

A Model for Prioritising Crime Prevention Problems

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Local crime prevention planning requires decisions to be made about which crimes will receive attention. Limited capacity, limited resources and competing priorities necessitate such decisions.

Prioritising crime problems generates a myriad of technical and political questions. Sifting through available crime data will not necessarily determine which crimes should be favoured over others. Complex questions about the relative harms associated with particular offences; fluctuating crime trends; crime reporting anomalies; and competing perspectives within a locality all complicate the processes associated with prioritising crime problems.

In response to the challenges associated with these processes, the following model has been developed. The model attempts to provide a framework for how decisions will be made in the context of local crime prevention planning. While aspects of the model are specific to New South Wales, the general concepts are applicable elsewhere.

Volume of Crime	<p>Step 1: Assemble BOCSAR and police crime data. Review this data across the LGA and identify the most voluminous offences.</p> <p>Step 2: Multiple the number of incidents for the key crime types emerging from Step 1 by the 'Dark Figure Multiplier'. This measure is designed to even out the picture for crimes with low and high reporting. This gross calculation goes some way to revealing the true picture of crime in the LGA.</p> <p>Step 3: Multiply the crime incidents generated in Step 2 by the 'Costs of Crime' value. While limited, this step helps to provide some insight into the actual total costs of crime. While all of these costs will not be borne by the local council, it does help to provide some indication of the costs of crime.</p>	<p>Volume Crime Priorities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Crime Trends	<p>Step 4: Review BOCSAR and police data to identify those offences which are increasing. Give greater weighting to those offences which have been increasing over a five-year period, by listing them as priorities 1) through 3). Include offences which have increased more recently in 4) and 5).</p>	<p>Crime Trend Priorities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
LGA Ranking	<p>Step 5: BOCSAR generates a crime ranking for each of the LGAs with populations over 3000 people. This is based on the rate of crime (per 100,000 people) and enables comparisons to be made across LGAs. Review the BOCSAR LGA rankings and highlight those offences for which the LGA appears in the top 20 LGAs.</p>	<p>LGA Ranking:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Community Views	<p>Step 6: Community consultation provides an important opportunity for different groups in the community to contribute their views about crime and disorder. While it is often difficult to exactly quantify community concerns, it is important to distil the key themes emerging from consultative processes. Where possible, the top 10 issues should be generated throughout the various consultation mechanisms.</p>	<p>Community Views:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10.
Perceptions of Crime	<p>Step 7: Despite the numerous problems associated with perceptions or fear of crime instruments, data generated from these instruments can be very instructive. Surveys of this type provide a further opportunity for community input and can be particularly helpful at targeting 'hard to reach' groups. These surveys can highlight crimes (and disorder issues) of concern and locations that people regard as unsafe.</p>	<p>A. Crime / Disorder Issues:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. <p>B. Locations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Risk Factors	<p>Step 8: Looking beyond crime and perceptions of crime is important to long-term preventative efforts. In any area, there will be an array of data that points to criminogenic or crime causing risk factors. Truancy data, child abuse notifications, well-being indicators, accident and emergency data and insurance records are just some of sources of information that can be instructive regarding future crime risk factors. Accessing this information will often be difficult, although some existing reports will be helpful (i.e. Vinson's locality analyses on risk and resilience). Nonetheless, giving some attention to wider risk factors is important to avoid adoption of a narrow crime reduction focus.</p>	<p>Risk Factors:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Priority Matrix	<p>Step 9: After the above steps have been accomplished, it is time to blend the findings from each step. The priority lists generated in Steps 1,2,3,4,5 and 7a should be combined. The top crime problems will fall out through combining the previous lists. Similarly, combining the findings from steps 6 and 7b will generate the locations requiring attention.</p>	

Step 10: The final prism that needs to be considered is local capacity. It is all well and good identifying a series of crime issues and prevention strategies, but the practical ability to tackle these issues will be compromised by existing capacity issues.

