

Reducing Burglary Initiative Project Summary

Stirchley, Birmingham

Introduction and overview

Round 1 of the Reducing Burglary Initiative (RBI) was built upon a strong evidence base of operational research, which had identified types of measures that can be effective in reducing burglary in local areas. A key objective of the RBI was to find out what works best where. Sixty three Strategic Development Projects (SDPs) were funded by Round 1 of the RBI. These projects were encouraged to develop innovative burglary reduction strategies. As a result, a wide range of interventions was implemented in a variety of contexts making use of different principles.

This paper presents a summary of one of these SDPs where the main interventions implemented were:

- Installation of alley gates
- Improvements to fences
- Property marking
- Publicity campaign, through a newsletter.

Burglary in the target area fell by 46% when comparing the number of burglary incidents during the year of 1998 with 2000, and controlling for burglary trends in the rest of the police force area. The project was also found to be cost effective.

1. Intelligence

Intelligence involves gathering and analysing information on crime problems and their consequences, and diagnosing their causes.

General context

The Stirchley project was located some 5km from Birmingham city centre. The area had good transport links to the centre and was within easy travelling distance to major employers. It contained some attractive residential areas with a variety of housing types. The population was some 21,000, 12% of whom were from ethnic minorities (roughly twice the UK average but half the Birmingham average). The unemployment rate was around 5% (just over the UK average but a bit over half the Birmingham average).

The target area was located within the police beat of Stirchley, which was part of the King's Heath Operational Command Unit. The beat

had a population of some 8,600, a third of whom were between 25-44 years old; a tenth were from ethnic minorities.

The project covered 9 residential streets, representing almost 17% of households in the Stirchley beat. They mainly comprised 2-storey 'terraces' (ie a number of houses joined in a continuous row along a street) or semi-detached housing dating from around 1900. Most residents were owner-occupiers of their homes, and most were long-term residents, although there were some students from the nearby university. Overall the area seemed fairly pleasant, but with a slightly 'run-down' appearance.

Within Stirchley, there were 2 subsidiary target areas. Area 1 contained a few vacant homes, plus some small businesses. Most houses backed onto each other in blocks. Some houses bordered parkland and a canal. In Area 2, houses lay side-by-side in a long chain and were open to parkland at the rear.

Significant consequences of the crime problem

National average material and social costs of domestic burglary were nearly £2,300 per household in 2000¹.

Evidence of crime problem – sources of information and analysis

Crime pattern analysis from recorded police statistics showed that, in the 3 years prior to 1999, the Stirchley beat had a burglary rate well over twice the national average, with 217-241 incidents per year. There were two hotspots (Areas 1 and 2 described above) which accounted for a quarter of all burglaries on the beat. Further analysis showed that in over 80% of the burglaries in these hotspots, the offender had gained access via the rear of the house (this was markedly higher than a national average estimate of 60%, suggesting a particular vulnerability). Site visits by the police established the importance of environmental factors, in particular rear alleyways and other means of access (described below).

Immediate causes and risk factors

The project focused on situational causes. Following the immediate causes set out in the Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity framework, the significant ones here acted mainly (but not exclusively) at the area or community levels rather than at that of individual households or offenders.

Environment

Logistical aspects of the environment centred on a network of alleyways, adjacent open land (park or common land) and a canal bank. These all afforded access to the rear of houses (one street block had a network of 14 alleys which gave rear access to over 70 houses), and escape routes. The alleys in particular meant that, once offenders were in them, they were *concealed from surveillance*.

Target enclosure

An inner enclosure comprised the houses themselves, which presumably were vulnerable to rear break-ins. An outer enclosure was either absent, or had incomplete or ineffectual boundaries due to a) poor fencing (in fact, further analysis showed that the pattern of burglaries followed the gaps in the fencing) or b) poor gates (some of these were poorly designed and could be climbed over or crawled under; others were not strong enough to resist a kick).

Crime preventers and promoters

Some residents had put up their own fences and gates. However, many were weak, as said, and the choice by some individual households not to do so meant that the whole interconnected area was vulnerable. In effect this represented an absence of collective action at the community level.

1. This was calculated in Brand, S. and Price, R. (2000) *The economic and social costs of crime*. Home Office Research Study 217, London: Home Office.

Offender perception/decision

No special information was collected on *offenders* (criminality, motives, resources, presence) but we can assume they perceived little effort to reach the rear of the houses (and to break in), little risk of being observed and caught whilst approaching, breaking in or escaping, and sufficient reward.

2. Intervention

A crime reduction project centres on one or more *interventions*. Interventions are how the action *works*. They can be described on both practical and analytical levels, both kinds of information being necessary for intelligent replication of good practice. Further details explaining how the intervention should be described are provided at the end of this case study.

