

## **Richness, retrievability and reliability – issues in a working knowledge base for good practice in crime prevention**

Bullock, K. and Ekblom, P. (2010) 'Richness, retrievability and reliability – issues in a working knowledge base for good practice in crime prevention'. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 16, 29-47.

<<http://www.springerlink.com/content/0928-1371/>> Volume 16, Number 1

<<http://www.springerlink.com/content/0928-1371/16/1/>> , 29-47, DOI: 10.1007/s10610-010-9116-9

### **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on descriptions of crime prevention projects identified as 'good practice', and how they are captured and shared in knowledge bases, with the purpose of improving performance in the field as a whole. This relates both to evidence-based approaches to practice, and to growing attempts at explicit knowledge management. There are, however, fundamental issues in the transfer of effective practice in the crime prevention field, which few working knowledge bases have properly addressed. Evaluation often remains weak and descriptions of successful projects do not always contain the right information to help practitioners select and replicate projects suitable for transfer to their own contexts. Knowledge remains fragmentary. With these concerns in mind this paper systematically examines the projects contained in the UK Home Office 'Effective Practice Database', a repository of project descriptions volunteered and self-completed on a standard online form by practitioners. The Home Office descriptions (and their equivalents elsewhere) reveal significant limitations of richness, retrievability and reliability. Ways of addressing these issues are discussed, ranging from the media and processes of 'knowledge-harvesting' to the use of more purpose-designed frameworks such as 5Is. But the fundamental issue remains one of taking knowledge management seriously and investing sustained time, money and leadership effort to make it work.

**Key words**

Knowledge Management, Evaluation, Home Office, Good Practice, Best Practice, SARA, 5Is

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## **Introduction**

### ***Background***

This paper focuses on the descriptions of projects identified as ‘good practice’ in the field of crime prevention, and how they are captured and shared in knowledge bases. Identifying and disseminating good practice has become big business in community safety practice. The purpose of doing so is fairly obvious – to improve the performance of local crime prevention activities, to help practitioners avoid past mistakes, to encourage innovation and to engender a wider culture and climate of quality of practice throughout the field (Ekblom, 2006). In the UK, evaluation of crime prevention initiatives has also been pushed by funding bodies and central government who often require evidence of evaluation of impact. More widely there has been a movement towards using evidence to inform crime prevention practice, associated with rigorous reviews of interventions which have been found to be effective in reducing crime (e.g. Sherman et al, 1997; Goldblatt and Lewis, 1998).

In parallel to the focus on impact evidence we are increasingly witnessing explicit efforts to capture, transfer and apply wider knowledge of practice: ‘knowledge management’ developed as a discipline almost overnight (Ekblom, 2002a). For example, in the UK the Home Office has developed wide ranging web based tools [i] and in the US the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing [ii] has amassed large amounts of material aimed at aiding practitioners to draw on research evidence and good practice knowledge to prevent crime.

There are, however, some fundamental issues related to the replication and transfer of effective practice in the crime prevention field, which few working knowledge bases have yet to fully address.

1. The replication of 'successful' projects has proved far from straightforward. Various reasons have been proffered for this. The local context is important in determining whether a preventative intervention is successful (Tilley, 1996). The implementation of crime prevention interventions triggers a series of causal mechanisms which lead to a set of outcomes. But these mechanisms will only be triggered in conducive contexts (Tilley, 1996). Because the contexts in which crime problems manifest themselves are different, the same interventions may have different outcomes in different settings. Copying examples of best practice as if from a recipe book may result in the adoption of interventions which are unsuitable for the context in which they are supposed to operate. As Ekblom (2007:P.81) put it, *'crime reduction methods are not like pesticide which can be sprayed uniformly over all the fields and have the same universal effect. A particular mechanism, such as deterrence of offenders by a CCTV system, may need a highly specific set of preconditions to be established among both offenders and crime situation before the desired mechanism is triggered, which then may or may not lead to the desired result'*. Even where contexts are similar, interventions are delivered by different people with different degrees of enthusiasm, effort, knowledge and wherewithal.
2. Impact evaluations have been weak. This limits what can be gleaned from projects and calls into question whether success has really been demonstrated. Commentators have pointed to weaknesses in practitioner evaluations for some time (Ekblom and Pease 1995; Read and Tilley, 2000; Scott, 2000; Bullock et al, 2006; Knutsson 2009). Read and Tilley (2000: P.9) noted, *'evaluation continues to be a weakness, and raises doubts about the status of self-assessed successes. There is relatively little systematic evaluation. What there is is generally weak. Few evaluations are independent. Evidence is used selectively. [...] There is little attention paid to how initiatives may have had their effects'*.
3. Descriptions of successful projects do not always contain the right kind or amount of information to help practitioners select projects suitable for transfer

- to their own contexts, and then to replicate them (preferably customised to those contexts). Problems have included limited description of the practical methods used and indicators of the quality; and a lack of information on transferable principles (Ekblom, 2006).
4. To expand on the last Ekblom (2002a, 2005) argued that many replications fail to copy the fundamental *principles* of an intervention; these principles, building on the Scientific Realist approach (eg Tilley 1996; Pawson and Tilley 1997) are equivalent to generic causal mechanisms such as reducing the value of goods prone to theft, or increasing an offender's capacity for self-control. Nor do the replications seek to recapitulate the intelligent process of moving from understanding a problem, to developing interventions to implementing and evaluating them. Instead they focus on replicating the external form of the intervention. Failure to follow principles or process may mean that any success is the result of good luck rather than good practice; thus high-fidelity replication does not guarantee success.
  5. There has been lack of synthesis of information. Ekblom (2005: 60) stated, *'looking at the body of evaluated knowledge as a whole, there is also a lack of synthesis of the results – knowledge should be a properly constructed building rather than a disconnected pile of bricks'*.

