Forty-years of Problem-oriented Policing: A Review of Progress in England and Wales

Abstract

This article analyses and critically reflects on the position of problem-oriented policing within England and Wales. Problem-oriented policing is a framework for improving police effectiveness. Its adoption has consistently been shown to be associated with sizable reductions in a wide range of crimes and public safety issues. However, many studies also demonstrate that problem-oriented policing is difficult to embed and sustain within police organisations. This article draws on the experiences and perspectives of 85 informed stakeholders, to critically examine and reflect on the position and practice of problem-oriented policing forty-years after its original formulation by Herman Goldstein in 1979. We argue that despite evidence of renewed interest in implementing the approach, problem-oriented policing is not habitually conducted within police organisations. Where conducted at all, the practice of problem-oriented policing lacks discipline, the processes tend not to be faithfully followed, and there are weaknesses at all stages of the process. Implications of the findings for future research and police practice are discussed.

Introduction

The latter part of the twentieth century saw the introduction of a plethora of novel, proactive policing approaches, which have continued to be important to this day. These have included: intelligence-led policing (Ratcliffe, 2008); CompStat (Silverman, 2006); hot-spot policing (Weisburd & Braga, 2006), evidence-based policing (Sherman, 1998), reassurance policing (Millie & Herrington, 2005), and predictive policing (Meijer & Wessels, 2019). This article analyses and critically reflects on the state-of-the-art of one such influential reform movement in England and Wales, 'problem-oriented policing', (often referred to as 'problem-solving' or 'POP') forty-years after its original formulation by Herman Goldstein in 1979. Goldstein developed the problem-oriented approach following criticism of the then dominant mode of police practice whereby incidents were dealt with on a case-by-case basis using 'standard' or 'reactive' police tactics (for example, police patrol, rapid response to calls for service, and enforcement of the criminal law) (Goldstein, 1979; 1990). Goldstein drew attention to research evidence that showed that such incident-driven policing does little to prevent incidents from recurring and as such fails to reduce demand on the police service or provide a good service to

1

the community (Goldstein, 1979; 1990). Goldstein called for a shift in the direction of police work. Rather than responding to incidents on a case-by-case basis, problem-oriented policing involves a structured process of 'identifying … problems in more precise terms, researching each problem, documenting the nature of the current police response, assessing its adequacy and the adequacy of existing authority and resources, engaging in a broad exploration of alternatives to present responses, weighing the merits of these alternatives, and choosing among them' (Goldstein, 1979: 236). Problem-oriented projects tend to use the 'SARA' (scanning, analysis, response, assessment) model to identify problems, to analyse the conditions that lead to the generation of that problem, to develop a tailored response to target those conditions, and to evaluate or assess their outcomes (Eck and Spelman, 1987).

Aims and contribution of this article

In the forty years since its original formulation, many police forces across the world have experimented with problem-oriented policing (see for example 'redacted', 1996; Scott, 2000; 'redacted', 2006). Many studies have shown problem-oriented policing to be an effective way of addressing a wide range of security and safety issues (e.g. Cordner, 1986; Eck and Spelman, 1987; Scott, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2001; Clarke and Goldstein, 2002; Scott and Clarke, 2020). Systematic reviews have demonstrated the positive impact of problem-oriented policing (Weisburd et al, 2008; 2010; Hinkle et al. 2020). Yet despite extensive evidence to support the effectiveness of problem-oriented policing, research also identifies recurrent challenges both in the implementation and practice of problem-oriented policing ('redacted', 1998; 'redacted', 2006; 'redacted', 2000; Scott, 2000; 2006).

Drawing on the experiences and perspectives of those doing problem-oriented policing, this article examines three themes: (1) the longevity (or otherwise) of problem-oriented policing with police forces in England and Wales; (2) the organisational position of problem-oriented policing; and (3) the nature of problem-oriented policing that is being practiced. These themes are considered important because if the organisational gains that problem-oriented policing offers are to be made, there needs to be good understanding of how it is delivered in practice. Whilst studies and reviews have examined the implementation of problem-oriented policing, most are rather dated having been conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. 'redacted', 2000; 'redacted', 1998; 'redacted', 2006). Since their publication there have been very many changes in the practice and governance of policing in England and Wales which may have had

