What is Problem-Oriented Policing?

Problem-oriented policing is an approach to policing in which discrete pieces of police business (each consisting of a cluster of similar incidents, whether crime or acts of disorder, that the police are expected to handle) are subject to microscopic examination (drawing on the especially honed skills of crime analysts and the accumulated experience of operating field personnel) in hopes that what is freshly learned about each problem will lead to discovering a new and more effective strategy for dealing with it. Problem-oriented policing places a high value on new responses that are preventive in nature, that are not dependent on the use of the criminal justice system, and that engage other public agencies, the community and the private sector when their involvement has the potential for significantly contributing to the reduction of the problem. Problem-oriented policing carries a commitment to implementing the new strategy, rigorously evaluating its effectiveness, and, subsequently, reporting the results in ways that will benefit other police agencies and that will ultimately contribute to building a body of knowledge that supports the further professionalization of the police.

-Herman Goldstein 2001

History of Problem-Oriented Policing

In the late 1970’s, researchers, police professionals, and policymakers became interested in improving the effectiveness of policing. Research during this period pointed out the limitations of random patrol, rapid response, and follow-up criminal investigations—practices that had been the foundation of policing for many years. These findings laid the groundwork for the emergence of problem-oriented policing. The research yielded important insights:

Police deal with a range of community problems, many of which are not strictly criminal in nature.

Arrest and prosecution alone—the traditional functions of the criminal justice system—do not always effectively resolve problems.

Giving the officers, who have great insight into community problems, the discretion to design solutions is extremely valuable to solving the problems.

Police can use a variety of methods to redress recurrent problems.

The community values police involvement in non-criminal problems and recognizes the contribution the police can make to solving these problems.

Source: www.popcentre.org/aboutwhatispop.htm
Early experiments in problem-oriented policing occurred in Madison, Wisconsin; London; and Baltimore County, Maryland in the early 1980’s. The first evaluation of an agency-wide implementation of problem-oriented policing took place in the Newport News, Virginia Police Department by the Police Executive Research Forum in the mid-1980’s. Since then, many police agencies in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Scandinavia, Australia, and New Zealand have continued to experiment with problem-oriented policing, to apply it to a wide range of crime and disorder problems, and to change their organizations to better support problem-oriented policing.

As problem-oriented policing has evolved over the last two decades, researchers and practitioners have focused on the evaluation of problems, the importance of solid analysis, the development of pragmatic responses, and the need to strategically engage other resources—including community members, city departments and government agencies, and local business and service organizations.

The Key Elements of Problem-Oriented Policing

A problem is the basic unit of police work rather than a crime, a case, calls, or incidents. A problem is something that concerns or causes harm to citizens, not just the police. Things that concern only police officers are important, but they are not problems in this sense of the term.

Addressing problems means more than quick fixes: it means dealing with conditions that create problems.

Police officers must routinely and systematically analyze problems before trying to solve them, just as they routinely and systematically investigate crimes before making an arrest. Individual officers and the department as a whole must develop routines and systems for analyzing problems.

The analysis of problems must be thorough even though it may not need to be complicated. This principle is as true for problem analysis as it is for criminal investigation.

Problems must be described precisely and accurately and broken down into specific aspects of the problem. Problems often aren’t what they first appear to be.

Problems must be understood in terms of the various interests at stake. Individuals and groups of people are affected in different ways by a problem and have different ideas about what should be done about the problem.

The way the problem is currently being handled must be understood and the limits of effectiveness must be openly acknowledged in order to come up with a better response.

Initially, any and all possible responses to a problem should be considered so as not to cut short potentially effective responses. Suggested responses should follow from what is learned during the analysis. They should not be limited to, nor rule out, the use of arrest.

The police must pro-actively try to solve problems rather than just react to the harmful consequences of problems.

The police department must increase police officers’ freedom to make or participate in important decisions. At the same time, officers must be accountable for their decision-making.

The effectiveness of new responses must be evaluated so these results can be shared with other police officers and so the department can systematically learn what does and does not work. (Michael Scott and Herman Goldstein 1988.)
The concept of problem-oriented policing can be illustrated by an example. Suppose police find themselves responding several times a day to calls about drug dealing and vandalism in a neighborhood park. The common approach of dispatching an officer to the scene and repeatedly arresting offenders may do little to resolve the long term crime and disorder problem. If, instead, police were to incorporate problem-oriented policing techniques into their approach, they would examine the conditions underlying the problem. This would likely include collecting additional information—perhaps by surveying neighborhood residents and park users, analyzing the time of day when incidents occur, determining who the offenders are and why they favor the park, and examining the particular areas of the park that are most conducive to the activity and evaluating their environmental design characteristics. The findings could form the basis of a response to the problem behaviors. While enforcement might be a component of the response, it would unlikely be the sole solution because, in this case, analysis would likely indicate the need to involve neighborhood residents, parks and recreation officials and others.

