

Expansion of Targeted Policing

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Key Takeaways

- + National homicide rates surged to a historic peak around 2021-2022 and then fell sharply through 2025, undershooting even the pre-pandemic baseline. This swing is better explained as a tail-risk phenomenon, driven by violence spreading and compounding on itself among a network of individuals than by changes to police patrol alone.
- + Cities that invested heavily in hot spots policing and cities that barely invested saw comparable surges and declines of more than 4 standard deviations (4 sigma)—roughly 30% to over 140% above or below baseline.
- + Effect sizes from evaluations of hot spots policing (roughly an 18.6% reduction in treated hot spots) are an order of magnitude too small to produce citywide homicide swings of this size.
- + A small, identifiable population of high-risk shooters and their networks, well under 1,000 people even in the largest cities, can plausibly account for the entire rise and fall of the homicide rates.
- + Focused deterrence and targeted prosecution aimed at these networks (Baltimore, NYC gang takedowns, Dallas's multi-pronged Crime Plan) offer the most plausible policing mechanism, not hot spot patrol alone.

Theoretical Mechanisms

Targeted policing approaches such as hot spots policing rests on the theory of perceptual deterrence. Concentrating officers and problem-solving activity at the small number of places where crime clusters raise the overall perceived risk of detection at those locations, discouraging violent acts from occurring there. The underlying causal chain runs through increasing an offender's subjective certainty of being caught.¹

Established Evidence

Gun violence and homicide are spatially concentrated in the most socially disadvantaged neighborhoods within U.S. cities.² Homicides cluster among a small number of people, places, and times. That concentration of homicide follows a power-law distribution, such that a narrow share of offenders and their networks account for most of the harm. It is that extreme end of the offender population, not citywide averages, that generates the tail risk driving the largest swings. Because homicide is so concentrated, a small, identifiable set of places and people can move the national numbers on their own.³

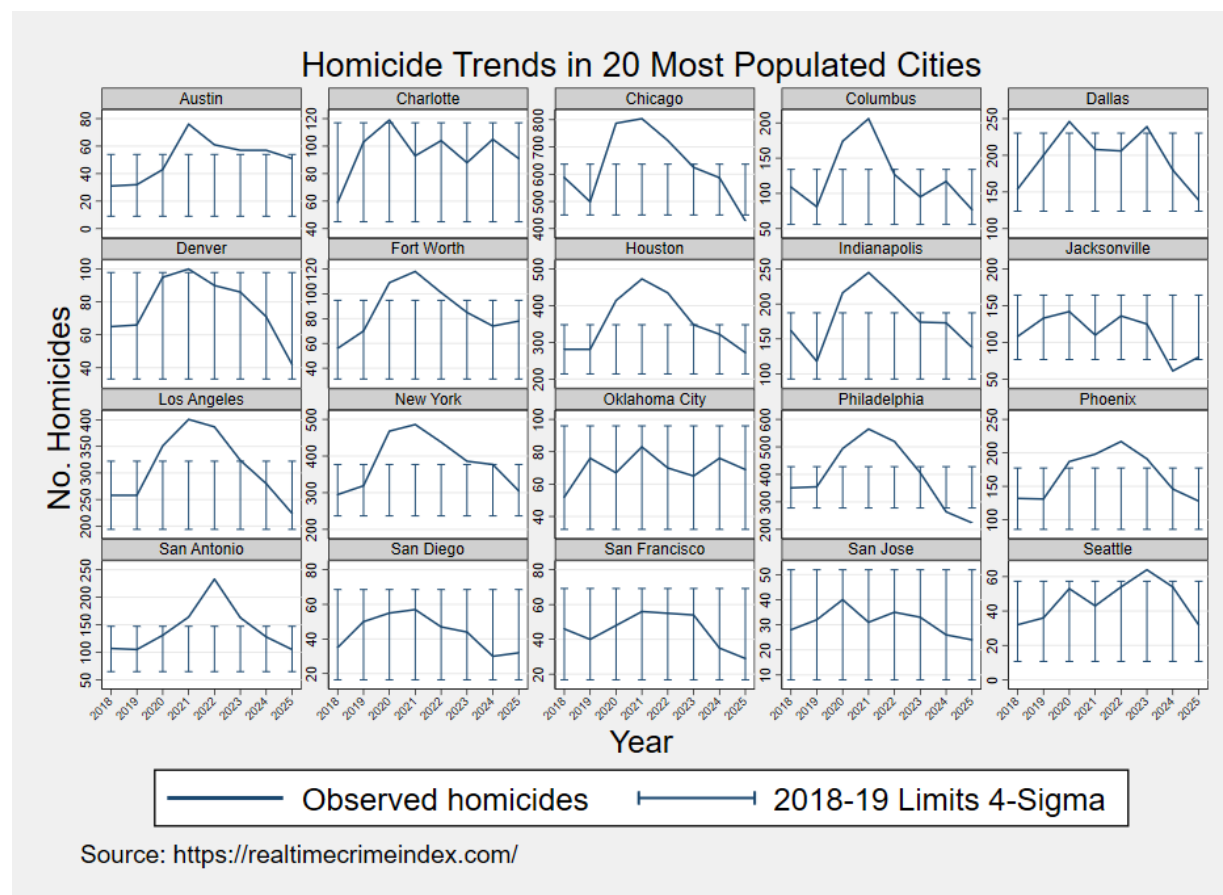
Precision-based policing that targets high-risk places and people—hot spots policing chief among them—seems like a plausible explanation for both the rise and reduction in homicide. Evidence shows that when police concentrate patrol where crime is most concentrated, they can meaningfully reduce it,⁴ consistent with the broader “law of crime concentration.”⁵ Hot spots policing is now widely used by U.S. departments.

