

POLICY ESSAY

FOCUSED DETERRENCE STRATEGIES AND CRIME CONTROL

More Than Lightning in a Bottle and Far From Ready-Made

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The Pareto Principle, named after economist Vilfredo Pareto who developed the “80/20” rule in the late 1800s, specifies that 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. During the past century, researchers focused on business, product consumption, medicine, and the behavioral sciences have observed the same basic persistent pattern regarding the “vital few and trivial many” (Juran, 1954). Not surprisingly, criminologists have lent further support to this principle, or various adaptations of it, by showing that a fraction of offenders commits a majority of crime (Moffitt, 1993), that a small number of geographic locations (such as hot spots, street segments, and even cities) accounts for the majority of observed crime patterns (McCall, Land, and Parker, 2011; Sherman, Martin, and Buerger, 1989; Weisburd, Bushway, Lum, and Yang, 2004), and that a small number of groups of offenders is responsible for a disproportionate level of street crime such as gun violence and drug offending (Zimring, 1981). Academics and criminal justice practitioners alike are intimately familiar with this concept.

Nevertheless, there is often a wide disconnect between what is known and what is done. Pioneers in Boston in the late 1990s developed the Ceasefire strategy by drawing on principles of crime prevention that have shown to have crime reduction benefits in a variety of settings (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, and Piehl, 2001). They developed a model that (a) used data to identify the high-risk gangs and groups of chronic offenders that were responsible for the Pareto Principle in action within Boston; (b) generated networks of capacity between criminal justice agencies including police, prosecution, probation, parole, and social services; (c) channeled criminal justice resources to suppress, deter, and alter high-risk offenders’ perceptions of the enhanced sanctions, as well as potential for victimization, related to the continuation of violence; and

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(d) mobilized the community and worked to enhance perceptions of procedural justice (Kennedy, 1997, 2011).

The broader complexity of the focused deterrence approach is perhaps best represented by a single description: *balance*. The remainder of this policy essay will be focused on the balance between practical programmatic implementation and rigorous empirical evaluation. Also, I highlight the equilibrium that seemingly needs to exist for focused deterrence to be executed properly within the field. Finally, I conclude with a discussion that centers on the balance that is attempted through focused deterrence regarding crime control and community mobilization. Traditionally within policing there has been an emphasis on preventing crime versus community involvement or, as noted by Packer (1968), a tension between due process and crime control. Focused deterrence is a rare and innovative application that is designed to balance these often contradictory processes.

Implementation and Evaluation of Focused Deterrence Interventions

Based on the evidence of a noteworthy reduction in youth firearms violence in Boston at the turn of the century, a highly predictable two-phase sequence emerged from policy makers and researchers. First, other sites replicated and adapted the model to fit the unique problems that plagued these settings (Braga and Weisburd, 2012; Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan, 2018, this issue). Second, researchers rightly preached caution when interpreting the results of the initial and subsequent adaptations of the focused deterrence framework until enough evaluation evidence emerged showing whether and to what degree the strategy corresponded with programmatic benefits in different contexts (Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Baumer, 2005). To see how these phases unfolded, I examined this latest systematic review on focused deterrence in the field.

Anthony Braga, David Weisburd, and Brandon Turchan's (2018) updated review now features findings from 24 quasi-experimental evaluations of focused deterrence interventions. Compare this with a systematic review conducted approximately 6 years earlier that only had 12 studies with enough scientific rigor to assess programmatic impact (Braga and Weisburd, 2012). As anticipated, the strategy has clearly become increasingly popular as a vehicle to disrupt persistent patterns of street crime, and it will likely continue along this trajectory in the future.

Braga et al. (2018) show that focused deterrence is associated with moderate and statistically significant crime reduction effects, with results from 19 of the 24 studies indicating significant declines in targeted outcomes, and an observed overall effect size point estimate of roughly .383. When we delve further, we see that effect sizes were highest in sites that focused on gangs and groups of chronic, repeat offenders (effect size = .657) and were less robust for studies aimed at examining at-risk individuals (effect size = .204). For settings that comprised the drug market intervention (DMI), we see a much more modest effect size (.091). Beyond programmatic type, the findings from a series of moderation

analyses accounting for fidelity of implementation showed that higher levels of impact were observed among strategies that did not experience considerable deviations from the program model.

For policy implications and practitioners considering adopting the focused deterrence framework, it is important to reflect on the various interventions that have been implemented and assessed thus far. Although most scholars within the academic community are invariably more concerned with evaluation rigor (e.g., programmatic theory, internal validity, and generalizability), practitioners and policy stakeholders are typically more focused on investing their (limited) resources into promising strategies that will address their localized problem. What is evident is that treatment fidelity, including the precision of the problem (as well as outcome) analysis, is calibrated with the differing programmatic effects that have been observed in focused deterrence evaluations.

