# UCL

# PROBLEM SOLVING FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING

How to solve local crime and disorder problems for neighbourhood police officers

Matthew Ashby and Spencer Chainey

# Contents

# Welcome

## This guide will help you solve local crime and disorder problems.

We hope this guide will be useful to police officers and others who work on neighbourhood policing teams, as well as other people responsible for dealing with crime and disorder in local communities. The UCL Jill Dando Institute provides short training courses that complement this guide. Visit our website for more details: www.ucl.ac.uk/jdi

Solving local crime problems is important because if they aren't solved they will continue to damage the lives of the people who live in your community. Residents and others are likely to feel unsafe and to have a negative opinion of their local police.

If a crime problem is not solved, you and your colleagues are likely to be called repeatedly to deal with the consequences of the problem. For example, if there is a problem in your neighbourhood with street drinkers abusing passers-by, local people are likely to repeatedly call the police to deal with them. If the problem is not solved, you and your colleagues could still be answering the same calls in ten years' time.

Sometimes problem solving is misunderstood as something that always takes a long time to implement or to have an impact on crime. This is not true. Once you understand a problem well, you can usually start implementing short-term responses very quickly. This gives you time and space to work on longer-term solutions that will help keep crime down.

This guide will take you through a process for identifying, understanding and solving local crime and disorder problems. These techniques have been developed by teams of researchers and police officers in different countries to deal with many different local problems.

This guide has been written by researchers at the UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science, a university department that develops better ways to cut crime and increase security. The Institute was set up using funds given in memory of the broadcaster Jill Dando, who was murdered in 1999. We now have more than fifty researchers working on ways to reduce all types of crime, from terrorism to bike theft.

As well as research and short training courses, we run MSc degrees in Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism, Crime Science, and Crime and Forensic Science.

This guide is an introduction to solving local crime and disorder problems. If you would like to learn more, there are links to further information throughout the guide. You might also like to visit our departmental website at www.ucl.ac.uk/scs

# Why solve problems?

## Solving problems means fewer incidents and fewer crimes.

The police are very busy: they deal with everything from speeding motorists to murder scenes, as well as many issues not related to crime. Add the time taken to investigate crimes and locate offenders, and many officers have little time left to work on preventing crimes.

Problem solving is a term used to describe legal and ethical action that prevents a specific type of crime or disorder in a specific place. Problem solving aims to ensure that fewer crimes occur, and that the problem does not reappear.

Solving problems is important because many years of academic research and practical experience have shown that it helps reduce crime more than traditional police activities can do alone.
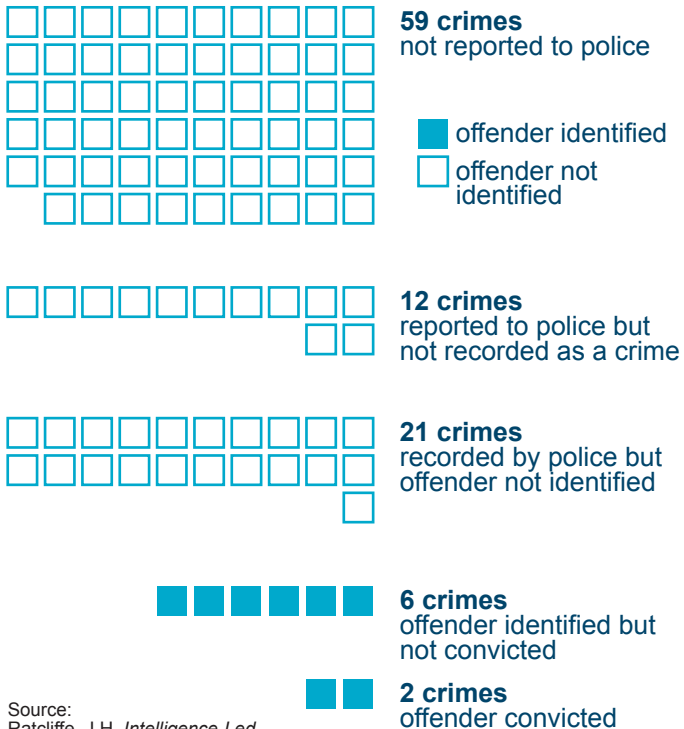
For example, while concentrated patrols in crime hotspots can help reduce crime (until the patrols stop), general 'random' patrolling has little impact on crime because there are simply too many streets to patrol. Investigating crimes after they have happened is

important and valuable, but most crimes are not reported to the police so many offenders remain free.

