Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities

"Proactive policing" refers to policing strategies that police organizations develop and implement with the intent to prevent and reduce crime. They differ from traditional reactive approaches in policing, which focus primarily on responding to crime once it has occurred and answering citizen requests for police service. The shift toward proactive policing began in the 1980s and 1990s, and today these strategies are used widely in the United States.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine were asked to assess the application and results of proactive policing strategies—their impacts on crime, the reaction of communities, whether they are being used in a legal fashion, and whether they are applied in a discriminatory manner. The National Academies appointed a committee of sociologists, criminologists, legal scholars, and law enforcement professionals to examine the evidence on these issues.

The committee's report finds evidence that a number of proactive policing practices are successful in reducing crime and disorder, at least in the short term, and that most of these strategies do not harm communities' attitudes toward police. However, the effects of proactive policing on other important outcomes—such as on the legality of police behavior and on racially biased behavior—are unclear because of gaps in research. These are critical issues that must be addressed in future studies.

Moreover, evidence on many proactive strategies is limited to near-term, localized impacts. Little is known about the strategies' long-term effects on crime or other outcomes, and about whether and to what extent they will offer crime control benefits at a larger jurisdictional level—for example, across an entire precinct or city. Research is needed to understand those impacts as well.

THE EMERGENCE OF PROACTIVE POLICING

Proactive policing developed from a crisis in confidence in policing that began to emerge in the 1960s because of social unrest, rising crime rates, and growing skepticism regarding the effectiveness of standard approaches to policing, which tended to react to crimes after they occurred.

In response, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, innovative police practices and policies began to take a more proactive approach—one that emphasizes preventing crime, mobilizing resources based on police initiative (rather than waiting for outside requests for police attention), and targeting the broader underlying forces at work that may be driving crime and disorder. Proactive policing is different from the everyday decisions of police officers to be proactive in specific situations, and instead refers to a strategic decision by police agencies to use proactive responses in a programmatic way to reduce crime. Today, proactive policing strategies are used widely in the United States.

The United States has once again been confronted by a crisis of confidence in policing. Instances of perceived or actual police misconduct have given rise to nationwide protests against unfair and abusive police practices. Although the report is not intended to respond directly to this crisis in confidence, it is important to consider how proactive policing
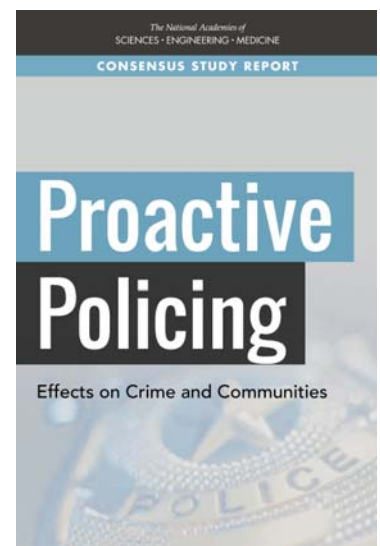
strategies may bear upon this crisis. It is not enough to simply identify "what works" for reducing crime and disorder; it is also critical to consider how proactive policing affects the legality of policing, potential abuses of police authority, and the equitable application of police services in the everyday lives of citizens.

IMPACTS ON CRIME

The report reviews evidence on specific proactive policing strategies' impacts on crime and disorder, including the strategies below. Evidence suggests that a number of these methods can be successful in reducing crime and disorder.

However, evidence in many cases is restricted to localized crime prevention impacts, such as specific places, or to specific individuals or groups of individuals; relatively little is known about whether and to what extent they will have benefits at the larger jurisdictional level or across all offenders. Furthermore, the evidence is generally on short-term crime-prevention effects and is seldom able to speak about long-term ones.

"Hot spots" policing focuses resources on locations where crime is concentrated—for example, by proactively increasing police patrols (by car or by foot), or through police crackdowns—in order to deter and respond more effectively to vandalism, break-ins, robberies, drug dealing, prostitution, and other crimes. The available research suggests that hot spot policing interventions produce short-term crime-reduction effects without simply displacing crime into surrounding areas. Instead, studies tend to find that areas nearby improve as well.

Predictive policing uses sophisticated computer algorithms to predict changing patterns of future crime, often promising to be able to identify the exact locations where specific types of crimes are likely to occur next. There are currently insufficient rigorous empirical studies to support a firm conclusion for or against the efficacy of crime-prediction software or of associated police response tactics.

