



A promising alternative to poli high-crime streets

BY DAVID WEISBURD, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 07/24/20 08:00 AM EDT
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Recent calls for defunding the police raise the question of whether we can reduce crime with other investments. Some commentators have argued that the key is to change the economic and social realities of those in disadvantaged neighborhoods. But targeting social inequalities in American society is a long-term effort and does not provide immediate solutions for communities that are suffering from crime problems now.

So absent investment in policing, what can communities do to reduce crime? One of the key observations that criminologists have made over the past three decades is that crime typically is concentrated on a small number of streets in a city. In larger cities, just 1 percent of the streets, on average, produce 25 percent of crime, and 5 percent of streets produce 50 percent of crime. And even in very high-crime neighborhoods, most streets are relatively free of crime. I term this the "law of crime concentration." It has been the underlying logic for a series of effective policing interventions.

But is policing the only way we can capitalize on the concentration of crime in cities to prevent crime? In a recent study supported by the National Institutes of Health, my colleagues and I found that crime on hot-spot streets is strongly related to the extent to which residents trust their neighbors and are willing to intervene in problems on their street. For example, when we asked residents whether people on their block can be trusted, 84 percent of people living on low- or no-crime streets, said yes.

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This was true of less than 50 percent of residents of the highest crime streets.

Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson calls this “[collective efficacy](#)” to emphasize the degree to which residents of communities can play a role in intervening and solving problems. We have found that collective efficacy is a key factor in explaining why some streets have high levels of crime.

A focus on crime hot spots has been the key to successful prevention programs such as [hot-spots policing](#). Our data suggest that it also provides promise for increasing the willingness and ability of residents to themselves control crime. Perhaps it is time to consider how cities can work to increase collective efficacy on high-crime streets. This would take an investment not in policing, but in other city agencies and resources. Social workers, community organizers and community psychologists would be the best agents to work with people who live on hot-spot streets to help them to be activists in preventing and responding to problems.

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This is not the job for which police were trained. Indeed, when residents themselves are able to intervene and prevent minor problems from escalating, the need for policing likely can be reduced. And this probably would reduce friction between the police and public — the police would have to intervene less, and residents would be better organized to enlist police support in ways that reflect community norms.

Our work suggests that increasing community trust and collaboration at crime hot spots provides a promising approach to preventing crime. Unfortunately, we do not yet have evidence of effective programs that might achieve this goal, in good part because we have given the exclusive responsibility of controlling crime on city streets to the police. Now that communities are rethinking this decision, they need to experiment with alternative approaches to preventing crime. Our research suggests that enhancing collective efficacy on high-crime streets is a worthy investment.

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