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# **What Works?: A systematic overview of recently published meta evaluations / synthesis studies within the knowledge domains of Situational Crime Prevention, Policing, and Criminal Justice Interventions, 1997 – 2017**

**Jaap de Waard<sup>1</sup>, October 2017**

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*'A systematic review is the Rolls Royce of research.'* - David Farrington, April 2010

*"Well, obviously there is a political context to almost everything that we do. Ministers want to be seen to be taking action and sometimes any action is better than no action ... There are often political commitments that lead you in directions that the evidence doesn't necessarily strongly support."* (anonymous n.d.)

## **Introduction**

An effective crime (prevention) policy can only be drawn up using 'lessons from science'. The basis for such a policy is reliable and validated knowledge, from proven high-quality and edited research. In recent years a multitude of studies have been published comparing the effectiveness of various criminal justice policy measures and interventions. In particular these were what are known as synthesis studies or meta evaluations which compare large quantities of research. These are a source of lessons which can be learned by those involved in both policy making and practice. They highlight features of policy which, in principle, promise to be effective, or – in any event – features which are almost certain not to have any effect. Here, 'effect' means a reduction in crime and / or reoffending / reduction in recidivism.

Thanks to the large number of recently performed meta evaluations in the criminological field, it is becoming increasingly more easy to make statements about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of interventions and measures. Meta evaluations which are intended to identify the efficacy of measures take account of the methodological accuracy of available research according to the degree to which they allow conclusions to be drawn. In this context, the following five point scale is used: 1 (weakest assessment) – a simple correlation between cause and effect; 2 – before and after measurements without a control group; 3 – before and after measurements with a control group; 4 – before and after measurements in conjunction with large-scale sample surveys consisting of 'processed' and 'unprocessed' groups; 5 (strongest assessment) – random allocation with controlled experiments.

This document presents a summary overview of knowledge on effective preventive and repressive criminal justice interventions and measures. The goal is to provide a systematic overview of recently published meta evaluations and synthesis studies of proven effective and ineffective measures and interventions. This will allow a policy to be pursued based on reliable facts, thorough analyses and useful concepts and insights from science and practice: so-called

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'evidence based crime policies'. It will also provide a description of a number of core factors and characteristics which determine the efficacy and effectiveness of those interventions and measures. A systematic classification is used via which the scientific knowledge is subdivided into three knowledge domains:

- Situational Crime Prevention (61 meta evaluations);
- Policing (51 meta evaluations); and
- Criminal Justice Interventions (147 meta evaluations).

Within these three knowledge domains, some 259 recently published meta evaluations are summed up chronologically. These studies can be accessed separately by clicking the attached deep links. In this way the studies can be examined 'without leaving one's desk'. Of course, the subject matter is very empirical in nature, meaning that not everyone can evaluate or understand it. That is why agreements have been made with the WODC (our in-house Research and Documentation Centre within the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice) to make the studies available in a more understandable and customer-friendly way via a so-called effective criminal justice interventions portal. For background information interested readers can contact: [kennisbank.helpdesk@minvenj.nl](mailto:kennisbank.helpdesk@minvenj.nl) A further 'translation' into another form is therefore going to take place. The main goal of this overview is to demonstrate that knowledge has been accumulated in recent years relating to the effectiveness of criminal justice policies ( prevention, detection, repression, or a combination of these issues).

#### **The Campbell Crime and Justice Group**

Following on from the Cochrane Collaboration, which publishes overview studies on the functioning of prevention and intervention activities in the healthcare sector, the Campbell Collaboration has set itself the goal, since 2000, to provide an insight into the outcomes of interventions in the fields of education, welfare and crime and justice.

