Prevention or Displacement?

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To establish beyond doubt that crime has been prevented by some specific action is a perilously difficult exercise. While it might be able to be shown that there is less reported crime in a community where a broad community-based crime prevention strategy has been introduced, it cannot be said with certainty that strategy alone prevented some crime from occurring. The strategy may be one of a number of factors that help explain the drop in the crime rate. However, it may be that offenders in the area may have desisted at that time anyway for unknown reasons, or it may be that the strategy has simply displaced (or deflected) crime. This last possibility is a fundamental issue for crime prevention and is the subject of this paper.

The displacement, rather than prevention, of crime has been described as a frustrating unintended effect of crime control (Barr & Pease 1990) and cannot be ignored by crime prevention proponents. To do so is to play into the hands of those who believe the best that can be done in tackling crime is to displace it. In turn, this leads to what Cornish and Clark (1986) describe as ‘a paralysing extreme-case pessimism’ which could produce a climate in which attempts to prevent crime will be made more difficult. As Barr and Pease point out ‘in one sense a crime displaced is a crime prevented’ (1990, p. 282), but the extreme-case pessimist is really suggesting that there will always be a fixed amount of crime which, according to the situation, is displaced from time to time, or from place to place. There are numerous examples of crime prevention initiatives which, despite being apparently successful, can nevertheless be used to demonstrate the five broad types of displacement that are generally agreed upon by criminologists.

Temporal Displacement

Temporal displacement occurs when crime prevention action forces the offender to commit the intended offence at a later time. A most obvious

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example of this is where a burglar arrives at the target premises to discover an impediment to his/her activity. For instance, the factory he/she intended burgling may be occupied by employees working overtime. If the burglar is determined to burgle that factory, he/she may then bide time until the workers leave, or the burglar may abandon his/her ‘work’ until another evening when he/she hopes the factory will be unoccupied.

It is exceedingly difficult, if not foolhardy, to claim that some preventive action will mean that a certain crime will not recur in the future. Temporal displacement is always a possibility and is often acknowledged as such. One USA campaign against pickpockets provides an example of this. The campaign, conducted in two shopping malls, comprised proactive and rigorous detection and apprehension of pickpockets. It involved the use of plain-clothes decoy police officers who moved into close proximity of persons whose behaviour was consistent with the known behaviour of pickpockets in that location. This approach led to a number of arrests that exceeded expectations and, after two months, pickpockets had effectively been displaced from the two malls. However, the police officer who devised the program acknowledges the probability that temporal displacement has occurred by stating that ‘the word was out to avoid our two shopping malls’ but that ‘eventually, when [note, not if] the pickpockets do return . . . they will run up against a proven pickpocket program’ (Bue 1991, p. 81).

**Spatial Displacement**

Spatial displacement occurs when crime prevention action forces the offender to commit the intended offence in a different location. In the burglary example, the burglar may be displaced (or diverted) to a different factory where he/she hopes preventive features (such as security guards) will not be present.

An area of anti-social behaviour that is a cause for concern in many countries and to which crime prevention attention has been directed is what one British study refers to as crime and nuisance in shopping centres (Phillips & Cochrane 1988). This reference includes such behaviour as loitering, driving recklessly or boldly around car parks, fighting, underage drinking, prostitution and petty theft. The British study found that real crime problems were actually far fewer in number than the retailers thought and the media portrayed. Nevertheless, a number of specific recommendations were made to reduce the potential for nuisance by congregating young people. These included such physical changes as replacing solid chrome barriers around cafes with space-defining ropes (to remove convenient leaning places for idle youth) and the installation of concealed panic buttons for all shops to enable shop staff to call security staff for assistance when harassed or when thieves had been detected.

In the USA, some 24-hour convenience stores have taken novel preventive action against threatening groups of youths gathering outside their premises. Using the store’s public address system, bland music is broadcast (such as Mantovani or Perry Como) which the young people apparently find so distasteful that it literally repels them.

A more formal program to address problems at shopping malls in the USA is described by Kent (1990). The major problem at one mall was that the
mall parking area had become a popular spot for upwards of 500 youths and 150 vehicles to converge between 8.30 p.m. and 1.00 a.m. Displays of driving bravado, loud car radios, and haphazard parking were irritating but basically harmless. However, when driving mishaps, consumption of alcohol and illegal activities like fighting and drug use increased, retailers complained that customers were being driven away and something had to be done. Mall security staff and local police then devised a preventive strategy that comprised shutting off entry to the mall’s car parks at 10 p.m. when most shops shut for business, thus cutting short the evening’s activities for the youths. Gradually, the mall lost its focus as a cruising and gathering place.