Detailed Explanation

The following provides a more detailed explanation for each of the 10 steps.

Step 1: Assemble BOCSAR and police crime data. Review this data across the LGA and identify the most voluminous offences.

The two major sources of crime data in NSW are the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and the NSW Police Force. BOCSAR data (at Local Government Area level) is freely available from their website and more detailed data can be purchased on an ad hoc basis. The BOCSAR on-line data tools and mapping service provides a wealth of relevant data. For the purposes of local crime prevention planning, it will be necessary to go below the LGA level. In the first instance, key crime trends across the LGA will be sufficient in identifying particular crime types that might warrant attention.

Relevant personnel at the Local Area Command (NSW Police Force) should be approached about providing relevant crime data. The LAC will possess more detailed data than is routinely provided by BOCSAR, including time of offence, victim details and person of interest details. Accessing this information is often dependent upon local arrangements.

Once relevant data is collected, analyse the data to identify the most voluminous offences. In essence, this step seeks to identify those offences which are committed most frequently in the relevant LGA. List the offences that have been consistently highest in the LGA for the last five years.

Step 2: Multiple the number of incidents for the key crime types emerging from Step 1 by the 'Dark Figure Multiplier'. This measure is designed to even out the picture for crimes with low and high reporting. This gross calculation goes some way to revealing the true picture of crime in the LGA.

It is well known that the level of reported crime is lower than the actual level of crime. People do not report crime for various reasons, including their relationship with the offender, the fear of reprisals and the triviality of the offence. Consequently, it is unwise to only work off reported crime statistics, especially given that 'private' crimes like domestic violence and sexual assault have far lower reporting rates than property offences. Just using reported crime statistics is likely to distort attention toward property rather than person offences.

Household surveys provide useful insights into reporting levels across particular crime categories. The Australian data from the 2004 International Crime Victimization Survey suggests that the following percentage of offences were reported to police:

- 37% of assaults
- 38% of attempted burglary offences
- 41% of personal theft offences
- 53% of robberies
- 55% of theft from motor vehicle offences
- 56% of bicycle thefts
- 84% of burglaries
- 88% of motor cycle thefts
- 94% of motor vehicle thefts¹

Offence categories differ across jurisdictions, making these figures incompatible with NSW crime data. Despite these differences, it is beneficial to use these figures as the 'Dark Figure Multiplier' to get a more accurate figure of the number of actual offences occurring in a particular LGA. Based on these figures, the 'Dark Figure Multiplier' would involve the following:

- Multiply assault figures by 2.7
- Multiply attempted break, enter and steal figures by 2.6
- Multiply steal from person figures by 2.4
- Multiply robbery figures by 1.9
- Multiply steal from motor vehicle figures by 1.8
- Multiply break, enter and steal figures by 1.2
- Multiply motor vehicle theft figures by 1.1

Based on other sources, the following can also be added:

- Multiply malicious damage to property figures by 3.2²
- Multiply retail theft figures by 5³
- Multiply sexual assault figures by 5⁴

While not an exhaustive list, these 'Dark Figure Multipliers' can help to illustrate a more accurate picture of the total level of crime in an area, rather than just relying on reported figures. It is acknowledged that there are significant limitations to this approach, but the limitations are considered less unreliable than merely utilising reported crime figures.

Step 3: Multiply the crime incidents generated in Step 2 by the 'Costs of Crime' value. While limited, this step helps to provide some insight into the actual total costs of crime. While all of these costs will not be borne by the local council, it does help to provide some indication of the general costs of crime.

