

Policing Crime and Disorder Hot Spots: A Randomized Controlled Trial¹

A. A. Braga & B. J. Bond

SUMMARY

Although policing disorder to prevent crime is a common crime-control strategy, existing research does not demonstrate a consistent relationship between disorder and serious crime (or between crime-control effectiveness and policing disorder strategies). Further, previous studies examining the effectiveness of “broken windows” policing are limited in both methodological rigor (i.e. these studies use non-experimental and quasi-experimental designs) and measurement. This study examines the effects of policing disorder on crime in Lowell, Massachusetts using a randomized block experimental design. This is done in conjunction with qualitative indicators on local dynamics to evaluate the effects of policing disorder at crime and disorder hot-spot locations. Insights on the causal pathways of crime-prevention mechanisms associated with policing disorder approaches are also discussed.

DATA AND METHODS

Like many problem-oriented policing projects, the program and evaluation design of this study follows the scanning, analysis, response, and assessment model. All crime and disorder calls for service in Lowell, Massachusetts in 2004 were geocoded; the densest clusters of these calls were identified. Preliminary hot-spot areas were identified using simple temporal analyses and ranking procedures. Hot-spot area boundaries were determined using qualitative data.² Borrowing from other studies measuring immediate spatial displacement, a two-block catchment area was included around the final hot-spot areas. Thirty four violent crime places were identified, with 17 matched pairs resulting for evaluation (randomly allocated to control and treatment groups). The intervention lasted one year, with the captain of each police sector accountable for implementation of situational interventions (designed to modify disorder at a place).³ Citizen emergency calls for service data were used as official indicators of crime, and systematic observation techniques were used to collect pretest and posttest data on physical and social incivilities at the treatment and control places.

FINDINGS

Total calls for service were reduced by 19.8% in treatment vs. control hot spots. All crime types showed reductions, although the degree of reduction varied cross crime categories. The systematic observation data revealed that indicators of social and physical disorder were significantly reduced at the treatment places relative to the control places. Further, the displacement and diffusion experimental analyses revealed that all call categories did not experience significant displacement or diffusion effects because of the problem-oriented policing strategy in the target areas. A mediation analysis indicated that situational prevention strategies generated the strongest crime prevention gains and increasing misdemeanor arrests also had a smaller crime reduction benefit. The use of social service strategies was not associated with significant reductions in crime.

¹ Braga, A. A., & Bond, B. J. (2008). Policing crime and disorder hot spots: A randomized controlled trial. *Criminology*, 46(3), 577-607.

² Place characteristics, local dynamics, and Lowell Police Department patrol officer perceptions of crime problems.

³ Control hot-spot areas were not identified to the captains.