

MYTHBUSTER

GETTING SMART ON CRIME WITH A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Crime is a complex issue. Take our [previous mythbuster](#) on serious and organised crime: even though it is a key concept in criminal policy, it remains open to interpretation. The institutions that deal with serious and organised crime understand and, therefore, address the issue in different ways. Some stress the serious nature of the crime and the harms it causes, others highlight its international nature and its existence as a cross-border phenomenon. To focus only on the latter, however, risks remaining blind to the many local factors that encourage serious and organised crime. This limited view jeopardises our effective approach, as it runs the risk of ignoring solutions at the local level.¹ Simplifying the complex problem of crime is fertile soil for a great deal of other myths, such as the belief that raising-awareness is a quick and easy fix to prevent crime² or that we can scare children onto the righteous path by showing them the inside of life in prison.³ Here, we discuss yet another misconception about the solution to crime: the idea that we can address crime without crime prevention.⁴



PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN THE CURE?

It is an oft-used phrase and makes intuitive sense: prevention is better than the cure. If we can prevent bad things from happening in the first place, we will not have to deal with the potential negative effects. Nevertheless, the balance does not tip in favour of crime prevention when we compare its public spending with that of the criminal justice system. The cure, or in this case repression, receives significantly more budget and attention than its preventative counterpart does.⁵ There are many financial and political reasons for this imbalance. One of these is the belief that crime prevention is too soft an approach.⁶ Indeed, crime prevention practitioners will not kick in doors and are unlikely to make the newspaper headlines. The effect of preventative work is much more subtle and demands sufficient time before it materialises.⁷ This is especially true for social crime prevention, for which it is also harder to show tangible results in the short term. You cannot physically observe that which you have prevented from happening, whereas a successful police operation can, for example, display the weapons or illegal drugs it seized. Although crime prevention can and should be evaluated on its success, the difficulty and patience needed to prove these results potentially conflict with policy cycles that demand visible results within a limited amount of time.⁸

Within these short time horizons, long-term investments in crime prevention become less appealing. Crime prevention, however, requires adequate resources, including proper funding, in order to sustain its delivery and produce the effects that research has already demonstrated it can have.⁹ Scarce resources, however, limit what is possible. Several governmental priorities compete for the same public resources and even within the funds that are allocated to crime prevention, the budget must be further divided into several initiatives. This can create competition and prevents long-term policymaking.¹⁰ Moreover, crime prevention policy and its implementation are fragmented across a variety of policy domains, ranging from the Ministry of Interior to the Education Department. This obviously imposes barriers to preventative action. One of those barriers relates to institutional logics, where the ones investing in crime prevention often do not directly benefit from its effects and, therefore, do not see the immediate advantage.¹¹ If we look at developmental prevention, where most interventions take place at earlier stages of life, among them improving parenting skills, children's physical and mental health, and school performance, we can see that it requires a high level of commitment and investment from the welfare and education domains. However, they are not the ones who will have to deal with a possible crime problem in the future.¹²

In addition, at this early stage, there is no immediate demand for prevention. The urge to act mostly arises as crime problems arise, but these are often symptoms of underlying processes that might have already started years before!¹³ While a violent incident in the city needs to be addressed immediately, the rising tensions could have prevented been earlier by strengthening community ties and the capability for solving problems in a non-violent way. Similarly, a new type of online fraud might spur governmental agencies to come up with innovative approaches, yet we could train citizens to protect themselves against the social engineering technique that underlies all of these scams.¹⁴ When problems occur, there is always a risk of reacting to the problems of the day and neglecting more structural solutions.¹⁵ It is here that law enforcement agencies will be able to handle some of these symptoms or manage their harmful effects, yet they might not always be in the best position to solve the problem and definitely not to prevent it in the first place.¹⁶ To complete the crime solving puzzle, a whole cast of other actors possess important pieces and should be involved and even lead actions if we want to effectively prevent crime.¹⁷

To sum up: a number of financial and political disincentives do not work in favour of crime prevention. They give rise to the idea that crime can only be solved by the criminal justice system. We now turn to why we advocate a more balanced approach and to give equal attention to crime prevention: because it works.

THE CRIME DROP: A CRIME PREVENTION SUCCESS

There is a growing evidence base that supports the effectiveness of crime prevention, from community-wide approaches to preventative policing strategies, but perhaps its biggest success story is a sustained drop in the crime rates of several offences. You read that right. Since the early 90s, the West has experienced a downward trend for some types of crime, a trend that was generally preceded by several decades of rapidly rising crime rates.¹⁸ While there are variations between countries, property crime has been consistently declining in the European Union since the mid-1990s.¹⁹ Burglary and theft are two phenomena where many countries note positive developments. How did this happen? According to scientific evidence: better and more crime prevention. Situational crime prevention and its focus on enhanced security closed off numerous opportunities for crime.²⁰ Take domestic burglary, where research clearly shows the effectiveness of improved window and door locks or external lights that come on when their sensors detect movement. These measures increase the risk of being caught and/or the effort that would be needed to enter a home successfully.²¹ In other words: improved security measures prevented a great deal of crimes and eventually led to a genuine crime drop.



Crime prevented is crime displaced?