Problem solving focuses on preventing crime, so that there are fewer incidents to respond to and fewer crimes to investigate. Problem-solving techniques deal with incidents that the police are repeatedly called to deal with, whether they are serious or minor. Problem solving gives police officers a chance to do something about crime.

Investigating crimes often won't help to reduce crime, because most crimes are not reported to police and most offenders are not identified.

**100 burglaries, robberies, thefts and assaults …**

**59 crimes**
not reported to police

■ offender identified
☐ offender not identified

**12 crimes**
reported to police but not recorded as a crime

**21 crimes**
recorded by police but offender not identified

**6 crimes**
offender identified but not convicted

**2 crimes**
offender convicted

Source:
Ratcliffe, J H. *Intelligence-Led Policing*. Cullompton: Willan.

# What's the problem?

## A problem is a set of recurring similar events that harm the community.

Problem-solving techniques deal with *repeating events* and they work best when the problem has been correctly identified and well defined. The first stage of problem solving is to identify if there is actually a problem to be solved. Before going further, ask some basic questions.

**Do the events repeat?**  If the event is unlikely to happen again, there is no problem to solve.

**Are the events similar?**  If the events have little in common, they are unlikely to have a common solution.

**Are the events harmful?**  Sometimes problems will involve harmful events that are not themselves illegal (law enforcement is only one part of police work). To justify a police response, events must be harmful to at least some people.

**Do the events affect the community?**  Not everyone in the community has to be harmed before police take action, but if no one in the community is affected by an issue, it probably shouldn't be a priority.

Sometimes police are asked to tackle 'problem' places such as shopping centres or groups such as homeless people. In these circumstances, ask what *events* are causing concern. For example, if you are told 'we have a problem with youths outside the local shops', ask what events are causing the issue – what are the youths *doing* at the shops that you want to stop happening?

Once you have decided that the issue you are dealing with is a problem that can be solved, there is a four-step process that can help you solve it. This process has been used for many years to solve many different crime and disorder problems in different countries.

The process is known as SARA:

**Scanning**.   In this stage, you define the problem clearly and specifically, so that it can be solved.

**Analysis**.   Next, you understand the problem in detail so that you can choose solutions that are most likely to solve it.

**Response**.   Once you understand the problem, you take action to solve it and identify what others can do as well.

**Assessment**.   After responding, you check to make sure the response solved the problem. If it didn't, you work out why not before trying more responses.

Researchers have studied why problem-solving techniques sometimes don't work; it is often because people miss out stages in the SARA process.

Sometimes people do not define a problem specifically, so the problem becomes too big to solve. In general,

descriptions of crime types that are used to monitor performance are not specific enough to be used to define a problem. For example, it would be very difficult to solve the problem of 'anti-social behaviour' (ASB), even in one neighbourhood, because there are likely to be several different types of ASB occurring, each with a different cause. It would be much easier to solve the problem of 'verbal abuse and littering by street drinkers outside the supermarket on Long Street during the daytime', because that problem is more specific.

Similarly, it would be very difficult for a police neighbourhood team to solve the problem of 'burglary'. The term 'burglary' might mean residential or commercial burglary, or distraction burglary, each of which can be done in many different ways. The problem of 'burglary of ground-floor flats on New Town Road through windows and back doors in the daytime' is very different from 'burglaries of pharmacies in the town centre at night through skylights'. The more specific a problem is, the more likely it is that you will be able to solve it.

### Find out more

J E Eck and W Spelman. 1987. *Problem Solving: problem-oriented policing in Newport News*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice.

J E Eck. 2010. *A Guide to Problem-Solving Success: recognizing the 15 sources of problem-solving failure*. `http://bit.ly/Rlgqii`

D Weisburd, J E Eck, J C Hinkle and C Telep. 2008. *The effects of problem-oriented policing on crime and disorder*. `http://bit.ly/Q95c36`

# Understanding the problem

## If you don't understand a problem, you can only guess at the solutions.

There are lots of reasons not to spend time studying a problem before taking action to solve it. You might feel it is important to act immediately, or that you are too busy to spend time analysing a problem. These feelings are understandable, but if you do not understand a problem then you can only guess at what the solution might be.

Sometimes it will appear obvious what the problem is. However, problem solvers have found that these appearances are often deceiving. For example, if you are asked to deal with 'burglaries of ground-floor flats through rear windows', you might decide to run a publicity campaign to encourage people not to leave windows open. However, if the problem is actually caused by burglars using tools to force windows open, or by faulty window locks, then this response will not work.

