Many reports on major national initiatives like the Crime Reduction Programme acknowledge ‘implementation failure’. Common explanations are ‘poor project-management skills’, or ‘short-term funding regimes’. Important here are, Herodotus’ excellent Soapbox article (Good Practice – What’s It all about? Network News, Winter 2005) also blamed ‘dumbing down’.

Higher echelons in crime prevention often believe ‘the only information you can hope to get into practitioners’ heads is a slogan or two, if lucky.’ I totally disagree. Crime prevention’s basic idea is simple (cutting the cause cuts the risk), but its practice is complex. Reliable, valid data must be collected, patterns analysed, evidence of what works assessed, selected and adapted (cookbook copying won’t work); ideas implemented; people mobilised; and evaluation, adjustment and learning done and shared. The complexity is numerical, too. One excellent project on underage drinking had 13 different interventions. Until we winkled it out of the team in a 3-hour interview they didn’t appreciate their own achievement... nor did anyone else.

Here’s my main point: Given this complexity, it’s futile dumming down community safety knowledge into slogans and rapid-read case studies to aid communication, if these can’t inspire actions that are sophisticated enough to do good and avoid harm. Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety is spot on – our mereal frameworks must reflect the complexity of the problems the they are intended to tackle.

S – Scanning
A – Analysis
R – Response
A – Assessment

SARA and the crime triangle are instant introductions to the problem-oriented approach to prevention. But once practitioners have grasped the basics they rapidly find little depth to guide action further, nor do they inspire the creativity vital to take community safety to new contexts and keep up with social change and adaptive criminals. SARAs ‘Response’ confuses several distinct activities. The crime triangle is incomplete and under-represents the offender side. Fragmentary part-models of causes abound. Each individual model (e.g. Routine Activities Theory, RAT) is simple – but they are all jumbled together leaving each practitioner to figure out how to combine them and cope with gaps, overlaps and competing explanations (e.g. how does RAT relate to rational Offender? Where does self-control fit? The TV programme Scrapheap Challenge comes to mind). Plans to improve performance by acquiring and consolidating crime prevention and community safety knowledge through the IPAK process (www.crimereduction.gov.uk/ipak1.htm), or setting national standards for partnership working are fine, but won’t succeed without a decent framework and language to describe causes and interventions. This is basic good practice in knowledge management.

Why the crime to oversimplify?

Misunderstanding of practice and disdain for detail – senior policy makers prefer high-level abstractions such as Systematic Reviews, delivering messages like ‘Street lighting is cost-effective at reducing crime and fear’. Fine for policy, but shift perspective to the street to be lit, when, why (including whom?), and it’s not remotely informative enough. Rapid job turnover among policymakers also discourages understanding of complexity.

Top-down stops too soon – top-down initiatives for improving community safety performance are important, but their designers somehow always leave their grand edifice miraculously suspended without a ground floor, let alone foundations. To fill the gap they rely on imperfect toolkits and minimalist peer-to-peer sharing of good practice, namely practitioners simply visiting successful projects; but the originators may have left, lack the time to talk, or have difficulty explaining what was done in clear, transferable terms that replicate the principles and tradeoffs.


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**Problem Space:**

*a Map of Symptoms and of Crime Prevention Objectives*

- Place
- Time
- Victim
- Crime type
- Modus operandi
- Offender
crime target

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**Diagnosis space:**

*The Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity*

- Crime prevention
- Crime predictors
- Crime prevention

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**Intervention in cause**

- Disruption of Conjunction of Criminal Opportunity
- Decreased risk of crime events