### ***The Home Office 'Effective Practice Database' (HOEPD)***

With these concerns in mind this paper systematically examines the projects contained in the Home Office 'Effective Practice Database (HOEPD)' [iii]. At the time of writing this is quite simply described on the website as *'a database of projects that have been tried around the country'*. (We say 'at the time of writing' advisedly because we're aware of plans to review it, but the general lessons we draw are intended to be rather less perishable [iv]). We examine the descriptions of projects thus collectively identified as effective practice and consider issues related to the replication and transfer of practice and the design of the HOEPD. Whilst our primary reference is the HOEPD, produced in a

country with advanced experience of crime prevention practice, we also give cursory attention to other, similar, databases which have developed elsewhere. We hope thus that the points raised here will have wider application.

*HOEPD in relation to other kinds of knowledge base*

The projects contained on the HOEPD have been designed, delivered and (generally, if at all) evaluated by practitioners. This differentiates the database from others which are being developed to facilitate the replication of what is known to be effective in crime prevention – most notably the Campbell Collaboration library. This is a collection of systematic reviews [v] of the research evidence about what is effective (or otherwise) in reducing crime. These reviews aim to inform policy and strategic choice of interventions. They are rigorous – the studies included in them undergo quality assurance on methodological rigour and the whole process is peer reviewed and controlled by independent experts. Systematic reviews have offered synthesis of a kind, but the picture of impact offered has tended to be one-dimensional. The findings of the reviews are expressed as high-level conclusions about generic methods of crime prevention (such as ‘CCTV reduces crime – but only in car parks’ (Welsh and Farrington, 2007) although more recent reviews (such as the example quoted) have begun to address the issue of theories/mechanisms.

Similarly, the aforementioned US based Center for Problem-oriented Policing provides (at the time of writing) 54 problem-specific guides (along with a host of other material). The guides are designed to assist practitioners in better understanding their crime or related problem, and in selecting preventive methods by which police can address them. The guides are informed by a review of the research (and other) literature about what has been found to be effective (or otherwise) in tackling that problem. The review procedure is independently managed and subject to anonymous peer review by a line police officer, a police executive and an academic prior to publication. As well as describing interventions, the guides help practitioners to undertake the preventive

process, based on the SARA (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment) problem solving model (Eck & Spelman, 1987), and allude to the importance of context [vi].

Lastly the Home Office has been preparing 'rapid evidence assessments' which (in this context) systemically summarise evidence about the effectiveness of crime prevention interventions. A reading of one exemplar of these, published in 2007 [vii] and examining the impact of mentoring on re-offending, reveals a concern with what works in terms of the central intervention and its variations. No process knowledge is captured, there is relatively little information to guide selection, facilitate replication and innovation and no interest in mechanisms. Rapid evidence assessments serve a different purpose from practice transfer although form an important part of the knowledge constellation. Like systematic reviews they help on the evaluation side (or at least would if there were a decent feedstock of evaluations to work on) but not with knowhow.

The HOEPD is not a library of systematic reviews or otherwise summaries of what is known to be effective in the area of crime prevention and community safety. It is a depository for practitioner-generated descriptions of crime prevention initiatives and assessments of what these have achieved. The HOEPD was selected for scrutiny as a primary Home Office framework and because it is fairly typical of others that have been developed around the world (see below)

At this point it's appropriate to briefly raise the issue of the distinction between 'evidence' and 'knowledge'. Although that distinction is sometimes blurred by fashion-following flits between terms, we here take evidence to mean a subset of knowledge which has been acquired by systematic and rigorous methods; and which focuses, fairly narrowly, on describing either impact and cost-effectiveness, or on some empirical state of the world. Knowledge as a whole does (or should) aim to meet certain quality standards but these are as diverse as the kinds of knowledge that are covered [viii]. It ranges from explicit theory at one end of the scale to tacit practice at the other; and

from 'what people think' to 'how to do'. Our own interest in reviewing HOEPD addresses both narrow evidentiary issues and broader practice knowledge ones.

## **Method**

This study focused on projects defined as 'operational topics' [ix]. Searches conducted on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2009 generated 59 separate projects. The project descriptions are provided on standard forms. Some of the information included is explicitly requested (although as will be seen in many cases, that information wasn't provided). This includes: project name, summary, details of those contributing, topic area, location, characteristics of victims and offenders, date of projects, financial and resource costs along with budget source. The rest of the descriptions are free text. The free text is organised in terms of the well used SARA model. Lastly, projects are asked to provide information about any other benefits or lessons learnt. Projects can self refer, immediately raising questions about quality control. Submitted projects are nevertheless moderated and ultimately cleared by central and local government prior to release. Given the limited nature of some of the descriptions, the nature of this moderation is a little unclear as we will see.

