

Hot spots policing

A strategy that targets police and partner resources and activities to those places where crime is most concentrated

First published

21 April 2018

Updated

11 August 2021

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall reduction	 Very strong	 Moderate	 Moderate	 Low	No information

Focus of the intervention

Hot spots policing is a strategy that involves the targeting of resources and activities to those places where crime is most concentrated. The strategy is based on the premise that crime and disorder is not evenly spread within neighbourhoods but clustered in small locations. Focusing resources and activities in hot spots aims to prevent crime in these specific areas and potentially, reduce overall crime levels in the wider geographic area.

Hot spots policing is not defined by the use of specific interventions or tactics, but by whether activity is targeted to specific high crime locations. Activities could include directed police patrols, aggressive disorder enforcement (crackdowns) or problem-oriented policing (POP).

This narrative is based on one review covering 65 studies, 62 of which contributed to a meta-

analysis. Of the primary studies included in the review, 51 were based on evidence from the USA, four from the UK, four in Sweden and six from other countries (Argentina, Australia, Colombia, Denmark, India and Trinidad and Tobago).

A range of crime outcomes were used in the studies, including: incident reports, emergency calls, and arrests.

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that hot spots policing has reduced crime.

The meta-analysis found that hot spots policing led to a small, statistically significant reduction in overall crime in areas that received hot spots policing, compared to those that received routine levels of traditional police crime prevention tactics.

These reductions were most evident in specific crime types including drug offences, disorder offences, property crime and violent crime.

The review also tested diffusion of benefits (crime reducing in neighbouring areas as well as in the hot spots) and displacement (crime moving to neighbouring areas). These tests found a small but statistically significant overall diffusion of benefits, with only one study reporting a statistically significant displacement effect.

Comparing research designs, randomised studies showed a smaller effect than quasi-experimental designs, but these were still statistically significant, showing a positive crime reduction effect.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The review had a well-designed search strategy which included unpublished literature, accounted for potential publication bias and used appropriate statistical methods to calculate the effect sizes reported. There was sufficient consideration of multiple elements of validity.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The review suggested a number of mechanisms by which hot spots might have an effect on crime.

Two theoretical mechanisms were identified which support the effectiveness of hot spots policing – deterrence and crime opportunity reduction.

It is assumed that crime can be reduced more efficiently by concentrating resources and activities on high crime areas, discouraging offenders from taking advantage of crime opportunities concentrated in specific locations.

Several other theories also influence hot spots policing. Hot spots policing aims to disrupt offenders by ensuring that capable guardians (people or technology that deter offending, such as police officers or CCTV) are present in high crime areas, reducing opportunities and making the costs of committing crime outweigh the potential benefits. However, none of these potential mechanisms are empirically tested in the review.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

There is evidence that hot spots effectiveness varies considerably by context. The review analysed variation in effect by crime type, programme type and evaluation design.

In terms of crime type, the review reported that hot spots policing was most effective in reducing drug offences, followed by disorder offences, property crime and then violent crime. All reported reductions were statistically significant.

When the authors compared the effect of taking a problem-oriented policing (POP) approach in hot spots (for example, in an area where there are high drug offences, police would intervene to attempt to address the conditions that led to the offending) to using more traditional policing techniques (for example, general deterrence or increased risk of arrest), they found that POP programmes were more effective.

When policing hot spots, taking a POP approach was also more likely to reduce crime in surrounding areas when compared to an increased use of traditional policing techniques.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review contained limited information about how hot spots policing was implemented and the specific activities undertaken as part of a hot spots policing strategy varied between studies. Examples of some of the specific activities undertaken included:

- directed patrols
- proactive arrests
- heightened levels of traffic enforcement
- CCTV
- number plate readers
- problem-oriented policing

The majority of the eligible hot spots policing studies seemed to implement the desired treatment successfully. However, a third of the studies (21 studies) did report some implementation issues that threatened the integrity and success of the projects. These included:

- disruption to the intervention due to staffing issues
- resistance from officers
- changes to computer systems and other technology failures
- lack of commitment to the problem-solving process
- lack of strict adherence to the target areas
- lack of support from other criminal justice partner agencies

The review focuses on issues associated with study implementation, as opposed to the implementation of the interventions themselves.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not include any formal economic analysis as only one of the 65 evaluations included had conducted any cost-benefit analysis.

This single study, based in England, found that police community support officers (PCSOs)

patrolling for 21 more minutes was linked to 85 to 360 fewer days of imprisonment in each targeted hot spot compared to control areas. This imprisonment reduction was associated with a saving of £5.60 to £23 for every £1 spent on PCSO patrol.

General considerations

- Hot spots policing is a strategy of focusing policing resources on concentrated areas of crime. Consideration needs to be given to the types of activities that are applied, and these should vary depending on the nature of the problem within the hot spot. In order to replicate outcomes across crime hot spots both deterrence and crime opportunity reduction needs to be constant.
- Qualitative research on crime and disorder outcomes was not included in the systematic review. This may be included in future updates of the review.
- The majority of the studies (51 of 73) were conducted in the USA and only four in the UK so some caution should be exercised when considering the generalisability of the findings to the UK context.
- There was limited evidence on the impact of hot spots policing on police relations with communities. The seven studies that did examine this issue found little evidence that hot spots policing programs result in negative impacts on police relations.

Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that hot spots policing has reduced crime.

Hot spots policing programmes that take a problem-oriented approach appear more effective than increased traditional policing (for example, increased patrols or enforcement).

The evidence suggested that hot spots policing was more effective for drug offences, disorder, property crime and violent crime.

Hot spots policing does not appear to displace crime into areas surrounding the target locations and can lead to a diffusion of benefits to the areas close to the hot spot.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

Braga, A., Turchan, B., Papachristos, A. and Hureau, D. (2019) '[Hot spots policing of small geographic areas effects on crime](#)', Campbell Systematic Reviews, Volume 15, Issue 3

Summary prepared by

This narrative was prepared by the College of Policing and was co-funded by the College of Policing and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

Tags

- [Crime reduction](#)
- [Hot spots policing](#)