What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: How to find out more about what works to reduce reoffending

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The College of Policing was established in 2013 as the professional body for all those working in policing and the What Works Centre (WWC) for Crime Reduction.[1] WWCs can be distinguished from other research centres by their focus on synthesising the best-available existing evaluation evidence, generating more of this evidence, and encouraging and enabling its use in policy and practice decision-making.[2] The College is a full and founder member of the Cabinet Office run What Works National Council. The Council's 13 centre-strong network of independent WWCs stretches across government priority areas,[3] and our sister centres include, amongst others, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE),[4] the Education Endowment Foundation,[5] the Youth Endowment Fund,[6] the Centre for Homelessness Impact,[7] the What Works Centre for Wellbeing,[8] and the Centre for Ageing Better.[9]

As a part of the WWC network, our emphasis is on creating relevant evidence, making it easily accessible, sharing it widely, and supporting its use in practice. Although we are the professional body for policing, our stakeholders go far beyond this specific discipline and include anyone with a role or interest in reducing crime, including the criminal justice and community safety sectors.

There are several core challenges that WWCs are trying to address. Firstly, how to support practitioners and policymakers to use evidence to inform resourcing decisions, particularly when the evidence doesn't always address questions about implementation or the cost effectiveness of initiatives. Secondly, how to encourage the development, testing, and replication of initiatives in areas where there are gaps in our understanding, in order to build the evidence about 'what works'.

In this short article I focus on some of the work we have been doing to tackle these challenges, from building capability to use evidence-based approaches in policing, to the development of resources to support decision-makers across the crime reduction sector to use the evidence base when making investment and resourcing decisions.

The College is in a unique position in comparison with other WWCs as our role as a professional body means we have additional levers we can use to support and encourage police officers and staff to use evidence-based approaches in their day-to-day work. As well as being responsible for sharing the best available evidence, as a professional body we set standards for policing, both professional and learning standards, and support the development of officers and staff. We have invested in building capability amongst officers and staff to use the evidence base by introducing evidence-based approaches into the curriculums for colleagues at multiple levels (from new police officer recruits to Chief Officers) and integrating this into the job promotion framework.

In our standard-setting role we have, following the NICE model,[10] explicitly used the existing evidence base to inform the standards we set. We have also set

1. What Works Centre for Crime Reduction | College of Policing
2. Gough, D., Maidment, C., & Sharples, J. (2018). *UK What Works Centres: Aims, methods and context*. EPPI-Centre Social Science Research Unit and UCL Institute of Education University College London.
3. What Works Network - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
4. NICE | The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
5. Education Endowment Foundation | EEF
6. Homepage - Youth Endowment Fund
7. Centre for Homelessness Impact
8. Homepage - What Works Wellbeing
9. Centre for Ageing Better | Action today for all our tomorrows (ageing-better.org.uk)
10. NICE guidance | Our programmes | What we do | About | NICE

standards for funding streams as in the case of the Safer Streets Toolkit,[11] which has underpinned four rounds of government funding for crime reduction.

Alongside building evidence-based approaches into the infrastructure of the profession, we have also developed opportunities, through our Bursary scheme,[12] for people working in policing to carry out their own research and increase its impact. We have had over 500 officers and staff receive a Bursary and they are delivering research that has been informing national practice. One example is Sergeant Lorna Dennison-Wilkins' Body Recovery in Water PhD study. Lorna tested the accuracy of decisions made by dive teams and search specialists to provide unique, evidence-based information on the most effective approaches to take depending on the environmental conditions and the circumstances under which the person came to be in the water. Her work now informs water-based searches in the field of search, rescue, and recovery, and she has delivered specialist training to police and other rescue staff at the National Search Centre. Her operational advice has been sought nationally and internationally by those conducting individual searches involving water.[13][14] Other bursary-supported research has influenced operational approaches to locating missing persons,[15] and protecting the welfare of police officers involved in the investigation of child sexual exploitation.[16]

For the remainder of this article, I focus on our role in sharing the existing evidence base on what works and making it accessible to decision-makers. I will introduce the resources we have created to support people to use the best-

available evidence from the Crime Reduction Toolkit, which sits at the heart of our WWC, the College Practice Bank, which seeks to identify, share, and encourage the testing of innovative approaches to reduce crime, and our Research Projects Map, which aims to boost collaboration among researchers and practitioners. These resources are relevant to practitioners, decision-makers, and academics working across the criminal justice sector, including those working in the Probation and Prison Services.

