

## Criminology 101: A Guide for Smart Policing Initiatives: What Every Police Officer Should Know About the Causes of Crime

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The past two decades have produced an abundance of well-established research findings about crime. These facts have been verified in multiple research settings and now can be regarded as solid evidence about crime that can be used to build effective criminal justice and police policy. This Review Guide sets forth these ten facts and their possible implications for practice and policy. By highlighting these facts, we are offering a guide to practitioners without requiring them to make their way through the criminological literature. Many practitioners have suggested that clear summaries of such research are not available, or that criminologists' writings do not address their needs directly. This guide and the webinar that it supports are an effort to address those concerns.

This guide comes during a time of unprecedented cooperation between criminologists and practitioners, especially law enforcement practitioners. Indeed, a core principle of the Smart Policing Initiative itself is that research and research partners are integral to the success of any initiative. Beyond SPI, there are a number of criminologists embedded in police departments across the country, a practice that is at least 20 years old dating to the involvement of Lawrence Sherman with the Indianapolis Police department. The Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative which began in 1998 and Project Safe Neighborhoods beginning in 2002 required a research partner on the crime prevention and problem-solving teams. The role of the research partner was to produce a data driven understanding of crime (typically violence or gun violence) in the jurisdiction, and then to craft an evaluation. So in many ways, these partnerships helped to produce a broader understanding and appreciation for the role of research

Because they are supported by very strong research evidence, the facts discussed below can be used with confidence by police to craft effective interventions. Many of these findings will not be new or surprising to police. However, they can be acted on and used as the foundation of a response to crime problems with greater confidence, and they will steer us away from approaches that don't work as well as from new approaches that aren't based on the "facts" of crime. As the use of evidence-based strategies is a core principle in Smart Policing, these facts offer a foundation from which to begin to craft such strategies. The wide-ranging nature of these findings offers multiple opportunities for police to think in new ways.

Many jurisdictions already use strategies built on the research findings reported here. This is a good thing, as these findings are consistent with what the police are doing in many jurisdictions. We recognize that the police are in a position where they must act, and don't have the luxury of waiting for research to confirm that a practice is or is not likely to work. Indeed, facing thousands of calls for service each month, local law enforcement agencies would not be behaving responsibly if they were to wait for research to verify or disprove the basis of their

actions. That said, police do have a responsibility to apprise themselves of the findings of criminological research where it is relevant to their activities.

#### WHAT THIS GUIDE DOES.

This review of Criminology 101 examines ten basic facts of crime and offers insights into how they can be used to reduce crime.

Following the approach of a popular late night entertainment show, we list the Ten Basic Facts of Criminology, and their implications for Smart Policing. We also present the evidence that supports these facts and discuss how they might be applied to crime problems. That said, the suggestions offered here are not the only way that such facts may be applied. Local circumstances may dictate variation in what can be done and how to do it. We believe that such variation can be positive and hope its outcome will be reported. It is important to note that despite these facts being based on multiple sources of solid research they may not always apply to every situation.

So let's get down to it...

### The Ten Facts

10. **Gender** makes a big difference. Males are nine times more likely to commit a crime than females, and for violent crime this figure is even higher. These findings have implications for prevention programs as well as for interventions. This disparity in gender in involvement in crime by no means should be taken as an excuse to ignore the role that women play in crime, however.

- Male involvement in crime is about ten times higher than that of females.
- Males are even more over-represented in violent crime.
- However, there are some crimes, such as shoplifting, where women participate in crime at a higher rate.
- Most importantly, domestic violence is a crime for which women are at elevated risk for being victims, much higher than for men.

The differential involvement in crime by gender leads us to consider a number of possible interventions.

- Clearly, prevention programs for young men are especially important. Making sure that young men who appear on the path to getting in trouble are dealt with effectively can pay substantial dividends in crime prevention later down the road. Such prevention pays off in reduced criminal justice costs, as well as saves involvement in prison, jail or detention.
- Intervention programs that identify young men at the early stages of trouble – those who have an arrest, have been adjudicated, spent time in detention, have a delinquent sibling – can pay dividends in reducing criminal involvement. While effective prevention is the

lowest cost and most effective approach, all is not lost when a young man gets involved in delinquency.