Some crimes might happen while you are studying the problem, but if your responses to the problem don't work then the crimes will continue indefinitely. It is often better to spend a little time understanding a problem properly, then taking action that is much more likely to work.

Specialist crime analysts can often work with you to analyse crime and disorder problems, combining their skills with your local knowledge. However, if an analyst is not available then it is still important to understand the problem before taking action.

To start understanding a problem, you should gather enough information so that you can answer six questions about it.

**What events happen?**   Work out exactly what events contribute to the problem.

**Where do they happen?**   Everything happens somewhere, and often lots of crimes happen in a small number of 'hot spots'.

**When do they happen?**   Lots of events happen at a few 'hot times', and responses must happen at the right time if they are going to solve the problem.

**Who is involved?**   Every problem will involve at least one offender and at least one victim. Also think about other people who can help solve a problem, or make it worse.

**Why do the events happen?**   Think about the motives of the people involved in the problem. What do they stand to gain?

**How do the events happen?** Break the event down into steps – each step is an opportunity to solve the problem. Breaking the event into steps means you can identify the steps that provide the best opportunities to solve the problem.

There are many sources of information that might help you answer these questions. As well as police crime records, intelligence reports and incident logs, you might want to use information from other organisations such as the local government or a community group. It may be helpful to ask people in the community to gather information for you, for example by keeping a diary of anti-social behaviour.

Once you know what, where, when, who, why and how, you can bring that information together to work out how to solve the problem. One way to do this is to use the problem-analysis triangle. This is based on the idea that a crime can only happen if a *motivated offender* and a *suitable target* are in the same *place* at the same time. If you take away the offender or the target, or the place where they come together, the crime cannot happen.

For most crimes, changing some elements of the triangle will have more impact than changing others would do. In general, you should focus on the part of the triangle that you and your partners can have the most impact on. This will vary depending on exactly what the problem is.

Some problems will have a few offenders committing offences against lots of targets in lots of places, for

Use the problem-analysis triangle to make sense of the information you have gathered about a problem.



example a gang robbing lots of banks in different neighbourhoods. This sort of problem can usually be solved most easily by dealing with the offender.

For some problems, a few targets will be repeatedly attacked by different offenders, for example robberies of cash-in-transit vans on different streets. In these cases, the most effective approach will usually be to make the target less vulnerable.

Other problems might be focused on events repeatedly happening at the same place, involving different offenders and different targets. For example, there might be many street robberies of different people by different offenders, all in the same alleyway. In these cases, the most effective approach is to focus on the place.

In these examples, one of the three elements – offender, target, place – stands out as being the one that you can successfully focus on to reduce crime. For many problems, the three elements will be more balanced and action might be needed on two or even all three.

When you use the problem-analysis triangle, you are more likely to solve the problem if you are specific about the three elements. Often you will not know everything about the offenders, targets and places. You should try to find out as much as you can, because the more you know the more likely you are to solve the problem.

The diagram on the right shows that it becomes easier to solve a problem if you are more specific about each element. For example, you might not know the names of the offenders, but if you have intelligence that suggests they are members of a particular gang, you might be able to deal with that gang's activities even without knowing who the individual offenders are. As you make each element more specific, you may find that potential responses to the problem become obvious.
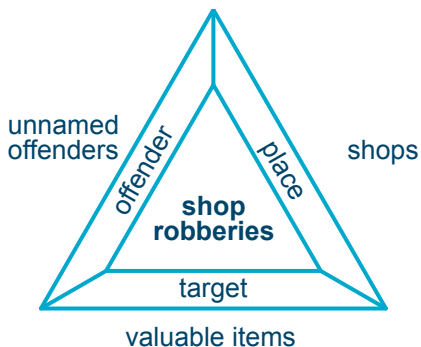
### Find out more

R V Clarke and J Eck. 2003. *Become a Problem Solving Crime Analyst in 55 Small Steps*. `http://www.popcenter.org/library/`

M Felson and R L Boba. 2010. *Crime and Everyday Life*. 4th edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

S L Gwinn, C Bruce, J P Cooper and S Hick (eds.). 2008. *Exploring Crime Analysis: readings on essential skills*. 2nd edition. Overland Park, Kansas: International Association of Crime Analysts.
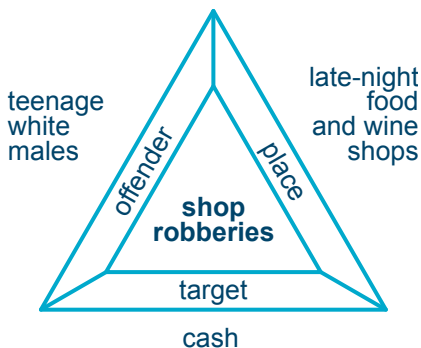
When using the problem-analysis triangle, be as specific as possible: the more specific the problem, the easier the solution is likely to be.

