

A Randomized Controlled Trial of Different Policing Strategies at Hot Spots of Violent Crime in Jacksonville: Executive Summary

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Police interventions focused on “hot spots”—small geographic places or areas where crime is concentrated—have gained widespread acceptance among practitioners and researchers as an effective approach to reducing crime, though ambiguities still exist as to what types of policing strategies work best for hot spots. During 2008 and 2009, the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office (JSO) and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) partnered on a project to test the effectiveness of problem-oriented policing and directed-saturation patrol at hot spots as a means of refining JSO’s strategies to reduce street violence.

Using data from 2006 through May 2008, JSO crime analysts and the research team identified 83 precisely defined hot spots of non-domestic, street violence in Jacksonville. These “micro” hot spots, which averaged 0.02 square miles in size, consisted of specific addresses, intersections, street blocks, and clusters of street blocks that exhibited high concentrations of violence during the two-and-a-half-year selection period. These hot spots were randomly assigned to problem-solving (22 locations), directed-saturation patrol (21 locations), or normal operating (i.e., “control”) conditions (40 locations) for a 90-day experimental period spanning from January 2009 through April 2009.

Problem-solving activities at the first group of locations were conducted by teams of supervisors, officers, and crime analysts who received training in the principles of problem-oriented and intelligence-led policing. In total, 60 officers and 4 analysts were assigned to this effort. Working in two shifts, they covered their assigned locations on a full-time basis, thus providing coverage seven days a week at each location. The officers and analysts attempted to identify and address the underlying factors driving crime in these locations, working closely with community partners where possible. Officers implemented a wide array of measures at these locations, including situational crime prevention, code enforcement and nuisance abatement, partnerships with business owners and rental property managers, community organizing, improvement of social services, aesthetic improvements, and investigation or enforcement activities.

Locations assigned to the directed-saturation patrol group received additional patrol during high-risk days and times as determined by JSO crime analysts. The patrols were conducted by a mix of on-duty officers and officers on overtime. During the selected days and times, pairs of officers in separate cars worked one to three hot spots at a time (officers assigned to multiple hot spots covered locations in close proximity). On average, the directed-saturation patrol locations received 53 officer-hours of additional patrol per week, leading to significant increases in field stops and other self-initiated activities in these places.

An analysis of the program’s impacts, which controlled for pre-intervention levels of violence, seasonal patterns, and selected characteristics of the hot spots, revealed that the problem-oriented policing intervention produced stronger and more lasting effects on violent crime. Although violence declined by up to 20% in the directed-saturation patrol locations during the intervention period, this reduction could not be

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clearly distinguished from natural variation in crime over time (i.e., the result was not “statistically significant”), and violence levels rebounded after the intervention. In contrast, the problem-solving locations experienced a statistically significant 33% reduction in officially-reported incidents of street violence during the 90-day period following the intervention, relative to trends in the control (non-intervention) locations. (Total violence and serious property crime also declined to a lesser extent.) This suggests that the problem-solving measures implemented by officers and analysts had taken hold by this time and were producing reductions in crime that may have lasted well beyond the study period.

A caveat to this finding is that calls to police about violence increased in areas within 100 to 500 feet of the problem-solving locations, though this did not lead to an increase in officially-reported incidents of violence. This may indicate that crime was displaced from the target locations to the surrounding areas, or that citizens became more inclined to call police about crime when exposed to the beneficial effects of problem-solving police activities in nearby locations.

In sum, this experiment provides evidence that problem-oriented policing can be an effective strategy for reducing violence at hot spots—and one that can produce lasting effects—though police should be aware of the potential for displacement or reporting effects in nearby areas and monitor these developments accordingly. Assigning officers to micro hot spots for extended saturation patrol, on the other hand, does not appear to be an optimal approach for reducing serious crime. Police might therefore experiment with other methods of directed patrol such as assigning officers to larger areas and giving them responsibility to conduct periodic stops and activities at multiple hot spots within those areas. This would potentially optimize patrol time and coverage across numerous hot spots. The research team will be conducting additional analyses of the experimental data to more precisely identify the types and dosages of police activities that were most effective at the hot spots.