

FOCUSING POLICE EFFORTS ON “HOT SPOTS” REDUCES CRIME – AND CAN PREVENT IT, TOO

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Imagine that crime increases in a neighborhood. Residents begin to see more police in the area, and before long law-breaking becomes less common. When this happens, people in the neighborhood have experienced “hot spots policing” – the deliberate practice of boosting police patrols where crime rates are high or increasing. This might seem like an obvious step, something as old as policing itself. But the strategy actually dates from the 1990s, when it started to replace random patrols, where police officers were assigned to fixed “beats” regardless of crime rates in different neighborhoods. By now, the alternative approach of hot spots policing is all the rage in police circles.

Most urban police departments use computers to map crime hot spots in real time and then “put cops on the dots.” Scientifically designed experiments in the field show that this approach really does reduce crime overall – it doesn’t just push the criminals from one place into another, as some feared might happen. I have seen hot spots policing bear fruit in my own city of St. Louis. In August, 2012, the police department mounted concentrated interventions in some of the most violent areas of the city. Over the next month, the targeted neighborhoods experienced decreases in firearm violence more than five times greater than in comparable areas subject to normal patrols.

Answering the Critics of Hot Spots Policing

Not everyone is on board with the hot spots approach. Skepticism comes from social workers, public health officials, and community groups, some of whom go so far as to publicly decry and oppose hot spots policing. The chief criticisms can be answered, however.

- Some critics argue that this approach produces only fleeting results and encourages abusive and discriminatory practices by law enforcement officials. But this confuses the basic logic of hot spots enforcement – putting the police where the crime is – with controversial enforcement practices such as New York’s “stop, question, and frisk” program, which, every day, subjects thousands of residents, mainly young minority men, to coercive encounters with the police. Clearly, concentrated police efforts can use different tactics more respectful of individual rights.
- Many question the deeper value of hot spots policing. Genuine prevention, such critics say, ameliorates the root causes of criminality, whereas hot spots policing simply reduces the opportunity that people poised to commit crimes have to actually carry through their intentions. True enough, hot spots enforcement alone cannot alleviate poverty, lack of opportunity, poor parenting, lousy schools, or any of the other social ills that may lead to crime. But these limitations do not mean that hot spots policing lacks preventative effects. Saving lives and

protecting property are no less real because they result from better policing rather than better parenting or mentoring programs.

Focused Policing Amounts to Good Prevention

The dictionary definition of “prevent” is to stop something from happening. Hot spots policing stops crime from happening – right here, right now. Its contribution to public health is clearly more immediate than fixing broken schools, teaching children to control their impulses, or raising the incomes of the poor.

Looking at the matter more deeply, we can also see that hot spots policing has preventative effects at multiple levels, just like good public health work. Experts distinguish three kinds of disease prevention. “Primary” prevention stops a disease from occurring. “Secondary” prevention treats the disease before symptoms appear; and “tertiary” prevention treats the symptoms and resulting complications. If criminality (that is, people’s propensity to commit crimes) is like disease and crime like the symptoms, then hot spots policing is obviously good secondary prevention. When critics fault it, they mean it does not qualify as primary prevention. Yet this ignores the important ways in which secondary prevention facilitates primary prevention – in the realm of crime-fighting as well as coping with disease.

Here is how primary effects happen. Criminologists have long held that crime begets crime. A boy who grows up in a neighborhood where lots of the older boys engage in criminal activity is more likely to do so himself than if he lived in an area with little crime. It follows that if heightened police presence prevents crime, the younger boys in the neighborhood will experience less social pressure or incentive to become criminally active. It is also possible that they will become more open to whatever lawful opportunities exist to get ahead or have fun in socially constructive ways. Reducing crime also makes it much easier for officials and nonprofits to improve basic educational, health and recreational services, offering good alternatives.

Criminologists also point to the two-way relationship linking actual crime and increases in criminality. Yes, criminal propensities lead to crime, but the opposite is also true. The great majority of young people who engage in crime are not “career” criminals. Research shows that most drift back and forth between criminal and legitimate activity – sometimes engaging in petty thefts, sometimes doing odd jobs, and other times engaging in street “hustles” at the edge of crime. Because most just take advantage of available opportunities, reducing criminal opportunities heightens the relative attractiveness of better alternatives. In this view, criminality is not a fixed trait that drives inherently bad people into crime. Instead, the propensity to commit crimes can be reduced by shifting opportunities.

The preventative promise of hot spots policing lies in its ability, very quickly, to make crime a less appealing way for people to “make it” in a given community – thus clearing the way for youth mentoring and counseling, afterschool and recreational programs, and job training. Hot spots policing not only saves lives, stabilizes neighborhoods, and reduces fear; it also prevents many young people from racking up long criminal records and cementing criminal identities.

Far from being an alternative to public health-like prevention, hot spots policing can be at the forefront of cutting off crime before it takes permanent, malignant hold. Using good tactics that respect civil liberties, concentrated police efforts to combat neighborhood crime can immediately open healthy new possibilities for all of the residents.