¹ Johnson, H. (2005) **Crime Victimization in Australia - Key Results of the 2004 International Crime Victimization Survey**, Research and Public Policy Series, No. 64, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

² Dodds et al (2004) in Chainey, S. and Ratcliffe, J. (2005) **GIS and Crime Mapping**, Wiley, England

³ This is a very conservative figure. Data on the actual volume of retail theft compared with what is reported suggests varying levels of detection. Some estimates suggest that offenders commit anywhere between 40 and 250 offences before being detected and that shrinkage figures suggest far higher theft rates than do official statistics (see Nelson, N. and Perrone, S. (2000) 'Understanding and Controlling Retail Theft', **Trends and Issues No. 152**, Australian Institute of Criminology for discussion of these issues).

⁴ <http://www.apf.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/ViolenceAgainstWomen.htm>

Gaining an insight into the costs of each crime can help with prioritising those offences to select for particular attention.

One study by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) has tried to measure some of the potential financial costs of particular crime categories. The following are the figures derived by the AIC:

- Homicide - total cost \$930m or \$1.6 million per victim
- Vehicle theft - total cost \$880m or \$6,000 per theft of vehicle
- Theft from vehicles - \$530 million or \$550 per theft from vehicle
- Shop theft - total cost \$810 million or \$110 per shop theft
- Criminal damage - total cost \$1.34 billion or \$700 per incident of criminal damage
- Assault - total cost \$1.44 billion or \$1,600 per assault
- Burglary - total cost \$2.41 billion or \$2,400 per burglary
- Robbery - total cost \$600 million or \$3,600 per robbery
- Sexual assault - total cost \$230 million or \$2,500 per sexual assault
- Fraud - total cost \$5.8 billion
- Drug offences - total cost \$1.96 billion⁵

For those offences with a per crime or per incident cost, it is possible to multiply the number of incidents in an area by the identified cost. For example, 205 incidents of assault in an area in a 12-month period incur total costs of \$328,000. When compared with the 20 counts of robbery (which equates to total costs of \$72,000), it is apparent that both the number and cost of assault is far greater, requiring increased attention.

Step 4: Review BOCSAR and police data to identify those offences which are increasing. Give greater weighting to those offences which have been increasing over a five-year period, by listing them as priorities 1) through 3). Include offences which have increased more recently in 4) and 5).

Crime trends are also important considerations in identifying key priorities. Thankfully, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research provide easily accessible data that makes it easy to monitor trends. Via BOCSAR's on-line crime data tools, it is possible to plot trends for various crime types over a maximum of ten years. By reviewing and including offences for which there have been long and short-term increases in crime, it is possible to highlight and prioritise offences which are likely to be a pressing problem.

Step 5: BOCSAR generates a crime ranking for each of the LGAs with populations over 3000 people. This is based on the rate of crime (per 100,000 people) and enables comparisons to be made across LGAs. Review the BOCSAR LGA rankings and highlight those offences for which the LGA appears in the top 20 LGAs.

This step ensures that crime rates are given due consideration. The total number of crimes in an area does not really demonstrate whether this is high or low compared with other areas. The BOCSAR crime ranking tool makes this possible. Again, this on-line tool is easily accessible and can quickly demonstrate whether an LGA is ranked high or low according to population.

⁵ Mayhew, P. (2003) 'Counting the Costs of Crime in Australia', No. 247 **Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice**, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

While this measure is useful to include, there are some potential limitations to this measurement. An area with a low residential population but high transient population moving in each day, will be potentially disadvantaged by this measure. For example, opportunity crimes like retail theft will be ranked high for these areas because the number of retail theft offences are divided by the total residential population of the area, not the average number of people in the area on a daily basis.

Step 6: Community consultation provides an important opportunity for different groups in the community to contribute their views about crime and disorder. While it is often difficult to exactly quantify community concerns, it is important to distil the key themes emerging from consultative processes. Where possible, the top 10 issues should be generated throughout the various consultations mechanisms.

Community members will often have very different concerns to those reflected in crime statistics. For example, a study undertaken by BOCSAR in the 1990s highlighted that 'dangerous / noisy driving' and 'youth gangs / louts' were issues identified in the top three neighbourhood crime problems.⁶ This suggests the importance of listening to community concerns and reflecting these concerns in the problems prioritised for attention.

