

Unintended (Negative) Consequences of Crime Prevention

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A major challenge facing crime prevention practitioners is preventing unwanted and unintended negative consequences of their actions. There are many examples of crime prevention programs and initiatives that have had detrimental and deleterious outcomes and consequences, despite their good intentions. The following examples highlight just some of the unintended consequences that have been associated with some forms of crime prevention.

Victim Blaming

Some efforts to prevent crime have resulted in victim blaming. Rather than focusing on deterring the offender, some crime prevention campaigns have advised 'potential victims' to modify their behaviour to avoid victimisation. Advice of this nature can promote fear and negatively impact upon the lives of the people targeted by these 'educational' campaigns.

"Never admit that you are alone in the house, to either a caller at the front door or to somebody on the telephone. If you are alone, always give the impression that there is a man about" (page 14)

"The first rule is to try and avoid walking alone, and never take short cuts through parks or vacant lots – particularly at night" (page 15)

"A very large percentage of crime throughout the Western world is committed against older people ... It is an unfortunate fact of modern life that there are those in our society who prey on the elderly – seeking any opportunity to take advantage of older people who are less capable of defending themselves and who are often more trusting because they are so much more vulnerable" (page 77)

Daley, P. (1987) **The Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Handbook: The Comprehensive and Indispensable Guide to all aspects of Personal and Child Safety, Home Security, Community Policing, Small Business and Motor Vehicle Protection**, Angus and Robertson Publishers, North Ryde.

Despite the good intentions of the Neighbourhood Crime Prevention Handbook, it is possible that the unintended consequence of some of the information provided is to make people more fearful and less inclined to leave their homes. Inadvertently, this might make public space less safe, because there will be less natural surveillance due to less eyes on the street. Some of the messages contained also infer that women are inherently vulnerable and perhaps provide excessive reference to crimes committed by strangers, when crime statistics tend to suggest that victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, for example, will frequently know the perpetrator.



Fortress Mentality

Some forms of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) and situational crime prevention strategies can contribute to a fortress mentality. By installing fences, gates, locks, security cameras and other access control measures, people can become more fearful and less willing to venture outside of their safe cocoons.

The owner of this property has obviously taken significant measures to feel safe and to repel intruders. How this form of fortification influences perceptions of safety outside of this terrace house is an interesting question.

Displacement

It is often suggested that by implementing a crime prevention initiative in a particular area, crime will simply be displaced to an adjacent area. For example, the installation of closed circuit television (CCTV) in a pedestrian area might push crime to a neighbouring area without CCTV or improved access control measures (including swipe card access to the building, concierge security and swipe card operated elevators) in an apartment complex might result in greater targeting of less secure neighbouring apartment complexes. While the research evidence tends to suggest that (geographical) displacement is less of a problem than might be anticipated, it should no doubt be considered when a crime prevention initiative is being developed.

Facilitating Offending

Some crime prevention measures have had the opposite effect of what was intended. Sadly, some crime prevention initiatives have made it easier to offend. For example, signs were installed in certain stations in the London Underground advising patrons that pickpockets were active in the area. What reaction would you have to a sign of this nature?



Source of image: <http://www.thevancouverite.com/pictures/pickpocket-vancouver.jpg>
- accessed on 8 July 2010

It has been suggested that on seeing a sign of this nature, commuters check their valuables (i.e. pat locations of concealed wallets) which provides would-be offenders with specific intelligence helpful in the commission of crime (see Paul Ekblom (1997) Gearing up Against Crime: a Dynamic Framework to Help Designers Keep up with the Adaptive Criminal in a Changing World. International Journal of Risk, Security and Crime Prevention, 2: 249-265). Consequently, consideration needs to be given to the potential unintended consequences of crime prevention initiatives that might assist offending.

Exercise

1. These are just some of the unintended consequences of crime prevention initiatives. List other examples of unintended consequences of crime prevention programs and initiatives.
2. How can you anticipate negative unintended consequences of crime prevention when designing or developing a program or initiative?
3. How can you ensure that any evaluation of a crime prevention initiative or program is sensitive to capturing data on unintended consequences?
4. Are there positive unintended consequences that might also derive from particular crime prevention initiatives and programs?