The level of detail contained in the project descriptions varies. On average project descriptions were eight pages long but this ranged from four to fifteen pages. The information contained in the descriptions was coded in terms of the information noted above along with the organisation of the projects (e.g. who was involved and who was accountable), the nature of the analysis and problem definition, the nature of the project interventions, stated outputs and outcomes. Five key themes emerged:

1. *Clarification of crime problem*: to what extent do the project descriptions clarify the nature of the problem that they are trying to prevent, the causes and consequences, the victims and offenders?
2. *Selection of preventative action*: Does the database contain the right information to help practitioners choose interventions, and what is the nature of



- information included? What level and type of information does the best practice case study description cover? For example, the nature of the description of practical methods and quality indicators, the scope of action, and the coverage on the ground.
3. *Replication*: What information does the database contain on the *trade-offs* within projects (e.g. between security and fire safety), which may have to be resolved differently in action replicated elsewhere? How far does the process information help reconstruct the unfolding stages of action so the replicators can do their local research, make their choices and design adjustments in appropriate sequence?
  4. *Innovation*: Do the database descriptions contain reference to tested generic principles or theories which can be used to generate plausible, evidence-based action in new contexts and/or on new problems where there are no comparable cases to replicate? Do they contain 'interchangeable elements' of action (such as how to mobilise people to act as crime preventers) which can be recombined in new ways to respond to new problems?
  5. *Evaluation*: Is reliable evidence presented that the initiatives were successful? How technically good were the evaluations? How comprehensive and how reliable do they appear to be? How rich is the evaluative evidence – for example does it cover process as well as impact?

## **Results**

### ***Clarification of the problem***

The database contains information which can help practitioners clarify the nature of their crime problem, retrieve relevant projects and select information regarding practice from within the project descriptions. The database facilitates such retrieval to some extent. It has a comprehensive search facility and in principle would seem to be useful for searching/selecting by problem type and by aspects of the context in which the

problem is occurring. Certain limitations are nevertheless apparent and are discussed in the following sections.

The projects are explicitly asked to specify the problem/s that they were seeking to address. Every project specified at least one problem type though generally projects stated that they were tackling more than one – on average three different – problems. Table one is indicative of the wide range of problem types being addressed.

[Table one about here]

The projects were asked to specify characteristics of the offenders and victims. Generally, this was less well documented than the problem type – an offender characteristic was stated in 32 of the 59 projects. Where the projects did note characteristics of the offenders on average two characteristics were indentified. The age of the offender (presented in bands) was most commonly identified (27 of the offender characteristics noted related to age), followed by ‘group offenders’ and ‘gangs’ (16), and offenders addicted to alcohol (10) and drugs (7). At least one victim characteristic was stated in 22 projects. Generally they were defined in terms of age (14), repeat victims (9), householders (4) and school children/university students (5). Failure to document this pretty elementary information, relevant to both situational and offender-oriented action, may be a symptom of poor problem analysis (and see subsequent sections) and hence weaknesses in understanding of the problems; or it may simply represent poor documentation of the projects or even unwillingness to make the effort to complete the form.

Further contextual information which may be useful for the selection of crime prevention activities is provided on the location where the project was situated. This is important for giving both guidance on geographical context, and also any links with wider strategic interventions that an individual project may have. Practitioners

submitting project descriptions are asked to specify the location of the project at various levels of detail (table two). Analysis of this information reveals apparent elementary differences between practitioners in the interpretation of the requirement to specify location characteristics. Some projects wrongly chose to state where their initiative actually took place (e.g. Accrington) and others interpreted it in terms of which geographical areas the initiative might be appropriate for (e.g. North-West).

[Table two about here]

As noted, more specific location types were also asked for, such as 'shopping centre'. In doing so some projects identified more than one specific location (23 projects stated more than one specific location, in 18 projects there was one specific location and in 17 the specific location was not noted). In all 90 locations were mentioned but again it is not clear whether projects understood this in terms of the generic type of location or where the location actually occurred (Table three). This shortcoming could be remedied by better guidance for completion of the database, which currently leaves the person filling it in free to make their own (mis)interpretation of what is required. But in this and other fields another issue is apparent: the headings appear to be static, once-and-for-all categories [x]. In a well-populated and actively growing knowledge base, the headings should be designed to continually grow and differentiate as new kinds of category surface under 'other' or existing categories become too loaded with cases to facilitate search and retrieval. For example, 'town centre' may need to be split into 'central business district', 'entertainment centre' etc. This is not chasing diversity for its own sake but refining and organising what should be a growing body of context information which may be important for selection and replication of practice.

[Table three about here]

*Free text*

Having filled in largely categorical information up to this point, practitioners submitting descriptions on HOEPD are now asked to provide free text descriptions of the action they had undertaken and the analysis and wider rationale for doing so. The guidance and structure supplied comprises the headings of the familiar SARA process.

Although it is not stated, we can presume the purpose of this information is to help practitioners completing the form to structure their descriptions so key elements of the action and its underlying evidence and logic are captured; and to help those consulting the knowledge base to retrieve specific kinds of knowledge and guide them through the preventive process as applied to this kind of problem. In particular the kind of information captured and made retrievable should help them select prior exemplars of action as being applicable to their problem and context, and then provide information to help them replicate whilst customising to their own context. We therefore have to ask: *Was the information there for the user? Was it retrievable? Was it of the right quality/reliability to guide the user's choice and actions?* (See Ekblom 2006 slide 27 and 2008 slides 12-14 for a more comprehensive set of questions.)

Examination of these descriptions revealed that generally the contributors claimed to have done some analysis of the problem that the project was trying to tackle. However 25/59 projects were assessed as having contained *no* evidence of systematic analysis of the problem at all or *very limited* analysis.

