

Does Crime Just Move Around the Corner? A Controlled Study of Spatial Displacement and Diffusion of Crime Control Benefits¹

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BACKGROUND

There is growing evidence that police can have an impact on crime by focusing police resources on crime hotspots.² However, many scholars have noted that such approaches risk moving crime or disorder to other places where programs are not in place, termed spatial displacement.³ Research has overwhelmingly found that displacement is seldom total and often inconsequential.⁴ A number of studies have pointed to evidence that place-oriented crime prevention strategies can result in a diffusion of crime control benefits to areas outside the immediate targets of intervention.⁵ To this point knowledge of displacement or diffusion has been gained from studies focusing on the effects of innovative crime prevention programs. The problem is that a study designed to measure direct program effects will likely face significant methodological problems in measuring displacement or diffusion.⁶ Given the substantial growth of crime prevention programs at hot spots in recent years and the growing controversy over the magnitude and nature of displacement, it is warranted to examine displacement and diffusion effects directly.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This study attempts to fill these gaps in the measurement and understanding of displacement and the related phenomenon of diffusion of crime control benefits. This is the first study that was developed to study spatial displacement and diffusion as a primary outcome. The main focus of the research is on immediate spatial displacement or diffusion of crime to areas near the targeted sites of an intervention. This study was designed to directly examine displacement and diffusion during an intensive police crackdown in two hotspots in Jersey City, New Jersey, a prostitution hot spot and a drug hot spot. To examine displacement and diffusion effects a wealth of data was collected in the intervention target areas and surrounding catchment areas, approximately two blocks surrounding each target area. The current study employs

¹ Weisburd, David, Laura A. Wyckoff, Justin Ready, John E. Eck, Joshua C. Hinkle, and Frank Gajewski, 2006. Does crime just move around the corner? A controlled study of spatial displacement and diffusion of crime control benefits. In *Criminology* 44:549-91.

² Sherman, Lawrence, Denise Gottfredson, Doris MacKenzie, John Eck, Peter Reuter, and Shawn Bushway. 1997. *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't and What's Promising*. Research Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Justice Programs. Also see: Weisburd, David and John Eck. 2004. What can police do to reduce crime, disorder and fear. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 593:42-65.

³ Reppetto, Thomas A. 1976. Crime prevention and the displacement phenomenon. *Crime & Delinquency* 22:166-67.

⁴ Hesseling, Rene. 1994. Displacement: A review of the empirical literature. In *Crime Prevention Studies*, vol. 3, ed. Ronald V. Clarke. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.

⁵ Weisburd, David and Lorraine Green. 1995. Policing drug hot-spots: The Jersey City drug market analysis experiment. *Justice Quarterly* 12:711-35. Also see: Braga, Anthony A., David Weisburd, Elin Waring, Lorraine Green-Mazerolle, William Spelman, and Francis Gajewski. 1999. Problem oriented policing in violent crime places: A randomized controlled experiment. *Criminology* 37:541-80.

⁶ Weisburd, David, and Lorraine Green. 1995. Measuring immediate spatial displacement: Methodological issues and problems. In *Crime and Place: Crime Prevention Studies*, vol. 4, eds. John Eck and David Weisburd. Monsey, NY: Willow Tree Press.

analyses of more than 6,000 20-minute social observations and citizen emergency calls for police service, supplemented by interviews with arrestees from the target areas and ethnographic field observations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative findings indicate that, at least for these two crime markets involving drugs and prostitution, crime does not simply move around the corner. Indeed, this study supports the position that the most likely outcome of such focused crime prevention efforts is a diffusion of crime control benefits to nearby areas. An examination of the ethnographic field work and arrestee interviews reinforce routine activities and rational choice perspectives as a means to help understand why there was little evidence of spatial displacement in the data. This qualitative data revealed there were various barriers to offenders moving their activity elsewhere, including a hesitancy to move to other areas that were unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or considered rival turf.

The qualitative data did not explain why there was a significant diffusion of crime control benefits both in the prostitution and drug crime sites. One possible explanation is incapacitation. Many offenders were arrested in the target areas, and if these individuals were also responsible for crime in the catchment areas, we might expect observed crime and disorder to have declined in the catchment areas. However, despite the intensive enforcement activities at the target sites, most offenders were not arrested for long periods of time and many remained active in these areas throughout the study period. It is more likely that deterrence played a more central role in the diffusion processes observed, with offenders assuming that the crackdowns were not limited to the target areas but instead part of a more general increase in police enforcement.

This study also suggests some caution to those who have argued that hot spots policing will produce strong crime prevention outcomes without displacement of crime. Our ethnographic field work and arrestee interviews show that though some offenders desist from criminality as a result of hot spots interventions, others seek out adaptations that will allow them to continue offending in the targeted areas. This may in fact lead to an overall crime prevention benefit, because such adaptations often require greater effort and thus reduce the actual level of offending of specific individuals. However, more generally, this study illustrates the importance of examining other forms of displacement, especially method displacement, before reaching a conclusion about the overall impacts of crime prevention efforts.