

Background

Hot spots policing has become a popular [response](#) to the [concentration of crime in particular places and networks](#). Generally involving a proactive focus on small areas that contain high levels of crime, hot spots policing relies on two primary strategies: problem-solving collaborations with residents of high-crime communities and the public and private organizations that serve them, and specialized enforcement teams that perform targeted investigations and patrols, such as the SCORPION unit involved in the Tyre Nichols case. While there is evidence that hot spots policing can be effective in reducing criminal activity when it is carried out correctly, there are also concerns that concentrated attention can promote police abuse and foster [negative sentiment toward police among the targeted communities](#), potentially creating a self-defeating dynamic due to a lack of [neighborhood cooperation with law enforcement](#).

One tool that has shown promise for [improving public interactions with the police](#) is procedural justice training. Officers are taught how to treat people in a fair and respectful manner, and shown how such treatment can promote [more favorable impressions of individual officers and the police force as a whole](#). Collectively, these findings suggest that hot spots policing and procedural justice training could be combined to simultaneously reduce crime and build stronger police-community relationships.

Research Question

Does the combination of hot spots policing and procedural justice training affect crime, police behavior, and perceptions of the police?

Study Strategy

Researchers selected 120 high-crime residential areas across three cities (Cambridge, MA; Houston, TX; Tucson, AZ). In each city, half of these areas were randomly assigned to police officers who went through a 40-hour procedural justice course. The other half of the hot spot areas were assigned to officers who received no additional training, with this random assignment allowing for a clear analysis of any causal effect of the differences in training.

Police in both groups were accompanied during their shifts by trained observers who graded the officers' behavior on each of the four aspects of procedural justice: giving voice to individuals, showing neutrality, treating people with dignity and respect, and demonstrating trustworthy motives. Notably, the observers did not know if the officers they were grading had gone through the additional training. In addition to officer observation, neighborhood residents in each of the 120 areas were surveyed about their perceptions of the police before and after the training had taken place. The number of arrests in each area also was recorded, along with the number of citizen-initiated crime calls and the number of crime incidents. In each city, the observation ran for roughly nine months (Tucson, July 2017 to March 2018; Cambridge, February 2019 to October 2019; Houston, October 2019 to July 2020).

Findings

The analysis indicates that the combination of hot spots policing and procedural justice training produced several positive developments. Areas patrolled by officers with procedural justice training experienced a 14% decline in crime incidents relative to areas served by officers without the additional training, though the training had no impact on the number of citizen-initiated calls to report crime to the police. This crime drop occurred alongside a 60% relative reduction in arrests carried out by officers who had engaged in procedural justice training.

In addition, observers found that officers with the additional training were more likely to allow residents to voice their viewpoints, to actively listen to those viewpoints, and to demonstrate neutrality and respect during these interactions. No impact was found for showing trustworthy motives.

Beyond the people directly involved in police interactions during the study period, residents living in hot spots with officers trained in procedural justice perceived the police as less harassing of people on their block and less likely to use unnecessary force compared to residents living in areas where officers did not receive this training, though they were not more likely to express confidence in the police.

Implications

The results of this research indicate that combining hot spots policing and procedural justice training may help reduce crime and improve community perceptions of law enforcement. The findings suggest that blending the two tools can reduce arrests and crime while creating more positive police-resident interactions and boosting certain opinions of the police among residents living in high-crime areas. While broader confidence in the police may not be affected, this evidence underscores the [value of procedural justice training](#) and provides more support for [incorporating procedural justice into national training standards for police](#).

"[Procedural justice] training is found to lead to fewer arrests, and to people reporting that the police are less violent and less harassing of people who live on their street."

- Weisburd et al. (2022)

"Our randomized trial points to the potential for [procedural justice] training not simply to encourage fair and respectful policing, but also to improve evaluations of the police and crime prevention effectiveness."

- Weisburd et al. (2022)

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