

MYTHBUSTER:

DOES CRIME PREVENTED MEAN CRIME DISPLACED?

Why implement anti-burglary interventions when, as a result, burglars will merely relocate their activities to another nearby area? It is sometimes believed that implementing prevention interventions, such as CCTV cameras, will simply cause offenders to shift their activities to different locations, change their methods or find new targets. Yet this is only one of the possible outcomes an intervention can bring about. In practice, crime displacement is often outweighed by two other outcomes: a ceasing of crime and the diffusion of crime prevention benefits.¹



CRIME DISPLACEMENT – THE EXCEPTION RATHER THAN THE RULE

Crime displacement (also known as the waterbed or crime spill-over effect) refers to the relocation of crime from a certain place, time, target, method or offender to another, as a result of a crime prevention initiative. This occurs when an anti-burglary intervention forces offenders to change their methods from burglary to armed robbery; or to change their targets by relocating to a nearby suburb in which the intervention is not implemented. Displacement is based on the idea that while situational crime prevention reduces crime opportunities, it does not address the motivations of offenders (e.g. that a burglar might commit a break-in to fund an underlying substance addiction). This is why, for a long time, it was assumed that situational prevention merely causes offenders to shift their activities to nearby locations in order to continue offending.²

This assumption is enhanced by the different types of displacement that can be distinguished. Firstly, *temporal displacement* means the timing of an offence will change. For example, a pickpocket will likely wait for a police patrol to end before they will act. Secondly, *target displacement* means that offenders will choose a different target. An anti-pickpocketing campaign launched by universities might cause pickpockets to shift their focus to the elderly population instead of students. Thirdly, *spatial displacement* means offenders will move to another location. An anti-pickpocketing intervention in a train station might force pickpockets to relocate their crimes to another suitable location, such as a busy bus station or a nearby shopping street. Fourthly, *tactical displacement* refers to a situation in which offenders change their usual methods. Due to an anti-pickpocketing intervention, offenders can change techniques and implement diversion techniques instead of discreetly robbing inattentive victims. Finally, *offence displacement* entails a change in the type of crime. Police patrols in busy places might force pickpockets to change their approach and make a transition to shoplifting.³

These different types of displacement make it difficult to accurately detect possible shifts in crime. Displacement is diverse, subtle and inconsistent, since offenders have many alternatives to choose from. Besides, some tactical changes can be minor and not all offenders think and act similarly. To continue the illustration, when pickpockets shift their efforts elsewhere, this new method, target or area of the displaced crime might fall outside the district or focus area of the responsible police department.⁴

There is however mounting evidence that demonstrates that crime displacement is not a common phenomenon. When it does occur, it is often a case of 'harmless' crime displacement. For instance, a police patrol to prevent pickpocketing in a busy train station might cause a small number of pickpockets to relocate their activities. However, that same patrol might also result in a decrease in other phenomena such as violence, vandalism or street harassment. This means that its displacement effect is minor compared to the additional improvements created by that patrol.⁵



Harmful crime displacement

Instead of an intervention creating (unexpected) improvements, it is also possible for the positive result of an intervention to be outweighed by its negative effects. This would be the case when prevention initiatives in retail stores reduce shoplifting, yet at the same time generate more break-ins in stores or cause an increase in robberies on delivery transports. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to measure possible harmful displacement effects and when they are observed, the results are often inconclusive.⁶ For this reason, it is important to evaluate prevention projects effectively and consistently. This will facilitate early detection and provides a chance for initiatives to be adjusted and improved.⁷

Displacement is not as common as usually thought, partly because certain types of crime are linked to particular spaces, also known as hotspots.⁸ Hotspots are locations (e.g. a cluster of streets or a busy square) in which crime is concentrated for a longer period of time. The presence of crime at these locations is due to the many opportunities for offending that come together in both time and space. In contrast to what displacement suggests, taking away these opportunities does not automatically mean offenders will relocate their activities.⁹

Firstly, for displacement to occur, crime would have to be inelastic. This entails that regardless of the prevention efforts, a shoplifter will routinely steal a certain amount of items from a certain number of stores. This means that in-store security or placing electronic tags on items would force a shoplifter to relocate to a store that does not implement these interventions. Nevertheless, a lot of criminal behaviour is elastic as well as variable. It is influenced by an opportunity (e.g. a valuable yet easy-to-steal item without an electronic tag) that presents itself at the right moment (e.g. in a busy store with inattentive employees). If these boxes are not checked, an occasional shoplifter might not even consider stealing.¹⁰

Secondly, displacement expects a certain level of mobility of offenders in terms of place, time and method. Yet not all offenders have a high level of mobility. It is not easy for a burglar to relocate when their usual neighbourhood implements target hardening strategies, such as door- and window locks or alley gating.¹¹ Changing locations provides new challenges and requires more preparation by finding new transportation or spending additional time to explore a new area. All of this entails a level of determination within offenders that is not automatically present.¹²

To state that displacement cannot take place would be too simplistic. There are, however, two other outcomes that frequently exceed the impact of displacement, i.e. the ceasing of crime and the diffusion of crime prevention benefits.

THE CEASING OF CRIME

The first potential outcome to counter crime displacement is a ceasing of crime. By denying offenders an easy target, many of them are expected to give up instead of finding a 'replacement' victim, target or method. There are several explanations to support this notion.