Crime Reduction Toolkit

The Crime Reduction Toolkit was the first product we delivered.[17] Working with an academic consortium led by University College London (UCL), with co-funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, we developed a Toolkit to make the evidence base on what works readily available online to all of our stakeholders.

The Crime Reduction Toolkit is the first resource of its kind and can be used by individuals and organisations involved in reducing crime to:

❏ Identify what interventions might work to address a particular problem or challenge,

❏ Assess their current practice and investment against the best-available evidence and check to see if interventions could be adapted or different choices need to be made to increase effect,

❏ Commission services which are aligned to the best-available evidence, and

❏ Work with service providers to identify interventions and approaches which can be tested in their local context. For example,

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11. Safer Streets Fund toolkit I College of Policing

12. The College runs an annual Bursary Scheme to provide some financial support towards tuition fees for Higher Education programmes Bursary scheme I College of Policing. The College also provides free and open access to those working in policing to the College's National Police Library and hosts a virtual peer-led network to support those working and studying.

13. Dennison-Wilkins, L. (2021). Body Recovery from Water Study. Going Equipped. Issue 3. Ryton: College of Policing. Accessed on 15.08.23 Body recovery from water study I College of Policing

14. Dennison-Wilkins, L., Hackman, L., & Hayatdavoodi, M. (2023). The Body Recovery from Water Study: The application of science to missing person search. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 17*.

15. Doyle, R. (2022). Missing persons: Making risk-based decisions. Going Equipped. Issue 5. Ryton: College of Policing. Accessed on 15.08.2023 Missing persons – making risk assessment decisions I College of Policing

16. Ralph, N. (2020). The impact of viewing indecent images of children on police wellness and wellbeing. Going Equipped. Issue 1. Ryton: College of Policing. Accessed on 15.08.2023 Dealing with the personal impact of crimes against children I College of Policing

17. Crime reduction toolkit I College of Policing

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wilderness programmes,[18] and sports programmes,[19] may work better in certain contexts or with particular groups.

The Toolkit includes interventions which have been subject to a systematic review. Systematic reviews identify impact-based research studies related to a particular intervention and then synthesise or combine the results, sometimes using a meta-analysis. This synthesis of the evidence allows statements on average impact to be made and what works conclusions to be drawn. We don't include evidence from single studies in the Toolkit because combining impact information from systematic reviews, which synthesise well-designed studies, increases the reliability of assertions we make about the strength and quality of the evidence. As a WWC, we encourage researchers to share single studies so that they may be included in future systematic reviews of interventions or updates of reviews.

To identify interventions to include on the Toolkit the UCL consortium undertook a systematic search for all systematic reviews focused on interventions with some form of crime reduction outcome, including aggregate crime numbers; (re)victimisation; (re)offending, or (re)conviction. The spread of outcomes considered means that the interventions in the Toolkit are delivered by a range of bodies including the Police, Probation, and Prison Services. The initial search identified 350 systematic reviews and revealed that most of the published best-available evidence was concentrated around interventions focused on working with people post-conviction, to reduce their reoffending. There was relatively less evidence on policing interventions and approaches to prevention and diversion.