- Building strong relationships in communities can provide police with community cooperation and support.
- Addressing the crimes of young women is also important, and just as is the case with young men, providing comprehensive approaches that focus on specific categories of youth, offending, or places can be most effective. Police may wish to “recruit” parents and schools in efforts to enhance crime prevention. Police should monitor the behavior of boys at risk as partners with other groups.

**9. Relational distance** matters. In other words, friends and family can be more dangerous than strangers. The nature of the relationship between victims and offenders is important for understanding the nature of the crime, as well as the prior history between victims and offenders. Criminology has taught us unequivocally that most victims and offenders are acquainted with each other. Often that acquaintance has occurred through their involvement in prior crime. Sometimes that involvement is when one person victimizes the other, other times it is when they commit crimes together as offenders.

- For many crimes, “familiarity breeds contempt; that is, individuals who are familiar with each other are more likely to get into disputes.”
- Most victims of violent crime know the offenders.
- A large fraction of property crime victims are acquainted with the offenders who burglarize them or steal their cars. Even though most burglaries and auto thefts are committed by strangers, a surprisingly high number of them are in fact committed by people known to the victim.
- Violent crime between intimates reflects the intensity of relationships, often entailing “expressive” violence. In the case of violence against women, likely suspects include spouses, family members and former lovers. This violence is not committed for an “instrumental” reason (i.e. to gain monetary advantage) but to even a score or right a supposed wrong.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. They already inform much of the police response to domestic violence. See for example, the COPS Office POP Guide on Domestic Violence: <http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p123-pub.pdf>

- Overlooking family violence is only likely to lead to additional violence. To reduce violence, police agencies should address domestic violence with vigor, based on known evidence-based practices [can we provide a link or two, perhaps to the High Point repeat victimization prevention program, the lethality assessment stuff from VRN?]

- Stranger on stranger violence is increasingly rare; most violent events have a link between victims and offenders and this is true with regard to serious crimes like sexual assault. Property crime often involves individuals who know each other, more often than was suspected twenty years ago. Thus, focusing on property crime can reduce violent crime, especially if analysis can identify property-crime hot spots in which the perpetrators live locally and are more likely to be known by victims. Property crime can often create motives for retaliation, thus an example of crime causing more crime.

BOXED MATERIAL. It is important to note that this kind of work is not new; that criminologists have been doing applied work for quite some time. There has been a surge in interest in what is known as “translational research.” This concept comes from public health and medicine, where the goal is to derive interventions from basic research and apply scientific findings to preventing and curing disease and promoting health. John Laub, former Director of the National Institute of Justice wrote about translational criminology most articulately.

<http://ccjs.umd.edu/sites/ccjs.umd.edu/files/Translational%20Criminology.pdf>

8. **Region** matters. We know that crime varies from one kind of social and physical organization to another. These forms of organization include population and building density, land use, proximity to transportation hubs and the sheer size of cities in both space and population. For example, crime in urban areas is higher than in suburban or rural areas and population density is generally associated with higher levels of crime (but not always).

- Violent crime rates in urban areas are generally higher than in other areas.
- Crime has increased in suburban and rural areas in the past several decades.
- In large metropolitan areas, central cities have an influence on crime rates of adjacent municipalities.

These criminological facts suggest a number of important things that police can do, particularly in the policy arena.

- Because crime takes a different form by region, it is important to conduct local problem analyses and craft different responses by region, especially for rural areas.
- Suburbs have seen increasing crime, some of which migrates from cities, and should look to best practices from urban areas.
- The demography and physical structure of an area has important implications for patrol, interventions and smart policing.

For a map of crime rates by state and region please see: <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/crime-map>.

7. Research on **risk factors** has been one of the most important developments in criminology over the past two decades. The earlier police can identify a high-risk delinquent, the more likely their path to becoming a career adult criminal will be altered. Risk factors are behaviors, relationships and activities that identify youth who are most likely to be involved in offending. In general, the more risk factors a child has the more likely a child is to become involved in serious crime. In addition, the earlier a risk factor occurs, the more serious are its consequences. Early onset (early smoking, drinking, drug use, sexual behavior) makes problems worse. Delaying the onset of risky behaviors will make their impact much smaller. There are also protective factors, things that help to insulate young people from getting in trouble.

- Key risk factors for involvement in delinquency among juveniles include:

Delinquent friends, Delinquent belief systems, Traumatic life events, Lack of parental supervision, Early childhood aggression, Commitment to street oriented peers

- Protective factors identified in the literature include:

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The identification of risk factors leads to a number of important areas for intervention. These interventions can take place in communities, schools, or homes and can be led by police, social service or other concerned groups.

