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Rethinking the Conclusion that Community Policing Does Not Reduce Crime: Experimental Evidence of Crime Reporting Inflation

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In evidence-based policy there are no more important organizations than the Campbell Collaboration and the National Academies of Sciences. Campbell emphasizes systematic review and meta-analyses, taking a rigorous approach to identifying, coding, and analyzing prior studies. The National Academies takes a narrative approach to review, relying on experts to assess existing evidence, and providing a consensus set of conclusions.

Both of these organizations have reviewed the evidence on the crime control effectiveness of community policing, and both have concluded that it is not an evidence-based strategy to reduce crime. Gill, Weisburd, Telep, Vitter, and Bennett (2014), in a Campbell systematic review that covered studies until 2012 and included 37 studies in a meta-analysis, noted that “We do not find evidence that COP reduces...officially recorded crime” (p. 423). In a more recent review, the National Academies of Sciences Committee on Proactive Policing (Weisburd and Majmundar, 2018), concluded that “existing studies do not identify a consistent crime prevention benefit for community-oriented policing programs” (p. 176).

These reviews have had a major impact on how we view the crime prevention benefits of community policing programs. In sum, they have led to the prevailing assumption that science does not support the view that community policing reduces crime.

However, it is important to note that the same reviews also concluded that community policing significantly improves community members’ satisfaction with the police and positively influences their perceptions of police legitimacy. We believe that estimates of the crime prevention benefits of community policing are likely confounded by these impacts. The main measures that researchers use to estimate crime outcomes (calls for service and crime incidents) are

likely impacted not only by whether crime is reduced, but also by the fact that community policing is likely to increase collaboration of the public with the police—indeed, that is one of the expressed goals of community policing programs.

Recently, we completed an experiment in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota (see Weisburd, Gill, Wooditch, Barritt, and Murphy, 2020), that led us to rethink the strong conclusions existing reviews have reached regarding the failure of community policing to show strong crime prevention benefits. The Brooklyn Park experiment was not specifically identified as a study to advance community policing, but it had a strong focus on community collaboration—a key component of community policing—as a way to advance crime control. It sought to use unallocated police patrol time to increase collective action and community collaboration in solving problems at crime hot spots. The program was called Assets Coming Together to Take Action (ACT). ACT was intended to work through officers encouraging three key mechanisms at the hot spots:

- (1) establishing proximal relationships with and between residents;
- (2) increasing working trust between the police and community members; and
- (3) developing shared expectations that empower residents to take action against problems and then leveraging these mechanisms to develop successful collaborative problem-solving strategies.

While ACT shares many similarities with established community and problem-oriented policing strategies, the overall goal of the approach was to create a “culture of responsibility” within the

community by connecting police interventions with the development of informal social controls. (Weisburd et al., 2020:6)

In some sense ACT provided an optimal test of the idea of community collaboration. The intervention involved the entire patrol force in Brooklyn Park, a city with more than 100 sworn officers. Accordingly, it had a very high level of dosage at each of the 21 treatment hot spots, with more than 1,000 activities documented during the experimental period. Perhaps most importantly, from the perspective of community collaboration, the officers identified 405 “assets” at the 21 hot spots, with a median of 18 assets at each hot spot. Assets were key stakeholders and resources that officers identified during their time spent at the hot spots who were willing and interested in working with police officers to address problems.

Our experimental analyses show that the police did succeed at increasing community collaboration and collective action in doing something about problems. When we asked a random sample of citizens at the hot spots whether they had participated in problem-solving efforts during the experimental period, a significantly larger number of respondents in the treatment hot spots said that they had. And when we asked whether they had spoken to a police officer about a problem, again a significantly larger number of residents of the treatment hot spots responded affirmatively. These results suggest that ACT was successful in increasing community collaboration.

But when we looked at the crime outcomes of the program, we did not find evidence of crime prevention. Like community policing programs that also seek to influence community collaboration, there did not appear to be crime prevention benefits from ACT. Indeed, the treatment and control hot spots had about the same changes in crime incidents (i.e., Part I and Part II crimes for which a police crime report is written) from the pretreatment to treatment periods.

What Happened?

Because of the valuable participation of Lieutenant William Barritt, who was the departmental coordinator of the experiment in Brooklyn Park, and Jody Murphy, the head of crime analysis in the Brooklyn Park Police Department (BPPD), we were able to get additional insight into what had happened. We noticed at the start of the experiment that the number of emergency calls for police service had increased a good deal in the treatment hot spots. We did not think that there was a reason why crime should have increased. This was a randomized experiment, and though that could happen just by chance, another explanation was that the experimental intervention was increasing the reporting of crime to the police. The strong effort to identify assets and increase community collaboration more generally provided a plausible causal chain that would lead the experiment to increase crime reporting.

Barritt and Murphy noted that they could look at this directly by examining the call behavior of assets in the experiment. While this was a difficult task that had to be done by hand, they went back and looked at the number of times that assets had called the police

during the experimental period, and the number of times they had called before the experimental period. The results are reported by hot spot in the table below. What is apparent is that assets called the police more than 700 times during the experimental period. On average across the treatment sites, more than a third of the assets who called the police had never called before.