Problem-oriented policing can be applied at various levels of community problems and at various levels in the police organization. It can be applied to problems that affect an entire community, involving the highest level of police agency, government, and community resources. It can be applied at intermediate levels (for example, a neighborhood or a police district), involving an intermediate level of resources. Or it can be applied at a very localized level (for example, a single location or a small group of problem individuals), involving the resources of only a few police officers and other individuals.

The SARA Model

A commonly used problem-solving method is the SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment). The SARA model contains the following elements:

**Scanning:**
- Identifying recurring problems of concern to the public and the police.
- Identifying the consequences of the problem for the community and the police.
- Prioritizing those problems.
- Developing broad goals.
- Confirming that the problems exist.
- Determining how frequently the problem occurs and how long it has been taking place.
- Selecting problems for closer examination.

**Analysis:**
- Identifying and understanding the events and conditions that precede and accompany the problem.
- Identifying relevant data to be collected.
- Researching what is known about the problem type.
- Taking inventory of how the problem is currently addressed and the strengths and limitations of the current response.
- Narrowing the scope of the problem as specifically as possible.
Identifying a variety of resources that may be of assistance in developing a deeper understanding of the problem.
Developing a working hypothesis about why the problem is occurring.

**Response:**

- Brainstorming for new interventions.
- Searching for what other communities with similar problems have done.
- Choosing among the alternative interventions.
- Outlining a response plan and identifying responsible parties.
- Stating the specific objectives for the response plan.
- Carrying out the planned activities.

**Assessment:**

- Determining whether the plan was implemented (a process evaluation).
- Collecting pre- and post-response qualitative and quantitative data.
- Determining whether broad goals and specific objectives were attained.
- Identifying any new strategies needed to augment the original plan.
- Conducting ongoing assessment to ensure continued effectiveness.

**The Problem Analysis Triangle**

While the SARA model is useful as a way of organizing the approach to recurring problems, it is often very difficult to figure out just exactly what the real problem is. The problem analysis triangle (sometimes referred to as the crime triangle) provides a way of thinking about recurring problems of crime and disorder. This idea assumes that crime or disorder results when (1) likely offenders and (2) suitable targets come together in (3) time and space, in the absence of capable guardians for that target. A simple version of a problem analysis triangle looks like this:

Offenders can sometimes be controlled by other people: those people are known as handlers. Targets and victims can sometimes be protected by other people as well: those people are known as guardians. And places are usually controlled by someone: those people are known as managers. Thus, effective problem-solving requires understanding how offenders and their targets/victims come together in places, and understanding how those offenders, targets/victims, and places are or are not effectively controlled. Understanding the weaknesses in the problem analysis triangle in the context of a particular problem will point the way to new interventions.
A complete problem analysis triangle looks like this:

Problems can be understood and described in a variety of ways. No one way is definitive. They should be described in whichever way is most likely to lead to an improved understanding of the problem and effective interventions. Generally, incidents that the police handle cluster in four ways:

**Behavior.** Certain behavior(s) is (are) common to the incidents. For example, making excessive noise, robbing people or businesses, driving under the influence, crashing vehicles, dealing drugs, stealing cars. There are many different behaviors that might constitute problems.

**Place.** Certain places can be common to incidents. Incidents involving one or more problem behaviors may occur at, for example, a street corner, a house, a business, a park, a neighborhood, or a school. Some incidents occur in abstract places such as cyberspace, on the telephone, or through other information networks.

**Persons.** Certain individuals or groups of people can be common to incidents. These people could be either offenders or victims. Incidents involving one or more behaviors, occurring in one or more places may be attributed to, for example, a youth gang, a lone person, a group of prostitutes, a group of chronic inebriates, or a property owner. Or incidents may be causing harm to, for example, residents of a neighborhood, senior citizens, young children, or a lone individual.

**Time.** Certain times can be common to incidents. Incidents involving one or more behaviors, in one or more places, caused by or affecting one or more people may happen at, for example, traffic rush hour, bar closing time, the holiday shopping season, or during an annual festival.