- First, it is important to be able to identify risk factors accurately. The sooner this can be done in the life course of a child, the more likely their negative impact is to be minimized.
- A corollary of this is that it is important to find partners who can identify risk factors. Potential partners include schools, social service agencies and city recreation groups. These same groups may also be effective in responding to risk factors, though on occasion the group that identifies the risk factors is not the group that attempts to minimize their impact.
- It is possible to make risk factors worse by ignoring them or reinforcing them. Police can often do this unwittingly. For example, arresting a parent in front of children can have negative consequences. For examples of the police working successfully in prevention efforts to address risk factors see the collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institute of Justice on Prevention <http://nij.gov/journals/273/Pages/preventing-gang-membership.aspx> .

6. One of the most important findings from criminological research over the past two decades involves our understanding of **victimization**. Victimization, the process of becoming a victim, more often precedes offending than follows it. Becoming a victim has identifiable steps and risk factors just as becoming a delinquent does. That means we need to think about victimization

prevention along with delinquency prevention. In many instances, we should be thinking about victimization prevention rather than delinquency prevention, because preventing victimization (while good in and of itself) also can prevent delinquent involvement. Police should be thinking about delinquency prevention whenever children are witnesses to or victims of crime.

## BOXED MATERIAL

Victimization is closely related to other characteristics of cities and people. Risk factors in particular are related to the odds of victimization. The work done by criminologist Dr. Janet Lauritsen shows that for black and white youth, the risks of violent victimization are virtually identical except in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Black children are at higher risk than white children because they live in much higher levels of disadvantage. To read more about this work see:

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/201629.pdf>

- The relationship between victimization and offending is particularly strong among juveniles. This calls attention to times when juveniles are most vulnerable to victimization, such as right after school before parents and other guardians may be home.

Victimization often creates a “motive” to become an offender. A youth whose locker is burgled or who is beaten up after school now has a motive to retaliate. In this context, the cycle of retaliation reflects the relationship between victimization and offending.

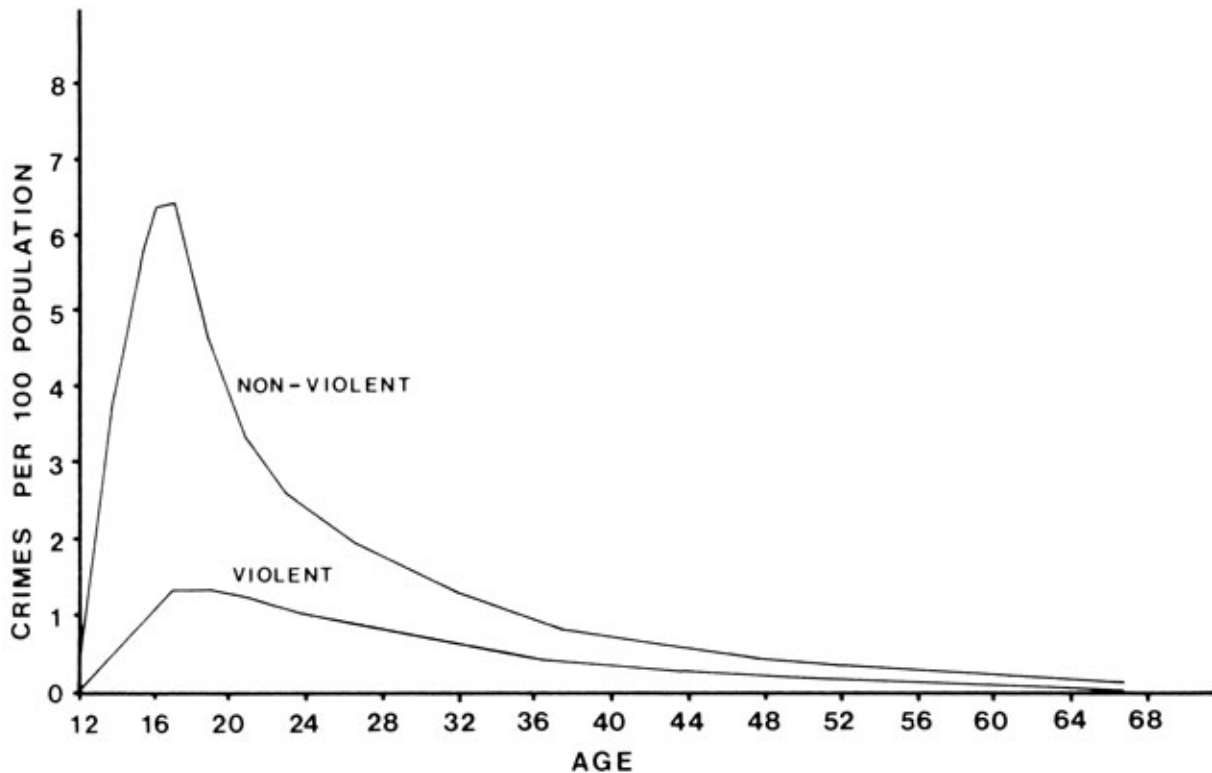
- Property victimizations can lead to violent retaliation. Criminologists have identified important links between property victimizations and involvement in violent crime, owing to the retaliation that many victims engage in.
- The probability of being victimized a second time is higher than the initial probability of being a victim of crime. This is true for individuals as well as property. See the POP Guide on Repeat Victimization: <http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p078-pub.pdf>