2

implications for how problem-oriented policing operates. For example, the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, introduced a statutory duty for the police to work in partnership to prevent crime ('redacted', 2006). The development of intelligence-led policing and the introduction of the National Intelligence Model, called for the police to use intelligence to aid the allocation of resources and co-ordinate activity (Ratcliffe, 2008). 'Neighbourhood policing,' a form of community policing with a strong emphasis on problem-orientation, was introduced nationally from 2005 (Higgins, 2018; Quinton and Morris, 2008). Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were introduced to oversee policing in 2012 (Lister, 2013; Lister and Rowe, 2014). More broadly, the economic context has shifted significantly and police services in England and Wales have been affected by reductions to budgets post-2010 (Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC), 2018; Higgins, 2018; HMIC, 2012 and 2017). Before setting out the results of our analysis, we consider the development of problem-oriented policing and its implementation in the UK and the analytical approach that underpins our analysis. As the next section notes, earlier studies noted major difficulties in mainstreaming problem-oriented policing. Have developments in the ensuing years opened the way to implementation success?

Problem-oriented policing in England and Wales

There is a long history of implementing problem-oriented policing in the UK. Police services started implementing the approach soon after its original conceptualisation in 1979 (see for example, 'redacted', 1996; 'redacted', 1998). Surrey Police and the Metropolitan Police Service both introduced problem-oriented policing in 1982, Northumbria in 1991, Thames Valley in 1992 and West Yorkshire in 1994 ('redacted', 1996). Research which examined these early initiatives revealed some broad themes: most attempts involved ostensibly 'ring-fenced' teams of officers operating in a broadly top-down managerial environment; they were relatively small-scale and involved only a small number of dedicated officers; and they recorded mixed successes in delivering the approach ('redacted', 1996). Demonstration projects, supported by the Home Office Police Research Group, were established in 1995 in Cleveland, Leicestershire and Merseyside ('redacted', 1996; 'redacted', 1998). The conclusion of research into the outputs and outcomes of these demonstration projects was that implementing a problem-oriented approach is much more difficult than expected and that the change in processes required to implement problem-oriented policing will take time ('redacted', 1998). The research drew attention to the importance of: providing reliable incident data in a form which is open to systematic interrogation; whole force commitment (especially from senior officers

3

who must be seen fully to embrace the approach); developing appropriate rewards and systems of accountability to support the delivery of problem-oriented policing; establishing training; and providing ways to learn lessons and disseminate them to improve delivery ('redacted', 1998).

Despite early implementation challenges, , several influential reports from the police inspectorate of England and Wales (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) which independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire & rescue services)[1] and the Audit Commission [2] highlighted the approach, following the promise revealed by the approach, and sought to generate interest within police organisations (HMIC, 1998; Audit Commission, 1999; HMIC, 2000). Based on the HMIC 2000 review 'Calling Time on Crime', a comprehensive review of the practice of problem-oriented policing in England and Wales was published (redacted, 2000). 'Redacted' (2000) found that that despite almost universal espousal of the approach by police services, the delivery of high quality problem-solving was exceptional and that whilst promising examples of small area crime and disorder problem-solving could be found in most forces, dependable outcome evaluations were rare . More recently, national policing policies have emphasised the application of crime prevention and problem-solving techniques as a strategic priority for police services. For example, problem-solving is embedded in the 'National Crime Prevention Strategy for Policing (2015)', the 'Home Office Modern Crime Prevention Strategy' (2016)[3] and the 'National Policing Vision 2025 (2016)[4]. Both of these emphasise the importance of preventing crime (rather than simply reacting to crime), the use of data and technology, and the delivery of problem-solving in partnership to achieve this. The development of these crime prevention strategies can themselves be understood in terms of the publication of the findings of the HMIC report 'Core Business' in 2016. This report emphasised that whilst preventing crime should be seen a primary purpose of police services, in practice it was not and called for a national strategy and operating procedures to facilitate this (HMIC, 2016). Problem-oriented policing then has had longevity. Likely this is because of its cogent business case: when used

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[1] See https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/ (24/08/2021)
[2] https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20150406163105/http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/about-us/ (24/08/2021)
[3]
https://www.npcc.police.uk/documents/crime/2016/Final%20A4%20National%20Policing%20Crime%20Prevention%20Strategy.pdf (24/08/2021)
[4] https://www.npcc.police.uk/documents/policing%20vision.pdf (24/08/2021)

correctly the evidence shows it delivers sustainable reductions in crime and disorder; it provides an efficient policing approach as all efforts are focused on solving a specified problem; it supplies a method to reduce harm and calls for service to the police (if the most significant reoccurring problems are identified and systematically tackled); it increases public satisfaction and confidence as it engages with those involved in the problem and delivers better outcomes; it is associated with positive staff performance and wellbeing (Sytsma & Piza, 2018); and it provides a process to tackle any re-occurring problem.

