

## SME RESEARCH BRIEF

### Research Review – Problem-Oriented Policing

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#### *What is problem-oriented policing and does it work?*

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Herman Goldstein (1979) set out the principles of problem-oriented policing 40 years ago, so most readers will likely be familiar with the term. Problem-oriented policing (POP) begins with an assessment of a community safety problem and then seeks to develop and implement a lasting solution to the problem rather than continuing to dispatch cruiser cars to deal with recurring individual incidents.

POP typically follows a Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment (SARA) model. For example, every police officer knows that a high proportion of crimes take place at a small number of locations. This conclusion is supported by extensive research which also shows that the pattern can persist over long periods of time. Rather than just continuing to respond to calls at the same addresses for several decades, proponents of POP would try to determine what caused the frequent calls and to develop initiatives to prevent them from recurring. For example, if a poorly-managed nightclub generated a high volume of calls for service, problem-solving strategies might include meeting with the club owner to let him/her know about the problem and to encourage them to deal with the problem, requiring training of bar staff, and working with landlords and municipal and provincial regulatory agencies to ensure compliance with rules. An evaluation by Weisburd and Green (1995) found that a similar strategy was more effective at reducing calls involving drug hot spots than arrest-oriented enforcement.

One of the strengths of POP is that it focuses on assessing the **results** of police actions. Typically, police statistics focus on *outputs* (such as the number of traffic tickets issued) rather than *outcomes* (the number of motor vehicle accidents prevented). This means that police officers can be very busy doing their jobs, but that their work may have only a limited impact on community safety.

It is important to note that POP is **not** a strategy or tactic, but rather is a process that can be used by the police to develop strategies and tactics (Weisburd, et al, 2010: 164). Thus, it can involve a broad range of activities including community policing, environmental design, focused deterrence, increased police patrols, youth programs, or any other ideas that come out of the planning process.

## *Can problem-oriented policing help to make our communities safer?*

Systematic reviews are the gold standard for assessing research results and are used extensively in fields such as health research. Weisburd et al (2010) conducted the most recent systematic review of POP. The most methodologically rigorous studies they examined (only 10 of 628 studies reviewed) showed that POP interventions were modestly successful in reducing crime. Because of the difficulty of conducting well-controlled studies in this area, the researchers also identified an additional 45 studies that met less-demanding selection criteria – these were pretest/post-test studies that did not have a comparison or control group. These studies found a much larger impact on crime with an average reduction of over 30 percent in the target crimes. The conclusion of the review was that POP could indeed enhance community safety.

## *Implications for Practice*

The research tells us that problem-oriented policing can be an effective way of improving community safety, however it has not yet become a basic policing practice despite its success. Scott and Kirby (2012:5) attribute this to a number of factors including:

- The pressures of emergency response and other calls for service take precedence over problem-solving.
- The police subculture focuses on enforcement over prevention and many officers don't see POP as 'real' police work.
- Leaders are not effective in managing change within their organizations.
- Job turnover within police departments means that champions of new initiatives may be replaced by those who don't choose to continue the programs even when they are successful.
- Line personnel do not engage with new initiatives, often because they view them as 'flavour of the month' projects – a view which is often justified.
- Police personnel may not work effectively with outside partners who may be key resources in dealing with community safety problems.

To embed a POP process in your organization, you will need to take account of these possible challenges.

## *Learn More About Problem-Oriented Policing*

The best resource for those wanting to learn more about POP is the website of the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing <https://popcenter.asu.edu/>. The Center provides specific resources addressing a long list of community safety problems. The book by Scott and Kirby cited below, which can be found under the 'POP Administration' tab on the website, is a very good introduction to POP from a police manager's perspective.

## *Key References*

Scott, Michael and Stuart Kirby (2012). *Implementing POP: Leading, Structuring, and Managing a Problem-Oriented Police Agency*. Center for Problem-Oriented Policing.  
<https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/pop-administration>

Weisburd, D., C. Telep, J. Hinkle, and J. Eck. "Is Problem-Oriented Policing Effective? Findings from a Campbell Systematic Review." *Crime & Public Policy*, 9, 139-172.