Recent Evidence and Current Trends

If departments pulled back from hot spots policing in 2020-2022 amid COVID, the George Floyd protests, and a general retreat from proactive policing, homicide might be expected to rise. Symmetric re-engagement after 2022 could then explain the decline.

This account runs into the basic problem that the rise and fall was not confined to cities that expanded hot spots deployments. Figure 1 presents control-chart analysis of homicide counts in the 20 largest U.S. cities between 2018 and 2025. Using each city's 2018-2019 average as a baseline and a conservative four-standard-deviation threshold (4-sigma),⁶ 14 of 20 cities breached the upper limit between 2020 and 2022. Cities that breached the 4-sigma band saw peak-year increases of 30% to over 140% above baseline, followed by comparably steep declines. These cities included those that made publicized investments in hot spots policing (Dallas, Denver)⁷ and cities with essentially none (Chicago, Philadelphia). By 2025, only Chicago and Philadelphia reverted below their lower limit, despite no major recent commitment to hot spots policing.⁸ If targeted policing through hot spots patrol were doing the explanatory work on its own, the cities that scaled it up should show the clearest reversions.

Figure 1. Control-chart analysis of homicide counts, 20 largest U.S. cities, 2018–2025



Even where hot spots policing has been intensively deployed, the effect-size literature suggests it could not generate on its own swings in homicide of this magnitude. Braga and Weisburd’s recalculation across 38 tests find hot spots policing associated with an 18.6% reduction in violent crime at treated hot spots relative to matched controls.⁹ Most of these estimates cover a small share of a city’s geography and total volume of crime. Even applying that reduction to every hot spot at once, the citywide effect is an order of magnitude too small to explain 4-sigma changes in homicide.

The strongest individual studies point the same direction. Rosenfeld and colleagues’ randomized experiment in St. Louis found officer-initiated enforcement in hot spots was associated with a 78.6% reduction in firearm assaults, versus 23.8% in control hot spots.¹⁰ MacDonald, Fagan, and Geller’s evaluation of New York’s Operation Impact found 12-15% reductions in robbery and violent felony crime.¹¹ Sizeable as these effects are, none operate at a scale that could explain 4-sigma citywide swings in homicide.

The strongest counter-case is Dallas. Tregle and colleagues evaluated its citywide hot spots strategy in 2021-2023 against untreated comparison cities, finding a significant

20.8% reduction in citywide violent crime.¹² Dallas ran a three-pronged Crime Plan combining hot spots policing, place-network investigations, and focused deterrence. Focused deterrence had not yet begun at the time of the evaluation, and place-network investigations were operating in only four locations. The citywide relative reduction in homicide started with hot spots policing in 2021 but likely accelerated in 2024 and 2025 through the combination of efforts.