These facts should cause us to be concerned about victimization, particularly among juveniles. Doing so compels us to act and the following are potential steps to reduce youth vulnerability to victimization.

- The police should work in conjunction with partners who understand victimization patterns and risks for young people and can work to address their victimizations. These partnerships should include a broad array of groups. For direction on this see <http://nij.gov/journals/273/Pages/preventing-gang-membership.aspx>
- Victimization prevention should be part of the focus of police and other partners. Emphasis on preventing future “repeat” victimizations should be put in place after initial victimizations of persons and places. This may include “target hardening” but also lessons on ways to reduce the risk of being a victim.

- Identifying key times and place of risk for victimization is an important task.
  - For example, the time between the end of school and when parents arrive home from work is a period of great risk for victimization for juveniles. Improving police record systems to better identify and track repeat victims is an important lesson to be drawn from this research.

5. **Maturation reform** is the process of becoming an adult over the life course. It “cures” most involvement in crime. There are two great periods of time in the life course when participation in crime drops considerably. The first is in the late teens as youth mature and become adults. The second decline in crime is not as precipitous but is important nonetheless and occurs in the late twenties or early thirties. This is particularly true among individuals who are imprisoned as their rates of recidivism decline dramatically as they approach their thirties. It is thought that the threat of finishing one’s life in prison is an effective agent for reforming involvement in crime.



- The age-crime curve above displays the pattern for both violent and property crimes. Both increase dramatically in the early teens, peaking at about age sixteen or seventeen. The decline in participation in property crime is much steeper than for violent crime.
- The police can play an important role in enhancing the natural processes of maturational reform. They can do this through refraining from targeting youth who have begun to be

engaged in such reforms, while focusing attention and resources that contribute to youth desistance from offending.

- The police can work closely with agencies that assist the transition through this reform. Homeboys Industries in Los Angeles is a good example. Homeboys Industries is one of the largest re-entry groups serving gang members returning to the community in California. This can involve the police in “crossover” roles; roles that are not associated with suppression or enforcement typically.
- Another key finding from the age-crime curve has to do with the use of criminal justice resources in the most efficient manner. Not many individuals become involved in crime after age 50; finding alternatives for them to the more expensive prison alternative represents an efficient use of resources.

4. Criminologists have long observed that **disorder and crime go together**. Once disorder and crime begin to spread in a neighborhood, it is hard to stop the downward spiral of more crime. This is most commonly known as Broken Windows theory, the link between disorder, signs of incivility, lack of guardianship, and crime. This was developed by George Kelling and James Q. Wilson in 1982 <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/>. Research since then has confirmed a relationship between the two conditions, though that relationship can look different from community to community. There is good evidence that disorder breeds more disorder, but inconclusive evidence that disorder breeds more serious crime.

- We do know that neighborhoods that are physically, culturally and social disorganized tend to have higher levels of crime. The characteristics of disorder include things such as broken glass, stray dogs, unmown lawns, youth hanging out with no apparent purpose, and general signs of a lack of care such as boarded up windows or abandoned buildings.
- Disorder can also be made worse through such conditions as high rates of unemployment, single parents living in poverty, and high rates of unemployment.
- The more concentrated these are and the higher their incidence, the more likely it is that neighborhoods will have higher rates of crime. That said, processes of collective efficacy can counteract such concentrations.

