



Benefits of crime fighting are contagious

This user abstract presents the following Campbell systematic review:

Bowers K, Johnson S, Guerette RT, Summers L, Poynton S. Spatial displacement and diffusion of benefits among geographically focused policing initiatives Campbell Systematic Reviews 2011.3 DOI: 10.4073/csr.2011.3.

What happens to surrounding neighborhoods when more police are put in high crime areas? Do criminals just move to nearby neighborhoods or do the crime-fighting benefits spread? A systematic review of international research finds that increasing police presence in problem areas not only reduces crime in those areas, but can also lead to less crime in nearby areas.

SIDE EFFECTS OF FOCUSED POLICING: DISPLACEMENT OR DIFFUSION

A common criticism of focused policing efforts (such as hotspots policing, ‘crackdowns’, or problem-oriented policing) is that it does not address the root causes of crime; criminals just move to another neighborhood. This is known as ‘crime displacement’. Criminal activity can in fact shift in a number of different ways. It can move from one neighborhood to another, the time of day crime occurs can change, different targets may be chosen, how the crime is committed may change (e.g. breaking windows versus picking locks). There can be changes in the type of offences committed and in the people engaging in crime (new offenders replace old). In theory, these kinds of changes in criminal activity can cancel out the benefits of increased police efforts in problem areas.

It has also been argued, however, that increasing police presence in one area can have positive effects for nearby areas. There can be a ‘bonus effect’ of a reduction in crime in nearby neighborhoods.

It is important to consider both negative and positive side effects of focused policing when deciding on policing strategies.

FOCUSED POLICING HAS DIFFUSE BENEFITS

The main findings of this review indicate that initiatives to increase police presence in problem areas are linked to less crime and disorder. Moreover, although there are no significant changes to nearby neighborhoods, the results show a trend towards the spread of crime-fighting benefits.

The findings of this review have implications for criminological theory. They support the idea that different areas in a city offer better or worse opportunities to commit crime. If it were equally easy (and worthwhile) to steal or murder in all areas of a city, criminals would likely just move away from the area with more police to the next neighborhood. But this is not the case; some neighborhoods seem to offer more and easier chances to commit crime. This means that increasing police in those areas can be a powerful method in combating crime.

FACTS ABOUT THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

This review includes 44 studies. The majority of the studies are from the USA (30) but studies from the United Kingdom (10) Sweden (3) and Australia (1) are also included. Each study evaluates a focused policing intervention which was limited to a physical area (smaller than a city/region), uses some quantitative measure of crime, and reports original research findings. The studies evaluate a broad range of interventions implemented in different contexts, including Problem-Orientated Policing (12), Police Crackdowns (10), Police Patrols (7), Community-oriented policing (5) and Hotspot policing (4).

This review focuses on two primary outcomes: the effect of focused policing on crime levels in the target neighborhood; and the effect of focused policing on nearby neighborhoods. A meta-analysis of sixteen studies to examine the effect on the target neighborhood shows that focused policing reduces crime in the target neighborhood.

The evidence also indicates that when focused policing is implemented, crime levels change in nearby areas more than would be expected if there was no focused policing in the target neighbourhood. The weight of the evidence shows that crime is reduced in these areas. This suggests that focused policing is more likely to result in a spread of crime control benefit than simply moving criminals to the closest neighbourhood.

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Further information

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