Even a partial and poorly applied problem-solving approach may be more beneficial than its complete absence. However, taken together the picture is clear: despite much optimism for and interest in problem-oriented policing, history has shown that its full introduction has been far from straightforward ('redacted', 2000; Scott, 2000; Cordner and Biebel, 2005; 'redacted', 2012; Goldstein, 2018). Bursts of enthusiasm that have led forces to embrace problem-oriented policing and attempt to embed it have been followed by waning interest and reversion to traditional methods of policing. Practice has been characterised as a series of isolated projects rather than diffused through entire organisations ('redacted', 2004). There have been problems at all stages of the SARA process. For example, analysis is often basic and can be overly reliant on police data, responses tend to emphasise traditional enforcement, and assessment is often underdeveloped and sometimes missed out altogether (e.g. Scott, 2000; 'redacted'; 'redacted', 2006; Goldstein, 2018). These points are returned to as we discuss the findings of this study.

Research design and methodology

The findings reported here are taken from a larger study on the extent, nature and patterns of problem-oriented policing in England and Wales [reference to be added following de-anonymisation]. This article draws specifically on semi-structured interviews with police officers and staff from eight of the 43 geographical police forces in England and Wales. The eight forces were purposefully selected to take part in this study to ensure representation of forces with different histories of problem-oriented policing (i.e. some with a longstanding commitment to the approach and some with little prior involvement) and variation in the nature and size of police force areas in England and Wales (i.e. urban/rural and metropolitan/non-

metropolitan forces). Broad characteristics of the eight police services are set out in the table below[5].

Table one: characteristics of sampled police services

Police service	Size[6]	Geographical region England and Wales	Community	Interviews	HMICFRS effectiveness score[7]
1	Small	North	Rural	11-20	1-2
2	Large	North	Urban	6-10	3
3	Medium	North	Mixed	6-10	1-2
4	Medium	Midlands	Urban	11-20	1-2
5	Small	Midlands	Mixed	6-10	3
6	Large	South	Urban	6-10	3
7	Small	South	Rural	6-10	1-2
8	Small	Wales	Rural	11-20	3

The objective of these interviews was to elicit the experiences and perspectives of an informed group of problem-solving practitioners in England and Wales. Eight forces were contacted by the research team and once agreement to participate had been secured, a nominated point of contact provided the research team with a list of names of individuals who had knowledge of and experience in applying problem-solving (see for example, USAID, 1996). Such 'key informant' interviewing is useful for generating detailed information about a given topic and provide insights that would not be generated by interviewing a more general sample (USAID, 1996).

Across the eight police forces purposefully selected to partake in interviews, we received the names of 118 candidate interviewees. All were contacted by the research team and 85 (72%) consented to be interviewed. Interviews took place either face-to-face on police premises or were conducted via telephone, and, with the agreement of the interviewee, were recorded. Participants were able to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions of problem-solving but, by virtue of their expertise, also reflect more broadly on the position of problem-oriented policing within their organisation. Participants were asked to: describe their role; describe their exposure to and involvement in problem-oriented policing; explain how long they had been

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[5] In order to protect the anonymity of the police service and participant, we include broad brush information only

[6] Size: small, medium, large (strengths <2000; 2000-3000, >3000)

[7] See https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/peel-assessments/how-we-inspect/2021-22-peel-assessment/ (27/08/2021)

involved in problem-solving; describe the nature of the training they had had; to discuss examples of problem-solving they have been involved in and the challenges they had encountered; to consider attitudes towards problem-solving particularly its relevance to contemporary policing; to discuss how problem-solving was practiced, promoted and valued (or not) in their force; to set out perceived advantages and disadvantages of the approach and what the approach had delivered to policing; to explain the nature of organisational support for problem-solving in their police service; to consider the role of non-police organisations in problem solving; to explain the degree of commitment to embedding the approach and how this varies within and between force; and to identify what they saw as the main barriers to the diffusion of problem-solving and how these might be overcome.

