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It's an ill Wind: Self Selection Policing Opportunities in the Pandemic

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The problem

Policing is under increasing pressure because of low rates of detection and the subsequent official processing of offenders.

Bringing serious and prolific offenders to justice through detection and official processing is important to the integrity of the criminal justice system but is difficult, particularly at a time of manpower cuts and other pressures. Self-selection policing (SSP) can be a useful approach to detection as it highlights the extent to which serious offenders also commit less serious, and more easily detected, offences. The COVID-19 pandemic offers increased opportunities, presented by the social distancing rules and other related restrictions, for exploiting this policing approach.

What we know about self-selection policing and how we know it

SSP is based on two premises:

1. Criminal careers are largely heterogenous in offence type and seriousness.

2. Police officers overestimate the homogeneity of criminal careers (Roach and Pease, 2013), thus foregoing detection opportunities for offences that are often easier to detect.

SSP proceeds by using specific, relatively minor offences (which sometimes co-occur with more serious offences), on the basis that 'people who do big bad things also do little bad things' (Roach, 2007: Roach and Pease, 2016), although the converse is not true. Klinger's triage characterisation of policing (ignore, engage, process) as the three options facing an officer, provides a way of thinking about self-selection policing, by suggesting officers take action in response to relatively minor incidents which are normally widely ignored.

Self-selection policing has been evidenced over the past 15 years during which time different possible 'trigger' offences have been identified and tested. The 'fit' of the approach to the pandemic is that contravening regulations about social distancing rules provides new and ideal trigger offences to indicate likely serious, concurrent criminality.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

Offences against Covid-19 regulations could be used to identify and process more serious offenders. They may also create opportunities to use familiar law rather than the emerging COVID-19 related law itself.

Already, there are anecdotes illustrating how the self-selection paradigm has been used:

ACC Hall of Northumbria describes how serious and organised criminals have been more easily identified due to the large reduction in vehicles on the roads (e.g. more effective ANPR).

A BCU commander in another northern force described the self-selection process used to identify and officially process serious offenders as 'like shelling peas'. Particularly via their tendency to speed more on less busy road networks.

Recent social media (e.g. Twitter) proliferate stories by police where they have identified individuals involved in serious criminality from their not wearing of masks on public transport. For example, British Transport Police officers recently seized a sizeable amount of cannabis from one individual and a concealed kitchen-knife from another, who raised suspicion by not wearing a mandatory face-covering while travelling on the London Underground.

Some ideas in response

The pandemic provides a proving ground for self-selection policing; the favourable experience to date and probably (sadly) in the expected autumn second wave of infections may embed the approach in the policing toolkit, with ingenuity about the choice of minor offence trigger and the use of the heterogeneity in criminal careers as a detection opportunity rather than a criminological curiosity.

For example, those who deal drugs will need to continue to move around to distribute during lockdowns and those with a disregard for the law at a high-level will be likely to break speed-limits in the space left by fewer vehicles being on the roads.

If you decide to develop any of these ideas – do let us know – we would love to hear from you!

Relevant resources

Roach, J. and Pease, K. (2016). *Self-Selection Policing: Theory, Research and Practice.* Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roach, J. (2018). Those who do big bad things still do little bad things: re-stating the case for self-selection policing. In Wortley, R., Sidebottom, A., Tilley, N., and Laycock, G. (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Crime Science*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge International Handbooks. p. 320-333. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330657672_Those_who_do_big_bad_things_still_do_little_bad_things_re-stating_the_case_for_self-selection_policing

Roach, J. (2017). Self-Selection Policing and the Disqualified Driver. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, Volume 13, 3, 300–311. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312898340_Self-Selection_Policing_and_the_Disqualified_Driver

Roach, J. and Pease, K. (2014). Police overestimation of criminal career homogeneity. *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling,* Volume 11, Issue 2, 164–178. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259539359_Police_Overestimation_of_Criminal_Career_Homogeneity