Increasing Collective Efficacy and Social Capital at Crime Hot Spots: New Crime Control Tools for Police[1]

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Abstract There is strong evidence that focussing police resources at 'crime hot spots'—small geographic places at which crime is concentrated—is an effective crime control strategy. Generally, hot spots policing strategies focus on formal social controls such as police crackdowns and often ignore the social context of the places that are targeted. Our article describes an approach that recognizes the importance of police community collaboration to improve public safety and reinforce informal social controls, and the emerging empirical evidence that social disorganization and collective efficacy may influence crime patterns at the micro-geographic level. We argue for the relevance of informal social controls in place-based policing and describe an innovative Smart Policing collaboration between the Brooklyn Park (Minnesota) Police Department and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University that implements a department-wide programme in which police lead interventions to increase collective efficacy in hot spots.

Introduction

There is strong evidence that focussing police resources at 'hot spots'—small geographic places at which crime is concentrated—is an effective crime control strategy. However, police scholars have virtually ignored the social context of micro-places. In this article, we argue that social factors have salience not only at the community level but also at the micro-geographic, hot spot level. Social interventions at hot spots provide potential for the police to marshal a new and important strategy to do something about crime. We describe a new approach to 'collective efficacy policing' currently being developed and tested in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. We argue that this approach is feasible for police to manage, and offers the possibility of both reinforcing short-term crime prevention gains and establishing change that will reduce crime at chronic hot spots in the long term.

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Background

A growing body of research suggests the existence of a 'law of crime concentrations at places' (Weisburd *et al.*, 2012; Weisburd, 2015). This finding, which has been observed in cities across the United States and internationally, indicates that about 50% of crime is consistently found at just 3–6% of small places, such as street segments and addresses (Pierce *et al.*, 1986; Sherman *et al.*, 1989; Weisburd *et al.*, 2004; Weisburd *et al.*, 2012; Weisburd and Amram, 2014; Weisburd, Telep, *et al.*, 2014; Weisburd, 2015). The locations of these places are relatively stable over time and crime at place varies a great deal within communities, suggesting that micro-place effects do not simply reflect neighbourhood-level crime problems (Groff *et al.*, 2009; Weisburd *et al.*, 2009; Groff *et al.*, 2010; Weisburd, Groff, *et al.*, 2014; Weisburd and Amram, 2014; Curman *et al.*, 2015).

In line with the implications of the law of crime concentrations at places for crime prevention, studies (including a number of experimental field trials) provide strong evidence that hot spots policing strategies reduce crime (Sherman and Weisburd, 1995; Weisburd and Green, 1995; Weisburd and Eck, 2004; Braga and Bond, 2008; Lum *et al.*, 2011; Braga *et al.*, 2012; Telep *et al.*, 2014). These interventions are effective because they increase the efficiency of police, allowing them to deal with a large proportion of crime by focussing on a small number of places (Weisburd and Telep, 2010). The evidence base also suggests that displacement of crime to surrounding places is not an inevitable consequence of such focussed policing efforts; conversely, diffusion of crime control benefits from 'treated' locations is more likely (Braga *et al.*, 2012).

The primary crime prevention mechanism of existing hot spots policing programs emphasizes formal social controls such as deterring potential offenders through formal guardianship or modifying the situational characteristics of places so that they are less amenable to crime. Hot spots policing strategies rarely take into account the role of informal community processes in controlling crime.

Bringing social interventions into the equation

Social disorganization theories suggest responses to crime that are based on informal social control (see Bursik, 1988; Sampson and Groves, 1989; Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003). Sources of the differential ability of communities to regulate their residents are reflected in structural characteristics such as poverty and residential mobility, or the ability of neighbourhoods to restrain unruly juveniles. Sampson *et al.* coined the concept of collective efficacy of communities, which is based on the 'willingness [of residents] to intervene for the common good' (1997, p. 919) and social ties or cohesion among community members, to emphasize the mechanisms by which a community can prevent crime through enhanced informal rather than formal social controls.

It is striking that police scholars have virtually ignored social disorganization in thinking about crime prevention at hot spots. Sherman *et al.*, for example, argue that '[t]raditional collectivity [social disorganization] theories may be appropriate for explaining community-level variation, but they seem inappropriate for small, publicly visible places with highly transient populations' (1989, p. 30). Is the concept of social disorganization inappropriate for understanding the variability of crime at specific places? Indeed, if the only units of analysis relevant to social disorganization are large geographic units like neighbourhoods, this is a reasonable position.