The Campbell Crime and Justice Group uses an accessible approach to encourage researchers, policymakers and employees in the field to find out about the effectiveness of interventions in relation to crime, without them losing their way in the sometimes contradictory outcomes of different studies. An extensive and strict peer-review procedure has been developed. Systematic reviews of research into specific interventions or the tackling of problems take place in accordance with strict scientific criteria. The outcomes are made understandable and accessible for people from the fields of policy and practice who do not have the time and opportunity to familiarise themselves with all the different publications. The strict criteria and review procedures must ensure that people can have implicit faith in the conclusions. If a systematic review states that an approach works, then this can be regarded as being true. If it does not work, it does not work. These meta evaluations can be regarded as "the pearls in criminal justice research"

<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>

## **Effective situational crime prevention**

One of the basic points of departure in the case of situational crime prevention is that opportunity makes the thief. The guru of the situational approach, Ron Clarke, therefore maintains that *'It is easier to change places than people'*. This is the essence of the approach: proper protection using technical and social measures generates a much greater preventive effect than direct influence on the personality or private life of the (potential) perpetrator. The aim, therefore, is to offer as little opportunity for crime as possible and thereby not tempt people to commit crimes. This means criminal behaviour is influenced indirectly.

A significant number of synthesis studies have shown that the situational approach can have considerable crime-reducing effects. All of those different security measures, also referred to as *situational crime prevention*, can be applied to various different types of crime. Many of the measures are applied on a large scale, which means that the scope is often very great indeed. That applies particularly in the case of car theft (the obligatory inbuilt immobilizers) and also in the case of house break-ins (certification / "secured by design" / Buildings Decree). There has also been a significant decrease in shoplifting from department stores and retailers (due to CCTV, no cash, anti-theft strips, private security, sensors, alarms, dummy packaging). In a large number of countries the application of these types of measures has led to a significant decrease in these specific offences. What appears to work? The deployment of supervisors in housing complexes, public transport and public space. The raising of lighting levels in (semi) public spaces. The use of CCTV at certain locations, aimed at specific crimes. The use of the Secured by Design Instrument. The raising of the general security level and the restructuring of residential areas. The installation of standard security measures during the production phase of consumer goods (cars, cameras, bicycles, mobile telephones, laptops). Lastly, the discontinuation of situations conducive to crime, such as dealer's premises and pawn shops, through the application of (civil) legislation and regulations, also appears to be effective.

## **Key characteristics of effective situational crime prevention**

A key characteristic of an effective situational approach is the relative simplicity of the measures. Examples are the straightforward increasing of lighting levels, ensuring visibility and accessibility. These are often relatively cheap measures. For example, the risk of burglary is reduced by a factor of sixteen by investing in extra locks, leaving a light on and the installation of an outside light in combination with a burglar alarm. Locations and places where there is an above-average level of crime can be made safer by relatively simple structural and technical measures, and by raising the level of supervision. Changing closing times and providing public transport in areas with pubs, clubs and discos will prevent a situation from arising in which (drunken) people congregate in the streets. This is a simple way of preventing violence.

## **Recently published synthesis studies relating to situational crime prevention**

*‘It is easier to alter environmental conditions than individual behavioural tendencies’*

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## Effective policing

What appears to work? The tackling of *repeated victimisation*. The chance of repeated victimisation is particularly great during a short period after the initial victimisation, mostly within a month. The specific tackling of repeated victimisation appears to be successful in areas characterised by a high crime level. The so-called *hotspots approach*, which involves the police carrying out specific surveillance on criminal hot spots reduces crime. Research shows that identifying and formulating a strategic response to hot spots can reduce crime in both the hot spot and surrounding areas. Focusing on small geographic locations when and where crimes occur, and targeting specific, high-impact repeat offenders, can effectively decrease crime. Collecting and using DNA evidence substantially increases the likelihood of solving property crimes — twice as many arrests and twice as many cases accepted for prosecution. When people see the police as fair, lawful and respectful, officers are safer and citizens are more likely to obey the law and comply with police orders.

The police appear to be able to reduce crime through (enforced) cooperation and information exchanges with local authorities and other parties, based on the strategy of so-called *third party policing*. The better the police are at identifying – in accordance with policy – the (causal) factors in relation to crime, the less crime there is. This strategy is known as a *problem-oriented policing*. Lastly, the *hard core / top ten approach* also appears to be effective. The strategy used is a specific person-oriented approach to habitual offenders.

## Key characteristics of effective policing

It appears that whether policing is effective or not depends on a number of characteristics. These include a specific focussed approach to (potential) perpetrators, victims and crime locations and times ('hot offenders, hot victims, hot times and hot places'). Moreover, the policy is targeted and takes account of the wishes and expectations of residents and businesses. Lastly, a thorough crime analysis is a must. This analysis will determine the nature and extent of crime, and analyse its causes, possible measures and interventions, and its effectiveness.

