

The Effects of Problem-Oriented Policing on Crime and Disorder: A Systematic Review¹

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Background:

Problem-oriented policing (POP) was first introduced by Herman Goldstein who argued 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. Goldstein believed that the unit of analysis in policing must become the “problem” rather than calls or crime incidents. POP has had tremendous impact on American policing, and is now one of the most widely implemented policing strategies in the U.S. The goal of this study was to synthesize the extant problem-oriented policing evaluation literature and assess the effects of problem-oriented policing on crime and disorder using a Campbell Collaboration systematic review methodology².

Methodology:

Selection criteria:

Eligible studies had to meet three criteria: (1) the SARA model (scanning, analysis, response, assessment) was used for a problem-oriented policing intervention; (2) a comparison group was included; (3) at least one crime or disorder outcome was reported with sufficient data to generate an effect size. The unit of analysis could be people or places.

Search strategy:

Several strategies were used to perform an exhaustive search for literature fitting the eligibility criteria including a keyword search on an array of online abstract databases, a review of bibliographies of past reviews of POP, forward searches for works that had cited seminal POP, hand searches of leading journals in the field, publication searches of several research and professional agencies, and consultation with leading policing scholars. We located ten eligible studies for our meta-analysis. We also collected pre/post comparison studies that were less methodologically rigorous, but met our other inclusion criteria, and we located 45 such studies.

Main results:

Based on our meta-analysis, overall problem-oriented policing has a modest but statistically significant impact on reducing crime and disorder. Our results are consistent when examining both experimental and quasi-experimental studies. The results of our pre/post studies indicate an overwhelmingly positive impact of POP.

Conclusions and Implications:

We conclude that problem-oriented policing is effective in reducing crime and disorder, although the effect is fairly modest. We urge caution in interpreting these results because of the small number of methodologically rigorous studies on POP and the diversity of problems and responses used in our eligible studies. Our study supports the overall commitment of police to POP, but suggests that we should not necessarily expect large crime and disorder control benefits from this approach. We conclude that the evidence base in this area is very much deficient given the strong investment in POP that is being made by the government and police agencies.

¹ Full report available at: <http://campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/228/>

² See http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/systematic_reviews/index.php for more information