

Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities

Highlights for Police Executives

“Proactive policing” refers to 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 on answering citizen requests for police service and responding to crime once it has occurred. 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 criminologists, sociologists, economists, psychologists, statisticians, legal scholars, and law enforcement professionals to examine the evidence on these issues.

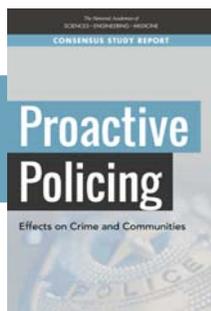
The committee’s report, *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities (2017)*, finds evidence that a number of proactive policing practices are successful in reducing crime and disorder, at least in the short term, and that most of these strategies do not harm communities’ attitudes toward police. 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. Moreover, evidence on many proactive strategies is limited to near-term, localized impacts. Little is known about the strategies’ long-term effects, and about whether and to what extent they will offer crime-control benefits at a larger jurisdictional level, such as across an entire precinct or city.

This publication highlights findings from the report that may be of interest and use to police executives and policy makers as they make decisions about proactive policing strategies.

EVIDENCE SUGGESTS MULTIPLE PRACTICES OFFER CRIME-PREVENTION BENEFITS

A number of specific proactive policing strategies provide evidence of consistent, localized crime-prevention benefits in the short term. These include:

- **Hot spots policing**, which focuses resources on locations where crime is concentrated—for example, by proactively increasing police patrols (by car or foot), or through police crackdowns—in order to deter and respond more effectively to vandalism, break-ins, robberies, drug dealing, prostitution, and other crimes.
- **Problem-oriented policing**, which seeks to identify 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.
- **Third party policing**, in which police seek to persuade or coerce property owners, business owners, public housing agencies, and other organizations to assist in preventing crime or reducing crime problems.



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IMPACTS OF SPECIFIC PROACTIVE POLICING STRATEGIES

Strategy	Impact on Crime	Impact on Community Relations	Impact on Legality of Police Behavior	Impact on Racially Biased Behavior in Policing
Hot spots policing	Crime-reduction effects; frequent diffusion of benefits to immediately surrounding areas	Rarely have either positive or negative impacts	UNKNOWN	UNKNOWN
Predictive policing	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion		
CCTV (passive use)	Modest reductions in property crime	Rarely have either positive or negative impacts		
CCTV (proactive use)	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion	Rarely have either positive or negative impacts		
Problem-oriented policing	Crime-reduction effects	Small-to-moderate positive impacts on community satisfaction with police		
Third party policing	Crime-reduction effects	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion		
Community-oriented policing	No consistent crime-prevention effects	Modest improvements in public's view of police in short term		
Procedural justice policing	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion		
Broken windows policing (aggressive tactics)	Small to no impacts on crime	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion		
Broken windows policing (placebased, problem solving)	Crime-reduction effects	Existing studies show little impact		
Stop-question-frisk (general, citywide)	Insufficient evidence to draw conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative effects on individuals subjected to SQF Insufficient evidence to draw a conclusion about effects on communities 		
Stop-question- frisk (focused)	Crime-reduction effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative effects on individuals subjected to SQF Insufficient evidence to draw a conclusion about effects on communities 		

- **Stop-question-frisk (SQF) programs, when targeted to violent and gun-crime hot spots;** these 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.
- **Focused deterrence strategies,** which 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.
- **Broken windows policing, when focused problem-solving strategies are used at specific places;** broken windows strategies intend 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. While effective when focused problem-solving strategies are used, these strategies have little or no impact on crime if they use broadly applied aggressive tactics for increasing misdemeanor arrests.

What these approaches have in common is their effort to more tightly specify and focus police activities. Police executives who implement such strategies are drawing upon evidence-based approaches. At the same time, evaluations of programs are generally short term (at most a year or two), which makes it difficult to know whether impacts are long term; and such evaluations examine only local or neighborhood impacts, leaving it unclear whether those programs will offer broader crime-control benefits across jurisdictions such as cities. Outside of hot spots policing, for which there are a large number of evaluations examining different types of strategies and targets, the number of rigorous evaluations is still limited.

In addition, research suggests that these strategies, with the important exception of SQF, do not lead to negative outcomes in terms of community perceptions of police. In most cases, it appears that crime-prevention outcomes can be obtained without this type of unintended negative consequence.

GENERALIZED USE OF SQF AND BROKEN WINDOWS NOT EFFECTIVE

There are certain proactive policing strategies that should not be viewed as evidence based, at least at this time. SQF used indiscriminately across a jurisdiction has not shown evidence of effectiveness; nor have broken windows policing programs that rely on a generalized approach to misdemeanor arrests (“zero tolerance”). These caveats, combined with evidence of negative individual outcomes for people who are the subject of aggressive police enforcement efforts, mean that police executives should exercise caution about adopting generalized, aggressive enforcement tactics. Agencies that are already applying such strategies broadly and without careful focus should consider scaling down present efforts.

Even in the case of focused programs for which there is evidence of crime-control success, when aggressive approaches such as SQF are employed, police executives should actively try to prevent potential negative outcomes on the community and on legality. They also should cooperate with researchers attempting to quantify and evaluate these issues.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED POLICING SHOWS MIXED RESULTS

The report also examines evidence on other community-based strategies, such as community-oriented policing and procedural justice policing. Community-oriented policing engages citizens in identifying and addressing public safety concerns. Procedural justice policing seeks to create interactions between the police and the public that encourage fair and respectful policing. Evidence suggests that community-oriented policing programs are likely to improve evaluations of the police, albeit modestly; the evidence base is not developed enough to draw conclusions about procedural justice policing. If the goal of an agency is to improve its relationship with the communities it serves, community-oriented policing is a promising strategy choice.

Many scholars and policy makers have argued that community-oriented policing and procedural justice policing will yield not only better relations with and evaluations by the public but also greater crime control. The committee did not find consistent evidence for this proposition, and police executives should be wary of implementing community-based strategies mainly as a crime-control approach.

The evidence on community-based approaches suggests that police executives may want to consider applying multiple strategies as a more general agency approach. For example, if an agency seeks to improve both crime prevention and community satisfaction with the police, it could combine practices typical of community-oriented policing with evidence-based crime-prevention practices such as hot spots policing or problem-oriented policing. This has already been done in problem-solving approaches that emphasize community engagement, where these dual benefits have been observed.

RESEARCH URGENTLY NEEDED ON ROLE OF RACIAL BIAS IN PROACTIVE POLICING

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 racial bias 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. 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 gaps in research 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.

IMPACTS OF PROACTIVE STRATEGIES ON LEGALITY OF POLICE BEHAVIOR UNCLEAR

However effective a policing practice may be in preventing crime, it is not permissible 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 if 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.

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

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

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For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the Consensus Study Report *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities* (2018). The study was sponsored by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, and the National Institute of Justice of the U.S. Department of Justice, with additional support from the National Academy of Sciences President’s Fund. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu/proactivepolicing>.

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