

Displacement theory

and crime prevention



Justice

Displacement theory argues that removing the opportunity for crime or seeking to prevent a crime by changing the situation in which it occurs does not actually prevent crime but merely moves it around.



There are five main ways in which Displacement theory suggests crime is moved around:

1. Crime can be moved from one location to another (geographical displacement)
2. Crime can be moved from one time to another (temporal displacement)
3. Crime can be directed away from one target to another (target displacement)
4. One method of committing crime can be substituted for another (tactical displacement)
5. One kind of crime can be substituted for another (crime type displacement).

(Felson and Clarke, 1998)

There has been a great deal of discussion about the nature and extent of crime displacement and whilst there are examples of apparent displacement, there are many studies which report that displacement does not occur at all, or only to a limited extent. A discussion paper on the perceptions and reality of displacement by Stephen Town (2001) concludes that “crime prevention initiatives can produce very substantial net gains, and commonly very little or no displacement is found. Reducing the local ‘pot of opportunity’ reduces crime”. Town comes to this conclusion following a comparison of extensive displacement research including studies conducted by Hesseling, which was the first major break-through on crime displacement.

In 1994 the Ministry of Justice in Holland tasked Professor Rene B.P. Hesseling with identifying and systematically analysing all available literature on crime prevention measures in which researchers had specifically looked for evidence of displacement. This huge task took fourteen months and involved reviewing fifty-five published articles, including those of Gabor (1990) and Eck (1993). Twenty of the studies were British, 16 were from the United States, 10 were from Holland and the remaining nine came from five different countries, all from the developed world. Twenty-two of the studies found no evidence of displacement, and six found evidence that crime prevention measures had produced a beneficial effect in adjacent areas – known as diffusion of benefits. Thirty-three studies found some form of displacement, mostly quite limited, and no study found complete displacement of crime.

Although the findings were overwhelmingly positive, there was, not surprisingly, variation between different crimes. Drug dealing, for example, had been found to be susceptible to displacement (Rengert 1990, Sherman 1990, Caulkins 1992, Eck 1993), which echoed the views of Barr and Pease (1990) on perpetrator displacement. However, the commonly asserted belief that the behaviour of drug addicts is fixed and impervious to logic or a change in opportunity was not confirmed. Cromwell, Olson, Avary and Marks (1991) interviewed thirty active, drug-addicted burglars and concluded “prevention does not always lead to displacement”.

Hesseling’s review of research was particularly positive in relation to residential burglary, with no evidence of displacement being discovered (Spickenheuer 1983, Forrester, Chatterton and Pease 1988, Schneider 1988, Lindsey and McGillis 1988, Pease 1991).

Displacement needs to be considered in crime reduction work, but there are strong theoretical reasons for believing it is far from inevitable. Even when it can be shown to occur, it is often not complete displacement, giving important net reductions in crime.

Further information

For more information on crime prevention theories and methodologies, please visit www.crimeprevention.nsw.gov.au