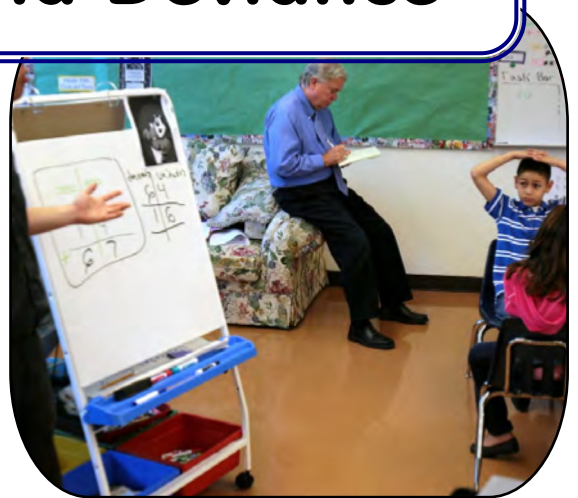




Crime and Deviance



Stealing to Offer: A Market Reduction Approach

Chris Livesey



While Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) strategies come in many forms, the majority focus on identifying and developing ways to stop an offence taking place.

Market Reduction Approaches, however, while sharing a similar crime reduction / elimination objective, are a little different because their focus is on preventing offenders profiting from various forms of economic crime, such as theft, by reducing the markets for stolen goods.

While this may seem a little counter-intuitive - how effective is a “crime prevention approach” that says little or nothing about actually preventing crime? - there is evidence to suggest (Sutton, 2008) that preventing offenders liquidating stolen assets is an effective form of crime prevention and control.

In general, ideas about Situational Crime Prevention fall into two main categories:

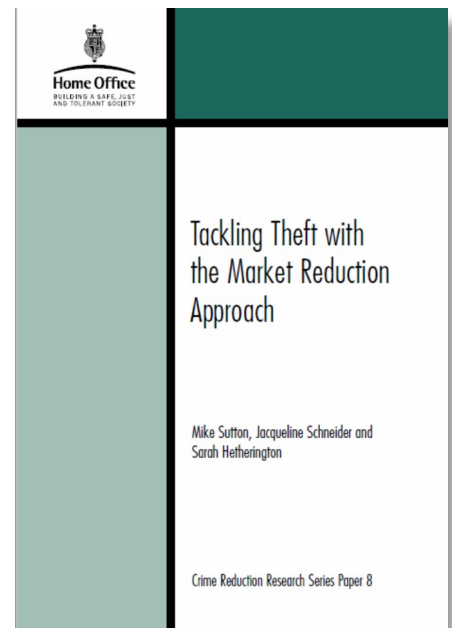
1. Reducing the potential benefits offenders get from their crimes.
2. Increasing the potential costs offenders face when deciding whether or not to commit a crime.

Most situational crime prevention initiatives have generally given greater attention to the latter, while less interest has been shown in the former. Although there may be a number of reasons for this, one possibility is the belief that increasing costs reduces crime and therefore obviates the need to address the “benefit reduction problem”: reducing levels of crime by increasing costs, so this argument goes, effectively takes the “benefit problem” out of the equation.

However, the idea that increasing the costs of crime actually reduces crime - as opposed, for example, to displacing it - is one that has come to be increasingly questioned, partly because it doesn't address an offender's underlying motivations for crime.

If, for example, one motive is to commit a crime, such as theft, in order to sell stolen goods for cash to buy drugs, making it harder and riskier to steal simply ups-the-ante for the offender, rather than necessarily preventing a crime from taking place.

A Market Reduction Approach (MRA) to crime takes the opposite view: rather than controlling crime by making the act itself more difficult and riskier, it argues that making it more difficult or, ideally, impossible, for offenders to benefit from their crimes - by restricting or eliminating their ability to convert stolen goods into cash for example - is a highly-effective form of crime prevention.



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In this respect, MRA suggests the costs of crime shouldn't be treated as being separate from and unconnected to its potential benefits. Rather, such costs are, in effect, rolled-up into "a lack of benefit", such as an inability to sell the goods you have stolen.

The logic here is that if you can't convert what you've stolen - such as a mobile phone or computer - into cash, it takes away the incentive and motivation to steal them in the first place.

This follows for two reasons:

1. There's little point in taking the risk of stealing something if it is worthless to you (unless, of course, you particularly like hoarding mobile phones, computers, various electrical goods and the like)
2. You are left to store a range of worthless goods that, if discovered, may lead to jail time.

Sutton argues here that an effective MRA involves reducing:

- the number of offers of stolen goods made by thieves to potential buyers
- the outlets for stolen goods
- the number of thieves and handlers by encouraging them to explore non-criminal alternatives, rather than just alternative crimes.

The logic here is one that reduces the need to increasingly "raise the costs of crime" (with all its attendant private and public expenditure, inconvenience and so forth) by focusing police and public attention on reducing the benefits of crime. If an offender knows they will gain no benefit - because they can't convert their crimes into cash - this removes most of, if not all, their motivation for crime.

