

The effectiveness of visible police patrol

Officers patrolling places or passing through an area, regardless of the crime rate in that area, has no effect on crime reduction.

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Research into public expectations of policing in the UK has previously highlighted a strong preference for a highly visible police presence (Bradley, 1998). However when these views were explored in more detail, it was discovered that people's seemingly instinctive reaction to call for more bobbies on the beat was motivated by a desire to see crime reduced.

The study also suggested that the police can help ensure the public accept and support the targeting of resources in high-priority areas by engaging them in a dialogue (for more evidence on community engagement in policing, see Myhill, 2006).

The effect of police patrol on crime

Random or reactive patrols, which involve officers patrolling places regardless of the crime rate or passing an area on route to attending a call from the public, have been shown to have no crime reduction effect (Sherman and Eck, 2002; Weisburd and Eck, 2004).

Visible police patrol can reduce crime, however, but only if it is targeted in the small geographic locations – or hot spots – where crime is concentrated (Sherman and Eck, 2002; Weisburd and Eck, 2004).

A systematic review by Braga and others (2019) concluded that overall, hot spots policing can be effective at reducing crime. Indeed, 62 out of 78 studies included in the review reported that crime fell in the locations targeted for police presence and activity relative to other locations that were not targeted.

One study found that property crime fell by 31% in hot spots patrolled by marked police cars compared to hot spots where business as usual was maintained (Ratcliffe and others, 2020). Property crime did not fall in hot spots patrolled by unmarked police cars, highlighting the importance of the police providing a visible deterrence.

Other research has suggested that visible patrol in hot spots may only be effective where a particular threshold of crime already exists (Ratcliffe, 2011). The crime reduction effect of targeted patrol might also be fairly short-lived.

For example, Novak and others (2016) found that increased foot patrol reduced violence in targeted hot spots relative to control areas, but only for the first 30 days of the three-month intervention period.

One of the barriers to implementing targeted patrol in the past has been the traditional view that targeting hot spots simply results in crime moving around the corner or being displaced elsewhere.

Importantly, systematic reviews have shown that crime displacement tends not to happen with focused police activity in high-crime places. The crime reduction benefits may even spread to the areas immediately surrounding the targeted locations (Braga and others, 2019; Santos, 2014; Ariel and others, 2016).

If patrols targeted on areas where crime is concentrated are most likely to be effective, what should officers do when they are in a crime hot spot? The systematic review by Braga and others (2019) has shown that problem-solving in hot spots has tended to have a larger impact on crime than increased patrol or law enforcement has.

One US study compared the effectiveness of different policing strategies by randomly assigning 83 hot spots of street violence to receive high-intensity foot patrol, problem-solving or the standard police response (Taylor and others, 2011). During the 90-day intervention period, the intensive patrol hot spots showed large initial reductions in violence compared to the other areas.

However, this effect was not sustained, and crime returned to its previous level in the 90-day follow-up period when the intervention was withdrawn. In comparison, while problem-solving took slightly longer to reduce crime, it had a larger and longer-lasting effect overall.

This pattern of results suggests that a combined approach could be an effective strategy – using targeted foot patrol to bring crime down initially alongside problem-solving to have a more lasting impact.

The effect of police patrol on public perceptions

Analysis of the Crime Survey of England and Wales has suggested that police numbers and perceptions of police visibility are both independently associated with public confidence in the police (Sindall and Sturgis, 2013).

There is also causal evidence to suggest targeted patrol – particularly targeted foot patrol – can have a positive impact on public perceptions.

The evaluation of the local pilots of neighbourhood policing found that targeted foot patrol improved public confidence in the police, perceptions of crime and feelings of safety – as well as reducing crime – when implemented alongside community engagement and problem-solving (Tuffin and others, 2006). Importantly, foot patrol was used by the police to initiate positive, informal contact with members of the public and in response to local priorities.

The visible presence of officers patrolling on foot may also act as a control signal – a sign that the authorities are taking the problems of local people seriously (Innes, 2004).

Evidence from a follow-up evaluation has highlighted that while targeted foot patrol may be a necessary ingredient to improve public confidence, it may not be enough on its own – without community engagement and problem-solving – to have an effect (Quinton and Morris, 2008).

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Tags

Crime reduction