The police can do many things to help change the incivilities in neighborhoods, even if they can't change the deep-rooted underlying conditions. They are most effective in those circumstances where they have strong community partners, especially neighborhood residents. Programs such as Weed and Seed <http://www.justice.gov/usao/nye/weedseed.html> have been shown to have a positive impact on communities and crime.



- The police can work to identify incivilities and report them to groups that can reduce those incivilities.
- The police can intensify patrol in places with high levels of incivility.
- The police can assign more officers and different kinds of units to places with high levels of incivility.
- The police can work with landlords to introduce landlord training programs to better screen tenants and deal effectively with troublesome renters.
- Police can work with residents and community stakeholders to improve the social cohesion necessary to bring order to such chaotic environments.

**3. Being a member of a deviant group enhances involvement in crime.** Deviant groups encourage more crime and more serious crime, particularly among juveniles. In gang research this is known as the selection-facilitation effect, where individuals who have an orientation toward involvement in crime select into gangs and once in the gang, the gang itself facilitates more crime. What we understand better as a consequence of several decades of research on groups is the role they play in facilitating increased involvement in crime. An excellent resource for this is the recent work of John Eck and Ron Clarke:

<http://www.popcenter.org/library/reading/pdfs/Intell-Analysis-for-ProbSolvers.pdf>

- For juveniles, over 90% of delinquency is committed in groups. “Lone” offenders tend to engage in different kinds of crime than groups.
- Groups are more involved in violent crime than property crime. For example, gang members are twice as likely to be offenders and victims of violent crime as non-gang members.
- Gangs and terrorist groups are perhaps the best example of how groups facilitate violent crime through breaking down barriers against using violence. In addition, acts against an individual member of a group are generalized to all other members, spreading the motive for retaliation throughout the group. The process of legitimating violence – arguing that the use of violence is justified or expected – in groups is important to understand.

Responding to the challenges of group crime can be difficult. First, targeting groups can be a tricky proposition because too much outside (police) attention can increase group solidarity and give groups recognition they might otherwise not have. It is an irony that being targeted by the police can increase the prestige and desirability of a group.

- Despite this, having special units that target group crime can pay dividends. Gang squads have been important in gathering information for investigations and prevention purposes.

- Tracking membership in groups accurately, including the onset and termination of membership is an important police task and an element of smart policing.
- Recent work in the use of social network analysis to better understand relationships within groups and how to best disrupt those relationships is worth looking into.

2. A **small fraction of individuals account for a large volume of crime**. In some studies, 6% of juveniles accounted for more than half of all crimes. Accurately identifying and dealing with these high rate offenders can help many communities get a handle on crime. Indeed, if these individuals aren't dealt with effectively, the prospects of lowering crime is not likely to be achieved. The POP Guide on repeat offending is helpful here.

<http://www.popcenter.org/library/reading/pdfs/Intell-Analysis-for-ProbSolvers.pdf>

- Study after study shows that in any community, a small number of offenders account for a large proportion of crime in that community. This is true across most ages and crime types.
- Many of these high-rate offenders are on criminal justice supervision of some sort such as probation or parole. This means that the system knows who they are and (usually) where they are and have the means to compel them to act.
- The same “formula” also applies to places; a small number of places account for a disproportionately high number of victimizations. Some studies have shown that as few as two percent of street addresses or zip codes account for more than three-quarters of reported crime. A St. Louis study showed that nearly 60% of homicides occurred in only 20% of all neighborhoods (Decker and Rosenfeld, Consent to Search). Clearly addressing these “criminogenic” places and neighborhoods will pay dividends in crime reduction. For more information see the POP Guide “Understanding Risky Facilities” might be made here. It is at [http://www.popcenter.org/tools/risky\\_facilities/](http://www.popcenter.org/tools/risky_facilities/)
- Careful and accurate identification of high-rate offenders should be a top priority for police. Police should develop an objective, crime-based set of criteria for identifying such individuals. (See the SPI Webinar on Offender Targeting).
- Enhanced coordination between the police and prosecution pays dividends in going after high-rate offenders. Other partners such as probation and parole can be enlisted to support such efforts, through such tactics as joint random checks on probationers and parolees, and focused deterrence “call-ins. [link to call-in information].