To help practitioners and policy makers understand the crime reduction evidence 'at a glance' we needed to develop a framework to rate and describe the evidence consistently and simply. Academics from UCL developed the EMMIE framework,[20] which structures the findings and quality of the evidence relating to specific interventions in relation to whether they are effective (Effect); how and where they work (Mechanism and Moderator), how to put them into practice (Implementation) and how much they cost (Economic). Each of these dimensions is included in the Toolkit for the interventions. If the systematic review level evidence does not include information on any of them, we also include the gap in information in the summary.
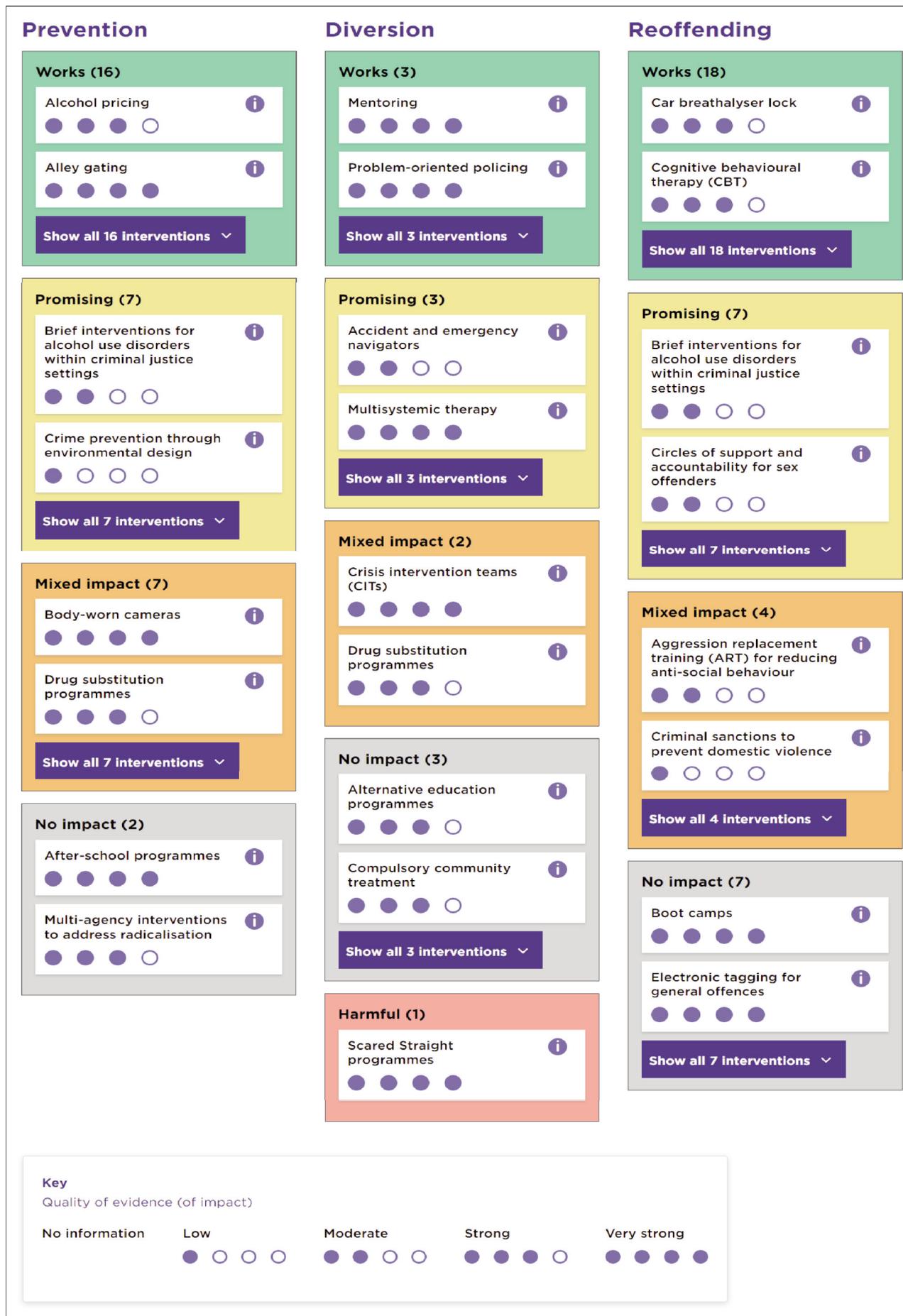
The Toolkit was launched in 2015 with 15 interventions; there are now over 70 included, and it received over 150,000 unique views in the last year. It is available on the College of Policing website and is an open resource for anyone to access and use. It can be viewed in two modes: table or visualisation view (see Figure 1 below for the visualisation view). The latter allows users to sort information using a shorter scale, labelling interventions as works, promising, mixed impact, no impact, and harmful. Table view provides a list of interventions with filters allowing users to filter by effect, problem, focus, population, and factor.

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18. Wilderness challenge programmes I College of Policing
19. Sports programmes designed to prevent crime and reduce reoffending I College of Policing
20. Johnson, S. D., Tilley, N., & Bowers, K. J. (2015). Introducing EMMIE: An evidence rating scale to encourage mixed-method crime prevention synthesis reviews. *Journal of Experimental Criminology, 11,* 459–473.

Figure 1. *Crime Reduction Toolkit in visualisation view.*

Prevention

Works (16)

Alcohol pricing ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Alley gating ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Show all 16 interventions ⌄

Promising (7)

Brief interventions for alcohol use disorders within criminal justice settings ⓘ
● ● ○ ○

Crime prevention through environmental design ⓘ
● ○ ○ ○

Show all 7 interventions ⌄

Mixed impact (7)

Body-worn cameras ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Drug substitution programmes ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Show all 7 interventions ⌄

No impact (2)

After-school programmes ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Multi-agency interventions to address radicalisation ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Diversion

Works (3)

Mentoring ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Problem-oriented policing ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Show all 3 interventions ⌄

Promising (3)

