

# Study suggests proactive policing may do more harm than good

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(Phys.org)—A pair of researchers, one with Louisiana State University, the other the University of Michigan has conducted a study on the benefits of proactive policing and have found an example where

removing it appeared to lower crime rates. In their paper published in the journal *Nature Human Behavior*, Christopher Sullivan and Zachary O'Keeffe outline their crime data analysis for a time period when proactive policing was halted and describe what they found. David Weisburd with George Mason University [offers a short history](#) of studies done on proactive policing in the same journal issue and compares them with what the researchers in this new effort found.

Most people know that the bulk of crime in [industrialized countries](#) occurs in areas where poor people live and that more often than not, such areas have a high population of minorities. Because of that, police departments have focused a large share of their resources on such areas. In recent times, police have adopted a practice called proactive policing in which they engage heavily with people in their jurisdiction—stopping people, asking questions, making arrests for minor offenses, etc. The aim is to prevent serious crime, rather than arrest or prosecute after the fact—but some have accused the police of targeting minorities. Studies indicate, Weisburd notes, that such tactics do help reduce crime rates. But in this new effort, the researchers have found an example where the opposite was true.

To learn more about the possible benefits of proactive policing, the researchers studied New York City crime data for the period 2013 to 2016 and then specifically during a seven-week period in late 2014 and early 2015. The latter period followed protests regarding [police](#) brutality leading to the death of Eric Garner. During those seven weeks, all proactive policing was halted.

In studying the data, the researchers found that reports of serious crimes, such as murder and robbery fell by 3 to 6 percent during the lull. This, they suggest, offers evidence that proactive policing not only does not prevent crime, it actually causes more [crime](#). It is possible, they suggest, that citizens living in areas that are heavily policed grow angry at being

targeted and thus feel justified in breaking the law.

**More information:** Christopher M. Sullivan et al. Evidence that curtailing proactive policing can reduce major crime, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2017). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-017-0211-5](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0211-5)

## **Abstract**

Governments employ police to prevent criminal acts. But it remains in dispute whether high rates of police stops, criminal summonses and aggressive low-level arrests reduce serious crime. Police officers target their efforts at areas where crime is anticipated and/or where they expect enforcement will be most effective. Simultaneously, citizens decide to comply with the law or commit crime partly on the basis of police deployment and enforcement strategies. In other words, policing and crime are endogenous to unobservable strategic interaction, which frustrates causal analysis. Here, we resolve these challenges and present evidence that proactive policing—which involves systematic and aggressive enforcement of low-level violations—is positively related to reports of major crime. We examine a political shock that caused the New York Police Department (NYPD) to effectively halt proactive policing in late 2014 and early 2015. Analysing several years of unique data obtained from the NYPD, we find that civilian complaints of major crimes (such as burglary, felony assault and grand larceny) decreased during and shortly after sharp reductions in proactive policing. The results challenge prevailing scholarship as well as conventional wisdom on authority and legal compliance, as they imply that aggressively enforcing minor legal statutes incites more severe criminal acts.

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