Impact of Group and Gang Interventions Relative to Drug Market Interventions

Gang and group intervention strategies have yielded the highest impact on outcomes that most often center on firearms violence. For cities that experience high levels of gun crime, the tactic seems simple enough. Nevertheless, a group/gang (or any) intervention must match the landscape of the problem. A perception that still persists within many law enforcement circles is that gangs and groups of offenders are cohesively structured organizations, which narrows the potential for focus and problem identification. And although some classic gang scholars have suggested that there is a hierarchical structure to gangs (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991), most contemporary researchers have indicated otherwise. Malcolm Klein (2004: 57) perhaps stated it best, “the word ‘gang’ implies a level of structure and organization for criminal conspiracy that is simply beyond the capacity of most street gangs.” Of course, the counter problem is a net widening by law enforcement that may have little-to-no bearing on actual gang members (particularly when relying on arrest-only approaches), and deleterious effects (such as gang-joining) among nongang members caught in the net (Wiley, Carson, and Esbenson, 2017). Again, obtaining balance regarding problem identification of those most likely to engage in firearms violence is a central component to effective group-focused interventions. The use of subject matter experts to illustrate this change in group dynamics is often a vital step for program design. But how has this been achieved in settings that have shown impact?

The use of homicide and group or gang audits and social network analysis has become commonplace at the inception of many of the group- and gang-focused interventions. Incident reviews are used to extract experiential knowledge from law enforcement experts to capture information about recent shooting incidents and known associates of recent shooters (offenders and victims) that identifies the nodes by which high-risk individuals and their groups of association are potentially linked (Kennedy, 1997). McGloin (2005) was among the first to champion the use of social network analysis to aid in strategic police-led approaches by unraveling the organizational character of street gangs and group networks.

For more than a decade, researchers have refined these types of analytical tools to be ever more precise.

Papachristos and Wildman (2014) analyzed patterns in homicide victimization and found that individual characteristics, structural neighborhood features, and perhaps most importantly social network position (particularly immediate social distance related to a recent homicide victim) were robust predictors of homicide victimization. Papachristos and Kirk (2015) advanced the use of social network analysis to assist the Chicago Police Department in a focused deterrence and legitimacy-based intervention by not only mapping the social networks and contacts between potential factions in groups and gangs but also charting interfaction relationships such as alliances, disputes, and mergers given the evolving and dynamic nature of group processes (see also Papachristos, Hureau, and Braga, 2013). The use of homicide and gang audits and social network modeling has been incorporated into almost all of the group and gang approaches that have been evaluated.

It is therefore not surprising that evaluation rigor is considerably higher in settings that have included a complex problem analysis coupled with the development of comprehensive partnerships among criminal justice actors, social service providers, and community members. As noted by Braga et al. (2018), the National Network for Safe Communities of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, directed by the architect of the original Boston strategy, David Kennedy, has provided support to more than 80 U.S. cities that have attempted to implement some version of the focused deterrence strategy. To this point, a growing number of evaluations for many of these cities is likely in the works, but certainly not all will be evaluated. Many sites have failed at the problem analysis and implementation steps and thus have never made it to an evaluation stage.¹ This issue is not uncommon, however, with problem analysis in policing (see Eck and Spelman, 1987).

Contrast the complexity (both real and perceived) of identifying groups and gang networks with the deceptively simple problem of identifying open-air drug markets. In High Point (NC), officials adopted the focused deterrence framework to disrupt a series of neighborhood-based open air drug markets, and the results of multiple independent studies comprising rigorous quasi-experimental designs indicated the strategy had a significant impact on targeted crime outcomes (Corsaro, Hunt, Hipple, and McGarrell, 2012; Saunders, Lundberg, Braga, Ridgeway, and Miles, 2015). In light of the High Point findings, the DMI may seem to be a particularly attractive solution in settings where the police identify an illegal drug market as a core community problem.

As expected, additional settings attempted to implement the model and the results have been much more variable. Braga et al. (2018) show that the DMI approach in particular is more likely to correspond with implementation fidelity problems. On the surface, the problem analysis for drug markets may not seem to require the same level of assessment

1. Implementation problems were well documented in Baltimore (Braga, Kennedy, and Tita, 2002) and Minneapolis (Kennedy and Braga, 1998) and have undoubtedly plagued several additional settings.

rigor as the group and gang intervention. Nevertheless, understanding the structure of the drug market, creating networks of capacity between stakeholders, having a strategic police response to all drug-related crime in the targeted community, and bridging the gap in police–community relationships is much easier to plan than to achieve.

