

Plenary meeting: Assess crime prevention: need for a full-grown cost-benefit analysis

Dieter Burssens, scientific researcher of the *Nationaal Instituut voor Criminalistiek en Criminologie* (national institute for criminalistics and criminology)

Dieter Burssens started by showing that the publications of the NICC and the *Team Preventie Ontwikkeling* (team prevention development) do not specifically focus on the prevention of domestic burglary, but on more general prevention themes such as evidence-based prevention, the thematic approach of prevention and the assessment of prevention. In this perspective they also examine what happens in other sectors, such as health care, welfare or education. They often find that one is confronted with the same problems across the different sectors. As the means for projects are getting ever more limited, it becomes ever more important to start to think "out of the box".

Not so long ago...

Mister Burssens gives a short retrospective of prevention campaigns and the different evolutions linked to this. In the past prevention was easy... One thought up a funny slogan or a playful poster. Only later the critical voices came in: "does it really work?"

Effectiveness on the agenda

Therefore one chose for an "Evidence-based policy and practice". The results of prevention often seem to fall short. The figures produced often seem to be weak or non-existent.

Another development, in the framework of "New Public Management", in which the authorities take up less missions themselves, but outsource these more to partners, lets the efficiency question come to the fore. The partners receive money for the mission in exchange for proven results.

Is there a problem?

Dieter Burssens noted that effectiveness and efficiency are important criteria when choosing prevention measures. But when you want to assess prevention measures, you have to take into account more than these criteria only.

To illustrate this, he gives an example in the health care sector. There one uses the notion "Number Needed to Treat" (NNT). This concept actually refers to the number of persons that needs to be treated preventively to prevent the disease in one person.

There is also the notion "Number Needed to Harm" (NNH). This number refers to the number of persons that needs to get preventive treatment in order for one person to be confronted with the negative side effects of this treatment. Often prevention experts only know the NNT (or the effectiveness) of our approach, but not the NNH (or the side effects) of it. See the example of the treatment that lowers the risk of fractures due to osteoporosis, but also sharply raises the risk of serious heart conditions.

The assessment of the crime prevention suffers from tunnel vision when it only maps the effectiveness of the measures. Too much focus is put on preventing the own issue and one forgets the side effects prevention measures can often bring about in other domains. They need to strive for a proportional prevention that maximizes the benefits of the prevention measures and that, at the same time, keeps the costs of the side effects of these measures as low as possible.

Towards a full-grown cost-benefit analysis

When a project starts, one will always strive for a maximum of benefits and a minimum of costs.

To know the **possible benefits** of prevention, one needs to take into account different elements during the analysis.

-Effectiveness of the measure

Example: the DARE project where police officers sensitize youngsters on the negative effects of drug abuse, doesn't seem to work. Different studies show that there are no long-term effects on youngsters. Yet one continues to put money into this kind of projects.

The higher the level of effectiveness of a measure, the more benefits there are.

-Frequency of the problem

Example: After the crimes committed by Kim De Gelder at a nursery enormous efforts were put in regarding the access control at nurseries. Given the rarity of such an incident, one can ask whether it was logical to invest so much money in the prevention of this phenomenon.

The higher the frequency of a problem, the more benefits there will be.

-Seriousness of the problem

The perception of the seriousness of a problem is not always objective. It depends on the personal view of people. This does not mean that this kind of elements can be left out of the cost-benefit analysis. It remains a crucial element to come to a meticulous cost-benefit analysis.

The more serious the impact of a problem is, the more benefits one will have by advocating prevention.

- Other elements that weren't discussed today include: the indirect consequences of crime, the feeling of insecurity and the financial benefits of prevention.

Which **possible costs** do we take into account?

The costs of prevention for society often go further than just the financial cost. It becomes important to limit these costs as much as possible.

-Curtailed of freedom and autonomy

Example: in a certain park there is regularly trouble. Therefore one decides to close the park for visitors as from 20h. Yet, there are negative effects due to the implementation of this measure, as the freedom of "good" visitors who want to enjoy a nice evening walk in the park, is also curtailed when they want to do go for a walk.

-Practical inconveniences, loss of time, ...

Example: a person taking a plane cannot take liquids in his/her hand-luggage. This causes a lot of inconvenience for people with young children. And you pay a lot of money for the drinks you can buy later at the airport.

- Other elements that weren't discussed today include: the impact on the privacy, the possible increase of feelings of insecurity, people who no longer learn to deal with risks, ...

A useful manner to substantially limit the costs of prevention, is by better defining the target group on the basis of for instance a risk profile. This way you can not only increase the effectiveness of measures, but you also do no longer disturb plenty of people with the costs or side effects of prevention.

Conclusion?

Assessing prevention measures is crucial to make a useful contribution to our society with prevention. In the first place we need to examine the effectiveness of our measures. However, a thorough cost-benefit analysis does not stop there. We do not only need to maximize the benefits (the effectiveness), but we also particularly have to deal with the costs of prevention. This way we make prevention more "palatable" for everybody.

Example: at airports one now focusses on devices that quickly scan liquids on their content. This way the ban on liquids could be abolished in the near future and people are free again to bring drinks while travelling.

You can read more on proportional prevention in the book '*Preventie Morgen*' (prevention tomorrow), published by Garant.



With financial support from the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union

European Commission – Directorate-General Home Affairs

Legal notice

The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the official opinions of any EU Member State or any agency or institution of the European Union or European Communities