



SLAPPING LIPSTICK ON THE PIG (PART III)

Simple policing strategies are the best

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. It's as close to a Nobel as a criminologist can get. [David L. Weisburd](#), a professor with joint appointments at Hebrew University and Virginia's George Mason University was awarded the 2010 Stockholm Prize in Criminology for demonstrating that hot-spot policing doesn't displace crime. One of a growing number of academics who propose that offending is rooted in place, Dr. Weisburd believes that concentrating efforts at crime-prone locations deters crime and can minimize conflicts between the public and police.

In the mid-90's Dr. Weisburd and his colleagues tested an enhanced [drug hot spot](#) strategy in Jersey City (N.J.) Police identified fifty-six open-air drug markets. At half undercover officers bought drugs and made arrests as usual. In the others they cranked things up, selecting targets in advance rather than ad-hoc, placing extra cops on patrol and sending in housing and liquor inspectors. What happened? Both the old and new approaches suppressed drug activity about equally. Effects from the enhanced sites also benefitted adjoining areas, contradicting the conventional wisdom that intensive policing displaces crime.

In a later study Dr. Weisburd and others geocoded 14 years (1989-2002) of [Seattle crime data](#) to reflect "street segments" (both sides of the street of a contiguous block.) Their analysis replicated earlier findings that crime concentrates at relatively few places. They also discovered that offending at these hot-spots was stable over time, and that the city's crime drop, which coincided with a general improvement across the U.S., was mostly due to declines at high-crime "micro-locations." ("Trajectories of Crime at Places," *Criminology*, 42:2, May 2004.)

Dr. Weisburd returned to Jersey City to revisit the [crime-displacement hypothesis](#). Two hot spots were selected; one prostitution, the other drugs. Police hit the prostitution site with a series of reverse stings, each time arresting dozens of clients. They also set up checkpoints between operations to inform and warn potential customers. A narcotics task force, a violent offender squad and intensified patrol took care of the drug location. (A few non-law enforcement tactics were applied at both locations, but what the cops did seems by far the most salient.)

Prostitution and drug offending plunged at both sites, with gains remaining evident after policing subsided. Again, there was a “diffusion of benefits” to surrounding areas and no substantial displacement. Offenders later explained to researchers that relocating was not so much in the cards as it would be difficult and unsafe. (“Does Crime Just Move Around the Corner?” *Criminology*, 44:3, August 2006.)

Drug, vice and stolen property stings (remember the LEAA-funded storefront operations?) have been around for decades. To respond to shootings and gang violence police across the U.S. have deployed specialized gang and anti-violence units and staged stop-and-frisk campaigns. As effective as such strategies may be (credited with a 32 percent 2007-2008 homicide drop in [Milwaukee](#)) they also tend to sweep in innocent citizens, making it crucial that officers are well trained and supervised and that there is good communication between the police and the community.

Multi-agency task forces are very popular. Philadelphia’s “[Operation Pressure Point](#)” deploys teams of police, probation officers and Federal agents to crime hot spots on weekend evenings, when most violence occurs. In [Charlotte](#) (N.C.) police partner with ICE to combat violent Central American gangs. U.S. Marshals regularly stage fugitive apprehension projects. A [recent California example](#) netted more than 1,000 wanted persons, including thirty-one homicide suspects.

Long-term Federal-local racketeering investigations seem particularly promising. Last month the U.S. Attorney in Los Angeles struck at the [MS-13 gang](#), indicting twenty-four members on charges that could in some instances draw life terms. In May he indicted 147 members of the [Varrios](#), a gang that is centered in the tiny, impoverished unincorporated community of Hawaiian Gardens.



Despite their many successes, the literature still treats police as though they’re in the nineteenth century. It’s assumed that crime can’t be deterred without (a) bringing in outside experts to (b) design stunningly complex programs that (c) involve special innovations and (d) call for multiple “partners.” And we haven’t even mentioned the

impenetrable, eye-popping rhetoric that's usually offered in justification. In fact, there's pitifully little proof that tacking on extraneous interventions -- slapping lipstick on the pig, if you will -- adds significant value to the core component of most anti-crime strategies: the police. As [Cincinnati](#) discovered, adding complexity can create turmoil, making programs so unwieldy that they can't possibly be sustained.

It may not seem so from TV cop shows, where everything gets resolved in sixty minutes and there's no paperwork, but even simple arrests consume lots of resources. Police must also jump through legal and procedural hoops that civilians can't begin to fathom. Most officers accept the limits of their authority and try to be effective within established law and procedure. Asking them to do things far removed from the norm is a recipe for confusion. Consider how [Baltimore](#) officials reacted to the notion (a strategy actually applied in [High Point](#), N.C.) of making buys from street drug dealers, then calling them in and threatening prosecution if they don't behave:

Representatives from the Police Department, state's attorney's office and mayor's office attended training last year sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Assistance to learn about how it works, and determined it wasn't a good fit for Baltimore, where much criticism of law enforcement focuses on repeat offenders who avoid prosecution. "When you have a city as violent as Baltimore, if you have enough to bring an indictment, we're not going to give bad guys a choice," said Margaret T. Burns, a spokeswoman for Baltimore State's Attorney Patricia C. Jessamy. [A mayor's representative] said elements of the strategy might work, "but having enough information to indict somebody and then not actually doing so is not something that this group felt was appropriate."

"Not giving bad guys a choice" is hardly the most pressing issue. In his younger days, when your blogger worked undercover buying everything from machine guns to a stolen front-end loader (don't ask) he quickly learned that there's no such thing as a "routine" deal. Explaining why someone got hurt while police were fulfilling the odd requirements of an "innovative" program is not something that any chief or prosecutor would want to do.

Tightening the law enforcement screws may be easier than dealing with the underlying conditions that breed crime. But keeping things down once the cops are gone is tough. Even crooks learn, and once the low-hanging fruit gets picked -- and get picked it must -- taking it to the next level may require far more resources than a local agency can spare. (That's where the Feds can help.) Initiatives such as [Weed and Seed](#) have sought to sustain gains with social service and community-building programs. Results, though, have been uneven, possibly because of the very heavy lifting that's needed to turn disorganized communities around.

We may be asking far too much from the police while giving them far too little credit for their knowledge and accomplishments. As the ones most intimately aware of their environment, they're in the best position to design and implement appropriate responses to crime. Outside advice can be useful, but it must be offered humbly and accepted with a critical eye. In the end, encouraging police to work where they're most comfortable and productive, while offering them the resources and information they need to do a quality job, will insure that the critical things only they can do are done right.