Effectiveness of focused policing strategies
A review of five Campbell systematic reviews

What is this review of reviews about?

Law enforcement agencies use a variety of strategies to guide their decisions about how to distribute resources to most effectively address crime. Many of these strategies involve adopting a focused approach, dedicating more police resources to target a specific place or a specific group of people.

This review summarises findings from three systematic reviews that assess the effectiveness of focused policing strategies: hot spots policing, problem-oriented policing, and focused deterrence (pulling levers).

The reviews show that focused policing strategies are effective in reducing crime rates, but concerns remain about the potential for such strategies to have negative effects. Therefore, this review also includes findings from a systematic review on the consequences of geographically focused policing for neighbouring areas, and a review of interventions to improve community perceptions of police legitimacy.

What have we learned from Campbell reviews of focused policing strategies?

Hot spot policing is effective in reducing crime

In hot spot policing, police focus their efforts on small geographic areas with high rates of crime (such as apartment buildings, street corners or city blocks). A Campbell systematic review of 19 studies (including ten randomised controlled trials) found that hot spot policing is more effective at reducing crime than routine policing. The greatest reductions are in rates of drug offences, violent crime and disorder offences.

Problem-oriented approaches have a larger effect than traditional policing approaches

The review of hot spot studies included any approach to crime reduction that was led by police and focused on a high-crime area. Such approaches included patrols, increased traffic enforcements, aggressive disorder enforcement, problem-oriented policing and crack downs implemented in specific area. Of these, hot spot interventions using problem-oriented policing had the largest effect on reducing crime.
In problem-oriented policing, police proactively analyse underlying problems that could be targeted to reduce crime, drawing on law enforcement and other community resources to address the problem.

For example, police in a small Pennsylvania town took a problem-oriented approach to vandalism and substance use in a local park, removing overgrown shrubs, installing cameras, improving lighting, and increasing patrols.

A Campbell systematic review of 10 experimental and quasi-experimental studies found that problem-oriented policing leads to modest reductions in many types of crime. Problem-oriented policing can be challenging to implement, and tends to be most effective when police departments are strongly supportive, and when interventions are more focused on specific geographic areas or types of crime.

**Focused deterrence (‘pulling levers’) strategies are also effective in reducing crime, particularly violent crime**

Another type of focused policing strategy is focused deterrence. This strategy, also known as ‘pulling levers’ policing, focuses on a small number of offenders, directly confronting them and informing them that criminal behaviour will be met with all potential sanctions. The message is reinforced through crackdowns on those who continue to commit crimes.

Police also provide incentives for improved behaviour, such as access to social services and job opportunities. A Campbell systematic review of 10 studies found that focused deterrence appears to reduce crime. Programmes that focus on groups or gangs have the largest effect.

**Focused policing methods do not displace crime to nearby areas**

Focused policing efforts raise concerns that criminals will just move to another area. However, a Campbell systematic review of 44 studies (covering a broad range of focused policing approaches, including problem-oriented policing, police crackdowns, police patrols, community-oriented policing and hot spot policing) found that increasing police presence in specific areas not only reduces crime in those areas, but may also lead to less crime in nearby areas.

Similarly, the hot spots review found that hot spot policing is more likely to reduce crime in the surrounding area than it is to lead to crime moving to that area.

**Research is needed on long-term effects of focused policing strategies and how they affect community perceptions of police legitimacy**

Focused policing strategies may improve relationships between police and communities if residents welcome police efforts to reduce crime. However, residents may see increased police presence and intensive interventions as unfair, which could lower their opinion of police legitimacy.

Research shows that people are more likely to cooperate with police and obey the law when they view the police as legitimate. Therefore, focused policing strategies improve crime rates in the short term, but they may be less effective in the long term if relationships between police and communities are damaged.

Little is known about the long-term impacts of focused policing.
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Procedurally just dialogue can improve community acceptance of police interventions

Focused policing interventions may benefit from incorporating elements of procedurally just dialogue.

A Campbell systematic review of 30 studies of police-led legitimacy interventions that used elements of procedurally just dialogue (such as treating people with dignity and respect, allowing them to participate in proceedings before making a decision, being neutral in decision making, and conveying trustworthy motives) found that such interventions improve community satisfaction, compliance and cooperation with the police, improve community perceptions of procedural justice, and reduce reoffending.

What questions remain?

The focused policing strategies covered in this policy brief (hot spots policing, problem-oriented policing and focused deterrence) have similarities and overlapping features with each other and with other policing strategies (such as community-oriented policing).

More research is needed to tease out the mechanisms that underpin successful interventions, to create a stronger evidence base for future interventions.

In addition, few randomised controlled trials have been conducted to provide data on problem-oriented policing, focused deterrence and policing legitimacy interventions.

More research is also needed on the effectiveness of focused policing strategies in different contexts. In the five systematic reviews summarised here, most of the studies were conducted in the USA or the UK, with a few studies from Australia and Sweden, and one study from Argentina. Little is known about the effectiveness of focused policing strategies in different countries, or in specific types of communities.
Included Campbell reviews


Other references


Photos

West Midlands Police, https://www.flickr.com/photos/westmidlandspolice/albums

About Campbell

The Campbell Collaboration is an international network devoted to producing a world library of systematic reviews of research to inform social policy and practice decisions. This policy brief was written by Ruth Pitt. Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.