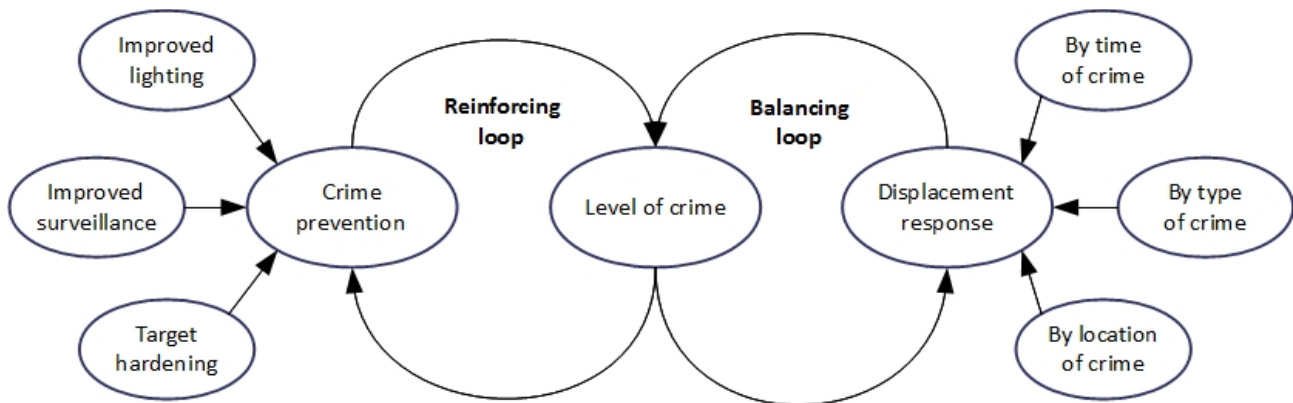


Crime reduction versus crime prevention

A quick Internet search for information on crime reduction reveals an interesting result. Many of the pages that can be visited are about crime reduction, but about as many are about crime prevention. Change the search parameters somewhat, and crime prevention pages may vastly outnumber crime reduction pages. So, either the two concepts are synonymous or something else is going on.

A little further searching reveals that, in fact, there are two quite different concepts here.

At its most simplistic level, crime prevention works on the assumption that there are ‘criminals out there’, and the aim is to make it increasingly difficult for them to commit crime. The focus is the physical environment. Examples are target hardening, improved lighting schemes and better surveillance facilities. Target hardening can range from better locks to burglar alarms on property and includes all the recent advances in car design that have made it increasingly difficult for criminals to break into them and steal them or their contents.



The one notion that is missing is that of the causes, drivers or enablers of criminal behaviour, and any attempts to deal with these.

Crime reduction, on the other hand, appears mainly to be about identifying those drivers of criminal behaviour and dealing with them. Hence the focus is much less on the physical crime targets and more on the people involved and the social bases of criminal behaviour.

Prevention is about design and management of physical things; reduction is about changing the behaviour of people. The snag with the prevention approach is that (like enemies in wartime, each developing new weapon systems to counteract the latest weapons of the other side) criminals will react to harder targets by developing new tactics to defeat them. If this does not work, then displacement will be the order of the day – a search for new, easier targets or locations for their attention.

Since the social drivers of criminal behaviour involve the individual, the immediate and extended families, school populations and local communities, any beneficial changes in these networks of influences are likely to impact on other members of the total population as well as the immediate offender or child at risk. Hence, over time, there is likely to be an increasing effect from working to reduce the drivers of criminal behaviour, hence spreading the benefits, which is much less likely with crime prevention initiatives.

Which raises the question of why so much attention is paid to crime prevention programmes and less to crime reduction. This is more than ever the case with so many 'what works' programmes providing very clear data about what does and what does not work, on the ground. Evidence-based policy-making is here – or is it?

Formal programmes are easy – relatively

Formal programmes are used to identify opportunities for making crime more difficult, and for the decisions about what is to be done, obtaining the funding, planning the implementation and managing the projects. They suit bureaucracies, who seek above all certainty and control. The work is collective, often planned and operated by multiple agencies, and so accountability is diluted to the point of non-existence. Co-ordination of the work of several agencies, along with third sector organisations provides more steady, non-accountable work for bureaucrats, as does the process of getting funding for the work, often from central Government.

