Problem-oriented Policing and Partnerships

Implementing an evidence-based approach to crime reduction

KAREN BULLOCK, ROSIE EROL AND NICK TILLEY

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Karen Bullock
Rosie Erol
Nick Tilley

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Chapter 1

Introduction: problem-oriented approaches to crime reduction and policing

This book is about attempts to introduce problem-oriented policing in Britain. Its virtues as an ideal are largely taken for granted. No critique of the concept is included here. Instead, our concern is with its implementation, both organisationally and in specific local initiatives to address identified crime and other problems. In looking at the implementation of problem-oriented policing we are concerned especially with three issues.

First, we look systematically at what is regarded as amongst the best problem-oriented work in Britain in order to distil what has been learned for others who choose to introduce the approach in areas over which they have responsibility, or who wish to undertake specific problem-oriented pieces of work. In connection with this aim we also discuss methods in problem-oriented initiatives that have so far been used rather little in the UK but may be useful in making improvements on what has been achieved so far. For these purposes, we hope that the book will be used by police managers, officials with responsibility for policing, police practitioners and analysts in police services as well as other practitioners concerned with crime and disorder.

Second, we provide case studies of efforts to bring change to the style and methods of policing in the UK. This, we hope, may be of interest to students and members of the academic community concerned with policing. The police are self-evidently an important and influential social institution, responding to our problems and endowed with powers that may significantly affect our lives. The drivers of police priorities and methods are important. The hindrances

and opportunities for change and innovation within policing provide, we think, some insight into the nature of contemporary policing.

Third, though the thinking behind problem-oriented policing goes back more than a quarter of a century, its emphasis on evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP) resonates with much more recent thinking in Britain about the ways in which public services should operate. This book has, we hope, something useful to say about some determined and quite sustained efforts to turn this into a reality. Academics, who as observers wish to understand attempts to undertake EBPP, and policy-makers and practitioners, who wish realistically to implement EBPP, will, we hope find material of interest here, even though some of the issues we focus on will be specific to policing and partnership work, and all the examples are police-specific.

This examination of the implementation of problem-oriented policing brings out many obstacles, disappointments and doubts about the existing achievements of and future prospects for problem-oriented, evidence-based policing and practice. Notwithstanding this we continue to think that the vision of problem-oriented policing and partnership in particular and EBPP more generally is admirable, but are left with a more jaundiced view of the practicalities.

There is a risk of naïve utopianism to which this volume should act as a corrective. This, we think, is no reason to abandon the aspiration to reform and we are left in some awe of those many individuals who have had the determination and guts to fight their way through the thickets and thickheads they have encountered as they have sought to change policing and the lives of those whose problems they have helped solve or assuage.

The concepts, relevance and implementation in the UK

Problem-oriented policing has become increasingly important in crime reduction policy and practice. The approach has been adopted explicitly in a growing number of police services and partnerships in the UK and is used in an *ad hoc* or implicit way in many more. The basic idea, *the application of scientific principles to tackling crime and disorder problems*, resonates with a range of new developments in crime reduction and policing. On a wider level it also resonates strongly with the push towards Evidence Based Policy and Practice which has become increasingly important in discussions of policy and practice. Specific key changes in policing and partnership include the increased focus on intelligence-led approaches, research

and analysis and in particularly the requirements of the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act and the National Intelligence Model. The ideas also feature heavily in recent Home Office policy, and plans for the implementation of neighbourhood and community policing models (see the 2004 White Paper *Building Communities, Beating Crime* and the 2005—08 National Policing Plan).

This introductory chapter describes the basic principles of problem-oriented policing and the language that is associated with it. It examines the case for change in the police service and the rise of the problem-oriented approach. Finally, it sets out the purpose of, methodology for, and structure of, the rest of the book.

The basic principles: what is problem-oriented policing and how do you do it?

