Problem-oriented policing has a modest impact on crime and disorder

Problem-oriented policing is one of the most widely implemented police strategies. There is some evidence that problem-oriented policing is associated with a reduction in crime and disorder. Findings are hampered by a lack of rigorous studies, so further research is required.

What did the review study?
Effective policing is needed to address the issue of crime and disorder.

Problem-oriented policing (POP) focuses police work on ‘problems’ as opposed to calls or crime incidents and it requires police to proactively develop response to crime and disorder problems based on a careful analysis of contributing factors. The approach has had a tremendous impact on American policing and is now widely implemented in the US and other countries. The classic implementation of POP follows the ‘SARA’ model of problem-solving (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment).

This review assesses the effects of problem-oriented policing on crime and disorder based on the existing evaluation literature.

What studies are included?
Studies were randomized and quasi-randomized experiments that included a comparison group. The included studies reported on at least one crime or disorder outcome. The unit of analysis was people or places.

The studies were conducted in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Eight of the studies were place-based while the remaining two focused on individual offenders.

The participants of the two person-based interventions were probationers and parolees in Knoxville and San Diego, while the rest of the participants were residents of six other American

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cities and residents of six neighborhoods in the United Kingdom. A total of 10 studies were included in the review.

What are the main results in this review?
Problem-oriented policing has a statistically significant impact on reducing crime and disorder, but the effect size was small, and there was a lack of diversity and responses in the included studies. The results were similar for both the randomized and quasi-randomized studies.

The evidence base is small and there are shortcomings in the quality of the evidence.

What do the findings in this review mean?
Generally, problem-oriented policing seems to work. However, many of the studies included in the review had methodological shortcomings. Given the lack of rigorous evidence, this conclusion should be read with caution.

There was a larger effect size for studies that focused on certain crimes e.g. disorder, as opposed to total crime. Thus further research should ensure that a more focused approach is taken.

The current evidence does show that problem-oriented policing is promising, as shown from a combination of the findings along with its consistency across studies. However, there is a need to conduct more high quality research, especially with regards to studies focused on total crime.

The review on which this summary is based was completed in 2008 and it may be that new studies add additional insights. A new review is in process.