MYTHBUSTER

AWARENESS-RAISING NEVER HURT ANYONE, DID IT?

Crime prevention initiatives often take the form of awareness-raising campaigns. However, there is little evidence that awareness in and of itself is able to prompt behavioural change, and consequently, that it can contribute much to crime prevention. Effective campaigns play into affective aspects of behavioural change and are part of integrated crime prevention strategies.

RAISING AWARENESS:
AN ELEGANT PRINCIPLE

Crime prevention practitioners often have to make do with limited resources. Many are subject to some form of political pressure or constraints. They are expected to respond quickly to crime problems and to do something about them, but in reality often cannot develop comprehensive and integrated interventions. The result: preventionists opt for awareness-raising campaigns to inform people about crime.

The underlying idea is simple: people act in accordance with the knowledge they have. If they do not behave the way we want, we have to give them more information.[1] Someone who *knows* that cybercriminals exploit weak passwords will choose stronger passwords. When people *are aware* that burglars enter houses through open windows, they will close the windows when they go out. And someone who *understands* the health risks of drug use is less likely to actually use drugs. Makes sense?

It would seem so. As such, crime prevention practitioners resort to *information* campaigns: door-to-door leaflets in a particular neighbourhood, public service announcements on television, and everything in between—posters, videos, social media ads. We intervene in school curricula to *teach* children a lesson, or take them somewhere so they can *learn* something about crime and safety.

Computer-savvy people behave safer online? Think again.

Recent Dutch research into cyber security found no significant correlation between knowledge on internet security and behaviour (cyber hygiene). Worse still, it found a significant negative effect of cyber security awareness on password strength and downloading unsafe software: those in the know had weaker passwords and downloaded more unsafe software![2] International research has found similarly weak effects of knowledge on online behaviour. Cain, Edwards and Still found that groups with more knowledge on cyber hygiene, such as younger people (vs. elderly) and experts (vs. non-experts) consistently applied it less.[3] In a similar vein, research based on 1.6 million computers found those belonging to software developers were infected by the most malware.[4] A systematic review of psychoeducational Internet security interventions also highlighted the disconnect between knowledge and behaviour, commenting that the educational programmes succeeded in increasing knowledge, but were not associated with a change in online behaviour.[5]

BUT DOES IT WORK?

In a word: rarely! Time and again, research has shown that knowledge about crime does not necessarily lead to a decrease in crime or victimisation—the idea underpinning the "awareness paradigm". The principle may be elegant, it is also wrong.

To understand why, we need to delve a bit deeper into what it is that determines human behaviour, including safety precautions and crime. The awareness paradigm assumes that humans behave according to the (presumably) objective knowledge they have. In reality, human behaviour is influenced by a myriad of factors and psycho-social processes, including (subjective) knowledge, planned behaviour, rational choices, social norms, role models, and individual psychology.[6]

Campaign designers should take as many of these factors as possible into consideration. Solely focusing on knowledge transfer will often lead to ineffective or even harmful campaigns. In crime prevention, one adverse effect is that victim-oriented campaigns may increase the fear of crime rather than effectively reduce crime (risk) or harm.[7] Indeed, ineffective crime prevention campaigns and campaigns that backfired one way or another have been covered in the literature since the early 1980s[8]—and it is somewhat surprising that we keep trying what we already know does not work.

Anti-drugs media campaigns proven ineffective

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) warns against ineffective and even counterproductive media campaigns for drug use prevention.[9] Campaigns that aim to raise awareness of drug-related problems are common in the EU. However, as early as 2013, one third of the EMCDDA-affiliated countries had quit or cut back on such campaigns. Those that implement them rarely conduct impact evaluations. In most cases, the campaigners only assess whether the target group liked or understood the message. Evaluations typically stop short of looking into actual behaviour change. EMCDDA points out that a systematic analysis of anti-drugs campaigns demonstrates their ineffectiveness: there is only a weak effect on the intention to use drugs in the future, and no effect at all on actual substance use.[10]

Campaigns also tend to be much less effective when they stand on their own. The effectiveness of campaigns depends on the extent to which the campaign is part of a broader set of policies and interventions. Thus, in crime prevention, information campaigns should not be considered an alternative to situational, developmental or community prevention, but instead supplement or support them.

