



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Policing Drug Hot Spots

More and more the Nation's police have come to be viewed as the central component in efforts to control crime and urban decay. Whether in the context of a call for more police involvement in communities or more police officers on the street, there is little doubt in the public mind of the importance of the police in controlling crime and crime-related problems of disorder. By contrast, however, many scholars are skeptical about the abilities of the police to accomplish this.

In response to the need for information on "what works" in policing as well as public pressures to strengthen law enforcement responses to drug crimes, in 1990 the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) initiated the Drug Market Analysis Program (DMA). DMA sought to develop strategies for addressing street level drug problems and encourage technological innovations in the geographic analysis of crime. In Jersey City, New Jersey—one of five DMA demonstration sites—an evaluation was conducted in 1993 of an innovative drug enforcement strategy that focused on "hot spots" of drug activity. This study found consistent and strong effects of the experimental policing strategy on disorder-related emergency calls for service. Further, there was little evidence of displacement of drug activity to areas near the experimental hot spots. The data actually suggest a "diffusion of benefits" around the hot spots as compared with the control locations.

Study design

Using narcotics sales arrests, drug-related emergency calls for service, and narcotics tip-line information over a 6-month period, as well as computer mapping techniques, 56 hot spots of drug activity were identified in Jersey City. These hot spots made up only 4.4 percent of the street sections and intersections in the city, but they accounted for 45 percent of narcotics sales arrests and 46 percent of emergency calls for service prior to the experiment. Crime and disorder problems were also common in these hot spots before the experiment.

A randomized experimental design was used for evaluating the DMA project in Jersey City. The 56 identified hot spots of drug activity were randomly divided into two

groups, and the existing six narcotics squads (each comprising one sergeant and five detectives) of the Jersey City Police Department were randomly assigned to experimental and control hot spots. The two groups of hot spots had such similar characteristics as the average number of narcotics arrests, mean age of narcotics sales arrestees, percentage of minority population, and percentage of those under the age of 18 living within the hot spot boundaries. Implementation of the experiment occurred between March 1992 and May 1993.

Enforcement strategy

In the 28 experimental hot spots, the law enforcement strategy consisted of three stages: planning, implementation, and maintenance. In the planning stage, officers collected information about drug activity, met with business owners and residents, and developed case files on suspected drug offenders. During implementation, officers used intensive crackdowns and coordinated efforts involving local government agencies (housing, beverage licensing) to close down drug activity. In the third stage, officers maintained gains made during implementation by close surveillance, foot patrols, and other forms of police presence as they were alerted to new drug activity.

In the 28 control hot spots, traditional drug enforcement strategies were applied. That is, officers continued to use a mix of tactics as employed in the years leading up to the experiment. These tactics were primarily unsystematic, arrest-oriented enforcement based on ad hoc selection of suspected drug offenders. With the control strategy defined as traditional enforcement approaches, the study could assess whether the experimental strategy provided improvement over existing drug enforcement strategies in use in Jersey City.

Effect on emergency calls for service

Emergency calls for service provide a reliable measure of crime and crime-related activity that is not influenced by the myriad factors that affect official indicators such as arrests. To assess the effects of the experimental policing

drug enforcement strategy, emergency calls for service in the 7 months prior to the intervention were compared with calls in the 7 months after the intervention was concluded.

- * In the target hot spots, the experimental policing strategy significantly affected three measures of public disorder@alls for suspicious persons, public morals (prostitution, liquor violations, gambling), and general assistance. Overall, the number of disorder-related calls for service increased by 71 1 calls in the post-experimental period in the control areas, but only by 256 in the experimental hot spots. (The increase in calls between the preintervention and postintervention periods was expected because of high activity in the summer months.)
- * Of narcotics calls, major improvement occurred in a few of the most active hot spots, but the experimental policing strategy did not have a consistent effect in all 28 experimental hot spots.
- * Displacement of emergency calls to a two-block area surrounding each drug hot spot was minimal. In fact, the number of emergency calls related to narcotics and public morals actually decreased in the areas surrounding the experimental sites as compared with the control sites. This “diffusion of benefits” from the experimental sites into the surrounding catchment areas provides additional support for the overall crime control effect of the experimental policing drug enforcement strategy.

Conclusion

The study shows that an innovative drug enforcement strategy can have success in reducing a key indicator of crime and disorder-emergency calls for service. The researchers further concluded that specifically focused

enforcement efforts do not necessarily lead to displacement of crime problems to surrounding areas.

The inconsistent effect of the experiment on narcotics calls is likely related to the study design. It is unlikely that drug activity was influenced in the catchment areas surrounding the hot spots but not in the hot spots themselves. It is more likely that the experimental intervention had an especially strong effect on reporting of drug activity, as compared with other types of calls, and that the influence of the experiment is masked by these changes in crime call reporting in the experimental hot spots.

The study also points to the importance of focusing on specific places as well as on specific types of crime. If police are to have an effect on crime and disorder problems, they must define focused crime prevention efforts that are as diverse as the phenomena they seek to confront.

This Research Preview is adapted from a study by David Weisburd, Executive Director, Rutgers University Center for Crime Prevention Studies; Lorraine Green, Assistant Professor, Department of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati; Captain Frank Gajewski, Director of Research and Planning, Jersey City (NJ) Police Department; and Lieutenant Charles Belluci, Jersey City Police Department. For further information on this study, see “Policing Drug Hot Spots,” Justice Quarterly, December 1995.

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