

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

FOCUSED DETERRENCE STRATEGIES AND CRIME CONTROL

Focused Deterrence Strategies Save Lives

Introduction and Discussion of an Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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After a brief reprieve, violence reduction is again in vogue. In the past year, media headlines regarding increases in violent crime and gang violence (often MS-13 specifically) have dominated the national news and the political landscape. Just a brief glance at the leading headlines from 2017 tells the familiar and overly simplistic story: Violence is increasing, driven by gangs, and the solution is more law enforcement and increased sanctions for violent offenders. This renewed attention on violent crime, and the accompanying rudimentary narrative of its causes and solutions, has easily infiltrated into political and policy discussions at the federal, state, and local levels. Yet scholars Anthony Braga, David Weisburd, and Brandon Turchan (2018, this issue) seize an opportunity to remind researchers, practitioners, and policy makers about the importance of identifying and implementing violence reduction strategies that have scientifically demonstrated impact. It is a basic call back to the importance of implementing evidence-based policing initiatives (Sherman, 1998) and for the continuing need to bring science to the streets.

Braga and his colleagues (2018) present a compelling case for the effectiveness of focused deterrence strategies to reduce violence. Through their research, they provide an update to a previously published Campbell Collaboration systematic review of the impact of focused deterrence strategies on violence reduction (Braga and Weisburd, 2012). Using similar methodology, Braga et al. (2018) update that review and meta-analysis, as well as provide additional insight regarding the impact of focused deterrence strategies. Some researchers may be surprised (as I was initially) that in the 6 years after their initial review, the number of qualified evaluations more than doubled (10 studies identified in 2010 compared

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with 24 in 2016) and, furthermore, that the quality of these evaluations has substantially improved. In this regard, their updated systematic review of focused deterrence is both necessary and timely.

Braga and his colleagues (2018) begin by thoughtfully describing the typical components involved in focused deterrence strategies to reduce violence. For those unfamiliar with focused deterrence strategies, this article provides a succinct overview of the basic components and the methods in which they are applied. These components—law enforcement, social services, and community engagement—and the tactics associated with them are aimed at specific individuals and groups/gangs through direct communication methods. The authors differentiate three types of focused deterrence strategies based on the specific problem addressed: (1) gang/group violence reduction, (2) drug market intervention, and (3) repeat offending by high-risk individuals.

A unique contribution of this article by Braga et al. (2018) is the care devoted to articulating the underlying theoretical mechanisms that support these initiatives. Interwoven into the authors' description are theories beyond deterrence, including situational crime prevention, collective efficacy, rehabilitation, and procedural justice and legitimacy. In short, using theoretical propositions and their underpinnings, these authors articulate *why* we should expect that the components implemented as part of a focused deterrence strategy will impact offender behavior. This is more than just a theoretical exercise required for publication in a major journal. Rather, this discussion serves as a clear explanation of the rationale behind focused deterrence strategies for practitioners and policy makers. Braga and his colleagues essentially set the stage for both researchers and practitioners alike by demonstrating that there is good reason to expect that criminal behavior can be reduced when strategies are appropriately tailored to address the underlying mechanisms known to influence behavior.

As with any strong systematic review, the main contribution of this article by Braga et al. (2018) is the identification, classification, and meta-analysis of the existing focused deterrence evaluations. After conducting a comprehensive search, the authors identified 24 quasi-experimental design evaluations that met their specified eligibility requirements. The results from the meta-analysis demonstrated a “statistically significant, moderate overall mean effect in favor of focused deterrence strategies” with no significant crime displacement detected. Rather, the authors found a general diffusion of crime control that “extended into proximate areas and socially connected groups that did not receive direct treatments.” Also important is the finding that the strongest reductions in crime are for strategies targeting gang/group violence, compared with more modest crime reductions for drug market intervention strategies. The authors further demonstrate that stronger program fidelity is linked to greater crime reduction effects.