Intervention principle 1

The first principle selected was to improve *and/or create effective target enclosures* around each block of houses. The practical methods used were to design and install *alleygates* (method 1) and fencing (method 2). The conjectured mechanisms by which these methods would work, included:

- blocking access to *vulnerable* and *unsurveilled* rear of houses
- reducing escape routes
- thereby making it easier for residents to act as preventers
- *detering and discouraging* offenders through perception of increased risk and effort.

Intervention principle 2

The second principle was to *lower the value of target goods* to the offenders and *increase the risk of possessing or selling them*. The practical methods used (method 3) were *property marking* with an ultraviolet pen, supported by a guidance booklet and a window sticker. The conjectured mechanisms included:

- helping residents to act as *preventers* by marking their property
- helping purchasers of goods to act as preventers, and hindering them from acting as *promoters*, by enabling them to identify goods as stolen, and refusing to buy them or reporting to police
- *detering and discouraging* offenders through perception of increased risk and effort, and reduced reward; amplifying this through window stickers.

Intervention principle 3

The third principle was to *aid preventers* by the method of communicating general crime prevention messages

through a newsletter (method 4). Conjectured mechanisms were obvious and included:

- *helping preventers* protect their own and neighbours' property
- *detering and discouraging offenders* by communicating that preventive action was occurring in the neighbourhood (some residents visited by police may themselves have been burglars)

This and the property marking scheme also served to mobilise and maintain the confidence of residents in the short term (see Involvement).

Offenders' countermoves

The project implementers accepted that such a geographically small project would run the risk of displacement of various kinds.

3. Implementation

Implementation is what is actually done – how the practical methods that realise the principles in locally-appropriate ways are targeted and converted into action on the ground.

Targeting of the action on the crime problem, offender, place and victim

Targeting was *tertiary* - aiming at known hotspots.

Aiming the action at the right social levels

The intervention methods were directed at *all residents* within a *specific geographical area*, to tackle causes of crime acting mainly at area-level. (This in fact evolved into implementation and involvement at the *community*-level, given the collective nature of the intervention and the outcome).

Inputs of funds, effort, human resources

The 'crude input costs' amounted to some £80,400 of which two-thirds was equipment (mainly the gates and fences). Personnel costs (mainly for police time) were just under a quarter. 'Modelling' the costs to take account of inflation and the lifetime of the capital assets yielded an input estimate of just over £25,000. Human resources centred on the local community safety sergeant with the West Midlands Police, who became project manager. Other workers were bought in commercially or supplied by local government for installing the gates and fencing.

Converting the method into action on the ground – management, planning, and supervision

A project steering group included representatives from the police, probation service, Birmingham City Council and local residents. The project benefited from a single manager - the police sergeant - who provided consistency, continuity and dedication, who had good prior relations with the residents and who regularly visited the target

areas to ensure people were locking the gates. The downside of this, however, was the risky dependence on one key individual, and his (initial) lack of procurement experience.

Outputs achieved

Method 1 – alleygates: 62 gates were installed, protecting an estimated 583 houses.

Details of interest: gates fitted with a British Standard mortice lock, and in many cases, 'headers' to stop people climbing over the top.

Method 2 – fencing: 420m of steel palisade fencing put up, estimated to have protected 90 houses.

Details of interest: land clearance was a significant cost element.

Method 3 – property marking: 400 property marking kits (UV pen, sticker, instructions) distributed to local residents. Half of households put the stickers on their front doors/windows.

Method 4 – newsletter: 400 newsletters x 4 rounds, distributed by resident volunteers.

The supporting environment for projects – infrastructure

The police officer who was project manager initially lacked tendering and procurement skills, causing some delay. This was eventually resolved when additional funding was made available for council officials to assist him.

4. Involvement

Professionals, like the police, often have to work through others rather than directly intervening themselves. Involvement refers to when those formally in charge of a crime prevention project (who could themselves be a partnership) act through an existing partnership or mobilise other agencies, companies and individuals to collaborate in implementing the intervention.

Partnership

Police and city council were the main partners in this project, working through a wider steering group also involving residents (this was primarily consultative rather than decision-making). Once the project was under way, it is thought that the council was drawn into more active involvement because the residents' *expectations* of action had been awakened, and they were becoming impatient due to delays. *Problems* in partnership working arose because of a) lack of clarity over the funding between police and local council; b) lack of prior experience of police and council organisations and individuals in partnership working; c) initial reluctance of council officers to deal directly with police officer of 'only' sergeant rank, in the absence of senior police involvement. It should be stated that this project began very soon after the Crime &

Disorder Act 1998 had come into force, and local government was relatively inexperienced in this kind of collaboration. But it became readily evident that the council were the agency with the most experience of installing local infrastructure (such as fencing) and had the personnel best equipped to cope with the processes involved in implementation.