However, we argue for another approach that is relevant to hot spots policing. Micro-geographic units such as individual street segments (the two block faces between two intersections) or specific facilities are not only physical settings but also 'behavior settings', or 'small-scale social systems' (Wicker, 1987, p. 614; see also Taylor, 1997).

Within the temporal and spatial boundaries of behaviour settings, objects, people, and events interact to produce the expected behaviour for that environment. These socially constructed settings have standing patterns of behaviour where residents take on certain roles and norms. People who frequent a street segment get to know one another and become familiar with each others' routines. They can be seen as the first building block of communities, or even 'micro-communities' within themselves, where face-to-face contacts between residents, visitors, business owners and so on are structured in clearly demarcated settings. The interactions and relationships between these individuals, and between individuals and other social institutions within or closely connected to the space, foster informal social controls that regulate behaviour (e.g. Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Taylor, 1997). Thus, these micro-communities share many of the traits that have been seen as crucial to social disorganization theory at the 'macro-community' level, in that these physical units also function as social units with specific routines. Thus, social disorganization has direct relevance to our understanding of crime at micro-places (Taylor *et al.*, 1984; Smith *et al.*, 2000; Rice and Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2012).

Recent research from Seattle, Washington (Weisburd *et al.*, 2012) suggests that the structural characteristics of places related to informal social control also vary across micro-places and are related to micro-level variability in crime. Weisburd *et al.* (2012) collected data indicating that micro-geographic hot spots of social disorganization and low social control exist and vary considerably from street to street. For example, 50% of public housing assistance in Seattle was concentrated on about 0.4% of the city's street segments. Within 800 ft of these housing assistance 'hot spots', 84% of street segments had no housing assistance recipients. They also identified similar hot spots of collective efficacy, as represented by the percentage of active voters on each street segment (Sampson *et al.*, 1997; Morenoff *et al.*, 2001;

Putnam, 2001; Coleman, 2002). Fifty per cent of active voters lived on just 12–13% of Seattle's street segments, and only 25% of segments within 800 ft of those hot spots also had high active voting levels. Property values, housing assistance, and collective efficacy were strongly related to whether a street segment was identified as a chronic crime hot spot over a 16-year period.

If economic deprivation and collective efficacy are important causal mechanisms underlying developmental patterns of crime at micro-places, can social interventions be added to the crime prevention toolbox of policing? Social processes such as poverty and social disorganization have typically been considered beyond the control of crime prevention practitioners, leaving police to focus only on immediate responses to individual incidents or problems (Clarke, 1995). But while hot spots enforcement strategies address the immediate need for police intervention, the benefits may slow as the order maintenance effect decreases and the underlying issues again rise to the surface. The finding that social processes also operate at the micro-geographic level offers the opportunity for much more targeted efforts to change the social context of places like specific street blocks or facilities, where the police have a greater ability to influence change. The potential exists to 'lower the scale' of social interventions.

Scaling down social interventions: new opportunities for policing and crime prevention

The idea of the police leading social interventions at hot spots is a new and somewhat radical idea for policing. Accordingly, there is no strong body of evidence or established model for practice to draw upon in advancing the approach. However, a new collaboration between the Brooklyn Park (Minnesota) Police Department (BPPD) and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University, supported by the

Bureau of Justice Assistance's Smart Policing Initiative, may provide the context and practical application for understanding and developing these ideas. This ongoing project seeks to identify, develop, and test (in the context of a block-randomized experimental evaluation) a department-wide program to increase collective efficacy at hot spots.

Brooklyn Park is well-situated as the study site for this effort. With a population of 77,000 people in 26 square miles, it is the second-largest suburb in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area and the sixth-largest city in Minnesota. Traditionally, a 'bedroom community' for nearby Minneapolis, Brooklyn Park is 85% developed and has a high population density—almost 3,000 residents per square mile (2010 census). There is no true downtown area, but both residential and commercial properties exist in the city. The population of Brooklyn Park is highly diverse. Twenty-five per cent of residents are foreign-born and almost 50% are non-White.

