What Works Briefings were superseded in 2015 by the Crime Reduction Toolkit.

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Summary

Hot spots policing is an effective crime reduction strategy, but only modestly. Hot spot policing works best for drug offences, violent crime and disorder, while it was less effective (but still had some positive effect) for property crimes.

What is a ‘what works’ briefing?

This briefing has been developed by researchers from the College of Policing to summarise the ‘best available’ evidence in relation to the effects of Hot-Spot Policing on crime and to highlight the implications for police policy and practice. This document briefly summarises two Campbell Collaboration Systematic Reviews. A systematic review is a longer and more technical report that trawls for all available evaluations of the policing of ‘hot spots’ (‘hotspotting’) and summarises findings from only those experiments that have high quality methodologies. The review then drew general conclusions from this pool of evaluations about how well hot spots policing worked in relation to reducing crime, compared to areas with similar problems where these tactics were not employed.

1 Braga, AA. The effects of hot spots policing on crime. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2007:1

2 Braga, AA., Papachristos, A. and Hureau, D. Hot spots policing effects on crime. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2012:8

http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/118/
What is ‘hotspotting’?

Crime and disorder is not evenly spread across areas and policing should be concentrated in the areas of greatest demand. Studies have also shown that crime is significantly clustered at a much smaller geographic level – in crime ‘hotspots’. Sherman et al. (1989), for example, found that half of all calls made by the public to the police in Minneapolis came from less than 3.5 percent of addresses. Hot-spot policing (‘hotspotting’) aims to identify locations where crime and disorder (and possibly other types of problems) are most prevalent and take law enforcement action in those areas as a deterrent. ‘Hotspotting’ involves the careful analysis of patterns of crime, thus enabling police to target their response where it is needed most.

Two key characteristics of hot spot policing are:

1. **Hot spots policing is geographically focused**: the location of crime rather than the features of criminals are central to the strategy. Hot spots policing is informed in part by environmental criminology, where the characteristics of an area or place are viewed as key in explaining clusters of criminal events. The review gives the example of how a combination of a poorly lit street corner with an abandoned building, located near a major thoroughfare, provides an ideal location for a drug market.

2. **Hot spots policing has tended towards a narrow ‘law enforcement’ approach to the problems identified**, even when problem-oriented approaches have been used. The review distinguished three types of hot-spot response, each progressively more ‘aggressive’ in its tactics, these were ‘enforcement–based POP’, ‘directed aggressive patrol’, and ‘crackdowns’. ‘Hotspotting’ has affinities with ‘problem–oriented policing’ (POP) in the way it uses analysis and intelligence to identify problems.

The lack of proper lighting, an abundance of “stash” locations around the derelict property, and a steady flow of potential customers on the thoroughfare, creates an environment conducive to drug dealing.

However, true POP interventions typically involve more than an enforcement-only response often involving partnerships and community cohesion interventions. However, more recent studies (Braga and Bond, 2008) have used a broader based problem-oriented approach to addressing crime hot spots.
Identifying hot spots

Hot spots policing focuses on localised problems below the neighbourhood or community level. The target areas for hot spot policing assessed by this review were high activity crime places - not entire neighbourhoods or communities with elevated rates of crime. Examples of places could include stores, homes, apartment buildings, street corners, and train stations. Hot spot policing seeks to address crime and disorder at specific locations such as these, not wider geographical areas.

Successful interventions examined in the review identified hot spots on the basis of calls made by the public relating to crime and disorder. Areas with elevated levels of complaints were identified by analysts from this call data. Hot spots can therefore be identified through analysis of call data, but this can be helpfully contextualised by the local knowledge of officers about the area in question. The review mentioned the example of a particular street having a high number of calls related to disorder because it is a route home from a nightclub. Call data alone cannot provide this contextual information. When analysis is supported by the local knowledge of officers, hotspots are most effectively identified and understood.

Does it work?

Yes it does, modestly. Hot spots policing programs generate modest crime control gains and are likely to produce a diffusion of crime control benefits into areas immediately surrounding targeted high-activity crime places\(^1\). However, it is not a cure–all for policing problems. The review found that hot spot policing worked best for drug offenses, violent crime and disorder, while it was less effective (but still had some positive effect) for property crimes. A previous review\(^2\) by the same author concluded that hot spot policing worked best for disorder (e.g. loitering, public drinking, solicitation), but was of limited use in dealing with violent offences. The difference in conclusion in relation to violent crime may be partly due to the different interventions that were deployed with hot spots (i.e. POP or increased policing) or the study methodology (randomised experiment or quasi experimental).

Doesn’t crime just move elsewhere?