*The offender, target and place in this triangle are not specific enough to help solve the problem.*

unnamed offenders    offender    place    shops

**shop robberies**

target

valuable items

∨ MORE SPECIFIC ∨

*The elements here are more specific, but the problem might still be difficult to solve.*

teenage white males    offender    place    late-night food and wine shops

**shop robberies**

target

cash

∨ MORE SPECIFIC ∨

*The elements in this triangle are specific enough to point to responses that can solve the problem.*

young white males from the 'Star' gang    offender    place    sales counters at late-night food and wine shops

**shop robberies**

target

cash from the shop tills

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# Responding to the problem

## In general, the harder a crime is, the fewer people will do it.

Once you understand a problem then you can take action to solve it. Many crime-prevention techniques work by making crimes harder because, in general, the harder a crime is to commit, the fewer people will do it. For example, there have been far fewer thefts of cars since engine immobilisers became common.

There are lots of ways to make crimes harder. For example, there are many legal tools (such as anti-social behaviour orders) to help control persistent offenders. The table on pages 16 and 17 gives examples of many different ways to prevent crime by focusing on the target and the place as well as the offender.

Some techniques are known *not* to help reduce crime. For example, setting up police-run pawn shops to attract burglars sometimes actually encourages burglary, and mass arrests of prostitutes during 'sweeps' of areas seldom stop prostitution for more than a few hours.

Some traditional policing methods can be effective, but only if they are closely targeted at a specific problem.

General foot or vehicle patrol, or reporting offenders for summons, usually does not reduce crime in the long term, but hotspot patrols can be effective as a short-term response while you prepare long-term responses. If community members or partners suggest that patrols and arrests should be the only responses, ask them what will happen when officers have to go elsewhere to deal with another problem. If patrol is the only response, the problem is likely to come back when the patrols stop.

When choosing a response to a problem, make sure there is a reason to think the response will work. Ask yourself: how will this action solve this problem? Often effective responses are imaginative, and may not have been tried before. However, potential solutions to many common problems have been tried and tested already. The website of the US Center for Problem-Oriented Policing at `www.popcenter.org` has free guides to many problems such as house burglary, robbery of delivery drivers, domestic abuse and bike theft.

### Find out more

R Brown and M S Scott. 2007. *Implementing Responses to Problems*. `http://bit.ly/XbBoEI`

R V Clarke. 1997. *Situational Crime Prevention: successful case studies*. 2nd edition. Monsey, New York: Criminal Justice Press.

Home Office. 2008. *A Guide to Anti-Social Behaviour Tools and Powers*. `http://bit.ly/ScqaMr`

M S Scott. 2004. *The Benefits and Consequences of Police Crackdowns*. `http://bit.ly/T5M1S9`

**Responding to the problem**

25 techniques for solving crime and disorder problems.

| **Increase the effort** offenders must make | *Harden targets*<br><br>Make it more difficult for offenders to get to or remove targets, e.g. anti-robbery screens in shops. | *Control access to facilities*<br>e.g. install alley gates so only residents have access to rear gardens. |
|---|---|---|
| **Increase the risks** of being caught | *Extend guardianship*<br>Encourage community to protect each other, e.g. 'cocoon' watch to prevent repeat burglaries. | *Assist natural surveillance*<br>Make it easy to see offenders, e.g. trim hedges so attackers cannot wait without being seen. |
| **Reduce the rewards** that offenders expect | *Conceal targets*<br><br>Make targets harder to find, e.g. encourage drivers not to leave valuables on display in cars. | *Remove targets*<br><br>Ensure vulnerable targets are not available, e.g. ensure power tools are not left on building sites. |
| **Reduce provocations** for offending | *Reduce frustration and stress*<br>Reduce the anger that can lead to assaults or abuse, e.g. arrange customer-service training. | *Avoid disputes*<br><br>Make sure groups don't conflict, e.g. arrange for pubs to close at different times. |
| **Remove excuses** for offending | *Set rules*<br><br>Make sure rules are clear, e.g. set up a no-drinking zone to prevent drunken behaviour. | *Post instructions*<br><br>Make sure people know the rules, e.g. put up signs clearly explaining what behaviour is unacceptable. |

