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Understanding deterrence

The idea of deterrence is one of the oldest and most basic concepts of crime prevention. Put simply, the idea of deterrence is that if you do something wrong and are caught, then the subsequent punishment will deter you from doing that wrong again. The fear of future punishment therefore discourages or deters transgressing of social norms expressed through the law.

There are two basic forms of deterrence: *specific* and *general*. General deterrence measures include the existence of laws, police, courts, penalties and prisons. These institutions serve as signposts or guidelines to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The objective is to create a general social climate environment that reduces the likelihood of intentional transgression of acceptable behaviour for fear of detection and the possible punitive consequences. So, for example, we all drive our cars on the same side of the road and generally observe other road rules.

Measures that generate specific deterrence effects are those directed at particular crimes or social problems that are perceived to be especially harmful. Here the measures to deter deviant or unlawful behaviour will be more focused and the punishments tailored to the offence. For example, the highly successful use of random breath testing (RBT) legislation and enforcement strategies in NSW in the early 1980s was directed not only at achieving general traffic safety outcomes, but also at the deterrence of the particularly harmful practice of drink driving.

Specific deterrence measures can be found in many crime prevention and reduction settings. One of the most famous is the Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire in the United States, which caused a rapid decline within a very short time in gun related homicides among youth gang members in South Boston. The well implemented, multi-modal initiative involved a collaborative partnership of all the agencies dealing with young people in the South Boston area. Based on the important deterrence principles of increasing the certainty, severity, and swiftness of sanctions, a set of tightly developed measures addressed gun related youth violence. An important feature of the success of both the Boston Gun Project and the NSW RBT initiative was the investment put into the effective communication of the deterrence message: i.e. if you offend you will be caught and you will be punished. However, to be effective this message had to be backed up by a real increase in the perceived risk of apprehension – something that was true in both cases.

Further reading:

Levinson D (ed.) 2002. *The encyclopaedia of crime and punishment - volume 2*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Homel R 1988. *Policing and punishing the drink driver: a study of general and specific deterrence*. New York: Springer-Verlag

Braga A, Kennedy D, Piehl A & Waring E 2001. *Reducing gun violence: the Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire*. Washington: National Institute of Justice (NCJ 188741)