An American professor and former adviser to O.W. Wilson when he reformed Chicago's police department, Herman Goldstein, first described the principles of problem-oriented policing in a 1979 article and later in a book published in 1990. Goldstein was critical of the way that the police service concentrated on organisational efficiency to the detriment of focusing on its core outcome: reducing problems of concern to local people. Goldstein (1990) stated that a problem-oriented police service would be characterised by the following:

1 Focus on the wide range of community concerns that the public expects the police to deal with, including troublesome groups, individuals and places.

2 Concentration on effectiveness in reducing, eliminating, better handling or lessening the impact of problems.

3 Pro-activity, based on careful enquiry, both in the early identification of problems and in the formulation of suggestions as to ways in which the police, community, and other agencies, might better handle them in the future.

4 Dis-aggregation of incidents that are normally lumped together in the broad, generic crime-type categories used by criminal justice agencies, into distinctive separately identifiable problems.

5 Commitment to systematic enquiry as the first step in solving problems: grouping together incidents and probing them for

common attributes and common conditions, such as place, time, people involved, the physical environment, causes, motivations, and methods; identifying the range of interests in the problem; interrogating, documenting and critically examining existing responses; and moving beyond the pooling and analysis of information simply to improve detection.

6 A broad, uninhibited and imaginative quest for tailor-made solutions to individual police-related problems, rather than dependence solely on standard tactics of arrest and prosecution through the criminal justice system.

7 Higher levels of accountability through the use of transparent evidence-based grounds for problem-focus and response, community involvement and improved community understanding of what the police can and cannot do.

8 Acceptance by police and others that efforts to address problems involve risk-taking where standard methods are ineffective, and alternative, ethical methods are attempted in relation to hitherto intractable problems.

9 Routine, skilful, methodologically informed and, ideally, independent evaluation of the effectiveness of innovative methods of addressing problems, to avoid replacing one ineffective response with another and to learn lessons for future practice and to check that existing methods continue to be effective.

10 Encouragement of rigorous methods in making enquiries.

11 Full use of police skills and expertise.

12 Acknowledgement of the limitations of the criminal justice system in responding to problems.

13 Identification of the multiple interests in a problem and attendance to them when valuing different responses.

Problem-oriented policing in practice

Problem-oriented policing suggests four processes through which problems should be tackled: problem identification; problem understanding; the development of responses; and evaluation. These can be briefly elaborated as follows.

Problem identification and understanding

Problem identification involves the systematic grouping of recurring incidents, recognising that there are links between incidents, and an attempt to understand how and why these sets of incidents arise. A problem should involve a group or set of related incidents, not a random collection of disconnected events. Most important, they should comprise matters of concern to the public that are relevant to the police function.

A tight definition and detailed breakdown of each problem is essential for the purposes of problem-oriented policing, as broad legalistic definitions of crime can hide what could be a variety of different problems, which manifest themselves in different ways and which would ultimately require different responses to deal with them.

Goldstein pointed to the use of police recorded statistics as a starting point for analysing problems, though he acknowledges the limitations of them. Police officers should seek to understand a problem through looking at it in detail. They should be thinking about what is already known about a problem. This involves reviewing existing research and other evidence, and making an assessment about whether more needs to be learnt about the problem. Officers also need to analyse, understand and critically assess the nature of current responses to problems.

Response development and evaluation

Responses to identified problems should be tailor-made to the explanations of why that problem exists. Goldstein did not believe that effective responses necessarily have to address the 'root causes' of problems. Rather, attention should be focused on a specific aspect of the problem seemingly amenable to intervention. In particular he thought that the police service should be looking to expand its responses beyond its normal remit of law enforcement. He argued that the police service is overwhelmingly concerned with its authority to enforce the law and that this view has impacted on the way that the police operate. Policing should be about seeking the best way to develop responses to a whole range of problems and in many cases this need not be law enforcement. Police officers need to recognise their role as more than enforcement of the criminal law. Even if the police do not directly provide what may be needed to deal with a problem, for example youth diversion services, they should recognise the role that those services can play in reducing crime and hence

work in partnership with other organisations. In any case, Goldstein argues, it is unlikely that an effective way of dealing with a problem will consist of a single type of response. It is more likely that a range of interventions will have the greatest impact. Attempts should also be made to review existing literature and other evidence to inform interventions.