By contrast, identifying and tackling underlying causes of criminal behaviour, to reduce crime, is far more difficult. There is little certainty and no control. Here are a few of the challenges:

- Influence networks that surround young offenders or children at risk are complex, highly variable, largely subterranean and volatile. In a world of prescriptive procedures and one-size-fits-all models, it is a serious challenge to understand them, and an even bigger one to influence them.
- The formal programmes, structures and processes that public sector people find comfortable are unlikely ever to add much value to crime reduction. Or anything much else for that matter. For example, between 1997 and 2015 there were 59 such changes all targeting the achievement of 'joined up local government', (source Institute for Government, 2016) but the problem persists.
- The budgets and financial controls, together with the standards, rules and processes of public sector thinking limit variety and hence restrict practitioners from dealing effectively with variability. Perhaps worse, they convey signals of lack of trust to both practitioners and clients alike, when the exact reverse is needed.
- The development of strong ties and trusting relationships which are at the heart of effective practice are difficult if not impossible to achieve when multiple agencies are dealing with the same problem, each with their own standards and targets, as well as their own agendas.
- Crime reduction is a 'wicked problem' and that means that what is needed is emergence, partial, iterative solutions and ongoing learning, all a far cry from the tidy, controlled programmes that are the (hoped for) norm in the public sector.
- Fragmented services are a fact of life, in connection with crime reduction. At the very least, there are six local agencies involved: Local Authorities (including housing departments); Social services, Children's Services; Education, Health and the Police service. Each of these has its own, internal fragmentation of services, and that just compounds the problem. Coordination is a major challenge, as is decision-making, and, as ever, accountability is absent.

None of this is to suggest that crime prevention is not valuable – on the contrary, there is clear evidence that good schemes do work. The problem is that assumption that there are criminals out there driving the need to make life difficult for them. Only crime reduction has the potential to

reduce the number of criminals, but that needs a different approach to local service provision which appears to be largely beyond the understanding and capability of most local agencies to deliver.

Crime and inequality / deprivation

One of the most striking results in recent research is the link between crime and inequality. This could be regarded simply as pointing to a link between deprivation and crime, but actually the position is more subtle than that. Research has indicated that at all levels of income, from those subsisting on social security to the wealthiest in the land, the correlation does not waver. In any comparison, those on lower incomes are more likely to commit crime and go to prison than those on higher incomes – even if the difference is that between the seriously wealthy and the stinking rich.¹

Factoring deprivation into the equation produces more insights. Deprivation does not just include income, or the lack of it. It also includes access to jobs, education, housing – and imprisonment (the lack of freedom). Perhaps above all, one key feature of deprivation is the lack of supportive networks, and the trusting relationships associated with them. For many if not most individuals at risk (or those who have already succumbed and have a record of criminality and punishment), that would mean that their chances of a full recovery and return to society as responsible and good citizens would be small, at least for some while, and that journey would be likely to be a hard, long and rocky one.

With deprivation having multiple facets, all grounded in inequality, there is evidently a need for multiple actions designed to restore the balance. Those problem-solving actions are not likely to be easy to implement, if at all, in the absence of trusting relationships between practitioner and clients, the client's family and friends and other local influence networks. A parallel is the decision-making necessary in relation to budgets and how funds should be applied.

This all underlines the earlier observation that fragmentation of service delivery is simply not the way to go. To repeat, having multiple agencies dealing with the same or overlapping set of clients may be good for creating bureaucratic overheads; it may be good for having neat and tidy budget arrangements and the accounting systems that accompany them; and it may even be helpful in enabling tidy project plans and programmes to be developed.

The problem is that the design and operation of such fragmented services fly in the face of what is actually needed on the ground if crime levels are to be substantially reduced. It is time for a fundamental system change. And that change should be entirely focused on enabling solutions to be developed to the challenges noted above.

1 Social Exclusion and Imprisonment in Scotland - Roger Houchin - Glasgow Caledonian University - January 2005