

What makes a good SARA?

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Problem solving is a central tenet to the way Merseyside Police operates. Correctly identifying problems and their solutions are therefore paramount to routine police work. In a nutshell, the idea is that treating groups of similar incidents is a more effective way of reducing crime and disorder than treating them as separate incidents.

The model of problem solving used by Merseyside is the SARA process. SARA is a simple but versatile process that helps to address crime and disorder problems. In many ways it replicates how good police officers operate routinely. A legitimate question then, is why document the process? The reasons are threefold, but intertwined: (a) past SARAs can be consulted to review successful, and unsuccessful, approaches to problems similar to those currently experienced, (b) not all police officers approach problems in the same way, and (c) many daily pressures move officers away from the process of combining events into problems, and documentation provides a countervailing pressure.

While the SARA process can be effective, it is really just a tool and tools are only powerful when used in the correct manner and in the right context. The key problem with the SARA process is that it becomes a formula into which you fit what you intended to do anyway, rather than a process which seeks to gain a deeper understanding of what is happening. At its worst, a SARA is a delaying tactic, buying time to address an issue for which immediate action might otherwise be demanded.

This document is intended to illustrate what elements are essential for a good SARA. While there is no single “right” way to perform a SARA, there are plenty of ways that will not produce the desired result. In the follow sections each phase of the SARA model is explained.

The SARA model has four phases:

Scan – descriptive exploration of the problem

Analysis – identifying the underlying causes of the problem

Response – addressing the problem by action

Assessment – measuring the effectiveness of the response

One of the common problems with using the SARA model is the blurring of the phases. To illustrate what sort of activities occur in each phase, two problems are discussed at the end. The first is a fictitious example and the second is a summary of a real problem located in the Knowsley area (SARA No 63).

Scan phase (problem identification)

The first phase helps identify the problem. The types of problems that come to the attention of the police are varied. Some are *chronic*, areas or people that are perennially the focus of police attention. Other problems are *spikes*, brief but intense activity of a specific nature. A further category is *recurrent low-level* problems that are only apparent over a long time period.

Problem identification is initiated through a variety of means. Crime statistics, letters from the public or elected officials, the local authority, other agencies and businesses are some the groups that bring problems to the attention of the police. Whichever way this occurs needs to be taken into account later in the SARA process. Problems can often appear larger when a vexatious or single issue individual or group is motivated to bring police resources to bear.

A common mistake in the scanning phase is that the definition of the problem does not contain a reference to the offensive behaviour that is generating the problem. Without this, often the identified problem is too large or vague to direct the deployment of resources. The problem can be made more focused by describing the problem in ways that *highlight the offensive behaviour*. For example, consider a problem such as “violence in the city centre”. What sort of violence? To make the problem more descriptive, consider modifying it to, “stabblings in the city centre”. The difference between the two descriptions may appear subtle, but it is important – the latter describes the offensive behaviour whereas the former is too broad a statement to be useful. Note that offensive behaviour will always be an action. Thus ‘youths causing annoyance’ is unhelpful, whereas ‘youths gathering around off-licence x in the early evening and deterring customers’ is helpful.

Analysis phase (underlying ‘causes’ of the problem)

This phase is typically the most difficult of the four SARA phases. Often the scanning is confused with the analysis, which results in an inadequate picture of the problem. People often believe police officers. Police officers usually believe themselves. Once they have scanned a problem, they may have undue confidence in what the causes are, and be unprepared or unwilling to put this to the test. This often results in an inappropriate response to the cause(s) of the problem. Analysis should always allow the possibility of being proved wrong in one’s beliefs.

The purpose of the analysis phase is to determine, to the highest degree of confidence, what factors produce, facilitate or are necessary conditions of, the offensive behaviour. The practical limits of researching an individual problem will always need to be kept in mind, but it is essential that adequate time be given for a thorough exploration of all components of the problem. To do this, the Problem Analysis Triangle (PAT) is recommended to structure the analysis.

PAT consists of three elements: offender, victim and location; all of which must be present for a crime or disorder incident to occur. Thus, a major part of the analytical process is to consider the problem from each perspective. The final piece of the puzzle is to devise how these three elements interrelate to form the observed problem.

Problems will vary in the attractiveness of each of the three elements as points for intervention. For instance, some locations provide ample opportunities for crime and thus form 'attractive' nuisances. Some victims may be chronically targeted. Remove the supply of opportunities and a great deal of the problem will have been addressed. In other cases, the problem may be a result of a single offender or a small group of offenders. The result of the analysis will determine the approach taken to tackle the problem.

During the analysis phase, it is crucial to keep an open mind about alternate theories of how the problem is manifested. This is the most challenging aspect of analytical work; developing alternate hypotheses to explain the factors generating a problem. The next step is to try to falsify the explanations. How could the competing theories be tested? What conditions would need to be present to make them true or false? Often an explanation is merely offered, with little scrutiny of how plausible it may be or any consideration to other explanations.