Brooklyn Park's crime rate is the highest among Minneapolis-St. Paul suburbs with 50,000 or more residents. In turn, crime is very concentrated in Brooklyn Park. Just 16 street segments in the city produce 25% of crime, and 2.1% produce 50% of crime. Much of this crime is concentrated at hot spots characterized by low-income public housing and low-rent apartments, as well as residential areas that have been affected by economic hardship and foreclosures. The mixed land use, high population density and heterogeneity, and population turnover associated with these locations suggest a connection between low collective efficacy and crime.

At full strength, Brooklyn Park Police Department (BPPD) has 108 sworn officers, with 48 officers, 9 sergeants and 2 lieutenants assigned to patrol. The department has a long history of collaborating with community service providers, community coalitions, and schools. Former chief Michael Davis was instrumental in developing a culture of community collaboration and this has continued with the current leadership; however, BPPD sought a more systematic approach to community outreach and problem-solving.

The programme is organized around three essential preconditions of collective efficacy: (i) the establishment of 'proximal relationships' with and between residents; (ii) the development of 'working trust' between relevant parties; and (iii) the 'shared expectations' that result from that trust and compel residents to act against social problems (Sampson *et al.*, 1997). The entire BPPD patrol force, including 50 patrol officers, has participated in a one-day training in understanding the causal relationship between collective efficacy and crime and how to apply this knowledge to community-building and problem-solving strategies.

The content of the training day was specifically designed to 'operationalize' collective efficacy at the street level. The training was designed and delivered by the entire project team, including senior officers and project coordinators from BPPD, the research team, and subject matter experts in collective efficacy and policing.[2] Importantly for buy-in, a small team of officers was selected to pilot test the first stage of the intervention in a selected location and report back at the training, so officers could connect the theory with practical application by their peers.

The intervention itself consists of a three-stage process termed 'Brooklyn Park: Assets Coming together to Take action (BP-ACT)':

- Assets (asset identification)
  - Officers will identify both the specific problems at hot spots and the key stakeholders and resources ('assets') that should be involved in solving them. The problem-solving process will place primary emphasis on identification of key assets, such as

residents, business owners, community groups, within the micro-community of the hot spot. Assets may also be 'anchor points' (Uchida *et al.*, 2014)—social service agencies, schools, places of worship, etc. that may be outside the precise boundaries of the hot spot but are meaningful to residents. Officers will be trained to identify these assets through conversations with local actors during their discretionary time (see below) and by utilizing the local knowledge they obtain through regular police work. These conversations will be guided, at least initially, by a procedural justice dialogue script (e.g. Mazerolle *et al.*, 2012) to help build trust and social capital with and among residents.

○ Importantly, this stage also involves assessing the liabilities at a location. Some individuals or organizations in a hot spot may be closely tied to the crime problems at that place and may not be best placed to help solve them.[3] In this case, police will also focus on stabilizing the location (in some cases through more traditional law enforcement methods, albeit with a view to protecting community trust that has already been developed).

• Coming together (coalescence)
○ This phase builds upon traditional community-oriented and problem-oriented approaches by emphasizing the creation of police-community problem-solving partnerships that build residents' willingness to take ownership of local crime issues. During this phase, officers will gather intelligence from the community, work with stakeholders to implement crime prevention strategies, and—key to our approach—use their training in collective efficacy and community-building to focus residents on creating collective ownership over the hot spot. Officers will match identified assets to identified problems within each hot spot through small group conversations or more formal meetings.

• Taking action (follow-up)
○ Patrol officers will submit information on their activities to BPPD's project coordinator. Officers and the project coordinator will collaborate to assess and track the implementation and progress of agreed-upon community actions in a shared project database.

The Brooklyn Park approach does not simply aim to replicate existing models of broken windows or community-oriented policing. Neither community policing nor broken windows policing focusses specifically on building relationships between citizens themselves through police community collaboration and leveraging those informal social controls to prevent crime. Nor do they typically place responsibility for these actions in the hands of the entire patrol force rather than a specialized unit. Traditionally, police have viewed communities as a problem to be solved. Fixing the broken window does not change the conditions that led to the window being broken or address the community's (un)willingness to fix it. Thus, the innovation of BP-ACT is to go beyond traditional community-oriented, problem-solving approaches by emphasizing the direct impact of everyday police intervention on informal social control and structuring a concrete approach for building community engagement and collective efficacy. Importantly, it also focusses on creating a 'culture of responsibility' within the community.