In these examples, the preventive strategies were geared to moving the problem on to somewhere else! That is classical spatial displacement and the lack of concern about it is encapsulated in Kent’s final paragraph which reads:

what then, you may ask, did the youths do when the security situation forced them out of their long-recognised weekend night playground? They moved to another location, but that’s another story and probably better grist for sociologists than security managers (Kent 1990, p. 55).

**Tactical Displacement**

Tactical displacement occurs when crime prevention action forces the offender to commit the intended offence using a different method. The burglar, on always finding the target premises occupied, might change his/her normal modus operandi of sneaking into premises and adopt a more confrontational approach of detaining and disabling the security guard before burgling the factory.

An example of prevention that stopped the activities of particular offenders comes from the city of Santa Ana in California. Local retailers adopted a common approach to accepting customers’ cheques, having suffered losses from fraudulent users of that practice who were stealing an estimated $500,000 annually. The new procedure implemented by the retailers involved asking those customers paying by cheque to place an inkless thumbprint on the reverse of the cheque before it was accepted or cashed: the thumbprint could lead to the identification of offenders. The introduction of this procedure led to a decrease in forgeries reported to the police of 48 per cent.

Interestingly:

banking establishments and some larger food store chains chose not to participate in the program because of what they believed to be adverse publicity. They indicated that they were willing to absorb the loss so as not to inconvenience their customers (Seleno 1989, p. 17).

It is a pity that it is not known whether those locations were subject to greater victimisation as a result of their non-cooperation. Such a finding would have been consistent with spatial displacement.

What happened to those offenders whose source of income was effectively terminated by the thumbprint requirement? Many were apparently involved in drug use and consequently could be expected to be displaced to ensure the funds required to buy drugs. Unfortunately, one cannot say, but a
similar example from Canada does suggest that tactical displacement probably occurred. Tremblay (1986) describes how Canadian banks introduced procedures to allow people to cash cheques at branches using a credit card to establish their bona fides. Introduced as a convenience for customers, this led to considerable activity by criminals who, with stolen credit cards and stolen cheques, were able to make fairly substantial sums of money quickly moving from one branch to another cashing cheques. The banks had expected some level of fraudulent activity but, when the losses they suffered became substantial, they fixed the maximum withdrawal limit at $100. This action effectively prevented more criminal activity as cashing fraudulent cheques became an unrewarding crime. According to Tremblay, it also caused some of the offenders to switch back to ‘purchase credit card frauds’ (1986, p. 247) indicating tactical displacement. In this case, the displacement was actually back to the sort of credit card frauds that were committed before the new opportunity was provided by the banks with their ‘convenient’ cheque cashing facility.

**Target Displacement**

Target displacement occurs when crime prevention action forces the offender to commit the intended offence on a different type of target. For example, a burglar may not be inclined to confront the security guard and decides to burgle empty office buildings instead. This form of displacement is well-reflected by the recent downward trend in armed robberies against Australian banks. The target hardening of many banks with pop-up screens and bullet-proof glass has led to a noticeable decrease in bank robberies. However, there has been an increase in the number of armed robberies of 24-hour convenience stores and service stations. Worse than that, the increased (preventive) security in those latter locations has now caused the Victoria Police to issue a ‘warning of an increasing risk to the security of the suburban home as armed robbers go in search of softer targets’ (The Age, 25 May 1991). In other words, armed robbers may be displaced into our homes. This is an announcement which will raise the fear of crime in the community and is not the sort of impact that a crime prevention initiative would seek.

Developments such as these follow from consideration of statistics of reported crime and might be thought to reflect the activities of different people rather than the same people moving from one offence to another. That may be true in part, and Barr and Pease (1990) write of it as ‘perpetrator displacement’, where other offenders take the place of offenders who have themselves been displaced for whatever reason. However, it is certainly true that there are resolute offenders who will change their offending activities when impediments are placed in their way.

Some offenders are truly professional, but others are far from it. These unprofessional offenders are typified by the gang of four Victorian teenagers who went to the local railway station intending to hold-up and rob a passer-by. As there were no passers-by, they decided instead to go to the local taxi rank and rob a taxi driver but dropped that idea when they found six taxis in attendance. Having been functionally displaced twice, the offenders then broke into the local school canteen and ran amuck causing $1,000 worth of
damage (Melbourne Sun, 28 June 1990). That last move is an example of the final sort of displacement.

**Functional Displacement**

Functional displacement occurs when some crime prevention action forces the offender to abandon the intended offence and commit a quite different offence instead. The burglar thwarted by increased security in commercial premises might therefore embark on a career as a shop thief, although he/she might also become an armed robber. In the latter case, by the offender being displaced to a more serious and more violent offence, it could be argued that the displacement is actually negative for the community as a whole. This illustrates another important dimension of displacement - the difference between what Barr and Pease (1990) call malign and benign displacement.