There were two broad and overlapping issues related to the project descriptions of the analysis of the problem they had undertaken. Firstly, the projects, in many cases, made limited or no use of crime or community safety data (fifteen projects presented no data at all); where they did there was a reliance on police data. Secondly, analyses frequently were limited in scope. To illustrate, one project based in Cheltenham sought to improve the safety of pupils in a secondary school. It was established following an accident

outside of the school when a pupil had been knocked down. The project described the analysis thus:

*'The danger posed to pupils crossing the main road outside the school was evidenced when a passing motorist knocked down a pupil outside the school. A number of subsequent Police operations identified that motorists were commonly speeding, not wearing a seat belt or using their mobile phone whilst driving by the school. Analysis of police operations showed that the tactics being employed were not working and motorists continued to break the laws, risking pupil safety.'*

Another project seeking to address antisocial behaviour in North Cornwall described their analysis as follows:

*'For a number of years Bude had experienced increasing levels of anti-social behaviour involving young people, particularly during the summer. Research identified that a significant proportion of the incidents were being committed by young people from the community.'*

In comparison, a police led student burglary prevention initiative based in Manchester presented convincing evidence of systematic analysis of the problem. This project description noted that, through routine scanning of crime data, one division in South Manchester suffered a disproportionate amount of burglaries compared to other crime types and that over a three year period the numbers of burglaries had been increasing. More detailed analysis revealed particular beats as hotspots, and that the main victims were university students. The project identified offender modus operandi (generally entry was gained through insecurity or by smashing windows, reaching through and snatching property) alongside other offender characteristics. Seasonal and temporal trends were identified (with autumn and winter months showing an increased risk for burglaries in the late afternoon and early evening, and how the annual rise in

September is mirrored by the start of a new academic year). Lastly, repeat victims and repeat streets were identified.

The North Cornwall and Cheltenham descriptions of the analysis undertaken compare unfavourably to that provided by the Manchester project. Whilst 'research' and 'analysis' is referred to no detail is given regarding how, specifically, the problems manifested and hence why any interventions targeted at it might be expected to work. The Manchester project, in contrast, provides evidence which helps the reader to understand why certain resources were targeted at certain places, people and time of the day. This level of information both reassures the users of the knowledge base that the project was built on sound analysis and helps them to judge whether the kind of problem targeted is similar to the one they are currently facing.

Apart from the need for proof of adequate evidence and analysis of the problem, descriptions such as these also miss out on information on *technique* for obtaining and analysing the data. For example, what problems and tradeoffs did they face in obtaining information on this kind of road safety/disorder problem? Did the project team do anything methodologically innovative and newsworthy that is worth capturing and transferring? Basically, transferrable know-how can be captured at every stage of the preventive process – but not on the basis of these descriptions. Unfortunately neither the format of the knowledge base nor any accompanying instructions for completion prompt contributors to supply this richer and potentially useful information. In short one might stumble across relevant details which a contributor happened to choose to include but systematic capture and retrieval of specific information is not possible.

### ***Selection of action for transfer***

Again reflecting the SARA model practitioners are invited to provide free text information regarding the activities they had planned and delivered to tackle the problems identified. With respect to the transfer of knowledge, the selection and

retrieval of information related to the characteristics of the preventive responses is especially important. The descriptions are very variable – some are rather thin and others rather dense. Systematic analysis of the descriptions revealed that the projects described just under 250 crime prevention activities – on average each project described four – though there was quite a range with projects describing between one and ten primary activities. Reflecting the great diversity of practice activities have been coded into ‘types’ for presentational purposes (Table four). These are not always clearly discernible or straightforward to classify – for example ‘publicity’ may be intended to *mobilise* people as preventers, or to directly *intervene* by deterring offenders, or both.

[Table four about here]

The ‘other’ category is wide and varied and included (amongst others): using children to shame speeding motorists, tackling the market for stolen goods, financial investigations, restorative justice, street pastors and even an eye scanning system for sheep!

For our purposes the issue is then, that there is no push to extract structured information from the project descriptions and to protect against hit-and-miss compliance by contributors. On the one hand this represents forgone opportunity to prompt for and mine rich knowledge that may be useful to others. For example, the contribution to success of highly motivated and charismatic leaders, handling the impact of loss of staff, quality assurance mechanisms, the development of specialist skills, how to handle trade-offs between security and privacy and so on. On the other hand it is very difficult to retrieve specific information about the project activities without wading through all the (unstructured) free text information. This would become a serious problem as the number of entries to the knowledge base scaled up. To illustrate, the ‘Distington project’ and the ‘Walsingham project’<sup>[xi]</sup> described in the HOEPD both give detailed and sensitive accounts of how to identify, and balance, conflicting interests (respectively young people and the rest, and travellers and the host community) but

there is little indication of these riches in any of the search tools. This information may be stumbled across in lengthy 'Response' and 'Assessment' sections but cannot be systematically retrieved. Nor are lessons recast in terms of generic principles to aid replication attuned to new contexts, and out-and-out innovation.

### ***Oversight and governance of the projects***

The projects generally involved more than one agency – only three involved the police alone. Twelve projects incorporated the police and one other, sixteen the police and two others and twenty-five projects involved the police and three or more partner agencies. Monitoring information was not generally provided – in only eleven cases was it clear that the project's implementation was monitored. (It should be stated that projects were not explicitly asked for this information and it is probably true that more projects were monitored than this.) Knowledge of *whether* a project's implementation was monitored gives some idea of project quality, which is important given the recurrent implementation failures documented in crime prevention. *How* the monitoring was done and whether the monitoring process worked well or poorly could be useful practice knowledge to share. A prompt about partnership issues could have yielded useful knowledge too – there are many dimensions to the practice of partnership (Gilling 2005; Ekblom 2004a).