Responding to critics

Critics of this approach may argue that the BP-ACT approach is beyond the scope of the police mission, and that police are law enforcement agents not social workers. We think that the Brooklyn Park

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[3] Indeed, in the pilot phase the officers initially identified a building manager as an "asset" but discovered later that the individual's family was involved in problem behaviors at the site and the manager was not working to alleviate the problems.

approach is a reflection of police acting in their 'sentinel role'. Nagin *et al.* (2015) argue that the role of the police as 'apprehension agents' has been overemphasized to the detriment of their guardianship ('sentinel') function in which they can prevent crime before it happens (see also Nagin, 2013). Nagin *et al.* propose that 'police effectiveness in their role as apprehension agents is an outgrowth of a failure in their role as sentinels to have successfully prevented the crime from happening in the first place' (2015, p. 84).

This argument supports the idea that police should work in a preventive rather than solely enforcement capacity, but what about the focus on social interventions? Nagin *et al.* (2015) also caution that the benefit of police acting in their sentinel role is highly dependent on the actual behaviour of the police at the location. Failure to collaborate with the community—or worse, alienating the community through, for example, zero-tolerance approaches—can hinder their ability to prevent crime (see also Durlauf and Nagin, 2011). We would further add that at the hot-spot level, police have perhaps the best understanding of what conditions on a block promote crime and disorder. Through their continual interventions, police—especially patrol officers—develop a working knowledge of a place that could prove useful in determining how formal and informal social controls can be effectively and efficiently marshaled.

Another objection to this modification of the police role is that the approach may be unrealistic at a time when most municipalities in USA are facing budget constraints, contracting out police services to county sheriffs, and even disbanding police departments completely (Nelligan and Bourns, 2011). To this, we would respond that innovations in policing do not necessarily require additional funding. While not always politically popular, existing resources can be reallocated in line with the evidence base (Durlauf and Nagin, 2011; Sherman, 2013). For example, hot spots policing approaches in general are efficient because they allow police to focus on a relatively small number of

places but deal with a large proportion of the crime problem (Weisburd and Telep, 2010). Weisburd *et al.* (2012)'s findings indicating that similar concentrations of social disorganization and collective efficacy exist at the micro-geographic level suggests that hot spots also represent a more efficient target for social interventions. Efficiency in the distribution of social resources, like police resources, is crucial in difficult economic times.

Furthermore, from an operational perspective, the proposed model does not require as substantial a change to the status quo as it might appear. An important innovation in this project is the leveraging of patrol officers' discretionary, or uncommitted, time outside of responding to calls and incidents for building connectivity and trust with and among hot spot residents. Research suggests that discretionary time can constitute a substantial part of an officer's shift (Famega, 2009); in Brooklyn Park, it accounts for approximately 32% of a 12-hour shift. Specialized police units are usually assigned to community- or problem-oriented police work but are typically cut when departments experience fiscal constraints. We propose that patrol officers can support specialized functions as part of their regular work through the modified problem-solving approach inherent in BP-ACT, just as many hot spots policing programmes were created from the reallocation of existing patrol resources (Sherman and Weisburd, 1995; Telep *et al.*, 2014). The most abundant resource for any police department is the discretionary time of the patrol officer.

Ultimately, we do not view engaging in 'collective efficacy policing' as an ill-conceived expansion of the police role. Our proposed approach makes use of discretionary time to allow officers to engage in necessary but reactive activity as well as building community capacity to partner with police in a collaborative approach to 'sentinel' activities. Our goal is to systematize the sentinel role of police into the regular patrol function, rather than leaving it primarily up to the specialized units that typically conduct guardianship and community-oriented activities. Furthermore, the hot spots focus allows

us to target these guardianship activities at the locations where they are most likely to have a deterrent effect.

Nonetheless, we anticipate that the collective efficacy policing approach will be new and challenging for many officers, and that officer buy-in to the programme and sustainability might be challenging. Brooklyn Park Police Department is an ideal testing ground because of its smaller size, cultural commitment to community engagement and relatively young patrol force, which we anticipate will be more receptive to innovation. However, in larger and more traditional departments such a transformation may be more challenging.