Just as the term “gang” has a unique meaning to different researchers as well as practitioners, so too does the term “open-air drug market.” May and Hough (2004) highlighted the distinctions between different types of drug markets, with a specific focus on (a) the organizational structure of the market and (b) the cohesiveness of the group dynamics. They contended that there are a variety of markets such as open markets (visible locales, known and unknown supplier and buyer relationships), closed markets (visible or discrete locales with only known supplier and dealer relationships), alley markets (back alley, quiet locales), pub and club (semiopen) markets, and retail markets (where buyers and sellers use digital technology to set up meetings). The structure of the markets (highly structured, semistructured, or fragmented) varies within contexts, as does the types of drugs sold; for example, crack and heroin sales are now seemingly more likely to have evolved from open to closed markets to reduce the risk of apprehension as well as for quality control among dealers and consumers within these markets. Thus, market structure is an important component that must be diagnosed properly at the problem analysis stage if the intervention is to have any meaningful impact.

Even if all of the various components of the focused deterrence framework seem to be primed, the strategy can suffer from problems that undermine its capacity to work. Pollack (2017: 814) noted that the DMI has “surpassingly stubborn implementation obstacles.” For example, based on personal experience from Peoria (IL), we found that the police department’s DMI strategy had all of the key components in place at project onset; a survey of residents in the targeted community within 1 year of implementation, however, showed that less than one third of respondents in the neighborhood had even heard of the strategy (Corsaro and Brunson, 2013). This realization was particularly stunning because the neighborhood call-in session² had well over 100 participants “from the community” in attendance. A retrospective analysis in fact indicated that most of the citizens at the call-in were from outside of the target neighborhood. Many in attendance in Peoria were employees and volunteers of nearby businesses and social service providers. As noted by Brunson (2015), minority residents from distressed areas are unfortunately those often most afflicted and least often involved in crime prevention efforts. In short, the criminal justice and formal organizational components to this strategy (police investigations, prosecutorial

2. The call-in session in focused deterrence strategies has been explained in almost all of the literature related to this topic. Briefly, the call-in is a public notification session where suspects are confronted with the sanctions available to legal authorities (as leverage) if patterns of offending continue (and that such continuance will not be tolerated); where community leaders attempt reintegration of the suspects into the community; and where social service providers determine individual needs. In most evaluations of focused deterrence strategies, the initial call-in has been considered the point of programmatic onset.

involvement, probation and parole officials, as well as social service providers) were all involved in the implementation phase, but residents from the target area were mostly absent. The community that was most distressed by open-air drug dealing was not a part of the attempted solution.

The Peoria example is but one of several DMI strategies that suffered some form of fidelity problems (Braga et al., 2018; Saunders, Robbins, and Ober, 2017). In many ways, in the evaluation literature, scholars have shown the strengths and limitations of the DMI approaches in practice, and its potential for impact when done properly is moderate, although mixed. The findings from the group and gang studies and from most of the offender-focused strategies have likewise demonstrated the potential for impact, which has a seemingly higher ceiling, particularly among settings that made it through the rigor of the implementation phase. The benefits of an engaged, active, and participating research–practitioner partnership have been highlighted as a promising approach for transparency and efficiency (Engel and Whalen, 2010; Klofas, Hipple, and McGarrell, 2010). It is my position in this essay that policy stakeholders and practitioners need to not only consider the importance of evaluation research but also *require* the use of analysis to assist with *implanting* the strategy more so than *assessing* it. The findings reported in the literature thus far reveal that the evaluation will also be more rigorous if research is heavily integrated within the implementation phase.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, Boston's Ceasefire did not catch lightning; similar impact has been observed in many other settings and applications, and the list continues to grow as illustrated by Braga et al.'s (2018) updated systematic review. Better understanding of the theoretical mechanisms of the strategy, the importance of reaching neighborhood residents that desire police involvement but who are cynical of traditional police responses to crime (Brunson, 2007), the critical importance of a rigorous problem assessment, and improving outcome evaluations are all primary points of emphasis for future focused deterrence interventions and subsequent evaluations.

What is clear from the volume of studies that have emerged thus far is that (a) the Pareto Principle related to focused deterrence extends beyond offenders; it can also be seen by the small number of subject matter experts that have worked with different agencies to both implement and evaluate most interventions that have been published to this point; and (b) partnerships between researchers and practitioners are vital not only from an evaluation perspective but also from an implementation standpoint. The connection between problem assessment, implementation fidelity, and outcome evaluation rigor is clearly intertwined as evidenced by the results of the different moderation analyses presented by Braga et al. (2018).

Just as the focused deterrence model is an attempt at balancing crime control and due process, deterrence and social services, and law enforcement with the community, the

most promising results from the studies conducted thus far illustrate the significance of research collaborators to understand the context of the problems that face the police, prosecution, and parole officials and to collaborate actively with them before and during the operational phase. Furthermore, criminal justice partners clearly need to collaborate with researchers (hopefully this list will continue to expand as well) to collect, analyze, and understand their own sources of data given the complexity of the focused deterrence framework in action. To the extent that future sites and additional research specialists can be integrated in and assess the strategy with improved evaluation rigor, we will be in a better position to understand the internal and external validity of focused deterrence in practice. In this sense, the application of focused deterrence seems to be anything but “shelf-ready” for practitioners and requires considerable efforts and multidimensional partnerships to be successful.

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