### ***Project inputs***

The projects were asked to provide different types of cost information – financial costs (e.g. the costs of new equipment such as CCTV or publicity) and resource costs (presumably the ongoing staff costs). Financial cost was stated for 21 projects. Where it was stated the costs ranged very widely from a few pounds to hundred of thousands of pounds. The resource cost was only stated for 16 of the projects. The budget source/s (e.g. police service or local council) was more commonly included (in 27 projects). This information would be useful to know for transferable lessons as it gives a sense of the scale of the project and consequently the investment that may be required to see



similar results. For example one project based on an industrial estate in Manchester presented convincing information regarding effectiveness along with significant amounts of output and process data which would facilitate replication in a similar location. They also included cost data which indicated that the project cost at least £1/2 million, indicating the significant effort and resources that may be required to see similar effects.

Not just the overall budget but budget breakdowns (e.g. into intervention, publicity etc.) and budgeting headings for these kinds of projects are useful to know but rarely reported.

Beyond costs, again it is possible to imagine wide ranging useful information on inputs which could be extracted from project staff – such as material resources (transport, property-marking kit, youth centre equipment) and human resources (necessary skills for staff, kinds of volunteer best suited to the tasks in question).

### ***Project outputs***

The projects were systematically examined for information on outputs. Ten projects were assessed as containing a number or a great deal of output information, a further 21 as containing some output data and the remainder as containing none. Some qualification of this assessment is required. Generally speaking the projects did describe interventions but tended not to quantify the outputs. The difference between description and outputs is illustrated by the following accounts of high visibility policing operations. One project, based in Middlesborough which was seeking to reduce theft from motor vehicles described its response as follows:

*'[Operation Anvil] ran for 6 weeks from 3/7/2006 until 14/08/2006. It provided: an influx of targeted high visibility Police & PCSO patrols which included patrols from the forces mounted section, and by street wardens, all of which took place during peak offending times'*

Another project tackling anti-social behaviour based in Bradford described their exercise thus:

*‘Although a range of measures were put in place to prevent anti-social behaviour, there was clearly the need for the police to have an enforcement capability to address those who still wished to offend. This included a visible presence on the streets and the proactive challenge of would-be offenders. In total there were 407 Stop and Account, 68 Stop and Search engagements, with 34 arrests being made for damage offences.’*

The former account is a description and the latter gives outputs and as such a much greater sense of the amount and nature of activity generated by the project.

### **Evaluation**

Whether a project has worked in reducing crime or increasing safety is obviously vital knowledge for helping users of a knowledge base to select practices to replicate. The stated outcomes of each of the projects in HOEPD, and how these had been evaluated, were examined. This included identifying who had conducted the evaluation, the data sources used, the evaluation designs, and assessment of whether the conclusions of the evaluation were plausible on the basis of the information presented. This section considers issues to do with the quality standard of the evaluations presented by the projects (a line also pursued in the European Beccaria programme [xii] (and raised too by Knutsson 2009)

Whilst it is feasible, and desirable, to capture valuable lessons from unsuccessful projects, generally projects claimed some form of success – they would have to or they could hardly claim to be ‘effective practice.’ Nevertheless four of the projects examined explicitly stated that *no* assessment of outcomes had been conducted in any form. In

three cases because the assessment had not yet started, in one case because the *project* had not yet started. With one exception (where assessment had been conducted by a university) it was not clear who had conducted the evaluation – though it can be assumed to be project staff or possibly police analysts. An examination of the evaluations highlighted a number of issues and problems:

1. Thirty-eight of the projects claimed to use a 'before and after' design (though this term would not necessarily be used in the project description) and so compared a period before the project started to a period after the project. Three used 'after only' designs and for the remaining 18 projects there was either no obvious evaluation design at all, outputs and processes only, feedback or anecdotal information.
2. With a very small number of exceptions comparison areas or controls were not used. There was generally a failure to adequately take account of alternative explanations for apparent effects, such as regression to the mean.
3. Generally the projects did not identify the mechanisms through which successful projects were assumed to operate – information vital for intelligent replication in new contexts, and for innovation.
4. There was a lack of data presented to back up the claims – 22 of the projects where an evaluation design was evident nevertheless failed to use data clearly and appropriately in this way. For example, one project based in Cleveland which was seeking to addressing theft of diesel in an industrial estate gave no absolute figures but merely stated that '*There was a 75% reduction in offences for the period November 2006 to March 2007 (inclusive) on the previous 5 month period.*'
5. Data sources were limited, where data sources were used police recorded data was the most common.
6. Before and/or after periods were often short or unclear. 19 projects had before/after periods which were one year or less. In 12 projects it was unclear

- what the before and after period was, in 7 projects the period was over two years.
7. Lack of statistical analysis: only one project applied tests to identify if changes in crime rates were statistically significant.
  8. Systematic measurement of displacement/diffusion of benefit was unusual.
  9. Some claims of success were made on this basis of very small numbers. For example a £50,000 project seeking to tackle a range of problems on a housing estate in Hounslow, London stated, *'during the project there were 6 burglaries in the Corporation Avenue area. This achieves a reduction of 74%'*.

For these reasons 17 of the 41 evaluations which had an obvious design were assessed as 'unconvincing' (in terms of the extent of the data provided, whether the claimed effects seemed reasonable in terms of the extent of the action taken during the project, and other contextual factors).

***Replication: identifying transferable lessons***

Replication of a selected success story is not about slavish copying of the end product but intelligent recapitulation of process and principles in a new context. This is demanding of (selective) practical detail given the complexity of mounting a crime prevention project in the real world. Both process and outcome evaluation information is required: as Eck (2002) noted, replicating successes is difficult where you are not clear why the original action was successful. Information required for replication is also important for selection: unless practitioners can answer the question 'Will I be able to replicate this action in my context?' investment could be a big gamble. Brown and Scott (2007: 25-26) suggest asking these questions about projects that have been shown to be effective: 'What was the intervention's context?' 'How precisely was the intervention implemented?' 'How reliable are the stated results?'