Finally, an impact evaluation of a campaign will tell you something about the effectiveness of a campaign. Of course, if the campaign is part of a coordinated effort, it will be harder to determine how much of a measured effect is attributable to the campaign itself. A very common mistake is to make claims about a campaign's success based exclusively on a process evaluation. A process evaluation tells you whether the campaign was rolled out as intended. Whether the target audience "liked" the campaign or remembered its message, says nothing about crime (risk) or harm reduction.[11] Worse still: false success claims may lead to a waste of resources at best and harmful effects at worst.[12]

Awareness-raising based on scare tactics does not work

A specific awareness-raising technique is to confront young people, in a direct and/or graphic manner, with what will happen to them if they use drugs or commit crimes. Such juvenile awareness programmes all use fear to influence adolescent behaviour. The fact that they are quite popular exemplifies the disconnect between evidence and observation on the one hand, and crime prevention on the other. As early as 1980, evaluation using a control group showed that the intervention caused an increase in criminality![13] Since then, multiple studies have shown that interventions that consist of scaring children do not work and are "likely" to have harmful effects. The authors of a systematic review urge authorities who implement them to adopt "rigorous evaluation".[14]

SO WHEN *DO* CAMPAIGNS WORK?

Of course, there are also examples of effective—in terms of impact—campaigns, in crime prevention and elsewhere. Impact evaluations of past campaigns are insightful, but they do not necessarily tell us *why* a campaign was effective or not. Systematic reviews help us discern patterns; explanations are offered by the behavioural sciences such as social marketing, the study of influencing human behaviour for social good.[15]

To cut to the chase: designing and implementing an effective crime prevention campaign is not the easier alternative to social or situational interventions. Publicity and awareness-raising campaigns require considerable research. There are various parameters to factor in, and in the end, only an outcome evaluation will tell you whether you got all of them right. Below, we give a few general guidelines.[16]

The message

The campaign message should be relevant, to the point, and of immediate significance. Don't tell people what they already know, unless you are able to remind them of it at exactly the right time. Calls to immediate action have more potential than just "giving information." As such, a newspaper ad telling people not to leave valuables in a parked car will not work, but you may have more success if you could deliver that message in the car park. The same is true in offender-oriented messages: reminding them of potential longer-term consequences (e.g. punishment) is less effective than pointing out immediate risk (e.g. getting caught, being arrested). In victim-oriented campaigns, avoid blame as much as possible.

In any case, the message must be to the point, practical and specific. Do not say "Don't give burglars a chance", but tell people what exactly they can do to help prevent burglaries (e.g., have a particular type of door lock installed).

Campaigns should not just share information and suggest action, but also play on subjective feelings. We know campaigns are more effective when they are localised, so it is better to address a specific neighbourhood than a whole city when a particular crime phenomenon is specific to that neighbourhood. Visual elements, too, should be recognisable and familiar for the target group in terms of language, age, sex and (sub-)cultural references. Unfortunately, this also means that targeting "the general public" is often ineffective.

Care should also be taken as to how the source of the campaign (the messenger) is portrayed through the message, and in fact, whether it is identified at all. Organisations must make sure that they come across as a trustworthy partner, but avoid coming across as moralising or a fearmonger.

The medium

It is obvious but often overlooked. A campaign should use the media channels that allow it to reach its target audience. The decisions made in this regard should be the result of research and deliberation. When physical media (e.g. posters and leaflets) are used, they should be distributed at relevant locations but limited to the geographical focus of the campaign.

Running campaigns on social media poses a whole set of challenges. Which social media? Video or just images? Targeted ads or a public post? How to configure the targeting? It is a science in itself, and the safest assumption to make is that crime prevention workers are not digital marketing specialists. Hiring a professional will probably pay off.

Finally, campaigns should be carefully planned in terms of timing and duration. Exposure should be sufficient to get through to the audience, but not too long so as to bore them—a real issue! Repetition (in bursts) is preferable to long-running campaigns.

Why the Get Home Safe campaign worked? Because it wasn't just a campaign

The Get Home Safe intervention to prevent (alcohol-related) assaults on pub-goers in South Belfast achieved a positive outcome: assault and attempted assault rates effectively plunged. Get Home Safe included a campaign urging people to drink sensibly and get home safe, using a slogan ("Think twice—Get home safe"), posters, leaflets, urinal mats, and ads on public transport, radio, TV and in the local press. Research showed that people noticed, remembered and appreciated the campaign. But the success of Get Home Safe cannot be attributed to the campaign alone, as the campaign was just one small aspect of an integrated approach which also included a door registration requirement, increased enforcement of by-laws, CCTV, a radio link, an alcohol referral scheme, and all with the support of local businesses.[17]

Embeddedness, strategy and integrated approach

Marketers of the social and commercial variant know it: an advertisement or awareness campaign on its own is poor design. The campaign is a first step, one piece of the puzzle, and should always be part of a broader, coordinated approach to reaching the objective.[18] Rather than just advertising a given product, you offer a discount (financial incentive) and put it at eye level in the shop (situational incentive called nudging[19]), to really make people choose that product over alternatives. Rather than just print a health message on a pack of cigarettes, this measure is made a part of an integrated tobacco control strategy, which also encompasses price hikes (fiscal measure) and a smoking ban in public places (legislative measure).

