

Posted 9/10/11

FORTY YEARS AFTER KANSAS CITY

Specialized teams may be dandy, but patrol still counts

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Nearly forty years have passed since a notable (some would say, *notorious*) experiment in Kansas City shook the foundations of American policing, bringing into question its organizing principle and laying the groundwork for a flood of empirical research into strategies of deployment.

In 1972 then-Chief Clarence Kelley (he would soon leave to head the FBI) invited George Kelling and his colleagues at the Police Foundation to use his department to test the proposition that routine patrol prevents crime. In what became known as the [Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment](#) (PPE), fifteen patrol areas were divided into five sets of three demographically similar beats, with each assigned one of three dosages (no change, more patrol, less patrol).

There's never been any question that policing deters crime. One need only to turn to such naturalistic "experiments" as the police strikes in [Boston](#) and [Montreal](#), the [New York City blackouts](#) and the destruction and looting that accompany mass disorders to see what takes place when hooligans think that they can rampage unmolested.

Wherever the threshold of general deterrence may lie, it's likely to depend in large part on two factors: the visibility of police and their perceived effectiveness. Patrol officers play a key role. When not responding to calls for service they're expected to brace suspicious characters, check out crime hot spots, help detectives solve crimes, effect on-view arrests, look for fugitives, corral misbehaving probationers and parolees, and so on.

According to the PPE report, that's exactly how Kansas City cops went about doing their jobs. Naturally, one would think that all this activity had great deterrent value. But one would be wrong. When outcomes were measured one year later, the crime rates in "proactive" beats (more patrol), "reactive" beats (no patrol) and the single-car "control" beats (no change) were about the same. Ergo, patrol dosage didn't matter.

Not so fast, said the critics. Researchers openly conceded that differences in dosage had been attenuated by factors outside their control. Some officers didn't obey experimental protocols. Patrol cars frequently crossed into other areas while running back-ups and responding to calls. Although the report's authors didn't think that the

POLICEISSUES.ORG

contamination was of sufficient magnitude to affect their findings, several academics, most notably [Richard Larson](#), disagreed. His objection, that patrol dosages didn't vary to the extent required to adequately test the hypothesis, is supported by the fact that arrest rates were about the same regardless of dosage, a curious outcome indeed.

So far there's been no attempt to replicate the PPE. Turning the messy environment of patrol into a laboratory is apparently more challenging than it seems. In "[Policing for Crime Prevention](#)" (DOJ, 1998) Professor Larry Sherman reviewed the very sketchy literature on random patrol and concluded that evidence in its favor was virtually non-existent. On the other hand, considerable evidence had accumulated that focused enforcement efforts such as directed patrol and hot-spot policing could reduce crime and violence.

Ten years later an analysis by [Dr. Anthony Braga](#) concluded that hot-spot policing held a lot of promise. An [anti-gun campaign in high crime areas](#) of Kansas City took weapons off the street and reduced armed violence. [A hot-spot program](#) in Jersey City slashed prostitution and drug offending without incurring substantial displacement effects; even better, improvements persisted even after police withdrew.

Few such projects are conducted under anything that resembles controlled conditions, so interpreting their outcomes is often a guessing game. In 2009 the [Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment](#), by Dr. Jerry Ratcliffe and his colleagues at Temple University, rose above the crowd by returning to the gold standard of scientific research – an experiment. From all appearances they seem to have done a far better job of it than the PPE.

During a three-month summer period pairs of new police academy graduates were assigned to sixty walking beats. Each was matched to a control area with similar rates of violent crime. Officers were essentially left to craft their own strategies. Some worked to develop relationships with residents and merchants, while others focused spent their time watching for possible offenders.

At project's end researchers compared the crime counts. After accounting for a displacement effect there were 53 fewer violent crimes overall in the experimental area, about one less violent crime per beat and a 23 percent improvement over the control area. Statistically significant gains were demonstrated by experimental beats whose pre-intervention violent crime counts were in the upper forty percent, with the most violent areas reaping the greatest benefits. (The statistical significance of the difference between pre- and post- intervention violent crime counts was .05 for beats with pre-intervention scores in the 60th. percentile, and <.001 for those in the ninetieth percentile.) Proactive

POLICEISSUES.ORG

policing rose sharply. As might be expected, the largest gain, 64 percent, was in pedestrian stops. Arrests also increased, but at a substantially lower rate (13 percent.)

Philly's fling lasted three months. But it's still experimenting. Using funds from NIJ's "[Smart Policing Initiative](#)," which supports promising, evidence-based crime-fighting strategies, PPD is testing different approaches at eighty "micro-sites," 20 with foot patrols, 20 problem-solving, 20 targeting chronic offenders, and 20 controls.

Indications are that hot-spot and similar approaches can help, especially when crime problems are well-defined and relatively contained and treatment dosages are substantial. (For news clips about recent efforts, including their pros and cons, click [here](#)). Still, at a time when shrinking resources make lengthy delays in police response the norm, some agencies have been returning officers to patrol. It's happening in Chicago, whose new chief [Garry McCarthy](#) disbanded specialized crime-fighting teams to help make good on the mayor's promise to put 1,000 more cops on patrol. Meanwhile the new chief at [San Diego PD](#) has dismantled long-standing community and problem-oriented initiatives. With eighty percent of patrol time taken up by emergency response, he insists that his hands are tied.

In America most policing is locally funded, so staffing and deployment varies. Yet as the economy continues to reel the future of specialized units seems cloudy. With no relief on the horizon, it may be worthwhile to study how best to integrate hot-spot policing and other crime-fighting strategies into the patrol function, which is after all the basic mechanism for delivering police services in the U.S. It may be the time to stop letting the cart lead the horse.