In a free text field of HOEPD projects were asked to identify 'lessons learnt' and 'other benefits' and some projects included information in these sections. 'Hurdles' and 'obstacles' as well as 'positive lessons' were sometimes noted by practitioners in the response and assessment sections as well. Despite the obvious utility of such material in transferring knowledge about crime prevention, it is not systematically prompted in HOEPD. Just giving a single place/simple heading for 'lessons learnt' is an inadequate means of extracting this information. It invites minimal contribution, and gives no clues or leads to follow. Should contributors respond to encouragement and start to supply plenty more detail, there would be retrieval issues too but currently that is a non-problem. There is much to be said on both capture and retrieval grounds for allowing space for 'lessons learnt' at every point throughout the project description, rather than a single catch-all at the end of the form. Investment in obtaining such information from practitioners is not only important for replication of good practice, but can also inform the practice of *delivery* in terms, for example of professional training and infrastructure requirements that may need to be met nationally, regionally or locally, if practitioners are to be enabled to perform well.

### **Summary and discussion**

This paper has sought to draw attention to the issue of knowledge capture for preventative purposes. This final section returns first to the themes identified in the introduction, summarises the issues arising, and discusses the implications for the capture and dissemination of knowledge in the crime prevention and community safety context.

1. *Clarifying the problem*: Broad information about the crime (and other) problems that the projects were tackling is provided. Descriptions of the causes and consequences of crime problems and clear statements about victim and offenders characteristics are much less common however. The analysis of the

- problems the projects were trying to tackle, is generally weak. The shortcomings of analysis in the preventative process are indeed well documented (e.g. Read and Tilley, 2000; Sampson and Scott, 2000; Bullock et al., 2006).
2. *Selection of preventative action, replication and innovation:* Capturing and describing the 'Response' stage of SARA is even less well undertaken in the crime prevention/community safety literature than is problem analysis. Descriptive information on what the projects did is of course available but systematic information on project costs, quality indicators and outputs (to clarify the scope of action and coverage on the ground) is limited. The knowledge about implementation issues is not described, captured or transferred to practitioners in ways that can help them select prior action to apply to their problem, replicate it and innovate as appropriate. (Nor, for that matter, is this information available to delivery managers so that they might improve their infrastructural systems; nor to policymakers so they can take account of the deliverability of different types of intervention when planning programmes, something that Systematic Reviews currently do not cover either.)
  3. *Evaluation:* The evaluations of the crime prevention initiatives contained in the database are problematic. Two-thirds of the projects were assessed as presenting unconvincing evidence of effectiveness. Some projects explicitly stated that no evaluation had been attempted. In many others there were weaknesses in evaluation design and technique. These shortcomings replicate those noted by many commentators (the most recent being Knutsson 2009) and call into question the reliability of claims that projects have been effective in reducing crime and other community safety problems. On the basis of the weak evaluations presented here, rather than re-inventing the wheel many would-be replicators would risk reinventing the flat tyre.

Before discussing the implications of the above, we briefly examine other attempts to capture good practice. In the UK the 'Respect' [xiii] website contains a library of case

studies of practice in tackling anti-social behaviour. It invites practitioners to '*share good practice and examples of differing approaches to tackling a problem*'. It is not apparent what, if any, quality control is conducted. The information is organised in terms of local authority area/region; the type of the anti-social behaviour, which partners were involved, which tools/powers were used and why, how the intervention methods were realised in practice, what the outcomes were for the perpetrator, the victims and the community, and how practitioners' experiences would shape future actions; practitioners are also asked to reflect upon what, with hindsight, they would do differently. None of the information the online form asks for is compulsory. A cursory examination of the project descriptions reveals that these vary enormously in terms of completeness and quality.

The European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) [xiv] provides a library of good practice examples which can be accessed using a simple search function (crime/problem category, country of origin, keyword search). The network employs an explicit 'good practice methodology' which the project descriptions should follow. The descriptions are provided on forms and information is presented under the headings of the objective(s) of the project, how the project was implemented, the partners involved in planning and/or development and/or implementation of the project along with who they were and what their roles, plans to measure the performance of the project, whether the project been evaluated, how, and by whom and the results of that evaluation. Examination of entries again indicates extremely variable quantity and utility of information.

The International Centre for the Prevention of Crime [xv] compiles an 'international compendium of crime prevention practices' which provides details of crime prevention projects generated from across the world. These are presented in booklet form which is available online. A short description is provided along with the project aims, information on project development and implementation, outputs and outcomes. The descriptions

are very brief, generally just a page or so of text. The compendium is divided into five sections: aspects of community safety, youth at risk, youth gangs, community safety and indigenous peoples, and police-community partnerships in crime prevention. Other than noting that projects have been selected from a pool which had led to positive outcomes, little is said about the selection process.

Although these approaches have not been examined in detail, taken together they seem to share the limitations of the Home Office descriptions: incompleteness (and sometimes) brevity, limited retrievability function except on superficial features, and an absence of clear and adequate procedures for quality control.