Accident and emergency navigators ⓘ
● ● ○ ○

Multisystemic therapy ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Show all 3 interventions ⌄

Mixed impact (2)

Crisis intervention teams (CITs) ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Drug substitution programmes ⓘ
● ● ● ○

No impact (3)

Alternative education programmes ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Compulsory community treatment ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Show all 3 interventions ⌄

Harmful (1)

Scared Straight programmes ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Reoffending

Works (18)

Car breathalyser lock ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) ⓘ
● ● ● ○

Show all 18 interventions ⌄

Promising (7)

Brief interventions for alcohol use disorders within criminal justice settings ⓘ
● ● ○ ○

Circles of support and accountability for sex offenders ⓘ
● ● ○ ○

Show all 7 interventions ⌄

Mixed impact (4)

Aggression replacement training (ART) for reducing anti-social behaviour ⓘ
● ● ○ ○

Criminal sanctions to prevent domestic violence ⓘ
● ○ ○ ○

Show all 4 interventions ⌄

No impact (7)

Boot camps ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Electronic tagging for general offences ⓘ
● ● ● ●

Show all 7 interventions ⌄

Key
Quality of evidence (of impact)

No information	Low	Moderate	Strong	Very strong
	● ○ ○ ○	● ● ○ ○	● ● ● ○	● ● ● ●

We know from formal evaluation and ongoing feedback that the Toolkit is accessed and used by those working across the criminal justice system, as well as partners and decision-makers responsible for designing, running, and commissioning crime reduction activity in the UK and internationally. For practitioner and policy decision-makers working to reduce reoffending, there are over 35 diverse interventions aimed at delivering these outcomes, such as diversion programmes like drug courts,[21] electronic tagging,[22] prison visits,[23] and halfway house programmes.[24]

We rerun the systematic search for systematic reviews at regular intervals and identify new and updated reviews between the searches. These activities enable us to continually add to the Toolkit and update the existing interventions when new research is published.

In creating the Crime Reduction Toolkit, we identified gaps in the existing What Works research evidence base, which we recognise means that the Toolkit is silent on some emerging and current problems faced by the sector. To fill this gap, we subsequently developed the College's Practice Bank.

Practice Bank

The Practice Bank was launched in April 2023 for practitioners to share innovative approaches to responding to new and long-standing problems.[25] The Bank is also an open resource on the College of Policing's website and allows practice to be shared regardless of whether it has been formally evaluated or not. It has invited considerable interest from the policing sector and to date, most of the shared examples are based on policing or partnership approaches to tackling crime and organisational change. The next phase of the Practice Bank will focus on proactively inviting other sectors, such as Prison and Probation Services to share their practice examples.

Much of the best-available evidence included in the Crime Reduction Toolkit reports on interventions designed to reduce reoffending and we anticipate developing the Bank to reflect initiatives linked to these areas of work. Practice examples will be updated twelve months after publication and this process will provide us with an opportunity not only to find out about changes and developments in criminal justice practice, but also to establish how the Bank has been used by practitioners across sectors.

The Bank is searchable and clearly labelled so users can quickly identify the level of testing that has been undertaken for each practice example. Each example is labelled according to the scheme as 'worked' (includes robust research evaluation evidence and best-available evidence of a what works standard), 'promising' (positive observed or measured outcomes), 'new/innovative' (untested), or 'didn't work'. Contributors can label their practice as promising, new/innovative, or didn't work, but the worked label can be applied only by the what works team following a consideration of the overall evidence to ensure that this is applied accurately and consistently.

Where possible, links to the best-available evidence from the Crime Reduction Toolkit are added to practice examples to allow users to contextualise initiatives — even when they haven't been subject to an impact evaluation. In keeping with the Toolkit, all practice examples are linked to the focus areas of diversion, prevention, and reducing reoffending, but as the Practice Bank has a wider focus than only crime reduction, we have included an 'organisational' category which captures initiatives intended to make workforce improvements, such as training and development.

The Practice Bank is the start of a pipeline that will allow us to take untested but innovative practice examples and push them through a testing process towards inclusion on the Crime Reduction Toolkit. As part of our emphasis on supporting the evaluation of local and national practice, we have established a 'Smarter Practice' process and label for priority areas such as for homicide and violence against women and girls. A panel of representatives from the College, the National Police Chiefs' Council, and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) review practice examples in priority areas to agree on those which are most innovative, and suitable for replication and testing. These examples are submitted to a What Works Board, chaired by the College CEO, to prioritise for investment in replication and evaluation. In the long run we expect to transform the scale and richness of the crime reduction evidence base with a pipeline of innovation that starts with the untested, flows into smarter practice, and finally into what works.