All interviews were transcribed. The following iterative thematic approach was used to identify the major themes in the interview data: (1) a period of familiarisation which involved two authors independently reading and re-reading all interview transcripts and noting down initial ideas on emerging themes; (2) generating initial codes based on the preliminary set of themes; (3) systematically coding the interview data based on these initial codes and collating data relevant to them; (4) searching for broader themes by collating codes into higher-order topics, and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme; (5) reviewing themes and mapping them across the data sets; (6) ongoing refinement of themes into an overarching narrative or story; and (7) selecting examples and quotations that illustrated the final themes. The codes and themes developed in this study were mainly informed by the literature on problem-oriented policing and the research aims. In conducting the analysis consideration was given to differences between police services – especially in terms of the degree of organisational commitment to problem-solving. However, with regard to the general aims of the article – to examine the longevity (or otherwise) of problem-oriented policing; its organisational position, and the nature of problem-oriented policing that is being practiced – few differences were evident. Hence, the discussion can be considered to cross-cut sampled police organisations.

Results

The position of problem-oriented policing in England and Wales in 2019

Across all police forces included in this study, interview participants talked of a resurgence of interest in police problem-solving. Participants attributed this apparent resurgence in part to a broader national reinvigoration of neighbourhood policing, within which problem-solving is often seen as a core responsibility. As one participant put it: '…certainly the last eighteen months we've really tried to bring back problem-solving … through neighbourhood policing and partnership working' [F12: Respondent 1044]. This reinvigoration can be understood in terms of a demise of neighbourhood policing post-2010 because of sustained reductions in police spending (see for example, Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC), 2018; Higgins, 2018; HMIC, 2012 and 2017). In particular, funding cuts led to a 15% decrease in the number of police officers in England and Wales and a 40% reduction in the number of community support officers, who were hitherto ring-fenced for neighbourhood policing and as such more commonly practiced problem-solving (Home Office, 2020). Participants discussed how this period of austerity led to the erosion and fragmentation of neighbourhood policing teams and with it a shift towards a more reactive (response) model of policing with minimal community engagement or proactive problem-solving: '(when) the financial crunch hit us we stopped neighbourhood policing and response and a lot of the forces then combined them into like a hybrid model; however, this meant that the community aspect got lost because what tended to happen was they would chase demand' [F12: Respondent 1044].' In turn, participants converged on the opinion that the prevailing response model of policing, in light of depleted resources as a consequence of austerity, was unable to effectively deal with current levels of police demand. As one participant put it: 'The operating model was completely screwed, and [the police service] had divested all neighbourhood policing. It was just a big reactive bubble of inefficiency and ineffectiveness' [F13: Respondent 2051].

In trying to further explain the apparent resurgence of interest in problem-oriented policing, several participants cited the activities and emphases of influential groups and organisations who, as set out earlier, have been driving an organisational emphasis on crime prevention. Notable was the growing emphasis on neighbourhood policing in the inspection process of HMICFRS (HMIC, 2016) within which problem-solving is a key feature. This trickle-down effect from national bodies to local police priorities is illustrated in the following quote:

> I think a lot of it [renewed interest in problem-solving] has come from a drive from National Police Chiefs' Council. You know, they've bought into problem-oriented policing massively now, and I think, because of that, then that's being passed down

through the various forces, through the chief constables and the Commissioners' Offices and what have you. I think that's probably where the drive has come from over the past couple of years. [F16: Respondent 1002]

Despite an apparent resurgence of interest in and enthusiasm for problem-oriented policing, it was also clear from our interviews that the approach was not widely practiced across all areas of police business. Indeed, where present, participants suggested that problem-solving was largely confined to neighbourhood policing teams: 'As far as I know, I don't think there are any [problem-solving] plans that are owned outside of neighbourhoods' [F13: Respondent 1050]. Participants cited several reasons for this compartmentalisation. First, neighbourhood policing teams were organisationally expected to problem-solve whereas other teams were not. As one neighbourhood police officer remarked: 'I think it will be more concentrated in the neighbourhoods because that's our role, to identify problems… and then problem-solving, whilst the CID [Criminal Investigation Department] are generally involved in investigations and serious crime' [F17: Respondent 1011]. Second, and relatedly, participants drew attention to how neighbourhood officers tended to have more time to devote to longer-term problem-solving as opposed to, say, response teams because they did not (generally) have to respond to emergencies:

> [Problem-solving is] more prominent in neighbourhood policing because inevitably response is going in and they're dealing in emergencies, they're dealing with the immediacy of stuff. Traditionally, and still the case, neighbourhood officers have more time ... they've got more time to work on it longer-term. They're not having to dash off to the next blue lights or they're not having to dash off to the next 999 as much. That's why it ends up sitting there because problem-solving as you know, it's slow time work often. It's over a few weeks or months that you actually implement a [problem-solving] plan. [F17: Respondent 1019]