Policy–makers worry that forceful police action to suppress crime and disorder in one location simply displaces the problem to adjacent areas (displacement effect). In fact, evidence suggests a mirror image of this, the diffusion effect. Instead of adjacent areas suffering from displaced crime, the benefits of police action have a positive ‘knock-on’ effect beyond the immediate area of the intervention. Monitoring surrounding areas for evidence of displacement and diffusion is advisable following hot spots interventions. This monitoring needs to be long term, not just a few weeks after the intervention.

\(^1\) Braga, AA., Papachristos, A. and Hureau, D. Hot spots policing effects on crime. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2012:8
\(^2\) Braga, AA. The effects of hot spots policing on crime. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2007:1
What type of interventions work best at hotspots

While different types of hot-spot interventions (‘enforcement–based POP’, ‘directed aggressive patrol’, and ‘crackdowns’) all appeared to be effective, POP generated larger crime reduction effects. POP appeared particularly effective with property crimes and disorder. However, it cannot be concluded from the reviews which type of police response is most appropriate for particular circumstances, or whether any of the police responses used in these projects are equally effective.

How does hot spots policing affect the public?

The effects of hot spot strategies on public perceptions of the police are unclear. The Review was unable to draw any conclusions about the effect of police action on local residents and regular users of the area, because only three of the evaluations collected this data. However, these three evaluations revealed the community members had positive opinions and experiences when subjected to hot spots policing initiatives.

There is evidence outside the review that residents of areas subjected to hot spots policing welcome the concentration of police efforts (Shaw 1995), however other studies found focused aggressive police enforcement strategies resulted in increased citizen complaints about police misconduct and abuse of force (Greene 1999). The potential impacts of enforcement-based hot spots policing on police legitimacy may depend in good part on the specific strategy used and the social context of the hot spots affected. It is worth remembering that while aggressive stop and search (‘crackdowns’) may suppress crime, if it does so at the expense of sacrificing the good will of law–abiding citizens, then this can have longer–term adverse consequences.
Implications for good practice

Accurate and complete call data is vital. It is crucial to identify as clearly as possible the existence of hotspots and the source of the heat, otherwise it becomes a blanket response to an undefined problem. Some studies had severe problems identifying hotspots because calls were not properly logged with for example, some problem properties having calls logged to several addresses because the building faced onto two roads. This meant the real scale of the problem was not identified. This emphasises the need to supplement purely statistical analysis with the local knowledge of patrol officers, who are more likely to know the areas they patrol and connect the dots on the map more intelligently.

Regular police presence at hot spots can have a lasting effect on crime and disorder. The Campbell Review does not mention it, but it is worth drawing attention to the ‘Koper curve’ (Koper 1995), based on 5000 hours of close observation of how long it took from a marked patrol car leaving a hotspot until the resumption of ‘business as usual.’ Koper demonstrated that it was necessary for a marked patrol car to remain at a hotspot for only between 11 and 15 minutes for its impact to suppress crime effectively in the hotspot. After an 11 to 15 minute stop, the probability of disorder occurring at the hot spot in the next 30 minutes was only four per cent. Remaining at a hot spot longer than 15 minutes produced diminishing returns.

Hotspots can be addressed through different types of intervention; There is no necessary connection between the identification of hotspots and the use of aggressive tactics. Alternatives should be considered: for instance problem oriented policing (POP)\(^5\) and community policing solutions might also be considered in areas with a particular concentration of problems.

A recent study from the US, for example, has found that while intensive police patrols in hotspots delivered short-term – but unsustainable – reductions in crime, the effect of problem-solving on crime was greater and longer lasting (Taylor et al. 2011) Additionally, another Campbell Review\(^6\) has found that improved street lighting can have a remarkable impact on levels of crime and disorder. Improved street lighting coordinated with other improvements to an area could bring benefits to locations where crime is high.

- Consider what environmental changes can be made to the hotspot to make it less suitable for criminal activity. Proactive patrols, raids, and crackdowns do not specifically address the environmental characteristics that cause specific locations to generate high volumes of crime. Effective, long term disruption of criminal or disorderly activity at a hot spot may best be achieved by focussing on the features of the place which cause a clustering of criminal activity at that particular location.

\(^5\) https://polka.pnn.police.uk/en/Communities/Documents/?clubId=38& folder=Research%252fWhat%2bWorks%2bGuides&file=pop+poster2.ppt

Further advice and guidance

The Home Office maintain a useful on-line resource centre at:

The Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science maintains a helpful website devoted to crime mapping, which is the first and essential ingredient in identifying hotspots. This can be found at:
http://www.jdi.ucl.ac.uk/crime_mapping/index.php

You can find more about taking a problem-solving approach to hot spots at
http://popcenter.org

References


Full reviews

• Braga, AA. The effects of hot spots policing on crime. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2007:1

You can access the full review online at:
http://campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/118/