

The Signal Crimes Perspective

- A Sixty 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.

- A *signal crime* is any criminal incident that causes change in the public's behaviour and/or beliefs about their security.
- 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.

What makes a signal?

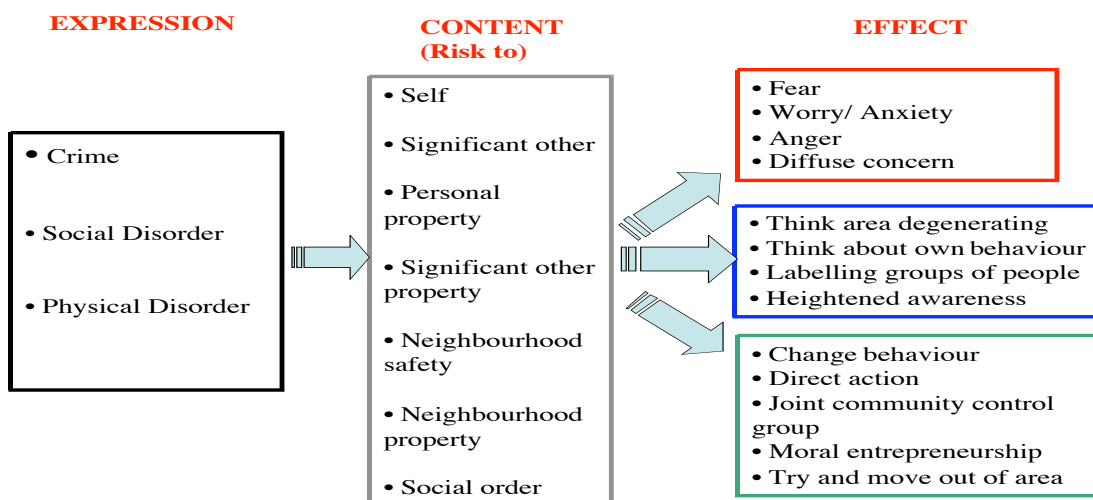
All signals are made up of three parts:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

An example of how these concepts be employed for analytic purposes is that 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 'I avoid that location' (*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 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:

- 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.
- 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.
- Perceptions of risk vary considerably by area, and different signal crimes and signal disorders function as causes of insecurity in different locations.

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.

Want to know more?

More information is available from Martin Innes at or by visiting our website at www.reassurancepolicing.co.uk