Reducing Burglary Initiative: the role of publicity in crime prevention

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This study examined the impact of local publicity on crime reduction, using data collected for 21 burglary reduction schemes in the north of England (and, in some cases, including a further 21 in the Midlands). They were evaluated as part of the Home Office’s Reducing Burglary Initiative (for further information about this initiative, see Kodz and Pease, 2003). The results were analysed to see whether or not publicising crime reduction efforts were associated with more successful schemes, and in particular, whether publicity was associated with a reduction in burglary levels.

Key points

- Approximately one-half of the schemes evaluated set up local stand-alone publicity campaigns and these schemes tended to be the most successful in terms of burglary reduction.
- For the 21 schemes located in the north of England, there was a clear relationship between the timing and intensity of publicity and burglary reduction. This was true even when other factors, such as the degree to which measures had actually been implemented, were taken into account.
- Across the 42 schemes located in the north of England and the Midlands, there was evidence of a significant reduction in burglary in the three months that immediately preceded implementation, an effect referred to as an anticipatory benefit (Smith et al., 2002). The results suggest that this effect, at least in the 21 schemes in the north of England, were a consequence of pre-implementation publicity.
- The results also suggest that publicising local crime prevention activity can, in itself, reduce burglaries.
- The results concerned with anticipatory benefit may have important implications for methods used in evaluation research.

Current thinking about crime prevention generally focuses on how certain types of interventions do or do not work ‘on the ground’. The research reported here supplements this approach by examining whether the anticipation or awareness of crime prevention effort might affect offender behaviour. In relation to this, Smith et al. (2002) recently suggested that it is as important to consider the perceptions offenders have of the availability of suitable opportunities as it is to examine the reality of these opportunities. These Findings explore whether publicising crime prevention activity enhances crime prevention efforts by increasing, for instance, offenders’ perceptions of the effort or risk required in perpetrating crimes.

Three main issues are discussed:
- the types of publicity used by the different schemes, when they were used and with what frequency
- statistical analysis of the role of publicity in burglary reduction
- the policy implications of the findings and future directions for research (for further detail, see Bowers and Johnson, 2003).
For the majority of the results presented here, data were analysed for 21 schemes that were implemented in the north of England. These schemes typically started in April 1999 and ran for approximately two years. However, in one case, the analyses consider data for an additional 21 schemes implemented in the Midlands.

The publicity used
All of the 21 burglary reduction projects implemented in the north of England had used some form of publicity but it was apparent that some types were used more frequently than others. The types of publicity most frequently used included:

- newspaper articles (used by 90% of schemes)
- leaflet or card distribution (62%)
- stand-alone publicity campaigns (57%).

Some of the less common forms of publicity were:

- those directed at offenders (14%)
- informal information distribution (14%)
- television appearances (24%).

On average, each scheme used around five different types of publicity, with use ranging from between two and nine types. In addition, on average, schemes tended to publicise their activities for a period of just over one year (ranging from 6 to 30 months). Thus, there was considerable variation in the extent to which the schemes took advantage of different types of advertising.

Which types of intervention were the most effective?
One of the fundamental questions in the overall evaluation was which types of intervention were the most effective? To answer this question, each scheme was coded to indicate whether it incorporated each of six different generic types of intervention (a classification system that was developed in collaboration with the Home Office).

Six different generic types of intervention

- location specific situational crime prevention which included initiatives such as target hardening
- area wide situational crime prevention measures such as CCTV and alley-gating schemes
- interventions involving stakeholders which included publicity campaigns and homewatch schemes
- enforcement schemes such as high visibility policing and witness protection schemes
- property marking schemes
- offender based schemes which focused on directly changing offenders’ behaviour.

Next, using statistical analyses, the relationship between overall burglary reduction gains (the number of burglaries assessed to be prevented by the schemes at the end of the evaluation period) and the types of interventions employed by each scheme were examined. Correlation analyses revealed that two types of intervention were significantly associated with burglary reduction:

- interventions involving stakeholders which included stand-alone publicity campaigns
- location specific situational crime prevention initiatives (such as target hardening initiatives and crime risk surveys) which identified possible areas where security could be improved.

Thus, the analysis demonstrated that schemes that employed stand-alone publicity campaigns, or engaged in other similar activities, were likely to be more successful at reducing burglary than those which did not.