Consulting community members can be difficult, especially across large geographical areas. Many people will have little direct experience of crime and thus have little interest in attending consultation sessions. Identifying critical stakeholders (especially hard to reach groups) and utilising consultation methods specifically for those groups can result in the identification of very pertinent information.

Step 7: Despite the numerous problems associated with perceptions or fear of crime instruments, data generated from these instruments can be very instructive. Surveys of this type provide a further opportunity for community input and can be particularly helpful at targeting 'hard to reach' groups. These surveys can highlight crimes (and disorder issues) of concern and locations that people regard as unsafe.

Further to community consultations mechanisms, it can be beneficial to conduct some form of neighbourhood survey. Many councils routinely conduct satisfaction and local area surveys. Including questions on crime and safety can help generate information about experiences and perceptions of crime. Increasingly, these instruments can utilise Internet technology, reducing costs of administration.

Careful consideration should be given to what is being measured by these means. It has been well documented that questions about fear of crime are frequently poorly constructed resulting in irrelevant or redundant findings.⁷ However, some very useful insights can be generated through instruments which require respondents to specifically identify locations that they perceive as being unsafe and the reasons for these perceptions. Commuters might highlight poorly lit car parks that warrant remedial action.

⁶ Chilvers, M. (1999) 'Public perceptions of neighbourhood crime in New South Wales', **Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice**, No. 44, BOCSAR, Sydney.

⁷ See Lee, M. (2007) **Inventing Fear of Crime**, Willan Publishing for a detailed discussion of the limitations of fear of crime surveys.

Step 8: Looking beyond crime and perceptions of crime is important to long-term preventative efforts. In any area, there will be an array of data that points to criminogenic or crime causing risk factors. Truancy data, child abuse notifications, well-being indicators, accident and emergency data and insurance records are just some of sources of information that can be instructive regarding future crime risk factors. Accessing this information will often be difficult, although some existing reports will be helpful (i.e. Vinson’s locality analyses on risk and resilience). Nonetheless, giving some attention to wider risk factors is important to avoid adoption of a narrow crime reduction focus.

Grappling with risk and protective factors in an area will help with longer-term strategic crime prevention planning. Understanding child abuse and neglect patterns, truancy rates, and accident and emergency admissions for alcohol-related crime incidents helps to gain a wider picture of what is occurring in an area. Accessing data from these sources will invariably be very difficult. Appropriate privacy protections will limit accessibility to various data. Nonetheless, alternative sources of data can be accessed. For example the series of publications by Tony Vinson on disadvantage and resilience by postcode can be very informative. Vinson’s most recent publication, ‘Dropping Off the Edges’, for example, provides analysis of systems data across Australia. This type of information can be very beneficial in considering future crime risks in an area.

Step 9: After the above steps have been accomplished, it is time to blend the findings from each step. The priority lists generated in Steps 1,2,3,4,5 and 7a should be combined. The top crime problems will fall out through combining the previous lists. Similarly, combining the findings from steps 6 and 7b will generate the locations requiring attention.

Step 10: The final prism that needs to be considered is local capacity. It is all well and good identifying a series of crime issues and prevention strategies, but the practical ability to tackle these issues will be compromised by existing capacity issues.

Assessing local capacity is a difficult task. Mapping existing services; reviewing positions dedicated to crime prevention; scoping existing committees and deciding how many services and agencies are willing to be involved are all critical considerations to gauging capacity. Obviously, if in a rural or regional area there are few services, then developing 15 crime prevention priorities will be of little utility.

Crime Priority Matrix: The Crime Priority Matrix simply collates the information generated through the various problem prioritisation steps. The final priorities are depicted in the vertical rows and horizontal columns.

Crime, Disorder and Risk Priorities						
Location Priorities		Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4	Priority 5
	Site 1					
	Site 2					
	Site 3					
	Site 4					
	Site 5					
	LGA-wide					