Dallas is the most rigorously documented citywide success, pairing place-based hot spots with person- and network-focused interventions—the more plausible mechanism behind the post-2023 decline. A tail-risk model fits the surge and reversal better: Homicide is driven by a small, identifiable population of high-risk individuals and their networks, such that shifts in focused deterrence and prosecution are more likely drivers than a citywide strategy. MacDonald and colleagues formalize this with a self-exciting point-process model calibrated to Chicago, in which shootings by a small “shooter” subpopulation propagate through co-offending networks, checked by arrest-driven deterrence.¹³ The calibration implies that fewer than 1,000 people each year, tied to roughly 3,500 networks, explain Chicago’s rise and retrenchment in shootings and homicides.

Table 1 reports each of the 20 largest U.S. cities’ pre-pandemic homicide baseline (the 2018-2019 average), the peak-year homicide count, the year it occurred, and the excess above baseline. Scaling that same calibration from MacDonald and colleagues for Chicago to the other 19 cities by peak-year excess homicides yields ballpark shooter-population estimates that are mostly in the low hundreds. Alongside are two estimates of how many people, tied together through co-offending networks, would need to be involved to produce a swing of that size, calibrated to Chicago’s 2021 peak. The peak-scaled column (5) applies that calibration to each city’s single worst-year homicide count. The cumulative-scaled column (6) applies it instead to each city’s total excess homicides summed across the 2020-2022 window when homicides surged nationally.

The two scaling methods land close together for nearly every city, which is what makes the estimates credible rather than an artifact of the choice of a single year. The numbers show that no city in the sample requires only a few dozen to a few hundred people to account for the entire rise and fall in homicide—a population small enough to identify, investigate, and prosecute, in contrast to the citywide scale at which hot spots policing operates.

Table 1. Homicide baseline, peak, and illustrative at-risk shooter-population estimates, 20 largest U.S. cities (2018–2025)

City (1)	Peak Year (2)	Peak Homicides (3)	2018–19 Baseline (4)	Estimated Shooters (Peak-Scaled) (5)	Estimated Shooters (Cumulative-Scaled) (6)
Austin	2021	76	32	61	69
Charlotte	2020	119	81	95	59
Chicago	2021	804	544	645	549
Columbus	2021	206	95	165	178
Dallas	2020	246	177	197	103
Denver	2021	100	66	80	71
Fort Worth	2021	118	63	95	112
Houston	2021	473	281	379	384
Indianapolis	2021	245	140	197	202
Jacksonville	2020	142	121	114	21
Los Angeles	2021	401	258	322	293
New York	2021	486	307	390	378
Oklahoma City	2021	83	64	67	22
Philadelphia	2021	565	353	453	417
Phoenix	2022	217	132	174	166
San Antonio	2022	233	106	187	168
San Diego	2021	57	43	46	25
San Francisco	2021	56	43	45	24
San Jose	2020	40	30	32	13
Seattle	2022	54	34	43	39

Peak-year homicide counts, 2018–19 baselines, and estimated shooter populations under a calibration of 70% shooter-attributable homicide share and 20% shooting-fatality rate, anchored to Chicago's 2021 peak (645 shooters). The cumulative-scaled column sums each city's excess homicides over the 2020–2022 surge window, the years homicides peaked nationally.

If broad hot spots policing cannot account for these swings, the more plausible mechanism targets specific people and networks, not places alone. Baltimore's focused-deterrence program fits this pattern. Pairing prosecution with social services outreach for a subset of individuals in the city's highest-violence district, it achieved a 25% greater reduction in homicide than a matched comparison of cities.¹⁴

Emerging Questions and Future Directions

Whether renewed focused deterrence explains recent declines in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia remains an open question, though a Philadelphia pilot offers suggestive evidence.¹⁵ Focused deterrence generally shows larger effects on serious violent crime than hot spots policing alone.¹⁶ New York's pre-2020 gang takedowns in public housing, for instance, cut gun violence by roughly a third in the first year and accounted for nearly a quarter of the decline over the following eight.¹⁷ Future research should explore what role the combination of focused policing and deterrence plays in explaining the rise and fall of homicides across multiple cities.