Working closely with police forces, criminal justice partners and the community safety sector, we have developed the Bank to include practice on a wide range of topics and have prioritised shared learning about the implementation of initiatives. Practice examples can be shared by anyone working in the sector by using the practice sharing form. HMICFRS are encouraging the

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21. Drug courts | College of Policing
22. Electronic tagging for general offences | College of Policing
23. Prison visits | College of Policing
24. Halfway house programmes | College of Policing
25. Practice bank | College of Policing

sharing of practice highlighted in their inspections. We also encourage Tilley Award winners,[26] and projects supported by the Science Technology Analysis and Research fund (Police STAR fund) to share summaries of their projects, and these are all searchable via a filter. Recently shared practice examples have included rapid video response to domestic abuse,[27] victim engagement forums,[28] homicide prevention rapid debriefs,[29] stopping unwanted prisoner contact with victims of domestic abuse,[30] and an intensive diversion programme for prolific burglars.[31]

Practice examples which are being evaluated can be linked to the Research Projects Map (see below) so that a summary of the project is available for other researchers.

Research Projects Map

The College's Research Projects Map is designed to promote collaboration in policing and crime reduction-related research.[32] It hosts summaries of ongoing UK-based research which is carried out by, or in partnership with, a university or other higher education institute. As well as professional research, post-graduate students carrying out relevant research are invited to share short summaries of their ongoing projects. Projects can be shared via our online research sharing form,[33] and randomised control trials (RCTs) can be shared via a dedicated RCT sharing form,[34] which collects additional information and acts as a register for RCTs.

Once shared, each research project has a unique page which can be shared via a link and can be updated during the life cycle of the project. The Map also facilitates the sharing of survey links and participant recruitment requests, which can be added at the right stage of the project. Projects include a completion date and researchers are invited to share final reports or details of published articles with the College's National Police Library.[35] Completed RCT projects remain on the Map once complete, and marked as such, plus links to final reports added.

Map contributors have reported a number of benefits of sharing their ongoing research. As a result of sharing a summary of their research, post-graduate student contributors have been offered access to linked datasets and been asked to review draft legislation as well as being invited to participate in international projects. Universities have also told us that sharing their work has instigated contact being made by practitioners for more information about their ongoing research and information about implementation. Placing projects on the Map has also facilitated new research collaborations and funding opportunities. The longer-term goal of capturing final research reports and publications is that they will contribute to filling gaps in our professional knowledge and have the potential to be included in future reviews of the evidence about policing and reducing crime.

Conclusion

The tools and resources developed by the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction are intended for use across the whole of community safety and criminal justice sectors. Knowledge exchange between different parts of the sector, as well as within organisations, has the potential to reduce siloed working, improve implementation, and support evaluation.

All of this helps drive forward evidence-based practice, and the chance of improving outcomes, in these sectors. In addition to the Crime Reduction Toolkit, launching the Practice Bank has taken us forward and provided a clear method for involving stakeholders more directly in delivering the aims of the Centre and linking their practice more explicitly to the existing evidence base. In creating a pipeline for learning from implemented practice and the potential to replicate and test it, the Centre has the potential to increase the evidence base on what works to reduce crime. WWCs thrive on engagement from the sectors they work with. Telling us about implemented practice, ongoing or completed research, and how the Toolkit is (or isn't) used by different organisations helps us to understand wider stakeholder needs. We actively seek your feedback and questions and involvement in the common aim to determine what works. Please do contact us via whatworks@college.police.uk.

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26. The Tilley Awards began in 1999 and were introduced by the Home Office to promote and reward the use of problem-oriented partnership (POP) approaches to crime reduction. The Awards are based on a problem-solving methodology known as SARA. This involves Scanning for problems that are a priority for the local community; Analysing available evidence sources such as local crime data, local intelligence obtained from strategic and delivery partners, and feedback from the local community; developing the best Response to address the problem; and Assessing the impact of that response.
27. Rapid video response (RVR) for domestic abuse l College of Policing
28. Victim engagement forum l College of Policing
29. Homicide prevention rapid debrief process l College of Policing
30. Stopping unwanted prisoner contact with victims of domestic abuse l College of Policing
31. Prolific burglar intensive programme l College of Policing
32. Research projects map l College of Policing
33. Research Map submission (smartsurvey.co.uk)
34. Randomised Controlled Trial submission (smartsurvey.co.uk)
35. National Police Library l College of Policing