

Places of worship linked with more neighborhood crime in Washington, D.C

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A new analysis of crime statistics near hundreds of places of worship in Washington, D.C., shows that these sites are associated with higher levels of violent and property crime—even after accounting for other factors commonly linked with crime. James Wo of the University of Iowa, U.S., presents these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on March 8, 2023.

Prior research has established that places of worship foster social ties and community actions for the common good, suggesting that these sites would reduce crime in their neighborhoods. However, few studies have addressed the hypothesized crime-reducing impact of places of worship.

In the present study, Wo conducted a statistical analysis of publicly available crime and neighborhood data for the areas immediately surrounding 742 places of worship across Washington, D.C.

The analysis showed that places of worship were associated with higher rates of violent and [property crime](#) in their immediate neighborhood. This association persisted even after accounting for various sociodemographic factors and other factors commonly linked with crime, such as proximity to bars, liquor stores, check-cashing stores, and D.C. metro stations.

These findings are in line with evidence from two prior studies suggesting that places of worship might unintentionally boost crime. Further research is needed to determine the mechanism by which this might occur, but it is possible that places of worship draw high foot traffic while having limited ability to monitor and regulate public activity, boosting the chances that potential offenders might seize the opportunity to commit crimes against weakly guarded targets.

The author notes that these findings do not invalidate the positive impacts of places of worship or religion. However, they suggest a need to consider places of worship as risk factors for neighborhood crime in order to accurately shape policing policies and crime-reduction efforts.

Future research could help confirm and extend these findings, such as by examining crime statistics over time as places of worship become established or shut down. Neighborhood-level data on social capital, [civic engagement](#), foot traffic (or the ambient population), and

anonymity could be collected in order to test whether these factors do, in fact, mediate the effects of places of worship on crime. Researchers could also examine whether similar patterns are seen in other cities in the U.S. and around the world.

James Wo adds, "Findings should not be interpreted as an indictment on religion or places of worship (POW). Rather, they highlight POW as an unexpected ecological risk factor for neighborhood crime, similar to how shopping malls, central business districts, restaurants, and retail stores have been deemed to operate as [crime](#) generators."

More information: Crime generators or social capital organizations? Examining the effects of places of worship on neighborhood crime. *PLOS ONE*. DOI: [10.1371/journal.pone.0282196](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0282196)

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