Adapted from D B Cornish and R V Clarke. 2003. "Opportunities, precipitators and criminal decisions". In *Theory for Practice in Situational Crime Prevention*, edited by M J Smith and D B Cornish. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press. http://bit.ly/Q1JSXc

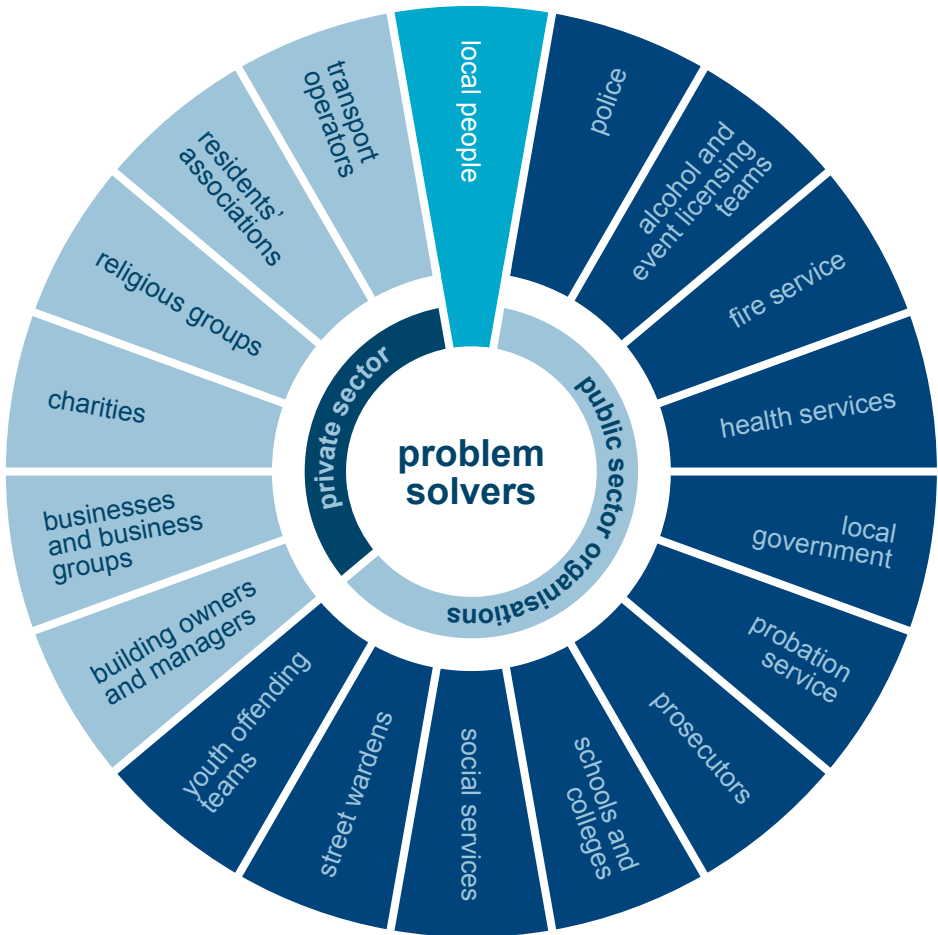| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Screen exits* | *Deflect offenders* | *Control tools and weapons* |
| e.g. electronic alarms at shop exits and pre-bail warrant checks. | Move offenders away from vulnerable targets and places, e.g. benches designed against sleeping. | e.g. ask shops not to sell flour or eggs to teenagers during Halloween. |
| *Reduce anonymity* | *Utilize place managers* | *Strengthen formal surveillance* |
| Make it easy to identify offenders, e.g. make school uniforms compulsory. | Find out what the community knows, e.g. start a Shop Watch scheme to identify potential shoplifters. | Monitor offenders or places, e.g. arrange probation visits more often or install CCTV on a street. |
| *Identify property* | *Disrupt markets* | *Deny benefits* |
| Make stolen goods easy to identify, e.g. bright orange school projectors can't easily be sold on. | Make it difficult to benefit from crime, e.g. ask pawn shops to give transaction records to police. | e.g. always have graffiti cleaned immediately so offenders know it will not be seen by others. |
| *Reduce emotional arousal* | *Neutralise peer pressure* | *Discourage imitation* |
| Prevent emotional provocations for offending, e.g. limit activities of convicted sex offenders. | Promote positive influences, e.g. 'friends don't let friends drink and drive'. | Prevent offenders imitating others, e.g. encourage newspapers not to publish details of offence methods. |
| *Alert conscience* | *Assist compliance* | *Control drugs and alcohol* |
| Explain consequences, e.g. ask children to speak to drivers caught speeding near schools. | Make legal behaviour easy, e.g. provide ticket machines to prevent fare evasion. | e.g. by setting licence conditions or enforcing no-drinking zones. |

