

The Signal Crimes Perspective 60 SECOND BRIEFING

WHAT'S THE KEY IDEA?

The key idea of the Signal Crimes Perspective (SCP) is that some criminal and disorderly incidents function as warning signals to people about the distribution of risks to their security in everyday life. Some crimes and disorderly behaviours are thus held to matter more than others in shaping the public's collective risk perceptions.

Signal Crime

A Signal Crime is any criminal incident that causes change in the public's behaviour and/or beliefs about their security.

Signal Disorder

A Signal Disorder is an act that breaches situated conventions of social order and signifies the presence of other risks. They can be social or physical in nature.

The following examples show how these concepts can be employed for analytic purposes. Someone may say that they 'saw a mugging' (expression), that this caused them to 'perceive a risk to their safety' (content) and as a consequence they 'avoid that location' (effect). Equally, someone may say that 'the area is badly lit. It's full of rubbish, covered in graffiti and there's suspicious looking people hanging about' (expression), that this caused them to 'feel very anxious. You're never sure who is round the corner or what they might do' (content) and as a consequence they 'don't go there anymore unless I really have to' (effect). In order for a signal to be classed as being present, then an expression content and effect must be identified. If any of these are missing then the incident is not a signal, and is functioning as 'background noise'.

HOW DOES IT DIFFER?

Unlike previous approaches that have concentrated upon explaining fear of crime, the SCP research has found there to be a variety of risks and effects attached by members of the public to problems of crime and disorder. The effects can be grouped together in terms of whether they change how people think, feel or behave. Some of the key combinations of expressions, contents and effects are illustrated overleaf.

WHAT MAKES A SIGNAL?

All signals are made up of three parts:

Expression

The expression is the incident that is the focus of a member of the public's concerns. For example, if someone refers to a mugging or vandalism of a bus shelter, then this is the expression.

Content

The content refers to the meaning that the expression has for the person. In respect of signal crimes and signal disorders, the content is a sense of being 'at risk' in some way that is signified by the presence of the crime or disorder referenced in the expression.

Effect

The effect is the change that is caused by the expression and its content. Signals cause changes in how people think, how they feel and/or how they behave.

EXPRESSION

Crime
Social Disorder
Physical Disorder

CONTENT

Self
Significant Other
Personal Property
Neighborhood Safety
Neighborhood Property
Social Order

EFFECT

Fear
Worry / Anxiety
Anger
Diffuse Concern

Think area degenerating
Think about own behaviour
Labelling groups and people
Heightened Awareness

Change behaviour
Direct action
Join community control group
Moral entrepreneurship
Try and move out of area

CONTROL SIGNALS

The signal perspective can also be used to understand how people view actions taken by the police, partners and communities themselves.

A control signal relates to the acts of social control by formal agencies and communities that influence perceptions of security and insecurity in an area. They can be either positive or negative in terms of their effects upon people.

WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Based upon extensive and detailed research in a number of different sites across England, a number of key findings have started to emerge, including:

1. The public's sense of being 'at risk' of crime is not determined solely by the 'volume' of offending in an area, but also the 'impact' that single incidents have upon their collective risk perceptions.
2. Levels of concern about safety are profoundly shaped by the presence of incivilities and disorder in an area. Indeed, the research suggests that in some areas, levels of disorder are more influential than crime in shaping perceived risk.
3. Perceptions of risk vary considerably by area, and different signal crimes and signal disorders function as causes of insecurity in different locations.
4. Interventions by police, partners and communities can shape perceptions of security. In particular, some standard operating practices employed by the police can, rather than reassuring the public, actually generate greater fear.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

A 'perspective' is 'a way of seeing', and the Signal Crimes Perspective provides an innovative way of interpreting how the public sees and understands problems of crime and disorder. It suggests a potential for targeting police resources to those incidents that matter most to the public in a particular neighbourhood.

PARTNERSHIPS:



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