Prepared for CCJ Homicide Decline Research Summit

The United States has experienced a sharp decline in homicide since the middle of 2022. This dramatic and largely unexpected shift has sparked a high-stakes debate about what is driving it. To examine the plausibility of dozens of potential factors, CCJ convened a two-day summit in September 2026 with about 50 researchers from criminology, economics, public health, psychology, sociology, and related disciplines. This brief was prepared to inform discussions during the convening.

Endnotes

¹ Bucci, Rebecca. "Addressing the 'Dirty Little Secret' of Deterrence: Testing the Effects of Increased Police Presence on Perceptions of Arrest Risk." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 40, no. 2 (2024): 311–342.

² Braga, Anthony A., and David L. Weisburd. *Policing problem places: Crime hot spots and effective prevention*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

³ Parker, Karen F. *Unequal Crime Decline*. New York University Press, 2008.

⁴ Braga, A. A., & Weisburd, D. L. (2022). Does hot spots policing have meaningful impacts on crime? Findings from an alternative approach to estimating effect sizes from place-based program evaluations. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 38(1), 1-22.

⁵ Weisburd, David. "The law of crime concentration and the criminology of place." *Criminology* 53, no. 2 (2015): 133-157.

⁶ Calculated with a Poisson control limit of four standard deviations which covers more than 99% of the expected distribution.

⁷ <https://time.com/6227552/hotspot-policing-crime-effectiveness/>

⁸ Kapustin, Max, Terrence Neumann, and Jens Ludwig. Policing and management. No. w29851. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2022.; Groff, Elizabeth R., Jerry H. Ratcliffe, Cory P. Haberman, Evan T. Sorg, Nola M. Joyce, and Ralph B. Taylor. "Does what police do at hot spots matter? The Philadelphia policing tactics experiment." *Criminology* 53, no. 1 (2015): 23-53.

⁹ Braga, Anthony A., and David L. Weisburd. "Does hot spots policing have meaningful impacts on crime? Findings from an alternative approach to estimating effect sizes from place-based program evaluations." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 38, no. 1 (2022): 1-22.

¹⁰ Rosenfeld, Richard, Michael J. Deckard, and Emily Blackburn. "The effects of directed patrol and self-initiated enforcement on firearm violence: A randomized controlled study of hot spot policing." *Criminology* 52, no. 3 (2014): 428-449.

¹¹ MacDonald, John, Jeffrey Fagan, and Amanda Geller. "The effects of local police surges on crime and arrests in New York City." *PLoS One* 11, no. 6 (2016): e0157223.

¹² Tregle, Brandon, Michael R. Smith, Chantal Fahmy, and Rob Tillyer. "More than meets the eye: examining the impact of hot spots policing on the reduction of city-wide crime." *Crime Science* 14, no. 1 (2025): 3.

¹³ MacDonald, John, George Mohler, P. Jeffrey Brantingham, and Anthony A. Braga. "Controlling Shootings by Focusing on Tail Risks." *CrimRxiv* (2026).

¹⁴ Kapustin, Max, Aaron Chalfin, Jeremy Biddle, Brian A. Wade, Natasha Khade, Cristina Layana, Ben Struhl, and Anthony A. Braga. Reducing Gun Violence at Scale. No. w35292. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2026.

¹⁵ Moyer, Ruth A. "Assessing the effects of the Group Violence Intervention on firearm violence in Philadelphia." *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 21, no. 2 (2025): 527-557.

¹⁶ Braga, Anthony A., Brandon S. Turchan, and David L. Weisburd. "Focused deterrence can reduce crime: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials and quasi-experiments." *Criminology & Public Policy* (2026).

¹⁷ Chalfin, Aaron, Michael LaForest, and Jacob Kaplan. "Can precision policing reduce gun violence? Evidence from "gang takedowns" in New York City." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 40, no. 4 (2021): 1047-1082.