Problem-oriented policing is effective

Problem-oriented policing focuses police work on “problems” instead of calls or incidents and requires police to proactively develop responses to crime and disorder problems based on a careful analysis of contributing factors. A new Campbell Review shows that problem-oriented policing leads to statistically significant reductions in crime and disorder. Moreover, problem-oriented policing was found to be effective across a diverse group of problems in a variety of situations.

Background
Problem-oriented policing (POP) was first introduced in 1979. The approach was one of a series of responses to a crisis in effectiveness and legitimacy in policing that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The arguments for implementing problem-oriented policing were that police were not being effective in preventing and controlling crime because they had become too focused on the “means” of policing and had neglected the “goals” of preventing and controlling crime and other community problems.

When using problem-oriented policing, the unit of analysis in policing must become the “problem” rather than calls or crime incidents. Problem-oriented policing has had tremendous impact on policing, and is now one of the most widely implemented policing strategies.

This Campbell Review assess the effects of problem-oriented policing on crime and disorder based on the existing evaluation literature.

Problem-oriented policing works
The Review shows that overall problem-oriented policing is associated with a reduction in crime and disorder. Although the effects are modest, problem-oriented policing was found to be effective across many different types of crime. Problem-oriented policing tended to be most effective when police departments were strongly supportive, and when interventions were more focused on specific geographic areas or types of crime.

Problem-oriented policing has been widely implemented in the last two decades, but there are not a large number of studies that met the criteria of the review. The small group of studies in the Review allowed the researchers to come to a solid conclusion regarding the promise of problem-oriented policing, but it did not allow specific conclusions regarding the types of approaches that work best for specific types of problems.

What is problem-oriented policing?
When using problem-oriented policing the police have to be proactive in identifying underlying problems that could be targeted to alleviate crime and disorder. The approach was named
“problem-oriented policing” to highlight its call for police to focus on problems and not on the everyday management of police agencies.

The traditional mandate of policing is expanded beyond crime and law enforcement, when problem-oriented policing is implemented. The police shall deal with an array of problems in the community, including not only crime but also social and physical disorders. And they have to expand the tools of policing beyond just the criminal law to using civil statutes and other municipal and community resources.

In 1987 the police started using the so-called SARA model, as a straightforward approach for implementing problem-oriented policing, which has become widely accepted. SARA is an acronym representing four steps the police should follow when implementing problem-oriented policing.

“Scanning” is the first step, and involves the police identifying and prioritizing potential problems in their jurisdiction that may be causing crime and disorder. After potential problems have been identified, the next step is “Analysis.” This involves the police analyzing the identified problem(s) so that appropriate responses can be developed. The third step, “Response,” has the police developing and implementing interventions designed to solve the problem(s). Finally, once the response has been administered, the final step is “Assessment” which involves assessing the impact of the response on the targeted problem(s).

**About the review**

The studies had to meet different criteria to be included in the review: the SARA model was used, a comparison group was included and at least one crime or disorder outcome was reported. After a systematic search, the researchers found ten studies of sufficient quality to include in the Review.

The ten studies were carried out in eight American cities and six residential areas in the UK. Eight of the research studies based on problem-oriented policing were place-based, while the remaining two research studies focused on individual offenders. The review covers studies spanning 17 years, from 1989-2006. The studies addressed problems ranging from repeat offenses by parolees to assaults on school children to hot spots policing.

Overall, the Review found problem-oriented policing has a modest but statistically significant impact on crime and disorder.