An obvious conclusion from the shortcomings in knowledge capture that we have documented here is that we need a better way of doing so through the development of systems of knowledge management of good practice designed to be fit for purpose: centring on clarity, consistency, rigour and detail. The selection and retrieval of information from the Home Office database (though this would probably apply more widely) would seem to be influenced by 1) limitations in what information the contributors are asked to supply (in terms of specific categories and level of detail); 2) limitations in how they are guided or not (by text and formatting) to supply the right kind and quantity and quality of information; and 3) limitations in how well practitioners comply with the guidance in completing the form and are encouraged or pressured to do so. Discussion of wider limitations on the quality of knowledge entered is largely beyond the scope of this paper. But these include motivation, commitment and 'knowledge mindset' of practitioners, lack of organisational reward or results from making the effort, and being prepared to recast their 'story' of action into a standard framework. These in turn might be shaped by factors such as time, training and organisational culture. Whilst there might still be questions about the quality of individual projects on which the descriptions are based, we don't believe the additional



demands of populating such databases are beyond the capability of the practitioner to meet.

A formal, structured and explicit framework for extracting information about the nature of the preventative process from practitioners is vital for extracting transferrable lessons. One of us has been preparing such a system deliberately designed to respond to problems of implementation failure and inadequate replication and innovation, and to capture detailed knowledge of practice issues in a form which can be searched, retrieved, and applied in generating new action [xvi]. The system has three components: 1) a process model, the 5Is, which builds on SARA (in particular expanding the amorphous 'Response' task into 'Intervention, Implementation and Involvement' and breaking each task into more detailed elements); 2) a framework, the Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity, which builds on the Crime Triangle for analysing 11 immediate causes of criminal events and setting out the counterpart principles of intervention, on both offender and situational sides; and 3) a suite of clearly-defined terms (including crime prevention and community safety, intervention and so forth) and ways of describing institutional settings which together help practitioners articulate and communicate key practice concepts and context. There is room for debate about whether this is the best of all possible frameworks, but at least it has evolved through a process of sustained and deliberate design based on an understanding of knowledge management in general and the special requirements of handling knowledge of crime prevention (e.g. Eklom 2002). At the time of writing the HOEPD fails to demonstrate similar levels of intelligent design. Both the Respect knowledge base and that of EUCPN have used some of the terminology of the 5Is framework but only superficially, which misses the point. (Examples of 5Is descriptions are listed in endnote xvi and a book is near completion (Eklom in preparation).

It is worth noting that practice fields beyond crime prevention have realised the need, and have been developing frameworks, to systematically capture more detailed

knowledge of research into effective practice. The SQUIRE standard (Davidoff et al., 2008), for example, supplies a detailed structure for describing evaluations of medical interventions in the field which takes account of the complex social processes in which those interventions and their delivery are embedded.

As well as developing an explicit framework, attention should be paid to *how* we extract knowledge from practitioners. Horizontal, peer-to-peer transfer is valuable but there is a major issue regarding how far one can go with self-selected, self-summarised project descriptions as a generic approach (let alone how well the individual Home Office attempt described in this paper has managed to realise it). The Home Office had been developing an alternative, moderated and more sophisticated system – IPAK (Improving Performance through Applied Knowledge [xvii] trialled on burglary (e.g. Kent 2006) – which moreover seems to have an air of deliberate, strategic functional design. Like 5Is, this approach recognised that there is a strong connection between good, and well-filtered, documentation of practice, and improved performance of future interventions. (The converse is probably also true, with weak documentation linked to poor practice.) But work appears to have halted around 2007.

Different ways of capturing information could indeed be envisaged. Perhaps capture could employ an online form, with prompts. Perhaps a professional ‘knowledge harvester’ (e.g. BSI 2001, NHS 2005) could gather information systematically from practitioners over the phone, via an online chat line or through a site visit. This would certainly help extract tacit knowledge (Tilley 2006, Ekblom 2007), focus on what is newsworthy and informative, organise the knowledge and recast ‘practice vernacular’ into generic, transferrable principles supporting replication and innovation. A major Australian study of managing good practice and fostering a continuous improvement culture (Australian Government Attorney General’s Department, 2003) trialled, with some success, the use of ‘participant-inquirers’ – practitioners trained in research and good practice concepts and processes, to capture and articulate practice knowledge.

(Unfortunately, as with IPAK, the wider initiative seems to have run into the sand.) But as ever, there is a trade-off between extracting adequately detailed and focused information to aid clarification, selection, replication and innovation, and putting would-be contributors off by overloading them with questions and demanding formats. To that end, methods of doing this have to be co-designed, trialled and improved; then properly supported and maintained when operational. Ideally practitioners would be guided and given official time to make the original contribution. Perhaps the HOEPD should be deliberately designed as a 'quick grab' knowledge base that captures material that will enable knowledge harvesters to spot something worth following up in person. Finally, of course, the fruits of the knowledge harvesting exercise have to be seen to be used and useful.

But none of this can be done half-heartedly, without sustained investment of time, resources and effort on the part of all stakeholders, and consistent and deliberate leadership on the part of the responsible body. We are currently facing a lost opportunity to capture, consolidate, retrieve and apply much knowledge that is rich and informative and which if properly used could greatly improve the performance of crime prevention. It's time that those responsible for improving practice in crime prevention, in the Home Office and elsewhere, took knowledge management more seriously.