The new response should be monitored and evaluated to ensure that one ineffective response is not merely replaced with another. This will also guard against a response simply reverting to its older form. The extent of the evaluation would have to be variable, as the size and extent of the problems varies.

So, simplifying a range of issues identified here, there are basically four main processes underpinning problem-oriented policing as shown in Figure 1.1. This figure draws on the SARA process described by Eck and Spelman (1987). SARA refers to Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment. It is presented here as a cycle, rather than a linear process, as it is sometimes shown, in order to convey the importance attached in problem-oriented policing to feedback and to continuous attention in order that new problems are addressed and old methods checked and modified where necessary.

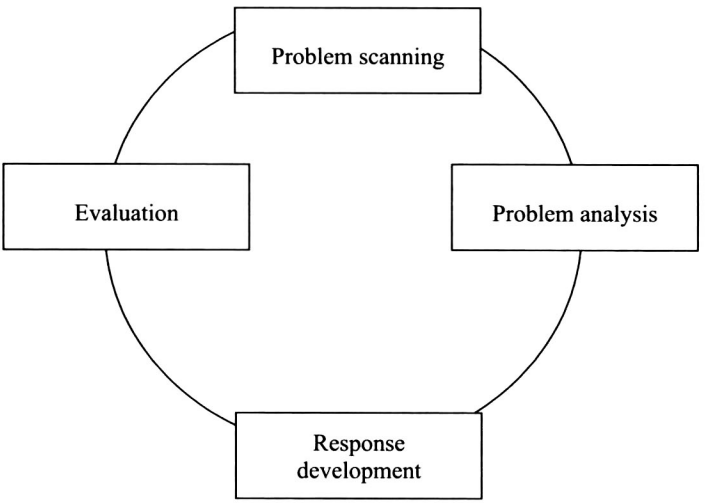

Figure 1.1 The main processes underpinning problem-oriented policing

The language of the problem-oriented approach

The language used to describe problem-oriented policing varies in ways where the significance will become increasingly clear throughout this book.

Problem-orientation and problem solving

The term 'problem solving' is widely used in UK policing, partly as a matter of taste. The link between Goldstein and problem-orientation is usually acknowledged (Read and Tilley 2000) and the models associated with the implementation of problem-oriented policing (SARA, PAT, RAT and so on: see Chapter 5 for explanations) are usually used to focus problem-solving work.

However, the difference in language is not without substantive significance. Problem-orientation, as we have described it, is about the systematic grouping of recurring incidents as problems and looking for the links between them to understand why they arise, the formulation of responses that are tailor-made to explanations of why problems recur (and which for the most part go beyond police enforcement), and evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures put in place. As we shall see in later chapters this presents a considerable challenge for the police service. In practice, much that is described as problem-oriented policing falls short of this ideal and is indeed better described as 'problem-solving' as some scholars have come to understand that term.

Clarke (1998) uses 'problem-solving' to refer to efforts to tackle fairly small-scale problems, such as the activities of one offender, noise nuisance associated with one house or late-night violence associated with a particular nightclub. Moreover, in problem-solving, as compared to problem-oriented work, there is less systematic analysis, responses are less likely to be rooted in that analysis and evaluation is either not undertaken at all or is cursory.

Problem-oriented policing and problem-oriented partnership

Goldstein used the term 'problem-oriented policing' to describe his approach to addressing problems. However, as we have already seen, Goldstein intended that problem-orientation would involve a search for the best response to a problem, whether or not the police could deliver it. For this reason there is a strong implication that the resources of other agencies will often need to be drawn in to adequately address a problem. More recently, in the UK, the term