

Problem-Oriented Policing in Violent Crime Places: A Randomized Controlled Experiment¹

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SUMMARY

Many researchers believe that crime problems can be reduced more efficiently if officers systematically focus their attention on crime “hot spots.” Previously, the value of focused problem-oriented policing efforts in controlling violence was not known. This randomized controlled experiment sought to generate more knowledge on the usefulness of problem-oriented interventions to control violent places; more specifically, to evaluate the effects of problem-oriented policing at high-activity violent crime locations in Jersey City, New Jersey. It was concluded that the Jersey City Police Department’s pilot problem-oriented policing program was successful at reducing crime and disorder at violent places, with little evidence of displacement.

DATA AND METHODS

In response to an increase in arrests for robbery (of 52%) and aggravated assault (of 76%) between 1987 and 1993 in Jersey City, the Jersey City Police Department (JCPD) collaborated with Rutgers University’s Center for Crime Prevention Studies to implement and evaluate a strategic response to urban violent crime problems.² The strategy combined problem-oriented policing and hot spots approaches in a pilot program. The JCPD and Rutgers researchers identified violent crime hot spots, while the JCPD Violent Crimes Unit (VCU) was responsible for developing appropriate problem-oriented policing strategies. The program and evaluation design followed the SARA model (scanning, analysis, response, assessment). Fifty six high-activity violent crime places in Jersey City were initially included in the experiment (subsequently matched into 28 pairs for evaluation purposes). Twelve pairs were selected for random allocation to the treatment or control group.³ The VCU was instructed not to engage in any problem-solving activities at control locations during the experiment. The officers developed and implemented responses that were linked to what they had identified as the causes of those problems, but this generally included an attempt to control disorder (i.e., invoking the “broken windows” theory). Twenty eight types of responses were implemented across the treatment places. Crime incident report data and citizen emergency calls for service were used as official indicators of crime. Physical and social observation data were also collected at control and treatment places. A randomized complete block design was used to assess the main effects of the intervention on reported crime incidents and citizen calls for service. Generalized linear models were used to analyze the randomized complete block group design. Further, a two-block catchment area was constructed around each of the 24 places; pretest and posttest official crime data in the areas surrounding control and treatment locations were compared to assess the diffusion and displacement effects for crime types that were affected by the intervention at the

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³ The officers were directed to select a mix of high-, medium-, and low-activity places, as well as not choose pairs of places that were spatially adjacent.

treatment places. Proximate spatial effects were measured using the same analytic techniques as the analysis of main effects.

FINDINGS

The total number of criminal incidents and the total number of calls for service were significantly reduced at the treatment places, relative to the control places (this is not driven by a large reduction in only one crime type). Further, property crime calls for service and incidents at the treatment places (relative to control places) decreased significantly between observation periods, but disorder calls and incidents did not change significantly at the experimental locations compared to the control locations. Observed physical and social disorder was alleviated; this result was statistically significant. Lastly, the displacement and diffusion experimental analyses revealed that the majority of crime types in the treatment catchment areas were not significantly displaced or diffused as a result of the problem-oriented policing strategy in the target areas.