Malign displacement produces changes that are socially undesirable, notwithstanding the subjectivity of that term. It is self-evident that crime prevention activity should not cause the community to be placed in a more vulnerable or worse position. The aim of crime prevention is to make the commission of a crime so difficult, risky, or even impossible that offenders will desist from, or at least abate, their activities. It is very difficult to predict whether the displacement that might result from any crime prevention initiative will be malign or benign.

Consider the number of city office buildings which have been target-hardened through increased security such that access to them is now only allowed to workers with identification passes and visitors who have been screened. This initiative has made it more difficult for sneak thieves to enter a building and steal handbags, money and other personal possessions of workers. Interestingly, this sort of offence is one that the local community - in this case, office workers in the building - could help prevent themselves. The workers could do this by securing their own property and encouraging others to secure theirs', and also by questioning strangers they find in the building. While some of these stranger-thieves deliberately dress smartly some, according to police, are quite scruffy, yet are never approached by workers.

So what do city office thieves do when their easy access to a building is blocked and the opportunity for thieving is removed? Will they desist? Or will they convert (that is, be displaced) into some other sort of offending? The lack of firm data makes it impossible to do more than speculate, but bag-snatching on city streets does seem to have increased as city offices have become more secure. To the extent that bag-snatching brings with it greater risks and trauma for the victim, it could be said that this scenario provides an example of malign functional displacement.

**Displacing Which Offenders?**

It is important that reports of crime prevention initiatives, especially where success is claimed, include discussion of displacement. Laycock's (1984) study of burglary in chemists’ shops provides a good example. This study found that chemists’ shops whose physical security has been inspected and officially ‘exempted’ by police suffered fewer burglaries of controlled drugs than other
shops where the police’s fairly rigorous security standards may not apply. In her discussion of displacement, Laycock indicates how robberies from chemists’ shops, burglaries from hospitals or surgeries, and thefts from doctors’ cars had all risen in the same period, and then acknowledges that ‘these rises could reflect a displacement effect’ (1984, p. 5). Laycock’s provision of those facts effectively leaves readers to make their own judgements as to the likelihood of displacement being the case.

In another study, Mayhew, Clarke and Elliott (1988) attempted to deal with the displacement issue in their study of motorcycle theft in Germany. The reduction in this offence occurred following the introduction of compulsory helmet wearing for motorcyclists, which meant that an unhelmeted thief would quickly draw police attention and be detected committing the greater offence. After considering the various motives for stealing motorcycles, the researchers decided that the helmet wearing law would have had greatest impact on non-professional thieves who stole for fun (joy-riding) or temporary transport. Accordingly, they inspected the logical alternative offences of motorcar and bicycle theft which would both service those purposes and, having found no increase in those, concluded that the most likely sort of displacement had not occurred.

This raises an important distinction between amateur and professional criminals. In 1983, Clarke suggested that ‘the more professional the crime or the criminal the greater the probability of displacement’ (1983, p. 245), and this still seems to hold today. The more that is known about offenders and their practices, the easier it is to plan preventive approaches that will make offenders’ jobs more difficult or more risky, especially if they are ‘reasoning criminals’ (Cornish & Clarke 1986), that is resolute offenders who will not act if the risks associated with the offending are too great.

It is possible to produce useful classifications of offenders such as that from Bennett and Wright (1984) who categorised burglars as planners, searchers or opportunists, but the careful collection of details relating to the offence and the situation in which it occurs is invaluable, in order to introduce preventive initiatives that will inhibit potential offenders. Poyner’s (1986) analysis of pickpocketing in city bus-stop queues is an impressive example of such an analysis. He established that most offences were committed on middle-aged males who could be observed to place their wallets in their back pockets after buying tickets and were jostled as the queue moved onto the bus. Poyner’s suggestion of a physical barrier to separate bus passengers from shoppers and pedestrians, and to allow orderly boarding of the bus would prevent the offence as he analysed it. Such a physical change would make life difficult for both the ‘reasoning’ or professional pickpocket and the amateur.

**Addressing Displacement is Vital**

This paper places the issue of displacement firmly on the agenda of crime prevention practitioners. It does this by outlining the major types of displacement and illustrating how they bedevil most crime prevention work. It also encourages practitioners to acknowledge the possible displacement of any or all of the above types that may follow their work.

Notwithstanding this, there will always be some instances in which it is hard to see displacement as an issue. Such an example comes from
The Netherlands where approximately 1,200 unemployed young people were recruited as 'safety information and control officers' on the tram and metro system specifically to tackle fare evasion, vandalism and aggression (Van Andel, 1988). There was a marked decrease in detected fare evasion following the recruitment of these staff, and the increased revenue from fares is a clear indicator that previous fare evaders were now paying for their travel rather than finding new ways to travel for nothing or indeed ceasing their travel altogether. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the fact that it is essential to treat displacement seriously and, in particular, to ensure that the community does not finish up worse-off as a result of malign displacement.

References