The classic response to situational crime prevention: prevented crime is simply crime displaced. Even if we successfully prevent a crime at a given location, it will naturally move on to the next spot, happen later or target at a different victim. Not only is this

hard to prove, a lot of research counters this assumption.²² In fact, several studies support the complete opposite: following a targeted security measure crime decreases in other and nearby areas. Instead of crime being displaced, the positive effects of crime prevention reach further than intended and spread throughout the neighbourhood.²³



While these increased security measures reduced opportunities for property crime, the yearly update on cybercrime that Europol provides does not paint the same optimistic picture – at all.²⁴ Property crime may have been declining, but cybercrime is definitely booming. Even when cybercrime is still widely underreported, it is obvious that the internet provides a huge set of opportunities for criminals.²⁵ Taking some lessons from the drop in property crime, curbing the cybercrime wave will require an updated prevention response, closing off those criminal opportunities. It will also demand a response that goes beyond the traditional government-police partnerships, as is the case for many preventative actions. Cyberspace is incredibly diverse, with many active players having different roles and responsibilities. Think about social media companies and other online platforms or internet service providers. Traditional actors such as the police and government do not have sufficient power to influence this field and prevent this type of crime on their own.²⁶ Without neglecting their own responsibilities, the traditional partnerships should team up with a new cast of actors, including the private sector, to take up security measures and prevent cybercrimes together.²⁷

The fall in property crimes offers valuable lessons, especially on crime prevention. The decrease in traditional crime such as property crime is a long-term trend, achieved through the sustained effort and accumulation of many individual crime prevention practices that have been proven to work. The takeaway for crime preventers, though, is not to sit back and relax. On the contrary: many people are still falling victim to property crime and there is still work to be done for many other types of crime, for example cybercrime. Preventing crime is not a one-off activity. It needs continuous effort to sustain its results and keep up with new *modi operandi*.²⁸

BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

The drop in property crime is a prime example of a long-term return on investment delivered by crime prevention.²⁹ However, the successes of crime prevention do not stop there and extend far beyond property crime. Our EUCPN toolboxes, filled with effective examples of crime prevention initiatives highlight various success stories from cybercrime to bullying (note: for an overview, have a look at our website). Targeting the processes that lead to crime might take a while to show results; it will have long-lasting effects that potentially reach even further than the problems they aimed to prevent.³⁰ Many social crime prevention approaches, for example Communities that Care, work on community level factors or on developmental processes during the earlier stages of life, and often affect the same set of factors that could lead to crime and other forms of problematic behaviour. Investing in this kind of programmes might thus have positive effects not only on crime but also on (problematic) substance use, school dropout, and bullying.³¹



Communities that Care

Communities that Care is a community planning system and not an intervention in the strict sense. It aims to prevent multiple problematic behaviours among youngsters, such as crime and substance use, by tackling common risk and protective factors that were identified in the community. Once those risk and protective factors have been identified, it matches those with evidence-based programmes. These programmes are chosen and delivered within strong community coalitions that are built from schools, professionals, city administrations, and any other actor that might provide an important piece to the puzzle. Originally from the US, this implementation strategy has been implemented in several EU Member States, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.³²

Another way to underscore the successes of crime prevention is by zooming in on another challenge of policy-making: money. Cost-benefit analyses provide the ideal tool and offer an economical comparison between the direct and indirect costs of a given programme and the economic value of the programme's benefits.³³ Staying with the example of Communities that Care, an American study reports that almost 4,500 US dollars are saved per youngster from reduced crime alone. The cost of that saved tax money? About 500 US dollars per child in the programme.³⁴ Seems like a good return on investment...

The results of combined cost-benefit studies also suggest that crime prevention has much wider effects than its effects on crime alone. They can lead to increased tax revenue from higher earnings, savings from reduced use of social services or savings from lower use of healthcare services and perhaps the greatest bonus: saving on expenses in the criminal justice system. We can easily illustrate this by looking at the difference between incapacitation and deterrence. Incapacitation works to prevent crime by denying offenders - that would have to be caught first - the opportunity to (continue to) commit crimes whilst being locked up or restricted in movement. Deterrence on the other hand, prevents crime prior to the actual commitment of a crime and works through perceived risks of being caught. Crime prevention by incapacitation would necessarily require higher rates of imprisonment, including all the costs that come with it. If crime is deterred, however, there is no need to punish and lock up a perpetrator: there will simply not be one. Consequently, preventing crimes through deterrence would not translate into gargantuan imprisonment rates and the costs that go with them.³⁵

Combined, these cost-benefit studies prove that the economic benefits usually outweigh the costs of crime prevention and it might be fair to assume that even the smallest effects of crime prevention are cost-effective if we compare the programme's costs to those of the life of crime we have successfully prevented.³⁶ One author concludes, "It is more cost-beneficial to invest in crime prevention than in imprisonment".³⁷ Crime prevention simply offers more bang for your buck.

TOWARDS A MORE BALANCED APPROACH

Given the successes of crime prevention and how it offers 'bang for your buck', we advocate a more balanced approach to crime. Neither crime prevention, nor repression are capable of dealing with crime by themselves. Nor should prevention and repression be treated as opposites where one excludes the other. Crime is simply too complex for a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, we should combine both prevention and repression in a holistic approach that balances both.³⁸ In other words: an approach that grants equal importance to both crime prevention and repression. Yet not just any crime prevention: crime prevention that is sustained over time and receives the funds it needs. Crime prevention that is guided by the best available evidence and knowledge. For that, the EUCPN is your guide.

Endnotes

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