O'Malley, 1994; Sutton, 1994). Whether the approach can retain its rational integrity in the face of this pressure remains its most vital challenge for the 1990s.



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