## HIGH RATE OFFENDERS WEBINAR LINK

1. Crime is highly **geographically concentrated**. This has become known as “hot spots” research and most police departments use some version of this. The expansion of mapping

capability to most large- and medium-sized police departments has aided this research and the crime analysts and criminologists have worked to push the boundaries of our knowledge forward. As the police “drill down” in an attempt to better understand their crime problems, it is important to note that the geographic concentration of crime is different by crime type.

You can see what leading criminologists have to say about this research and how to use it at these links, from the National Institute of Justice.

[https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/news\\_at\\_glance/228602/sf\\_5.html](https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/news_at_glance/228602/sf_5.html)

<http://www.nij.gov/topics/technology/maps/Pages/ncj209393.aspx>

- There are “hotspots” of crime in most communities. These hotspots are areas where a disproportionate number of criminal offenses are reported.
- Hotspots vary in intensity, size, crime types, duration and intensity.
- Hotspots often co-exist with some of these other facts, particularly disorder, risk factors, groups and demography.

One of the challenges of using maps to produce hotspots is that they often tell people what they already know, or think that they know. It is clear that we are entering a second generation of mapping in policing in which we ask more sophisticated questions with more sophisticated data and software. Several core principles remain, however.

- Correct and careful identification of concentrations of crime is an important task for police. Crime analysts are effective at doing this as are criminologists.
- But policing hot spots is more than placing “cops on dots.” Effective police responses to such concentrations of crime involve innovative use of Smart Policing. Suppression is not always the best approach, or can be used in conjunction with other approaches as the Glendale Smart Policing Initiative did. An additional resource is the COPS Guide on Police Crackdowns: <http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p049-pub.pdf>
- Cooperation with city agencies and strong police-community relationships can pay dividends in responding to concentrations of crime. Such city agencies can include streets, zoning, land use commissions, traffic and nuisance abatement. The POP Guide the POP Guide “Using Civil Actions Against Property to Control Crime Problems” can be found at: <http://ric-zai-inc.com/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-P277>
- CAD data can be used to identify addresses with high rates of 9-1-1 calls for crime.

## Conclusion

Are these the only criminological facts we could recommend? Not by any means. There are multiple others, but these are the ones with the strongest evidence. Additional facts include such things as the impact of single-parent families in poor neighborhoods on crime, the role that crime plays in causing more crime, and the reasons behind the 20-year decline in crime in the US. Additionally, all of the facts presented here are about crime, not criminal justice practice.

Now the question becomes, how do we use these to our advantage for prevention, Patrol Partnerships? Smart Policing? Investigations? Assigning personnel? Problem solving?

Equally important, how do we combine multiple “facts” to increase the impact of our Smart Policing project?

These are questions that police can work in partnership with researchers to answer. And they are consistent with the principles of Smart Policing that build on evidence to ground their interventions, constantly assess progress and integrate innovation into routine practices.

#### Resources:

Braga, Anthony, Andrew Papachristos, David Hureau. 2012. Hot Spots Policing Effects on Crime. Volume 8. *The Campbell Collaboration*.

[file:///C:/Users/shdecker/Downloads/Braga\\_Hot\\_Spots\\_Policing\\_Review.pdf](file:///C:/Users/shdecker/Downloads/Braga_Hot_Spots_Policing_Review.pdf)

Centers for Disease Control/National Institute of Justice. 2013. Changing Course: Keeping Kids Out Of Gangs. <http://nij.gov/journals/273/Pages/preventing-gang-membership.aspx>

[Center for Problem Oriented Policing. http://www.popcenter.org/](http://www.popcenter.org/)

[Crimesolutions.gov](http://Crimesolutions.gov)

Decker, Scott H. and Richard Rosenfeld. 2004. Consent to Search: The St. Louis Consent to Search Program. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/191332.pdf>

Janet Lauritsen. 2003. How Families and Communities Influence Juvenile Victimization. *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Bulletin*.

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/201629.pdf>

[Smart Policing. http://www.smartpolicinginitiative.com/](http://www.smartpolicinginitiative.com/)

Warr, Mark. 2002. *Companions in Crime*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Weisburd, David, Lorraine Green Mazerolle. Crime and Disorder in Drug Hot Spots: Implications for Theory and Practice in Policing. *Police Quarterly*,

<http://pqx.sagepub.com/content/3/3/331.short>