Timing of publicity
The relationship between the timing and intensity of publicity and that of the implementation of the interventions themselves was also important. Did the schemes tend to publicise their efforts before, during or after the implementation of the interventions? To answer this question measures were produced that showed how scheme implementation and the extent to which activity was publicised varied over time – the quarterly costs associated with these two activities were examined. Data used were collected as part of the cost-effectiveness analysis conducted for the Reducing Burglary Initiative evaluation.

The results (Figure 1) were produced by calculating the spend per quarter on advertising (expressed as the full amount per quarter) and scheme implementation (expressed as £1,000s per quarter) averaged across all schemes that had advertising costs associated with them (17 of the 21 schemes). It should be noted that this only includes advertising paid for by the scheme, and will therefore exclude some forms of publicity, such as radio interviews or local newspaper articles. It is clear from Figure 1 that the patterns of advertising and implementation intensity were relatively similar, but that the peak in publicity intensity preceded that for implementation, suggesting that the interventions were promoted or publicised in some way before they were actually implemented. This represents an important finding, as promoting schemes prior to their implementation may further enhance crime prevention efforts (see below).
The role of publicity in burglary reduction

The hypothesis that changes in scheme burglary rates would be associated with publicity events was also explored by using quarterly data that examined the relationship between the timing and intensity of publicity events and scheme burglary rates (see Methodological note).

The analyses also took into account other factors that changed over time, such as changes in the burglary rate in the wider policing area (basic command unit), the implementation intensity of the scheme (expressed as the spend per household), the number of agencies involved and changes in key personnel. The analysis revealed that the following three variables were significant predictors of burglary rates in the SDP areas:

- the burglary rate in the wider area
- changes in the number of agencies involved in the scheme
- the amount of publicity used.

The burglary rate for the wider area was included as a variable as it helped to control for changes in the scheme area not attributable to crime prevention activity.

Thus, both the analyses that considered the overall success of the schemes and the current analysis, which examined changes in the extent to which publicity was used and how the burglary rate changed over time, provide evidence to support the hypothesis that publicising scheme activity has a positive effect on burglary rates. Furthermore, a more detailed analysis of the individual schemes revealed that:

- of the 21 schemes in the north of England, those that had spent more per household on advertising showed larger burglary savings than those that had spent less
- of the five most cost-effective schemes in the north of England, four had implemented stand-alone publicity campaigns as part of their initiative. Such stand-alone campaigns were fairly cheap to implement in comparison with other interventions.

Anticipatory benefits

The impact of publicity also helps explain the frequently observed crime reduction pattern of ‘anticipatory benefits’. Smith et al. (2002) have shown that crime reduction may actually pre-date the physical implementation of crime reduction initiatives, an effect they refer to as an anticipatory benefit.

To establish whether such effects were evident and statistically robust within the Reducing Burglary Initiative areas, this study examined changes in the pattern of burglary over time. Specifically, this was to establish whether or not, on average, a reduction could be seen in the quarter that immediately preceded the start of the scheme. This typically took the form of the burglary rate changed over time, provide evidence to support the hypothesis that publicising scheme activity has a positive effect on burglary rates. Furthermore, a more detailed analysis of the individual schemes revealed that:

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Figure 2 Ratio between action areas and PFA for before and after time periods and for the quarter prior to the inception of the schemes

Note: the values shown were indexed to the first quarter - the average crime ratio for each quarter was divided by the crime ratio for the first quarter. Thus, a value of one for a particular quarter would indicate that the crime ratio was identical to that for the first quarter.

burglary ratios remained fairly stable over time. However, there was a substantial reduction in the burglary ratios in the quarterly period that preceded the start of the schemes, a drop that was statistically reliable. This suggests that across the 42 schemes there was significant evidence of an anticipatory benefit.

There are, though, a number of rival explanations for this pattern of results. These include the possibility that the reduction observed reflects the seasonal trend or that the pattern is simply a statistical artifact. However, on the basis of the analysis presented here, and a more detailed consideration of the data which is presented in the report that accompanies this Findings (Bowers and Johnson, 2003), it was concluded that the anticipatory benefit observed was most likely to be attributable to the effects of pre-implementation publicity associated with the schemes.