Assets Who Called the Police in 2015 and through October 31, 2016

Site #	Number of assets	% of assets who called police during this period	Number of calls by assets or their family members during this period	% of assets who called during this period but had never called BPPD before
1	7	42	3	75
2	11	27	20	33
3	11	9	9	0
4	12	23	3	33
5	13	50	35	50
6	13	18	76	33
7	13	23	4	66
8	14	56	50	56
9	15	53	35	38
10	16	40	20	33
11	18	83	43	28
12	18	47	22	13
13	20	75	61	47
14	23	42	14	40
15	23	52	35	42
16	24	66	107	33
17	25	36	13	55
18	25	54	35	77
19	26	50	61	50
20	38	63	173	50
21	40	51	55	15

These findings suggested that we had good evidence that the community collaboration component of the program had increased crime reporting of citizens in the treatment hot spots. But could we create a measure that would reflect the extent of this increase? One simple way to do this was to compare the number of citizen-initiated calls for service (CFS) to crime incidents before the experiment and during the experiment. We call this “crime reporting inflation,” which is represented by the following equation:

$$\text{Crime reporting inflation} = \frac{(CFS_{\text{during}} - \text{Incident}_{\text{during}})}{(CFS_{\text{before}} - \text{Incident}_{\text{before}})}$$

If the experimental intervention was not having an influence on crime reporting, we would expect the treatment and control hot spots to have about the same score on this measure. That is, in a world in which we did not intervene, the randomly allocated hot spots would be expected to behave similarly in both groups in the pre-experimental and experimental periods. If the experimental period and the pre-experimental period were equal in length, we would expect the outcome of our measure to be 1. However, the experimental period was 16 months and the pre-experimental period was 12 months. This means that, absent treatment in our experiment, we would expect the crime reporting inflation statistic to equal 1.33 (16/12), accounting for the fact that the gap between calls and incidents is being counted for an additional four months during the experimental period.

For the untreated control hot spots, the crime reporting statistic equals 1.27, about what we expected. However, for the experimental hot spots that received ACT, the inflation statistic was 1.67. This reflects a strong degree of crime inflation for the treatment condition, and the difference between the groups is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This is the first experimental evidence of the reactivity of crime outcomes to interventions that emphasize community collaboration that we are aware of. Combined with our survey results regarding community collaboration and the analyses of the behavior of assets, our findings provide strong evidence that an intervention that encourages community collaboration is likely to strongly influence reporting behavior.

What could be the cause of this crime inflation? Of course, one explanation could be that crime increased in the treatment condition and therefore citizens called the police more. While this could be an explanation, we have no reason to believe that the ACT intervention would increase crime. Moreover, we are not measuring here whether calls increased, but whether the relationship between calls and crime incidents changed. Why would the gap be so much larger in the treatment condition than the control condition? And why would the measure of crime reporting inflation in the control condition remain relatively stable between the pre-experimental and experimental periods and the treatment condition increase to a large degree? If the treatment was having no impact we would expect the two groups to be similar in a randomized experiment.

We think that the control condition represents a “normal condition” for the relationship between crime calls and crime incidents. In general, that relationship would be expected to be positive on our measure because, in normal circumstances, a number of the calls that citizens make to the police are not founded once police come to investigate. What our experimental intervention did was to increase the

number of calls beyond the “normal condition,” creating an upward bias in assessing crime in the treatment hot spots. This upward bias may be obscuring real crime changes.

But what does this mean in terms of the program’s impacts on crime? Would our conclusions regarding the crime prevention impacts of ACT change if we could adjust the crime counts for crime inflation? We tried to do this by adjusting the crime incident outcomes in the experimental condition by the overall crime inflation ratio for the two groups (1.27/1.67).¹ When we do this, our findings regarding crime are quite different. The difference between the groups is now statistically significant at the 0.10 level (p=0.055), the threshold we set at the outset of the experiment.

While we think these findings are important for assessing ACT, they are even more important for their implications more generally for studies where community collaboration is an important element. Our findings suggest that using raw uncorrected official crime data to assess crime outcomes of community policing programs likely leads to large underestimates of crime prevention outcomes.

And what does this mean for the evidence-based conclusions of the Campbell Collaboration and the National Academies? Our work suggests that it is time to reconsider that literature in light of the Brooklyn Park findings. Assessment of the crime prevention impacts of community policing must be carried out with the aim of correcting for crime reporting inflation.

References

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¹ Another approach would be to adjust outcomes not by a global measure but by the specific outcomes for each hot spot. The problem of doing this is that the crime outcomes are part of the crime inflation measure. For this reason, we chose to use the overall global estimate in our analyses. Our colleague Cynthia Lum raised the question of whether this measure is also affected by actual reductions in crime. In this context, if crime is reduced the gap between calls and crimes should grow even larger. But in this context, we might also expect the number of calls to decline as crime problems decline. These complexities suggest the importance of exploring and refining this measure in future studies.