The same is true in crime prevention. Campaigns have a place in crime prevention, but they should meet at least the following two conditions. First, they should concentrate on the emotive and affective aspects of behaviour change in addition to knowledge transfer and awareness-raising. Second, they should accompany and support other approaches to crime prevention (criminal justice, situational, developmental and community prevention), in such a way that they enhance and reinforce one another.[20]

The truth about why we raise awareness

We raise awareness not only because we believe in the underlying mechanism—that knowledge about crime leads to less crime. In fact, there are other factors that push preventionists towards information campaigns. Here are a few:

- **It is cheap** compared to other types of crime prevention interventions. Social prevention, for example, requires a substantial and long-term investment of human and financial resources. A mass media campaign, on the contrary, can reach many people for a low per-capita cost.
- **It is quick.** Awareness campaigns simply do not require much time. The whole process—from idea, to the designing and dissemination of the campaign materials up to a rudimentary process evaluation and reporting—should not take more than a few months. On to the next!
- **It wins the numbers game.** Crime prevention interventions are subject to two types of evaluation: process evaluation and impact evaluation. Neither are necessarily easy, but a process evaluation of awareness campaigns is as easy as it gets. You printed 10,000 posters and how many millions did you say your campaign reached?
- **Policymakers love awareness.** Combine all three, shake and… *voilà*: the perfect cocktail for policymakers. Awareness campaigns allow them to *do something* about the problem, before the next election and without getting too invested. The numbers will look good, too![21]

These are valid considerations, but they tell us nothing about the effectiveness of crime prevention awareness campaigns.

Endnotes

1   In social sciences, this model is referred to as the information deficit model, which by now has been widely discredited. See, e.g., M.J. Simis, H. Madden, M.A. Cacciatore, and S.K. Yeo, The Lure of Rationality: Why Does the Deficit Model Persist in Science Communication?, *Public Understanding of Science* 25:4 (2016), 400-14, https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0963662516629749.

2   S. van 't Hoff-de Goede, R. van der Kleij, S. van de Weijer, and R. Leukfeldt, Hoe Veilig Gedragen Wij Ons Online? Een Studie Naar De Samenhang Tussen Kennis, Gelegenheid, Motivatie En Online Gedrag Van De Nederlanders (How Safely Do We Behave Online? A Study of the Correlation between Knowledge, Opportunity, Motivation and Online Behaviour of the Dutch), Den Haag: De Haagse Hogeschool, 2019.

3   A.A. Cain, M.E. Edwards, and J.D. Still, An Exploratory Study of Cyber Hygiene Behaviors and Knowledge, *Journal of Information Security and Applications* 42:2 (2018), 36-45, https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jisa.2018.08.002.

4   M. Ovelgönne, T. Dumitraş, B.A. Prakash et al., Understanding the Relationship between Human Behavior and Susceptibility to Cyber Attacks: A Data-Driven Approach, *ACM Transactions on Intelligent Systems and Technology* 8:4 (2017), Art. 51, https://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2890509.

5   F. Mishna, C. Cook, M. Saini et al., Interventions for Children, Youth, and Parents to Prevent and Reduce Cyber Abuse, *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 5:1 (2009), https://dx.doi.org/10.4073/csr.2009.2.

6   A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, New York: General Learning Press, 1977; H.W. Perkins and A.D. Berkowitz, Perceiving the Community Norms of Alcohol Use among Students: Some Research Implications for Campus Alcohol Education Programming, *The International journal of the addictions* 21:9-10 (1986), 961-76, https://dx.doi.org/10.3109/10826088609077249; D.B. Cornish and R.V. Clarke, Crime Specialisation, Crime Displacement and Rational Choice Theory, in: H. Wegener, F. Lösel, and J. Haisch (Eds.), *Criminal Behavior and the Justice System: Psychological Perspectives*, Berlin: Springer, 1989, 103-17; I. Ajzen, The Theory of Planned Behavior, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50:2 (1991), 179-211, https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T. Cf. EMCDDA, Mass Media Campaigns for the Prevention of Drug Use in Young People, Lisbon, 2013, http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/pods/mass-media-campaigns_en.