# Working with others

## Many problems can only be solved with help from partner organisations.

The police are responsible for reducing crime, but in many cases other organisations will be more able to solve a particular problem. For example, a response to street prostitution is to block off one end of each affected street, turning through streets into dead ends. The police cannot do this, but local government organisations can. The better you understand a problem, the easier it will be to identify what partners and the public can do.

Working with others is key to problem solving: most responses will be more effective if they involve partner organisations, and many problems can only be solved by others. In these cases, the role of the police is to co-ordinate the SARA process.

Sometimes, organisations may be unable to help solve a problem. Occasionally, they may be unwilling to solve a problem because they profit from it. Convincing an organisation to help should start with an educational programme or a straightforward request. If this does not work, confrontational requests may be necessary. In rare cases, you may want to consider charging for

problem solvers

private sector
- building owners and managers
- businesses and business groups
- charities
- religious groups
- residents' associations
- transport operators

local people

public sector organisations
- police
- alcohol and event licensing teams
- fire service
- health services
- local government
- probation service
- prosecutors
- schools and colleges
- social services
- street wardens
- youth offending teams

or withdrawing some police services, publicising the organisation's lack of help or taking legal action.

## Find out more

S Chainey. 2012. *Information Sharing for Community Safety*. http://bit.ly/VrQO8d

H Goldstein. 1997. *The Pattern of Emerging Tactics for Shifting the Ownership of Prevention Strategies*. http://bit.ly/TBlJaQ

M S Scott and H Goldstein. 2005. *Shifting and Sharing Responsibility for Public Safety Problems*. http://bit.ly/VLMgnF

**Working with others**

# Problem solved?

## A problem is solved when crime goes down.

The police service measures success in many different ways, but problem solving can only be called successful when the events that make up the problem happen less often, or become less harmful. Measures of police activity, such as the number of arrests made, are no substitute for reducing the level of harm that the community is suffering.

The number of crimes that happen, for example, each month, varies naturally in several ways. There might be more of some types of crime in the winter, or in months with five weekends, or when a particular event is happening. This makes it difficult to know if a reduction in the number of crimes after you respond to a problem is due to the response or would have happened anyway.

These issues can often be dealt with by specialist crime analysts, whom you should ask for help if you are unsure about the results of your responses. If crime goes down after you act, it can be tempting to assume that the change is due to your actions. However, if something else caused the reduction in crime, it is likely

the problem will come back and you will have to take further action.

Whether the response worked or not, you should try to work out why. This will either help you to solve similar problems in the future, or work out what more you can do to solve the current problem. Look back at your analysis and your plans for responding to the problem. Ask whether each component of the response worked as expected, and if it did not work then ask yourself why.

Finally, keep monitoring the problem even if your response appears to have worked. If the problem is solved it should not return, even after the response finishes. If the problem comes back, go through the SARA process again until the problem is solved permanently.

### Find out more

J E Eck. 2002. *Assessing Responses to Problems: An Introductory Guide for Police Problem-Solvers*. http://bit.ly/VLOBPe

## What next?
If you want to understand the SARA problem-solving process in more detail, you might like to read *Become A Problem Solving Crime Analyst in 55 small steps* by Ronald Clarke and John Eck, available online in several languages at http://www.popcenter.org/library/

**Problem solved?**

The UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science is the first institute in the world devoted to studying crime science. Our research concentrates on new ways to cut crime and increase security, drawing upon UCL's vast experience in related disciplines, including architecture, economics, engineering, geography, medicine, psychology, statistics and town planning. The JDI brings together 30 top departments and research groups from across UCL that are interested in the field of security and crime. The JDI promotes multidisciplinary research in crime and security and also runs conferences, events, training and short courses in these fields. We work with partners and clients in academia, industry, commerce and government.

35 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9EZ
**www.ucl.ac.uk/jdi**