Response phase (addressing the problem)

If the analysis has been performed properly, the actions required to solve or alleviate the problem may be obvious. The analysis should lead to a menu of activities. If any of the three elements is a necessary condition of the problem, the menu may be limited to this element. For example, one flasher in a park suggests targeting the offender, thirty flashers suggests targeting the location. More usually, a menu will address more than one component of a problem.

Consider a SARA involving TFMVs in a car park. The scanning and analysis phases determined that the location allowed easy access and egress for offenders, a lack of surveillance and a propensity for vehicle owners to leave valuable items on display while the car was unattended. There are two aspects working here: location and victim. Therefore there are two "arms" comprising the response section. Some activity must be allocated to improving the deficiencies of the location (restrict access to legitimate users and increase surveillance). To complement this, changing victims' behaviour to be more conscious of the opportunities they present to offenders will need to be carried out. If only one of these approaches was taken, the solution would be incomplete, that is opportunities would exist *to a greater extent* than if both approaches were taken.

So what are the general types of activities that could comprise a response section? In terms of opportunity reduction there are four themes: *increasing effort* (to offend), *increasing risk* (of getting caught), *reducing rewards* (of the behaviour) and *removing excuses*. Of these four categories, the third involves reducing the benefits. The remainder involve increasing the costs of offending. Within these themes there are subcategories that specify precise actions. The table below outlines them. When devising a response to a given problem it is essential to relate the underlying causes determined in the analysis phase to the individual activities in the response phase. Referring to the table below may help structure how the response phase is developed.

Increasing effort (for the offender)	Increasing risk (of getting caught)	Reducing rewards (of committing offence)	Removing excuses
<p>1. Target hardening: Making the commission of a crime more difficult.</p>	<p>5. Screening entrances and exits: increasing conspicuousness when rules are not being observed.</p>	<p>9. Removing targets: making a crime impossible because its purpose is precluded or its object unavailable.</p>	<p>13. Setting rules: clearly defining the law and unacceptable conduct (and the consequences).</p>
<p>Eg Steering locks</p> <p>2. Controlling access to targets: Limiting access of would-be perpetrators to the place where crime is possible.</p>	<p>Eg Merchandise tags</p> <p>6. Formal surveillance (of victims and offenders): locating perpetrators, victims or crime-prone places in time and space.</p>	<p>Eg Removable car radio</p> <p>10. Identifying property: making stolen goods more easily recognisable.</p>	<p>Eg Customs declarations</p> <p>14. Alerting conscience: publicising the rules (subtly or otherwise) to make offenders think twice.</p>
<p>Eg Parking lot barriers</p> <p>3. Deflecting offenders and victims: inducing offenders or victims to be elsewhere than at a place where crime is possible.</p>	<p>Eg Burglar alarms</p> <p>7. Surveillance by employees: the oversight by those at work as part of their work function.</p>	<p>Eg Property marking</p> <p>11. Reducing temptation: limiting occasions on which a potential target is publicly identifiable as such.</p>	<p>Eg Roadside speedometers</p> <p>15. Controlling disinhibitors: reducing the frequency of states that may induce rule breaking.</p>
<p>Eg Street closures</p> <p>4. Controlling crime facilitators: controlling the means whereby crime is made possible or easier.</p>	<p>Eg CCTV systems</p> <p>8. Natural surveillance: making crime or the identity of those committing crime more visible.</p>	<p>Eg Rapid repair</p> <p>12. Denying benefits: design or later action make the crime less profitable after the fact.</p>	<p>Eg Drinking laws</p> <p>16. Assisting compliance: making it easy to follow the rules or law.</p>
<p>Eg Caller ID</p>	<p>Eg Street lighting</p>	<p>Eg Graffiti cleaning</p>	<p>Eg Easy library checkout</p>

The major hurdle of the response phase is ensuring that the activities are implemented properly. It is vital that the response section is monitored continually throughout its life, not just reviewed before it is brought to the next T&C meeting.

Assessment phase (effectiveness of response)

One of the first POP projects (Newport News) identified five objectives to any problem solving exercise. They were:

1. Totally eliminate problem
2. Substantially reduce problem
3. Reduce the harm caused by problem
4. Deal with problem better
5. Remove problem from police consideration

A well written SARA will have an exit strategy (which is actually located in the response section of the SARA sheets). This is usually a statement that describes the conditions that need to be met for the SARA to be closed. The form of this statement will be dictated by the nature of the objective. If it is either of the first two objectives, it will be something like “this SARA will be closed when a X% reduction in Y calls for the beat is realised”. The other objectives will require a different criterion in order to close the SARA.

The other consideration for assessment purposes is any ongoing activity that needs to be performed post SARA finalisation. Some problems are of a type that require some level of consistent attention to prevent an influx of incidents. This attention is likely to be of low-level as long as it is continually maintained. The attention could vary from reminders to residents to be vigilant with household security, to community forums/survey to elicit current views on the problem (gone away/re-emerged/etc).

Some thought may need to be given to what conditions would need to be met for the SARA to be raised again. If post SARA activity is undertaken, alert bobbies, or other agency representatives, will be in a good position to act quickly to prevent future increases of activity.