7   Cf. EUCPN's definition of crime prevention, adopted by its Board in Helsinki, 11 Dec. 2019: "Crime prevention is ethically acceptable and evidence-based activities aimed at reducing the risk of crimes occurring and its harmful consequences with the ultimate goal of working towards the improvement of the quality of life and safety of individuals, groups and communities."

8   For a series of examples, see E. Barthe, Crime Prevention Publicity Campaigns, Washington D.C.: Community Oriented Policing Services, 2006, 7; A. Christiano and A. Neiman, Stop Raising Awareness Already, *Stanford social innovation review* (2017), 34-41.

9   EMCDDA, Mass Media Campaigns.

10   M. Ferri, E. Allara, A. Bo et al., Media Campaigns for the Prevention of Illicit Drug Use in Young People, *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 6 (2013), https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD009287.pub2.

11   S. Lab, *Crime Prevention: Approaches, Practices, and Evaluations*, 7th edition, London: Routledge, 2016, 34-7; T. Silva and M. Lind, Experiences of the Member States Performing Evaluations in Projects and Activities Aimed at Crime Prevention, Research report, Östersund: Mid Sweden University, 2020, 25.

12   N. Tilley, *Crime Prevention*, Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing, 2009, 181.

13   J.O. Finckenauer, "Scared Straight" and the Panacea Phenomenon: Discussion, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 347:1 (1980), 213-7, https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1980.tb21271.x; J. Beck, 100 Years of "Just Say No" Versus "Just Say Know": Reevaluating Drug Education Goals for the Coming Century, *Evaluation Review* 22:1 (1998), 15-45.

14   A. Petrosino, C. Turpin-Petrosino, M.E. Hollis-Peel, and J.G. Lavenberg, Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review, *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 9:1 (2013), https://dx.doi.org/10.4073/csr.2013.5; J. Esrick, R.G. Kagan, J.T. Carnevale et al., Can Scare Tactics and Fear-Based Messages Help Deter Substance Misuse: A Systematic Review of Recent (2005–2017) Research, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 26:3 (2019), 209-18, https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2018.1424115.

15   Social marketing has been practiced widely in health promotion and disease prevention, where the benefits of such approach are well-established. In crime prevention, this is much less the case; cf. P. Homel and T. Carroll, Moving Knowledge into Action: Applying Social Marketing Principles to Crime Prevention, *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* 381 (2009). For an introduction to social marketing, see S. Michie, L. Atkins, and R. West, *The Behaviour Change Wheel: A Guide to Designing Interventions*, London: Silverback, 2014; J. French and R. Gordon, *Strategic Social Marketing*, London: SAGE, 2019.

16   There is surprisingly little literature on developing good awareness campaigns in crime prevention specifically. The following (American) manual is a good starting point: Barthe, Crime Prevention Publicity Campaigns. For a short but insightful read, check also Christiano and Neiman, Stop Raising Awareness Already.

17   K. Bowers and S. Johnson, Using Publicity for Preventive Purposes, in: N. Tilley (Ed.), Handbook of Crime Prevention and Community Safety, Cullompton, Devon: Willan, 2005, 338-40.

18   Christiano and Neiman, Stop Raising Awareness Already.

19   For the most comprehensive discussion of nudging, see R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. Applications in crime prevention can be found here: D. Sharma and M. Kilgallon Scott, Nudge; Don't Judge: Using Nudge Theory to Deter Shoplifters, Paper presented at the 11th European Academy of Design Conference, Paris: Descartes University, 2015; J. Roach, K. Weir, P. Phillips et al., Nudging Down Theft from Insecure Vehicles. A Pilot Study, *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 19:1 (2017), 31-8, https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461355716677876.

20   M. Tonry and D.P. Farrington, Strategic Approaches to Crime Prevention, *Crime and Justice* 19 (1995), 1-20.

21   Cf. the most common pitfalls ("deadly sins") in crime prevention as described in P.-O. Wikström, Doing without Knowing: Common Pitfalls in Crime Prevention, *Crime Prevention Studies* 21 (2007), 59-80.

For more information, check the following EUCPN Toolboxes:

European Crime Prevention Network.
Preventing Drug-Related Crimes: Achieving Effective Behavioural Change.
Toolbox Series No. 16. Brussels: EUCPN, 2020. https://eucpn.org/toolbox16-drugrelatedcrimes.

European Crime Prevention Network.
Preventing the Victimisation of Minors in the Digital Age: Awareness-Raising and Behavioural Change.
Toolbox Series No. 15. Brussels: EUCPN, 2019. https://eucpn.org/toolbox15-victimisation.