### **Acknowledgements**

For helpful comments we are grateful to Jessica Anderson, Jason Roach and Aiden Sidebottom, plus an anonymous referee

### **Endnotes**

- i. [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/)
- ii. [www.popcenter.org/problems/](http://www.popcenter.org/problems/)
- iii. Available at: [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/epd/index.cgi](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/epd/index.cgi)

- iv. Since this research was conducted the HOEPD has made various improvements, some on the basis of our observations. These include allowing registered users to view and add ratings in addition to providing comments on the project summaries. These ratings are based on the overall strategy, transferability and impact the initiative has made to address the original problem. Stronger links have also been made with the Tilley Award (these reward good practice in problem-oriented policing). Further changes are planned.
- v. Simply, a systematic review is a synthesis of existing evidence related to a particular topic.
- vi. A volume in the crosscutting 'problems solving tool' series of COPS (Brown and Scott 2007) does make more of the kind of information needed to guide selection and replication but this has yet to percolate through the problem-specific guides.
- vii. See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/rdsolr1107.pdf>
- viii. Ekblom (2002a) distinguishes between 'know-about, know-what works, know-where, know-who, know-how and know-why').
- ix. The database allows search on key words or there is an advanced search facility which enables you to search by 'operational topics' along with characteristics of victims and offenders and location type. You can also search on 'organisational topics' (e.g. governance of initiatives or cross cutting solutions) and 'hallmarks of effective partnerships' (e.g. skills and knowledge, community engagement, intelligence-led processes, effective leadership).
- x. Discussion with the Home office reveals an intention for the headings to evolve on the basis of consultation with users and reviews.
- xi. The 'Distington project' [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/cgi-bin/epd/index.cgi?action=viewidea&ideaid=1061](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/cgi-bin/epd/index.cgi?action=viewidea&ideaid=1061)), 'Walsingham project' [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/cgi-bin/epd/index.cgi?action=viewidea&ideaid=1065](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/cgi-bin/epd/index.cgi?action=viewidea&ideaid=1065))

- xii. see [www.beccaria.de/nano.cms/en/Home1/Page/1/](http://www.beccaria.de/nano.cms/en/Home1/Page/1/)
- xiii. [www.respect.gov.uk/members/case-studies/article.aspx?id=8626](http://www.respect.gov.uk/members/case-studies/article.aspx?id=8626)
- xiv. [www.eucpn.org/goodpractice/index.asp](http://www.eucpn.org/goodpractice/index.asp)
- xv. [http://www.crime-prevention-intl.org/filebin/Documents%20ajouts%202008/Septembre%202008/Basse\\_resolution\\_International\\_Compedium\\_of\\_Crime\\_Prevention\\_Practices.pdf](http://www.crime-prevention-intl.org/filebin/Documents%20ajouts%202008/Septembre%202008/Basse_resolution_International_Compedium_of_Crime_Prevention_Practices.pdf)
- xvi. The system is described in Ekblom (2002b, 2005, 2007) and a range of further guides and case studies is at [www.designagainstcrime.com/web/crimeframeworks](http://www.designagainstcrime.com/web/crimeframeworks). An example of a detailed project description, on preventing underage drinking and antisocial behaviour, is at [www.designagainstcrime.com/web/5iscco.docs/gpps05.doc](http://www.designagainstcrime.com/web/5iscco.docs/gpps05.doc). A simplified format for capturing project information using 5Is is at [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/ipak/evidencebase/burglary005.htm](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/ipak/evidencebase/burglary005.htm). A trial knowledge management system based on 5Is is under development by the Australian Institute of Criminology at [www.aic.gov.au/research/projects/openaxis.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/research/projects/openaxis.html). Other good examples include a description, in a report for the New Deal for Communities programme (Adamson, 2004) of a youth crime project using intensive supervision; and a domestic burglary reduction project from the Home Office's own Crime Reduction Programme (undated) which can be found at [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/r204sup5bacup.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/r204sup5bacup.pdf)
- xvii. [www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/ipak/ipak01.htm](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/ipak/ipak01.htm)

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## Tables

### Richness, retrievability and reliability - Karen Bullock and Paul Ekblom

**Table one: problems the projects were seeking to address**

<b>Problem type</b>	<b>Number of projects seeking to address this issue</b>
Antisocial behaviour	41
Criminal damage	27
Fear of crime	16
Robbery	12
Drug offences	10
Gang related activity	7
Business and retail	6
Violence	5
Theft from and of cars	5
Road safety	5
Traffic	5
Older people	5
Arson	3
Fly tipping (illegal dumping)	3

**Table two: Location of projects**

<b>Location of projects</b>	
All	19
All, rural	1
All, urban	1
Other	1

Mixed	2
Not stated	7
Rural	10
Suburban	2
Urban, suburban	4
Urban	11

**Table three: Location type**

Location type	
Town or city centre	18
Licensed premises	14
Housing estate	9
School or university	9
Car park	6
Industrial estate/park	5
Shopping centre	5
Taxi rank	5
Off licensed premises	4
Park or open space	3
Other	12

**Table four: activities**

	Number of interventions	Proportion %
<b>Intervention in the causes of criminal events</b>		
Police enforcement actions	42	18
Situational including design	27	11
Diversion inc outreach	22	9

CCTV, Automatic Number Plate Recognition, speed cameras	9	4
Environmental	9	4
Interventions with the family	8	3
Anti-social Behaviour Orders(ASBO)	5	2
Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABC)	5	2
Dispersal or exclusion areas	5	2
Property marking	3	1
Addressing individual drug or alcohol problems	4	2
School talks and visits (could also be Involvement)	4	2
<b>Involvement: Mobilisation of people to act as crime preventers; and climate-setting</b>		
Publicity inc media	21	9
Enforcement of conditions such as housing or licensing	13	5
Watches e.g. neighbourhood watch, pub watch, cocoon watch	11	5
Crime prevention advice	8	3
<b>Implementation: activities to support preventive process, and build capacity for conducting project</b>		
Research, development, IT, intelligence	7	3
Training for staff	6	3
<b>Other</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>12</b>