Lastly, by definition, community officers tended to be closer to communities and were hence seen as being better able to identify, or be made aware, of community-related issues that are appropriate for a problem-solving approach:

> I would say neighbourhoods believe in it [problem-solving] because they get the opportunity to do it. It's kind of hardwired into the role profile. They tend to understand

9

it a little bit better, and because they're working with communities day in, day out, they understand that going time and time again is just not going to work and you have to think a little bit differently. [F18: Respondent 1020]

Participants drew attention to how the language and practice of problem-oriented policing had become very strongly linked to community policing and other parts of the organisation struggled to see its relevance: 'I don't think that detectives necessarily see problem-solving as part of their role. … problem-solving still is linked culturally in peoples' minds with neighbourhood policing rather than with all aspects of policing' [F13: Respondent 1056]. Although participants overwhelmingly agreed that problem-solving is more readily observed in neighbourhood policing teams, there was also widespread acknowledgement that the approach should not and need not be limited to this area of policing. Indeed, the utility of problem-solving across a broad spectrum of police business was emphasised. As one participant remarked: 'It's not just a responsibility of the neighbourhoods to do problem-solving… everyone deals with a crime and disorder issue that needs to be problem-solved or managed. So, I don't think it's the responsibility of one group' [F17: Respondent 1011].

Participants suggested that problem-solving is applicable to a wide range of crime types including those more serious offences that typically fall outside of the remit of neighbourhood policing. As one interviewee suggested: 'You can apply problem-solving techniques to absolutely anything [….] counterterrorism, yeah, organised crime, drug trafficking, whatever it is, I think you could work through that. Some problems are obviously bigger than others, but using the methods and the same approach' [F17: Respondent 1012]. Police personnel outside of community teams were also thought to have much to contribute to problem-solving. As one told us: 'It's almost a social scientist role, the detective, isn't it? You go there and you look at what you've got, and then you hypothesise about what happened and then try and build the evidence to support your hypothesis. So, I think they make excellent problem solvers. [F17: Respondent 1013]. Participants also drew attention to how many parts of the organisation would have much to benefit from problem-solving. As one participant put it: "Response officers have got to realise that they've got to be part of it, if it's to save them as well, isn't it? They get as frustrated as we do with demand calls to them, you know?" [F16: Respondent 1010].

Despite a generally shared view that problem-solving is portable to wide-ranging areas of police business, achieving this aim was identified by many participants as merely an aspiration. Due to the cultural and organisational changes needed to embed the approach, it was also seen as a significant challenge, even in police forces with a long history of problem-solving. For this participant:

> Do we have somebody who's leading on problem-solving that really believes that problem-solving is the way forward, yes, definitely. However, making that a reality, making it day to day business, changing the culture of the organisation, giving people the time to understand and find those solutions and deliver those solutions, that's where the challenges lie. There's a will but the reality of what we're dealing with and the day-to-day basis just make it very difficult to deliver that will. [F17: Respondent 1017]

The practice of problem-solving

Whilst our findings suggest that problem-oriented policing in England and Wales in 2019 is largely concentrated in neighbourhood policing teams, it is not the case that it is practiced in a straight-forward manner. In what follows we consider themes that emerged from our interviews related how problem-solving was implemented in practice within neighbourhood policing teams.

Whilst the language of SARA, as a means of structuring problem-solving, was common in participants' accounts, several problems in its application were evident. SARA was sometimes presented by interview participants as 'intuitive' and 'obvious' and what officers are doing anyway rather than a process to be logically followed. As one explained: 'it's nothing that people don't do intuitively anyway, and it's installing that from the start and making that an expectation of the job' [F12: Respondent 1044]. Relatedly, whilst participants were aware of and spoke about the model, they also noted that that it was not always followed faithfully or consistently. A 'lack of discipline' was often noted by participants. As one stated: 'Sort of if I'm working through a problem, I'll sort of just muddle my way through it a little bit, I suppose' [F17: Respondent 1018]. Another conceded that: 'What it needs, in my view, is … some discipline around how to apply it [SARA] and it needs properly measuring' [F17: Respondent 1019]. Breaking down the application of the SARA process further, the analysis and assessment stages were often characterised by participants as weaker than scanning and response. As one

put it: 'One of the things I noticed when officers do problem-solving is their assessments are always really poor, you know, they're not great on some of the techniques around baselining and measuring […] it just seems to be too hard to do. What they really jump to is a response' [F14: Respondent 1065]. For another 'analysis is usually poor. I think the S and A get merged and then the A at the end gets missed off or is very add on, does crime go up or down is usually what's happened as opposed to did the mechanism work?' [F14: Respondent 1070]. Failure to conduct adequate analysis was cited as a reason why some problem-solving initiatives produce limited or no effects. This being because where problems are poorly understood, responses risk being misjudged and/or poorly targeted:

> What we seem to have now is a situation where we're looking to go from that understanding to some form of intervention very, very quickly. … In many cases I don't believe it takes us to the right interventions and the right problem-solving strategies. That's highly problematic because then you're doing stuff but potentially the stuff that you're doing is not relevant or won't impact on the problem that you're trying to solve in the first place. [F17: Respondent 1017]

The assessment of implemented responses was likewise identified by interview participants as a major challenge in problem-solving. Many spoke of assessment being omitted or done superficially:

> I can show you that nobody ever does any assessment so we don't know how it all works. …I could have shown you hundreds of POP plans and every single one of them would have been blank for assessment. …. the cops are activists, they want to do stuff - they don't want to do the frontloading thinking and they don't, they just want to go out and run around and do stuff and they don't want to think about what they've done afterwards and I think that's why we're so inefficient in our productivity is so low because we're discouraged from thinking, we're told to do, if you sit through our DMM [daily management meeting] every morning, you'd see that, it is action first, thinking second. We're all […] I'm guilty of it. [F13: Respondent 1051]

There seem to be several factors underpinning the identified weaknesses in the contemporary practice of problem-oriented policing. First, it was deemed to result from limitations in organisational resources, be that in terms of overall levels of staffing, availability of training

12

and/or analytical capacity. As noted above, the neighbourhood teams were thought to be somewhat under strength due to a general shortage of officers across the board. As one interviewee put it: 'this is really where the nub lies […] actually having the resources to understand the issue that you're trying to tackle, so having that detailed understanding takes time and we lack significant resources that can provide us with that detailed understanding' [F17: Respondent 1017]. Participants also drew attention to how officers had limited understanding of problem-solving, which meant they lacked the knowledge and ability to do it well. This position is clearly a long standing one since many of those we spoke to as part of this study told us that they had not had training in problem-solving during their careers. However, participants were telling us that as part of the wider reinvestment in community policing, problem-solving training was increasingly being provided. Likewise, participants drew attention to how limited analytical capacity has influenced the ability to conduct effective problem-oriented policing. As noted, from the perspective of participants the analysis and assessment stages of problem-solving are often weak. Participants drew attention to how officers do not generally have the analytical skills needed for problem-oriented policing. Participants drew attention to how, ideally, officers would have access to analysts to support problem-solving but in practice this was unusual. As part of restructuring of police organisations in the difficult financial climate following 2010, many posts for analysts were reportedly cut. As one respondent told us: 'So, during that same period, because obviously this restructuring was to do with costs. We lost all of our analytical support' [F20: Respondent 1036]. The consequence being that 'in terms of being most efficient around problem-solving, our ability to have access to good analytical product, or detailed analytical product is very difficult, or nigh on impossible to come by' [F15: Respondent 1078]. Some of those spoken to drew attention to the beginnings of re-investment in the analytical support necessary for problem-solving.

Second, weaknesses in the practice of problem-oriented policing were also attributed to limitations of partnership working. Partnership working was often described by participants as important to the delivery of successful problem-solving. This was usually framed in terms of police inability to change many of the conditions that underpin recurring problems. As one interviewee put it: 'Well, I mean, it depends on the problem and non-police organisations are essential to many of the problems that we deal with. If we need to get to that underlying societal change, it's not going to be undertaken by the police' [F17: Respondent 1017]. This meant that officers were often reliant on partners to address problems adequately. Beyond responsibility

13

for and competency to deal with presenting problems, participants also drew attention to the extra resources and knowledge that partners may bring to the problem-solving process:

> 'I think we very much need to recognise that as a single agency we just cannot deal with these issues adequately, we've just got to come together as partners and work together as a team and resolve them, that way because everybody has their own contribution that they can make which is unique to that partner and without bringing everybody together and making sure that we have that multi-agency approach, I don't think we can ever properly problem-solve without that' [F17: Respondent 1014].