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## Effective criminal justice interventions

In 1974, Robert Martinson wrote 'Nothing Works' in a classic contribution to *Public Interest*. He meant that nothing works as regards preventing reoffending and reducing recidivism. This sombre conclusion determined criminal justice intervention policy for many years. In the past ten years, however, the notion of rehabilitation has been revived. The knowledge domain of effective interventions and measures aimed at preventing reoffending and reducing recidivism has expanded substantially in recent years. A container of various interventions now exists: from training in social skills to discipline camps, group coaching and controlling one's feelings.

An analysis of all the available meta evaluations paints the following picture. Some criminal justice interventions have negative effects. This means more reoffending. This seems to occur in conjunction with what are known as 'scared straight programmes' and boot camps / discipline camps. Some interventions also produce better than average results, with sometimes a 60% improvement as regards reoffending. Effective interventions include child raising support, cognitive behavioural therapy, employment guidance and mentoring programmes.

If you take everything into account it appears that, on average, there is a *12% improvement* in the case of the assisted group in comparison to the non-assisted group. Therefore, on average, criminal justice interventions prevent one in eight cases of reoffending. This is a small, but certainly not negligible effect. The key question is why is there so much variation in reoffending between all the different interventions (from a 40% deterioration to a 60% improvement).

## Key characteristics of effective criminal justice interventions

The available knowledge reveals that a number of characteristics can be identified which determine the level of effectiveness (read: reduction in reoffending) of criminal justice interventions. The effect declines as the intervention gets more removed from the concrete behaviour and the conditions in which that behaviour occurs. Of course, delinquent behaviour is personal. Nevertheless, the behaviour is often reinforced by the social context, which is often conducive to crime. If that social context is ignored, it will be more likely that the intended effects will not be achieved. The effectiveness of interventions is determined to a considerable degree by the way in which they acquire form in (difficult) practical situations. Important factors are then the duration of the intervention, the quality and enthusiasm of the practitioner and the effectiveness of the implementation. Lastly, effective criminal justice interventions cost money. Only high-quality and intensive approaches produce results. A considerable personal effort also has to be made during the execution of the intervention.

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## In conclusion

On the basis of the above, there is reason for moderate optimism about what works as regards tackling crime and reducing reoffending. A key characteristic of effective policy is that it is specific and concentrated: selection and focus are the most important features. A policy that is too general and based heavily on a 'probable idea' is not effective. The effectiveness of all manner of interventions is determined to a considerable degree by the way in which they acquire form in (difficult) practical situations. Dealing with people correctly and the proper personal treatment of perpetrators and (potential) victims seem to be crucial for the success of interventions. Taking measures which limit the opportunity structure (situational crime prevention) to commit crimes appears to be more effective than using an exclusive perpetrator-oriented approach. Lastly, there is

a lot of evidence that situational crime prevention is effective. However, the large-scale national application of these effective measures seems to be difficult to get off the ground. Within the various intervention domains there is still room for improvement. This can be achieved by, for example, learning lessons from the evidence that criminological science has generated in recent years.

I hope to have shown that there exists an overwhelming 'evidence of knowledge' and 'recipes' in our criminal justice system for evidence based criminal justice policies. Or even better: prescriptions that help to avoid policies that are probably not cost-effective. I have further pointed the key aspects of evidence based criminal justice policies in the fields of situational crime prevention, policing and criminal justice interventions. It would seem logical that I would be optimistic about the efforts to give a firmer scientific basis for the criminal justice policy. However, it is clear that in order to succeed you have 'to swim upriver'. Only with a lot of effort the gap between the scientific and policy arena can be breached. This asks a lot from the scientific community, that is not seldom not well understood when presenting technical exposés in not very accessible publications. Continuing efforts are necessary to bring the scientific findings in the public debate. On the other side some see an advance of managers in the field of criminal policy and the administration of services, with no connection to or interest in the content of that policy. This would lead to widening the gap with the scientific community. But even managers are geared to the 'delivering of results', which can provide for the connection with an evidence based thinking. In this I (Jaap de Waard) will continue to play a role, as 'knowledge activist' to apply evidence based knowledge into criminal justice policies. Sometimes you succeed in this task and sometimes you are not.