In a perfect world, every problem would be solved at the first point it came to notice. One of the reasons the SARA model works is that it has a built-in mechanism to evaluate the problem solving efforts. If an exit strategy is expressed, it is a simple manner to determine whether the responses addressed the problem (did X fall by 20%?). If the responses “failed”, two conclusions can be drawn: the response was the wrong thing to do, or the response was right, but it was not done properly or as intended. The former implies that the understanding of the problem is not as complete as previously thought and requires a re-visit to the analysis section. If the latter is applicable, compliance is the issue. Either way, it is important to discover the true nature of the problem and the reasons for the “failed” response.

If it is concluded that the response was wrong, a review of the analysis section is warranted and possibly performing again. Then, a new suite of responses will be developed. Thus, a SARA turns into a SARARA. If the problem is particularly

complex, it may even turn into a SARARARARARA or worse. It is tempting to see these situations as evidence of poor workplace performance, but this is not the case. If anything, a SARA that goes through a number of cycles is far more valuable than one that is straightforward. Complex problems are difficult to address, and the lessons learnt from these will be of greater value than those gained from problems with obvious solutions.

Sample problems:

Problem 1: This contrived example is meant to illustrate that a SARA-like process is actually (or should be) carried out in a wide variety of scenarios. It is not a mysterious way of operating, merely a systematic way of approaching a group of events.

Scanning.

One morning you get into your car to drive to work. The familiar sound of the engine is absent when you turn the key in the ignition. In fact, the engine sounds like it is struggling to start. So, what is the problem? It isn't simply "the car". The problem is "car will not start". In this case, the offensive behaviour is "not starting".

Distinguishing non-starting when the engine turns over but fails to start, non-starting because the starter motor does not work, and non-starting because no lights come on when the key is turned also helps clarify what might be the problem.

Analysis.

What are the possible reasons for the inability of the car to start? There are a variety of mechanical explanations that could be responsible for the lack of forward motion. Before lifting the bonnet, you see a series of lights on the dashboard. If there are none, the problem is electrical. If there are lights, but the starter motor makes a sad click, the starter motor is implicated. If the starter motor works, but the fuel gauge shows empty, you've forgotten to fill up, there is a fuel leak, someone has siphoned fuel, or your children have been driving the car.

Response.

The logical action, assuming the starter motor works and the tank is empty, is to check for leaks and, finding none, to fill the tank.

Assessment.

After filling the petrol tank, you attempt to start the car. As you do, you notice the petrol indicator light is now off. The engine roars to life. Problem solved

Suppose you took the same action, but the car still didn't start? You would review the situation and try to isolate the cause of the engine failure. The iterative process is carried out until the problem is remedied.

Problem 2: SARA 63 Knowsley Industrial Estate. The problem outlined here is a good example of problem solving – the problem was solvable, took up a sizable amount of police time and involved a great deal of analysis and hard work. What follows here is a summary of the SARA.

Scanning

Kirkby Industrial Estates consistent volume crime levels.

NB: while the above expression does not describe the problem adequately, the analysis phase determined the components of criminal activity that were operating in the area. This gave a direction for efforts to be focussed.

Analysis

PAT

Place: Knowsley Industrial Estate comprises a mixture of light industry units, yard-style small businesses and a number of large national companies. With the possible exception of caretakers, the area has no actual residents. The main area containing the small business units operates Monday to Friday during business hours. The large corporations and retail outlets operate every day and attract large amounts of vehicle-borne customers

Victim/Caller: The victims are a mixture of customers using the business area facilities, car parks, etc. The businesses themselves are targeted by thieves purporting to have lawful business in the area.

Offender: Offenders are in the main opportunist thieves who use the commercial nature of the area to cover criminal activity. Intelligence suggests the abundance of vehicles attracts professional car thieves from the surrounding estates and established areas of Huyton.

How do the features combine to cause a problem?

The commercial activity and mixture of retail and trade outlets provide lawful excuses for thieves to visit the estate. The crime is almost entirely contained to weekday business hours, as outside this period their presence is immediately noticeable. The proliferation of trade goods, tools and vehicles presents easy pickings for opportunist thieves. Many visitors to the trading estate may not be as “streetsafe” aware as the resident businesses and employees.

NB: the central issue appears to be access control. Many employees found it difficult to tell the difference between authorised personnel and members of the public, thus intruders were rarely confronted. Further, lax security of car keys at premises’ front desks and sales reps visiting businesses made TOMV a relatively simple offence to perpetrate.

Response

A combination of meetings and letters were held/sent to businesses on the estate pointing out the volume of crime contributed by a lack of access control, poor security, and keys being left in vehicles. This entailed a great deal of work (over 100 businesses were personally visited). The message regarding access control and lax security was re-emphasised through the Knowsley Business Watch as well as the Knowsley Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

Assessment

In the three months prior to the inception of the SARA, roughly 100 incidents occurring on the estate were reported to police. In the three months after the start SARA 42 incidents were reported. The three months following that recorded roughly 50 incidents.

While the SARA is now closed, activities are still ongoing to encourage businesses to be vigilant in terms of crime prevention.