Partnership working was seen as important by participants. There is long history of official endorsement for partnership working in England and Wales (see for example 'redacted', 2018). Government circulars have encouraged partnership working since the early 1980s; the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act made partnership in crime reduction a statutory duty for police, local authority departments, the probation service and health services; funding initiatives have often required partnership activity ('redacted', 2018). It is within this context that some interview participants described close and fruitful relationships with partners. Whilst not necessarily the panacea for effective partnership working (see for example, Chermak et al., 2013), close working relationships were especially evident in circumstances where police officers and representatives of other government agencies were formally co-located in physical space. This participant told us:

> 'That's been embedded for some time, to be fair. That isn't one of the areas that I think is a huge area for development. For us, it's kind of part and parcel of daily business, in terms of working with partners. We've got some of our staff embedded with local councils as well, as well as the expectation of regular joint action groups with the right partners sitting round the table' [F15: Respondent 1078].

However, reflecting studies conducted on partnership working in the field of community safety in the UK over several decades (e.g. Blagg et al, 1988; Liddle and Gelsthorpe, 1994; Crawford, 1997), good partner relationships were not universally described by interview participants. Some described major difficulties in securing partner engagement in problem-solving: 'The big challenge I have certainly at my level now is trying to encourage our partners to think in the same way. That is still a real, real issue' [F18: Respondent 1020]. In explaining this several

14

themes were evident. Circumstances played a role – where the problem was seen to be a shared problem, partnership working to resolve it was considered more likely. To illustrate:

> I've always found from my experience of working within the partnership world is that if you're trying to deal with something that there's a common goal, common interest there you'll get them on board; if it's something we're trying to push as the police but it's not really a priority for them then you're sometimes struggling because you don't get the buy in from them then that becomes a big uphill battle to try and achieve that [F19: Respondent 1041].

Similarly, interview participants drew attention to how agencies had different day-to-day priorities, which can affect their willingness to engage:

> In regard to partnership working, we can get a little bit of like talking to a brick wall sometimes. And generally, it's around communication and correspondence with emails between partners, they're not particularly great at always communicating what they're doing on their side, although they should be telling us for our documentation, really. But I don't know. Obviously, everyone has got their own workload and they have obviously got to prioritise what they're doing day-to-day. But just a bit of an update on what they're doing would be great. [F15: Respondent 1072]

Occasionally, interview participants described how austerity had promoted partnership working. As one noted: 'Because it's not just the police that have had cuts, the council have, the health service in different departments, they've all faced cuts and there's still more to come, so you've got to work smarter and work more effectively' [F17: Respondent 1012]. However, such observations were unusual, and instead it was more common for participants to indicate that budget cuts had reduced partnership working. One suggestion was that agencies retreated to focusing on their core statutory priorities when budgets were cut and as a consequence were less willing to engage with others. Put succinctly, 'Everyone went into silos when austerity kicked in' [F14: Respondent 1067]. More broadly, it was felt that austerity left fewer resources available to implement responses to identified problems:

> In public services, we are running the risk of growing apart, because all of our funding is reduced, which, for me, makes problem-solving all the more important. So, have we

15

got areas where we get frustrated that partners aren't getting involved? Yes, yes, absolutely. It's a resource issue, you know? So, where we know a tactic works, and another partner … it might be something as simple as boarding up, or painting windows on boards … we've got things that we know might work, but we're dependent on a partner to do it, then often, they can't do it, won't do it, don't understand why. [F18: Respondent 1030]

Finally, organisations were thought to be differently willing to engage in problem-solving. One participant stated: It's a real mixed bag, I think. …so one of our obviously critical partners would be local authority […..] but there are some real headaches about getting the right people around the table that I see, and again in terms of my job, this is probably what my problem-solving focus is, to try and unblock the multiagency world a bit more. [F18: Respondent 1031]

Conclusion

Problem-oriented policing has now been in existence for over forty years. In that time, many police forces have experimented with the approach. A large body of evidence has accumulated which shows that when done well, problem-oriented policing is highly effective (Weisburd et al, 2008; 2010; Hinkle et al. 2020). Despite widespread endorsement of and extensive evidence to support problem-oriented problem, the approach has proven difficult to implement and sustain, and serial weaknesses have been identified in its application in practice. This article has provided a snapshot of the operation of police problem-solving in England and Wales in 2019 – 40 years after its original articulation by Goldstein (Goldstein, 1979). We have considered three themes: (1) the longevity (or otherwise) of problem-oriented policing; (2) the organisational position of problem-oriented policing and (3) the practice of problem-oriented policing.