Firstly, a large amount of crime is linked to hotspots within a city, such as an industrial area that becomes desolate after closing hours. Implementing situational prevention measures, such as fencing the perimeter or installing high-quality locks and automatic lighting, will reduce opportunities for crime, by making it more challenging, and therefore less appealing, for thieves to strike.¹³

In addition to finding a successful opportunity, offenders must also have detailed knowledge of the spaces they regularly encounter during their activities. Thieves should know what buildings to target, which security measures to avoid and how to quickly enter and exit the area. Therefore, when suitable targets within their preferred location are reduced, it is more likely that crime will cease than be displaced to a less familiar area.¹⁴

Finally, certain offenders take into consideration the risks and efforts it takes to achieve the reward. When preventive action is taken to maximise the risk and efforts, for instance by securing the perimeter, the risks of getting caught will start to outweigh the possible rewards of crime. Consequently, it can result in an offender abandoning their plans instead of displacing their activities.¹⁵

THE DIFFUSION OF CRIME PREVENTION BENEFITS

A second noteworthy outcome is the diffusion of crime prevention benefits to nearby areas that are not deliberately targeted.¹⁶ This diffusion of benefits (also referred to as the bonus, free rider or multiplier effect) occurs when the beneficial influence of an intervention spreads beyond the places, individuals or types of crimes that are directly targeted. Simply put, the positive effects of an intervention extend further than the initial aim of the intervention. In addition, this positive spread is gained without using additional resources. In practice, this would mean that an effective domestic burglary initiative in one neighbourhood also results in fewer break-ins in surrounding areas.¹⁷

Similarly to displacement, the diffusion of benefits takes place in various ways. For instance, target hardening strategies (e.g. security tags or keeper boxes for expensive objects) in certain stores can also reduce shoplifting in other stores without such strategies. Furthermore, these strategies might cause shoplifters to avoid other businesses (e.g. second-hand stores or gas stations) altogether. Another option is for such intervention to likewise reduce other types of crime, like cargo theft. Finally, it could occur that even when security tags are not functional, shoplifters will still be more cautious before committing theft.¹⁸

Micro- vs. macro-spaces

Diffusion effects are just as difficult to measure as displacement effects. Yet, when investigating these effects, the focus mainly lies on a proximal effect within micro-spaces (neighbouring streets or suburbs), rather than on a distant effect (to neighbouring regions or countries).¹⁹ This is because situational crime prevention mainly focusses on specific types of crime within specific micro-spaces. It tries to prevent burglaries in neighbourhoods by identifying as well as reducing theft opportunities, for instance by gating small alleyways.²⁰ However, both crime displacement and the diffusion of benefits can likewise occur within meso- and macro-spaces, as is the case for organised crime.

Organised crime groups have a lot more experience, knowledge and resources than the occasional offender. They have access to an elaborate (international) network which helps them bypass situational crime prevention efforts. Human traffickers, for instance, are more likely to find alternatives and displace crime into another region or even country, since in their case, a much larger amount of resources, people and money are at risk.²¹

It is important to acknowledge that what works within micro-spaces might not work in macro-spaces and vice versa, especially with regard to situational crime prevention that focusses on reducing crime opportunities created by specific areas. We therefore have to identify what works, for which type of crime and in which type of space, by implementing evidence-based practices and evaluating their results.²²



It is clear how a reduction in crime is a more likely outcome than a displacement of crime. Yet how can we deliberately enhance the diffusion effect in order to increase the spread of positive effects to other areas?

Firstly, policymakers and practitioners can deliberately boost the diffusion effect themselves. One method of doing this is by means of large-scale publicity of local crime prevention initiatives. When new security cameras are introduced in specific locations, such as parking spaces or public squares, the municipality can promote this action without specifically naming all targeted locations. This helps by causing offenders to believe that the intervention is being implemented more widely than they initially estimated. Similarly, by not specifically stipulating the timing of such initiatives, offenders are led to believe that the surveillance will start sooner or last longer than is the case in reality. All of which creates a false, yet greater threat of apprehension.²³

A second method consists of introducing more flexibility and variation into crime prevention interventions. Initiatives should be continuous and random instead of evenly distributed within the same reoccurring area. Greater variety creates further uncertainty as to the actual risk of apprehension for offenders. That is, instead of organising a weekly police patrol in the same street at the same time, these patrols could be organised targeting varying locations on randomly appointed days. This variability increases the risk of getting caught.²⁴

A more complicated matter are fixed crime prevention interventions, such as security cameras or specialised window and door locks. These are static and cannot easily be changed from time to time or place to place. Uncertainty can therefore be created by using more generalised communication. Instead of advertising security cameras or alarm systems on a specific building, a preventive CCTV-label could be put up at the entrance of an industrial area to generate confusion and create a safety-in-numbers effect.²⁵

CONCLUSION

To fully reject the possibility of crime displacement would be dismissive. Its potential manifestations are so diverse that it becomes difficult to fully examine the phenomenon in all its possible aspects. Nevertheless, it can be stated that the ceasing of crime and the diffusion of crime prevention benefits generally outweigh the negative effect that is crime displacement. Consequently, the ultimate outcome of effective situational crime prevention is an overall reduction in crime. Firstly, by reducing the opportunities for crime, the risks and efforts become too disproportionate in comparison to the possible rewards, making it easier for offenders to cease committing crime instead of making an increased effort to displace it. Secondly, the diffusion of benefits creates a situation in which the positive effects of a prevention initiative are disseminated among neighbouring areas. The diffusion effect can moreover be deliberately heightened by promoting prevention initiatives. This may cause offenders to overestimate the timing, location and intensity of interventions and may generate a greater threat of apprehension.

Endnotes

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