Closed circuit television (CCTV) is thought to create a general deterrent effect on crime by increasing an offender's perceived risk of being identified or apprehended for criminal activity. The results from studies examining the use of CCTV in relatively passive monitoring systems are mixed, but tend to show modest outcomes in terms of reducing property crime at high-crime locations. For proactive uses of CCTV, however, there are insufficient studies to draw conclusions about their impact on crime and disorder.

Problem-oriented policing seeks to identify and analyze the underlying causes of crime problems and to respond using a wide variety of methods and tactics, from improving lighting and repairing fences to cleaning up parks and improving recreational opportunities for youth. Although this strategy has been popular, there are surprisingly few rigorous program evaluations of it. Overall, the small group of rigorous studies show that problem-oriented policing programs lead to short-term reductions in crime. The studies generally do not assess long-term impacts or possible jurisdictional impacts.

In third-party policing, police seek to persuade or coerce property owners, business owners, public housing agencies, and other organizations to take some responsibility for preventing crime or reducing crime problems. While there are only a small number of evaluations of these programs, the available evidence supports a conclusion that third-party policing generates short-term reductions in crime and disorder; evidence of long-term impacts is more limited.

Focused deterrence strategies attempt to deter crime among repeat offenders by understanding underlying crime-producing dynamics and implementing a blended strategy of law enforcement, community mobilization, and social service actions in response. These strategies also allow police to increase the certainty, swiftness, and severity of punishment. Evaluations of focused deterrence programs show consistent crime-control impacts in reducing gang violence, street crime driven by drug markets, and repeat individual offending. The available literature suggests that these programs have both short-term and long-term areawide impacts on crime.

Stop-question-frisk (SQF) programs rely upon the legal authority granted by court decisions to engage in frequent stops in which suspects are questioned about their activities, frisked, and often searched. Evaluations of focused uses of SQF targeting places with violence or serious gun crimes and focusing on high-risk repeat offenders consistently report short-term crime-reduction effects; there is an absence of evidence on long-term impacts. Evidence on the crime-reduction impact of SQF when implemented as a general, citywide crime control strategy is mixed.

Broken windows policing intends to disrupt the forces of disorder before they overwhelm a neighborhood or to restore afflicted neighborhoods to a point where community sources of order can maintain it. Implementations vary from informal enforcement tactics (warnings, rousting disorderly people) to formal or more intrusive ones (arrests, citations). Broken windows policing interventions that use broadly applied aggressive tactics for increasing misdemeanor arrests to control disorder generate little or no impact on crime. On the other hand, interventions that use neighborhood-based problem-oriented practices (see above) to reduce social and physical disorder have reported consistent short-term crime-reduction impacts; there is an absence of evidence on long-term impacts.

Community-oriented policing involves citizens in identifying and addressing public safety concerns, decentralizes decision making to develop responses to those concerns, and works to solve them. Existing studies do not identify a consistent crime-prevention benefit for community-oriented policing programs, though many of the studies have weak evaluation designs.

Procedural justice policing seeks to impress upon citizens and the wider community that the police exercise their authority in legitimate ways, with the expectation that if citizens accord legitimacy to police activity, they are more inclined to collaborate with police and abide by laws. While there is only a very small evidence base from which to draw conclusions, existing research does not support a conclusion that procedural justice policing

impacts crime or disorder. At the same time, because the evidence base is small, conclusions also cannot be drawn that such strategies are ineffective.

What the effective strategies have in common is their effort to more tightly specify and focus police activities. In contrast, generalized, aggressive enforcement tactics such as stop-question-frisk used indiscriminately across a city, or broken-windows policing programs that rely on a "zero tolerance" generalized approach to misdemeanor arrests, do not show evidence of effectiveness.

LAW AND LEGALITY

However effective a policing practice may be in preventing crime, it is impermissible if it violates the law. The most important legal constraints on proactive policing are the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (which protects against unreasonable search and seizure), the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and related statutory provisions. Although proactive policing strategies do not inherently violate the Fourth Amendment, any proactive strategy could lead to Fourth Amendment violations to the degree that it is implemented by having officers engage in stops, searches, and arrests that violate constitutional standards.

Specific policing strategies such as SQF and "zero tolerance" versions of broken windows policing have been linked to violations of both the Fourth Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause by courts in private litigation and by the U.S. Department of Justice in its investigations of police departments. Ethnographic studies and theoretical arguments further support the idea that proactive strategies that use aggressive stops, searches, and arrests to deter criminal activity may decrease liberty and increase Fourth Amendment and Equal Protection violations.