There is growing evidence that, in fact, crime and disorder does cluster in these ways. It is not evenly distributed across time, place, or people. Increasingly, police and researchers are recognizing some of these clusters as:

- Repeat offenders attacking different targets at different places.
- Repeat victims repeatedly attacked by different offenders at different places.
- Repeat places (or hot spots) involving different offenders and different targets interacting at the same place.

Source: [www.popcentre.org/aboutwhatispop.htm](http://www.popcentre.org/aboutwhatispop.htm)
The Problem Analysis Triangle was derived from the routine activity approach to explaining how and why crime occurs. This theory argues that when a crime occurs, three things happen at the same time and in the same space:

- a suitable target is available.
- there is the lack of a suitable guardian to prevent the crime from happening.
- a motivated offender is present.

Situational Crime Prevention

While the Problem Analysis Triangle helps to analyze problems, situational crime prevention provides a framework for intervention. By assessing the opportunities that specific situations offer for crime, situational crime prevention has identified five main ways in which situations can be modified. These are:

- Increasing the effort the offender must make to carry out the crime.
- Increasing the risks the offender must face in completing the crime.
- Reducing the rewards or benefits the offender expects to obtain from the crime.
- Removing excuses that offenders may use to “rationalize” or justify their actions.
- Reducing or avoiding provocations that may tempt or incite offenders into criminal acts.

These five approaches to reducing opportunity can be expanded to list 25 techniques of situational crime prevention.

These techniques have been constructed according to two important theoretical premises: that “opportunity makes the thief” (opportunity theory) and that the offender (or would-be offender) makes choices (rational choice theory) in order to make the best of those opportunities.

The 10 principles of crime opportunity

1. Opportunities play a role in causing all crime, not just common property crime – For example, studies of bars and clubs show how their design and management play an important role in generating violence or preventing it.
2. Crime opportunities are highly specific – For example the theft of cars for joyriding has a different pattern of opportunity than theft for car parts. Crime opportunity theory helps sort out these differences so responses can be appropriately tailored.
3. Crime opportunities are concentrated in time and space – Dramatic differences are found from one address to another even in a high crime area. Crime shifts greatly by the hour and day of the week, reflecting the opportunities to carry it out (see Routine Activity Theory).
4. Crime opportunities depend on everyday movements of activity – Offenders and targets shift according to routine activities (e.g. work, school, leisure). For example burglars visit houses in the day when the occupants are out at work or school.
5. One crime produces the opportunities for another – For example, a successful break-in may encourage the offender to return in the future or a youth who has his bike stolen may feel justified in taking someone else's as a replacement.
6. Some products offer more tempting crime opportunities – For example easily carried electrical
items such as DVD players and mobile phones are attractive to burglars and robbers, (‘hot products’).

7. Social and technological changes produce new crime opportunities – Products are most vulnerable in their 'growth' and 'mass marketing' stages, as demand for them is at its highest. Most products will reach a 'saturation' stage where most people have them and they then are unlikely to be stolen.

8. Crime can be prevented by reducing opportunities – The opportunity reducing methods of situational crime prevention can be applied to all aspects of everyday life, but they must be tailored to specific situations.

9. Reducing opportunities does not usually displace crime – Wholesale displacement is very rare and many studies have found little if any crime displacement. (see crime displacement theory).

10. Focused opportunity reduction can produce wider declines in crime – Prevention measures in one area can lead to a reduction in another nearby, a 'diffusion of benefits'. This is because offenders might overestimate the reach of those measures.

To learn more about opportunity theory click here.

To learn more about situational crime prevention, click here.

The two principles of rational choice theory

1. Offending behavior involves decision making and the making of choices, which are constrained by time, cognitive ability and information, resulting in a 'limited' rather than a 'normal' rationality for the offender.

2. Decisions and factors that affect offender decision making vary greatly at both the different stages of the offence and among different offences. Cornish and Clarke (1998) therefore stress the need to be crime-specific when analyzing offender decision making and choice selection, and to treat separately decisions relating to the various stages of involvement in offences. For example, treating decisions relating to the offenders' initial involvement in the offence separately from decisions relating to the event, such as choice of target. This, they claim, allows a more 'holistic' view of offender decision and choice making and a broader analysis from which to implement appropriate interventions.

To learn more about rational choice theory click here to read about The Reasoning Criminal.

Source: www.popcentre.org/about-situational.htm