A response essay, authored by Nicholas Corsaro (2018, this issue), skillfully places the findings from Braga et al.'s (2018) systematic review within a larger context. Corsaro was directly involved in 7 of the 24 studies included in the meta-analysis, and therefore,

he has experiences to share regarding both implementation and evaluation across multiple jurisdictions. In his essay, Corsaro (2018) articulates the importance of balance—that is, the balance needed between implementation and evaluation of focused deterrence strategies. He also reminds readers about the importance of the initial problem analysis necessary to identify, design, and implement the appropriate crime reduction strategy. Corsaro cautions readers not to overlook the likely large number of jurisdictions that failed at the initial problem analysis or implementation stage and, therefore, never made it to the evaluation stage. He clearly establishes the case for heavy involvement by researchers before, during, and after implementation to enable reductions in violence.

This is a similar refrain that Corsaro and I (Corsaro and Engel, 2015) noted after working directly with practitioners in New Orleans, Louisiana. After conducting an initial focused deterrence evaluation in that city, we concluded by reiterating that “researcher-practitioner partnerships are not only imperative for problem identification, implementing effective strategic approaches, resource management, and evaluation purposes, but also helping law enforcement keep track as to which individuals and groups are driving a city’s violent crime problems” (p. 28). Unfortunately, our updated evaluation in New Orleans in which we examined the next 2 years after the research team concluded our initial work demonstrated that the initial violence reductions were “not sustained over time as the implementation of key components of the initiative withered” (Corsaro, Ozer, Haberman, and Engel, 2017: 7). Similar failures in long-term implementation and sustainability were reported in Boston, Cincinnati, and other cities when police executives or political leadership changed, partnerships dissolved, and officials initially engaged simply stopped doing the work (Tillyer, Engel, and Lovins, 2012). Although the evidence regarding crime reductions is clear, we have not systematically considered the issues surrounding program sustainability.

In addition, no comprehensive review of focused deterrence strategies would be complete without a discussion of the “black box” problem for evaluators. Braga and his colleagues (2018) again raise these issues for our collective consideration, and Corsaro (2018) adds important commentary. As we know all too well, it has been difficult to assess the value of the individual components that collectively form focused deterrence strategies. Although in at least one evaluation researchers attempted to disentangle the impact of different components (e.g., Engel, Tillyer, and Corsaro, 2013), there is clearly more work to do. Unfortunately, the comprehensive and integrated nature that defines these programs (and likely leads to their success) cannot be easily parceled into individual contributions. Of all the work that remains, this area is the most critical because our gap in knowledge has direct budgetary implications. Local government officials need to decide where and how to invest their limited resources for violence reduction efforts. Therefore, a cost–benefit analysis in which the various components of typical focused deterrence strategies are examined is desperately needed. The question I am most commonly asked when working with practitioners is whether they need full implementation of all components to achieve reductions in violence. Unfortunately, my response is that we simply do not know. Developing this

body of knowledge would be invaluable to practitioners and local officials who are striving for positive impact with limited resources.

Finally, although Braga and his colleagues (2018) acknowledge the increasing strength of the quasi-experimental designs they evaluated, they conclude with a call for more vigorous research designs, advocating for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) as the preferred methodology for enhanced scientific rigor. Nevertheless, designing RCT evaluations to test focused deterrence strategies is much easier said than done in the real-world settings in which these strategies are implemented. Rather than continue arguing for the use of RCTs, perhaps it is simply time for the research community to think beyond RCTs and recognize the value and unique contributions of other research methods that are a better fit for the specific phenomena and complex settings we are trying to explain.

In conclusion, for those of us with one foot in the practitioner world and one foot in academia, Braga et al.'s (2018) systematic review provides a succinct and powerful summary of what works to reduce violence, along with a call to action. Although identifying the available evidence and remaining gaps in our knowledge is certainly important for researchers, the real value of this review should be in the field where, unfortunately, many police executives continue to implement strategies that do not work, or worse, do nothing based on the notion that violent crime reduction is beyond their control. To put these findings in a larger context—beyond academia—is simply to note that Braga et al.'s systematic review provides the best evidence to date that *focused deterrence strategies save lives*. Perhaps that should be the prevailing headline that drives our political and policy discussions moving forward.

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