Of the 21 schemes implemented in the north of England, five had formally publicised what was to happen before the start of the scheme. This typically took the form of publicity campaigns or residents’ surveys. Furthermore, the authors’ experience of how these schemes were implemented would suggest that pre-scheme publicity - albeit of a more informal variety - was present in the majority of the remaining schemes.

This significant quantity of pre-scheme publicity, combined with the earlier analysis demonstrating a strong association between publicity measures and burglary reduction, further supports the idea that the crime rate of an area may be positively affected by the anticipation of a scheme. Hence, changing offenders’ perceptions of the risks and efforts involved in targeting an area can be a useful tool in crime prevention.

Factors to consider when starting publicity campaigns

- Publicity campaigns could draw on lessons learnt through advertising research. They could be novel, interesting, relevant to the audience they are aimed at and possibly incorporate humour and metaphors.
In order to keep people familiar with a publicity campaign, it may be necessary to alter the colours, design or location of posters so that they do not fade into the background.

The use of simple labels for graphics or logos can increase people's familiarity with publicity campaigns which could lengthen the impact of a campaign.

The creation and continued use of a distinctive logo may also help engender sustainability, particularly if that logo becomes initially associated with a successful crime reduction campaign. Re-using this logo may then potentially have benefits in terms of eliciting recognition and support from the community, whilst also having a more marked deterrent impact on offenders.

Publicity can have negative effects, so care should be taken about what message is given. Possible detrimental effects, such as unduly raising fear of crime, should be considered and future research may examine how people receive campaigns.

The effectiveness of different types of publicity will vary. Comparisons of the effectiveness of campaigns could be carried out examining costs, the reaching of audiences, understanding, impact and longevity.

Unfortunately, in the current research it was not possible to do this sort of comparative analysis as the types of publicity used by different schemes were not systematically varied.

Policy implications

The results of this research suggest that publicising crime prevention effort may have crime reduction effects above and beyond any interventions implemented. It may, therefore, be advisable for scheme organisers to invest in publicity as a relatively straightforward and cost-effective method of enhancing the impact of crime prevention measures. Moreover, it may also be prudent to implement publicity campaigns as interventions in their own right, as was observed here in the form of stand-alone publicity campaigns. Policy makers should seriously consider the types of publicity they implement. Some forms can be cheaper and/or effective for longer than others. One possibility is to use ‘pulse’ publicity to boost the effects of schemes on burglary reduction, i.e. publicity done in bursts throughout the project rather than continuously.

It is also useful to make distinctions between national and local publicity and purchased and non-purchased publicity. For instance, local publicity is more likely to have a concentrated impact on a particular area, whereas national publicity will disseminate messages more widely. Furthermore, in some cases it might be useful to pay for publicity whereas in others, the media might pick up on issues themselves and provide free publicity. The latter type might have the disadvantage that the scheme will have less control over the content. In relation to this point, consideration should be given to the message delivered – not all publicity is ‘good publicity’.

Evaluation and research implications

The anticipatory benefit effect may have important implications for future evaluation work. This was examined in relation to one indicator of scheme success – the number of burglaries which had been prevented by the schemes. This was estimated by using a calculation that excluded the quarter immediately preceding implementation in the ‘before’ period. This significantly increased the estimate of overall scheme effectiveness, suggesting that relative to a standard estimate of scheme success, up to an additional 50% of burglaries may have been prevented. This demonstrates that calculation of the effect of schemes with possible anticipatory benefit should be carried out with care.

Further research should examine the publicity effect further, for instance, looking at methods for maximising the scope and duration of burglary reduction impacts through different publicity targeting strategies.

Methodological note

To examine the hypothesis that changes in the scheme burglary rates would be associated with publicity events, a multi-level or hierarchical linear modelling statistical analysis technique was used. This allows hierarchical data to be analysed – data were modelled that varied both by scheme (for which there were 21) and by quarterly time point (for which there were 18).

References


For a more detailed report which includes a discussion of the policy implications of the findings see The role of publicity in crime prevention: findings from the Reducing Burglary Initiative by Kate Bowers and Shane Johnson (2003). Home Office Research Study No. 272 London: Home Office. Copies are available from the Communication Development Unit. It will also be available on the Home Office RDS website http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/

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