The 'whole patrol force' approach to collective efficacy building may be an important way to establish both officer receptivity and sustainability. A disadvantage of using specialist units to implement innovative practices is that those units can end up operating in isolation from, and even at odds with, the overarching culture of the organization. Officers in those units may have little contact with regular patrol officers, and patrol officers may be sceptical or simply unaware of their function. On the other hand, while it may take time, if the leadership sets expectations for the use of discretionary time by the entire patrol force, the culture may eventually shift and routines will be established, thus sustaining the approach. Furthermore, when specialist units are disbanded or moved, there is no sustainability for the community—in traditional community-oriented policing, there is no guarantee that community members will be empowered with the tools they need to continue the approach. In the case of BP-ACT, the focus is on building relationships *before* solving the problems.

Changing the structure of police training, accountability, and performance measurement is also key to buy-in and sustainability. In Brooklyn Park, the BP-ACT training was delivered to the entire force in the same manner as other regularly scheduled training modules, with introductions and participation from the chief and senior leadership to reinforce the Department's commitment to the approach. Much of the training was delivered by senior officers, which may have provided more legitimacy than a team of external researchers. This training could ultimately be incorporated into the academy curriculum to develop a culture of collective efficacy building across the force. Sherman (2013) and Nagin *et al.* (2015) both highlight the importance of performance metrics that evaluate a broader range of police functions and outcomes than arrests, response times, and so on, which do not necessarily measure effectiveness. Performance evaluations of individuals and the organization as a whole that emphasize police relationships with the community, collaborative problem solving, and measures of informal social control indicate that these outcomes are valued within the organization.

Discussion and conclusions

Why should the police enter the new and difficult territory of social intervention at hot spots if they are doing so well already? As we noted at the outset, a strong body of evidence suggests that the police can be effective by bringing relatively short-term interventions to micro-places. Why is this new approach needed?

Deterrence-based approaches certainly provide crime prevention benefits at places. But deterrence necessarily has a time limit (Sherman, 1990; Koper, 1995; Nagin, 1998). Even if we assume a residual benefit after a police crackdown or focussed intervention (Sherman, 1990), the characteristics that led to the place becoming a hot spot in the first place remain and could lead to a re-emergency of crime in the long run. Of course, the police can deal with this problem by continuing to patrol the area or using predictive policing (among other tools) to identify the optimal times for intervention. But deterrence does not change the underlying conditions and will not solve the long-term problem on its own.

Problem-oriented policing seeks to address the underlying conditions, and research suggests that it can have stronger impacts on crime than simply increasing police presence (Braga *et al.*, 1999;

Weisburd *et al.*, 2010). However, long-term prevention will be hindered if we cannot address the social causes of crime. Broken windows theory advocates have already argued that the police can play a role in strengthening the community's efforts to bring informal social controls into crime prevention (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). We are advocating that the police focus such efforts at micro-geographic places and consider broader efforts to reinforce informal social controls. This is not only consistent with the research evidence, but also provides a more manageable focus for police intervention.

For patrol officers to be successful in promoting collective efficacy, it will require (especially in large agencies) a shift from the myopic focus of crisis response to a bifurcated approach that allows space for community-building efforts at hot spots. When done right, community-building strategies work to the benefit of the traditional crime fighting responses at places. Research indicates that a community prone to engaging in informal social control is less likely to need the police and is of more value to the police when crime does occur (Sampson, 1986; Sampson *et al.*, 1997). Even where collective efficacy is low, allowing the police time to build relationships with citizens may be an important precursor to its development (Silver and Miller, 2002; Wells *et al.*, 2006; Kochel, 2012), and subsequently pave the way for collaborative problem-solving and interventions to improve housing, economic opportunities, and strengthen families and youth. Citizens who feel safe and view the police as partners may become empowered to take responsibility for crime control and self-regulate community safety (Gill *et al.*, 2014). Thus, we argue that if we include the achievement of higher levels of informal social control in the general scope of police patrol at hot spots, we could transform the social context of these places and promote long-term crime-prevention gains.

This approach also has the potential to increase crime control gains while building stronger ties with the public. In a time of growing concerns about public trust in the police in disadvantaged and minority communities (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015), a crime-prevention approach that seeks to build ties with communities and strengthen collective efficacy in communities seems particularly promising. We think that these new tools are key to policing in the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

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