In so doing, we drew on semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 85 informed stakeholders from eight police forces in England and Wales. Before proceeding, we make some observations on the limitations of the method. We acknowledge that problem-solving experts are likely to be positively disposed to the concept but are also likely to be more critical of organisational inadequacies in implementing it, precisely because they were eager to see it succeed. We acknowledge that those who took part in this study cannot be considered a representative group from which to make inferences about the use, attitudes and understanding

16

of police problem-solving more generally. Those who consented to interview represent a handpicked group of practitioners engaged in and knowledgeable about problem-oriented work. Consequently, we recognise that the findings reported here may therefore put problem-solving in an unduly favourable light. Where shortcomings in delivering problem-solving are identified, they will if anything, therefore, underestimate the challenges in making it normal business in police services.

We find that problem-oriented policing, unlike other proactive policing models that emerged during the 1990's, problem-oriented policing remains prominent and popular. However, we also find that it is also largely segregated organisationally, within neighbourhood or community policing teams where there is an expectation that officers will conduct problem-solving as part of their role. This expectation is not present in other policing specialisms, which explains, at least in part, why it does not diffuse through police organisations more generally. Despite this, it was commonly acknowledged that problem-oriented policing could and perhaps should be present in other parts of the organisation. We further find that even within community teams, the ability to conduct problem-oriented policing appears to have been compromised by cuts to police budgets. This has led to the erosion of community policing teams (either by disbanding them altogether or by shrinking them). Where problem-oriented policing is being conducted, its practice often lacks discipline in that core processes are not being faithfully followed: there are weaknesses at all stages of the SARA models. These shortcomings are due to lack of organisational capacity (too few staff, poor understanding of the processes and limited analytical capacity), weaknesses in partnership working, and an organisational culture that emphasises getting on and doing things immediately rather than reflecting on and systematically planning to prevent crime more effectively but over a slightly longer timescale. It was striking that these observations were evident across our sampled police services – size of the service and degree of organisational exposure to problem-solving making little difference to these overarching findings. It is also striking that the findings reported in this paper show that challenges to implementation found in much earlier research remain.

History shows that interest in police problem-solving has fluctuated in England and Wales over the past 40 years and that it has been difficult to deliver ('redacted', 2000; Scott, 2000; Cordner and Biebel, 2005; 'redacted', 2012; Goldstein, 2018). During this period leaders have regularly moved away from problem-oriented policing to experiment with a variety of untested approaches, which require the formulation of new policies and protocols, as well as staff

17

training. This results in significant wasted effort and resource, whilst also generating frustration within front line staff. Nonetheless, whilst the implementation of problem-solving undeniably remains challenging, evaluations of the approach consistently show its effectiveness in dealing with a huge range of policing problems (e.g Cordner, 1986; Eck and Spelman, 1987; Kennedy et al., 2001; Clarke and Goldstein, 2002; Scott, 2020). As such, the UK government and the police inspectorate, together with individual police forces, continually return to this approach. The upstream investment in prevention should, if applied consistently across police forces, deliver reductions in demand and reductions in crime and see economies of scale in the introduction of good practice. At the time of writing, there has been a resurgence of interest in problem-oriented policing in England and Wales which reflects contemporary recognition that the approach can help improve policing outcomes and reduce demand. It seems to have helped boost the interest and involvement in problem-solving in a significant number of police forces in England and Wales, but it is clear that there remains much to be done. A detailed examination of the organisational matters that need to be attended to is beyond the scope of this article (see 'redacted', 2020). However, cogent leadership providing a strategic focus on problem-oriented policing, coupled with a relentless and painstaking focus on meeting implementation needs are clearly important. Police personnel need to understand evidence relating to 'what works' alongside the skills to apply it in their local conditions (involving partnership working, analytical skills, and creative thinking). They also need the motivation to engage in this taxing, discretionary work.

In conclusion, despite the enthusiastic support from those officers and police staff who are trained and fully familiar with problem-solving, problem-oriented policing has still not yet reached a tipping point where it has become the standard way of working, even in forces with a long history of commitment to it. Capitalising on the resurgence of interest in problem-solving is important. Failure to do so may lead to the characteristic decline of problem-solving and reversion to traditional methods of policing. Yet mainstreaming problem-solving has over a long period repeatedly been found enormously challenging: delivering its full potential will require patience and continuing efforts over the years to come.

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19

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20

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