

Police Interventions to Reduce Violent Crime: A Review of Rigorous Research

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Summary: What interventions “work” when police are trying to reduce violent crime? By examining only evaluations of interventions that are scientifically valid, this presentation provides a review of what we know works for law enforcement. Specifically: The most effective police strategies are focused and highly proactive, relying on crime analysis. Evidence suggests police tend to be particularly successful when tailor-made efforts are concentrated on specific high violence street blocks, corners, and address clusters.

Data and Methods: Using a comprehensive search strategy, Lum,² Koper,³ and Telep identified 89 total rigorous policing intervention evaluations and visually summarized these studies in a three dimensional “matrix” (an interactive version will soon be available at <http://gemini.gmu.edu/cebcp>) based on the target of the intervention (x-axis), whether the intervention was general or specific (y-axis), and the intervention’s level of proactivity (z-axis). A subset of these studies (about 70 percent) reported on at least one violent crime outcome and was used for the current analysis.

Findings: Overall, police can be most effective in reducing violence crime when they are proactive, use specific (as opposed to general) strategies, focus on small places (or groups operating in small places), and develop tailor-made solutions that make use of a careful analysis of local problems and conditions.

Proactive interventions challenge the reactive nature of current law enforcement practices. By using crime analysis to predict where, when, and how incidents will occur, the efficacy of crime prevention strategies increases greatly. Reactive, arrest-based approaches that focus on individuals after they have already committed crimes are generally less effective, and may even increase recidivism. Focused and specific interventions are strategies that target specific types of crime (e.g., a focus on just gun-related homicide), specific types of people (e.g., specific gangs) or specific crime mechanisms/factors contributing to crime (e.g., emphasizing physical environmental factors that could enable crime), as opposed to general, blanket strategies (e.g. increasing the number of patrol officers or mandatory arrests).

Further, targeting the very small percentage of places within a city that have violent crime – usually only about 5% of an entire jurisdiction – can significantly reduce a city’s overall violent crime rate. Even more powerful is combining the targeting of these small geographic units (blocks, corners, clusters of addresses) with tailor-made, multi-agency, focused interventions. An example would be a problem-oriented approach to reducing crime at violent hot spots that includes gang activity. A “pulling levers” approach that emphasizes deterring specific high-risk gang members have proven effective in violent crime prevention at these places. Even at the neighborhood or police beat level, successful interventions were those which still used a more careful allocation of police resources than standard random preventative patrol. An example includes crackdowns in high crime neighborhoods, a kind of hot spots approach to larger geographic areas.

Implications and Policy Relevance: The Lum-Koper-Telep Matrix is useful because it generalizes scientific findings in ways that can be applicable across many different types of organizations and jurisdictions. Our purpose is not to recommend a particular program as a panacea for violent crime, but instead, to use science to demonstrate the utility of adopting particular dimensions of scientifically tested programs that have shown to be effective. The Matrix also reveals areas where federal funding has helped us gain insight into effective ways of reducing violence while also pointing out key gaps in our knowledge that further Congressional funding could help fill.

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