This has the additional social benefit of both reducing the costs of dealing with offenders (through arrests, prosecutions, prisons and so forth) and reducing the risk of offending / re-offending; if a potential offender is demotivated by a sound knowledge of a lack of perceived benefit, there is little reason to suppose they will continue to offend.



How many electric toasters does one person need?



One very expensive social cost of crime...

How it works

MRA works to restrict or eliminate access to markets for stolen goods. These include:

- commercial fences, such as pawnbrokers and second-hand dealers who either sell directly to (innocent) customers or re-sell to another distributor.
- network sales: buyers may be final consumers or, more-likely, small-time distributors who re-sell the goods through friendship networks.
- hawking stolen goods directly to a consumer through pubs, door-to-door sales and the like.
- e-fencing is a more-recent addition to the list of potential markets and mainly involves sales through legitimate Internet markets (such as e-bay).

The basic objective of a Market Reduction Approach is to prevent offenders profiting from their crime, something that involves a combination of agencies, from the police using prosecutions and warnings to “known fences”, to the media publicising arrests and the general public being made more-aware of the provenance of the “cheap goods” they might be offered - and the consequences of buying such goods at “knock-down prices”.

These range from being arrested for handling stolen goods (an offence that carries a maximum 14-year prison sentence) to, in the case of counterfeit goods, possible personal harm from faulty unlicensed products.

Educating potential buyers to the risks involved in buying stolen goods is important because, MRA argues, it's rare for customers to proactively seek-out stolen goods; rather, they are much more likely to be offered such goods. The crackdown on buyers and outlets makes it harder and riskier for thieves to convert goods into cash, thereby providing a strong economic disincentive for crime.

More significantly, **Sutton et al** (2001) take this a step further when they argue that reducing or eliminating the ability of thieves to benefit economically from their actions takes away their motivation to offend:

“Markets for stolen goods provide motivation for initial and continuing involvement in crime. Some inexperienced burglars fail to sell goods stolen from their first burglaries and consequently they give up stealing after two or three attempts.

Other burglars, however, are able successfully to convert stolen property into cash at their first attempt; not surprisingly they tend to repeat the criminal acts that reward them with money. This is an important area for crime prevention.

Reducing markets for stolen goods might help to ground many criminal careers before they can properly begin”.

“I’ve got different people about the place that I’ll take different types of items to.

Like electrical goods might go one place, power tools or whatever goes to another place - to whichever person that can sell that type of thing.

And do my deal with him and then he’ll do his deal with whoever he does his deal with”.

Sutton (2008)

Limitations

There are a few limitations to MRA that are worth noting:

Firstly, it only applies to economic crimes (such as theft or burglary) where there is a need for cash and a market to convert crime into cash.

Having noted this, its use could potentially be extended to white-collar / corporate / organised criminality, involving things like money-laundering. The objective here would be to prevent an offender cleaning “dirty money” by blocking their access to banks, legitimate and illegitimate businesses and so forth.

Secondly, to be effective it requires high levels of police intelligence gathering and good coordination between different control agencies to “limit any opportunities for displacement of dealing activity from one market type to another”.

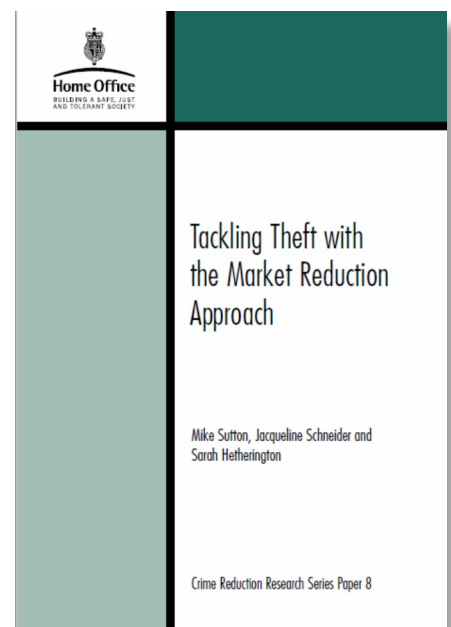
Thirdly, it can be time and resource-consuming for control agencies, particularly where the various markets - involving thieves, dealers and consumers - need to be extensively monitored as part of an intelligence-gathering operation prior to police action.

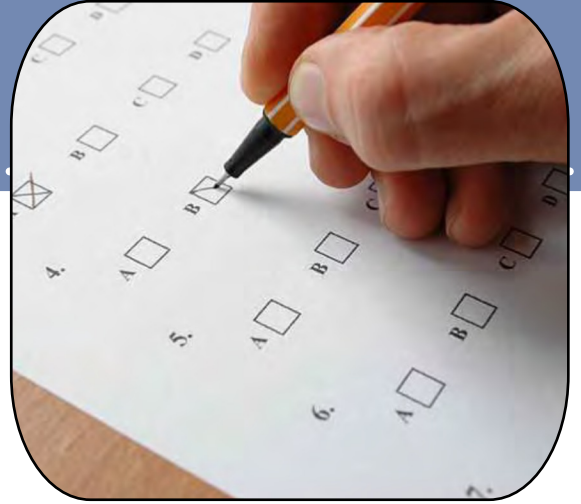


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