Mobilisation and collaboration

The most significant aspect of involvement in this project (and arguably the most significant distinguishing feature of the project as a whole) was the need to establish residents' *collective agreement on action*. One un-gated alleyway or one gap in the fencing could leave a vulnerability in the target enclosures that affected the interests of all. Not all residents initially favoured the gates or fencing. Agreement on gates required political will. It was achieved by meetings, and in particular the involvement of a local elected councillor with experience of gating, good links to business and contacts with/influence on council officials. The gates, on private land, needed signed individual agreements with the residents/property owners, some of whom did not wish the gates imposed on them. The fencing, on public land, could be erected without this agreement (although meetings were arranged to try to establish consensus); but they did require planning permission, which was obtained. A *wider climate of understanding and support* was created by a range of public meetings and the newsletters (method 4). This and the property-marking initiative (method 3) *alerted/motivated/empowered* residents to act as preventers, but both methods were conceived primarily as means of creating and maintaining *credibility for continued collaboration* in the face of delays with gates and fencing. Involvement of the local Neighbourhood Watch coordinator, the local elected councillor and the chair of an existing residents' group were instrumental in getting ordinary residents involved and in securing agreement. It is possible their efforts also generated some additional 'social capital' which supported a more general *collective efficacy*.

5. Impact

Impact covers crime and disorder reduction achieved, cost effectiveness and wider learning points.

The evaluation of the project

This project was subjected to an independent impact, process and cost-effectiveness evaluation by South Bank University and collaborators in the Southern Consortium engaged to assess the Burglary Reduction Initiative of the Crime Reduction Programme in England & Wales. The following results on impact and cost effectiveness are based on the Southern Consortium's findings. The *impact evaluation design* involved comparing changes in

recorded burglary statistics over some 3 years, in a) the target areas; b) the rest of the Sturchley police beat (the 'buffer' area used to assess geographical displacement), and c) the rest of the King's Heath operational command unit (the 'reference area' used to indicate general background trends).

The overall *objective* of the project was to achieve a 50% reduction in burglary in the target areas and a 10.5% reduction in the Sturchley beat as a whole, 'against previous years' figures'. The first objective was achieved with a 53% fall in domestic burglary from the year prior to the project to the first year of project implementation. For the whole of the Sturchley beat there was a 7% fall from the year prior to the project to the first year of the project. By year 2 of the project, the second objective was reached, with a 45% fall relative to the year prior to the project. However, it is plausible that some (but by no means all) offending in the target area was displaced from *domestic* burglary to burglary of *non-dwellings* such as commercial buildings. Analysis of aggregate data suggests that the downward trend in the target area (53%) greatly exceeded the drop in the 'rest of King's Heath' reference area (25%) during the first year. During this period the police were advising residents on property marking and consulting them about installing gates. Over the same period domestic burglary rose in the 'buffer area' immediately surrounding the target areas, indicating possible geographic displacement. In the second year, following the completion of gate-fitting in the target area, burglary fell further in the target areas – and also in the buffer areas immediately surrounding them. This is consistent with the idea that there may have been geographic 'diffusion of benefit' into the buffer area, perhaps because local offenders thought the whole area was too 'hot' to operate in.

Cost-benefit analysis was a feature of this and other projects in the Crime Reduction Programme. It was estimated that 21 burglaries were saved in the target areas relative to the expectation derived from the wider King's Heath reference area. Using these estimates of burglary savings multiplied by the national cost estimate per burglary to the household (£2,300), set against the 'modelled' costs of the project, suggested that the project was beneficial. There were several alternative estimates based on different assumptions. One typical attempt suggested that for every £1 of resources used, £1.72-worth of resources were saved. Diffusion of benefit increases this figure; taking account of functional displacement to non-domestic burglary however neutralises it. However, displacement is a sign that burglars are 'on the run' from the preventive interventions. Certainly, the residents of Sturchley felt the benefit. The true test of displacement is what happens when *all* the local vulnerable points are made secure.

Replicability

Issues to consider for replicability include:

- the community context of residents' willingness to collaborate on collective action
- the administrative/legal context of urban planning regulations for the installation of common fencing etc
- the balance of public and private ownership of housing
- the architectural design and layout of the housing.

Acknowledgements

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2. The Southern Consortium was led by South Bank University Criminal Policy Research Unit.