However, there is not enough direct empirical evidence on the relationship between particular policing strategies and constitutional violations to draw any conclusions about the likelihood that particular proactive strategies increase or decrease constitutional violations. In order to establish a causal link, studies would ideally determine the incidence of problematic behavior by police under a proactive policy, and compare that to the incidence of the same behavior, in otherwise similar circumstances, when a proactive policy is not in place.

Even when proactive strategies do not violate or encourage constitutional violations, they may undermine legal values such as privacy, equality, and accountability. Empirical studies to date have not assessed these implications.

RACIAL BIAS AND DISPARITIES

Concerns about racial bias loom especially large in discussions of policing. Recent high-profile incidents of police shootings and abusive police-citizen interaction caught on camera have raised questions regarding basic fairness, racial discrimination, and the excessive use of force against non-Whites, and especially Blacks, in the United States.

In a number of studies, social psychologists have found that race may affect decision making, especially under situations where time is short and such decisions need to be made quickly. And a series of studies in field settings with police suggest that negative racial attitudes may influence police behavior.

Some proactive policing strategies have also features that align with psychological risk factors for biased behavior by police officers. For example, research in social psychology suggests that implicit biases are particularly likely to emerge in situations where time is short and decisions need to be made quickly. Proactive policing strategies may put officers in situations of more frequently enforcing the law—situations that sometimes require the quick thinking and decision making that are risk factors for the emergence of implicit biases.

However, there is relatively little field research exploring the potential role that racially biased behavior plays in proactive policing compared to other policing strategies. There is still less research on the ways that race may shape police policy or color the consequences of police encounters with residents.

When police target high-risk places or people, as is common in proactive policing programs, there are likely to be large racial disparities in the volume and nature of police-citizen encounters. Existing evidence does not establish conclusively whether and to what extent such racial disparities are indicators of statistical prediction, racial animus, implicit bias, or other causes.

The current gaps in research mean that the committee was unable to draw any conclusions about the role of biased behavior in proactive policing. The research gaps also leave police departments and communities who are concerned about racial bias without an evidence base from which to make informed decisions. Research on these topics is urgently needed, both so that the field can better understand potential negative consequences of proactive policing, and so that communities and police departments may be better equipped to align police behaviors with values of equity and justice.

COMMUNITY REACTIONS

The committee also assessed the impacts of proactive policing on issues such as communities' fear of crime and their evaluation of police legitimacy. Emerging research suggests that place-based proactive policing strategies—which focus on areas with high concentrations of crime, such as hot spots policing or use of CCTV—rarely have negative short-term impacts on community outcomes. At the same time, the evidence suggests that such strategies rarely improve community perceptions of the police. There is a virtual absence of evidence on the long-term and jurisdiction-level community impacts of place-based policing.

Studies on problem-solving interventions, which seek to identify and remedy underlying causes of crime problems, show consistent small-to-moderate positive impacts on short-term community satisfaction with police. Evidence also suggests that the risk of undesired negative effects from these strategies—known as backfire effects—is

low. At the same time, there is little consistency in these strategies' impacts on perceived disorder and quality of life, fear of crime, and police legitimacy. Again, there is little research on long-term or jurisdiction-level impacts.

Studies evaluating the impact of "person-focused" strategies such as stop, question, and frisk (SQF) have design limitations that prevent causal inferences to be drawn. However, studies of citizens' personal experiences with these strategies do show marked negative associations between exposure to SQF and proactive traffic enforcement and community outcomes.

Community-oriented policing, which involves citizens in identifying and addressing public safety concerns, leads to modest improvements in the public's view of policing and the police in the short term. These improvements occur with greatest consistency for measures of community satisfaction and less so for measures of perceived disorder, fear of crime, and police legitimacy.

In general, studies show that perceptions of procedurally just treatment are strongly and positively associated with subjective evaluations of police legitimacy and cooperation with police. However, the amount of research on procedural justice policing was insufficient to allow the committee to draw causal conclusions about whether this approach will improve community evaluations of police legitimacy or increase cooperation.

THE FUTURE OF PROACTIVE POLICING

The report supports the general conclusion that there is sufficient scientific evidence to support the adoption of some proactive policing practices, certainly if the primary policy goal is to reduce crime. At the same time, there are key gaps in the knowledge base: Few studies to date have examined long-term outcomes, and little is known about the impacts of proactive policing on the legality of police behavior and on racial bias. It is time for greater investment in understanding what is cost effective, how such strategies can be maximized to improve the relationships between the police and the public, and how they can be applied in ways that do not lead to violations of the law by police.

COMMITTEE ON PROACTIVE POLICING: EFFECTS ON CRIME, COMMUNITIES, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

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