

Hot spots policing

About hot spots policing as a strategy to tackle crime, including how it works and the evidence base.

First published 19 October 2022

Hot spots are areas with persistently high levels of crime and disorder.

Hot spots policing is a strategy for reducing crime. It targets resources and activities in hot spots. The strategy is based on the idea that:

- crime and disorder are not evenly spread within neighbourhoods but clustered in small locations
- focusing resources on persistent high-crime areas can tackle crime problems more efficiently

Definition of a hot spot

A hot spot is a small geographical area where crime occurs often enough that it's predictable. These small areas are known as micro-units of geography.

An officer should be able to stand in the centre of the hot spot and see most of it with their naked eye (Sherman and others, 1989).

Hot spots can include:

- buildings
- an address or group of addresses
- street segments or groups of street segments
- bus stops

(Ratcliffe and others, 2011.)

How it works

Hot spots policing involves increasing visible patrols. This discourages offenders from taking advantage of opportunities to commit crime.

The two theories that underpin hot spots policing are:

- deterrence theory
- crime opportunity theory

Deterrence theory

This suggests crime can be prevented when an offender perceives that the cost of committing a crime outweighs the benefits.

Most importantly this involves:

- increasing the certainty of being caught and the swiftness of that happening
- the severity of punishment

(Braga, 2016.)

Increasing visible patrols can increase certainty of being caught and deter potential offenders.

Crime opportunity theory

This suggests that offenders make rational choices. They choose targets that offer a high reward with little effort and risk.

According to routine activity theory, a likely offender and suitable target (for example, a victim or property) need to be together at the same place and time for a crime to happen. This needs to be in the absence of a capable guardian (Braga and others, 2019).

This is illustrated in the problem analysis triangle (Figure 1). The sides of the triangle are:

- offender
- location
- victim/target

To reduce crime, one side of the triangle needs to be removed or controlled. Police can act as capable guardians by increasing their presence in high crime hot spots.



Figure 1: Problem analysis triangle

- [Read more about the problem analysis triangle](#)

Evidence

A systematic review combined all relevant studies on hot spots policing. It showed that implementing a hot spots policing approach led to small but statistically significant reductions in overall crime and disorder.

There is evidence that hot spots policing can work to reduce several crime types. These include:

- drug offences
- disorder offences
- property offences
- serious violence

(Braga and others, 2019.)

See our [drug crimes evidence briefing](#) for more information about strategies and interventions to reduce drug offences.

Spatial displacement

Spatial displacement is a common concern with hot spots policing.

This is the idea that a police focus on high-crime areas causes criminal activity to move elsewhere.

Several studies demonstrate this is not the case. This includes a meta-analysis that combined the results of a large number of studies. They show hot spots policing is more likely to lead to a

reduction in crime and disorder for nearby locations (Weisburd and others, 2006; Braga and others, 2019).

Hot spots policing strategies

Evidence is still growing on the best strategies for hot spots policing.

The most effective activity to reduce crime at hot spots is uncertain. The two broad strategies for hot spots policing are:

- high visibility
- problem-oriented policing

High visibility

This strategy focuses on police presence in a hot spot. The approach requires police to travel unpredictably between hot spots. They spend short periods in each hot spot to maximise the deterrent effect.

Evidence demonstrates that the ideal time to spend in a hot spot is 10 to 16 minutes. Beyond this there are diminishing returns on the amount of crime deterred (Koper, 1995).

The goal is for potential offenders to feel that offending is more risky in these areas. This is due to the belief that police enforcement could increase at any moment (Sherman, 1990).

Problem-oriented policing

This strategy addresses the underlying conditions of hot spots that lead to crime problems.

Problem-oriented policing is also known as problem-solving policing. It involves identifying and analysing problems in the hot spot. This leads to the implementation of a tailored solution.

Evidence has found that problem-oriented policing strategies may:

- take longer to reduce crime but have a more sustainable effect
- be better than high visibility strategies in high-crime areas

(Braga and others, 2019.)

Problem-orientated policing can take some time, so it might be reasonable to combine the two approaches. High visibility patrolling can be used to reduce the problem. At the same time, problem-solving work can take place to address the underlying causes.

- [Read more about problem-solving policing](#)

Community relations and reputation

Evidence is still growing on the implications of hot spots policing on police legitimacy. The current body of evidence is small.

There is little evidence that hot spots policing negatively impacts on police and community relations (Braga and others, 2019).

The strategy used within the hot spots should be considered. Interventions with a [procedural justice](#) element can enhance citizens' view of police legitimacy (Mazerolle and others, 2013).

- [Read more about enhancing police legitimacy](#)

Long-term impacts

Evidence is still growing on the long-term impacts of hot spots policing. Current studies on hot spots policing have only looked at its short-term benefits.

In the most recent systematic review, no studies had more than a one-year follow-up period (Braga and others, 2019). This means very little is known about how hot spots policing affects crime in the long term.

Tracking the long-term impact of hot spots policing is important to help understand its benefits and costs.

Read more

See the best available research evidence for hot spots policing in our crime reduction toolkit.

- [Hot spots policing – crime reduction toolkit](#)

This content was created in collaboration with the [Cambridge Centre for Evidence-Based Policing](#).

References

- Braga AA and others. (2019). 'Hot spots policing of small geographic areas effects on crime'. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 15(3), pp 289-311.
- Braga AA. (2016). 'Hot Spot Policing: Theoretical Perspectives, Scientific Evidence, and proper Implementation'. In: Teasdale A and Bradley MS, eds. 'Preventing Crime and Violence'. Switzerland: Springer. pp 269-279.
- Koper CS. (1995). 'Just enough police presence: Reducing crime and disorderly behavior by optimising patrol time in crime hot spots'. *Justice Quarterly*, 12(4), pp.649-672.
- Mazerolle and others. 2013. 'Legitimacy in policing: A systematic review'. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 9(1), pp i-147.
- Ratcliffe J and others. (2011). 'The Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment: A randomised controlled trial of police patrol effectiveness in violent crime hotspots'. *Criminology*, 49(3), pp 795-831.
- Sherman LW, Gartin PR and Buerger ME. (1989). 'Hot Spots of Predatory Crime: Routine Activities and the Criminology of Place'. *Criminology*, 27(1), pp 27–56.
- Sherman LW. (1990). 'Police crackdowns: Initial and residual deterrence'. In: Tonry M and Morris N, eds. 'Crime and justice: A review of research'. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp 1-48.
- Weisburd D and others. (2006). 'Does crime just move around the corner? A controlled study of spatial displacement and diffusion of crime control benefits'. *Criminology*, 44(3), pp 549-592.

Tags

Hot spots policing Crime reduction