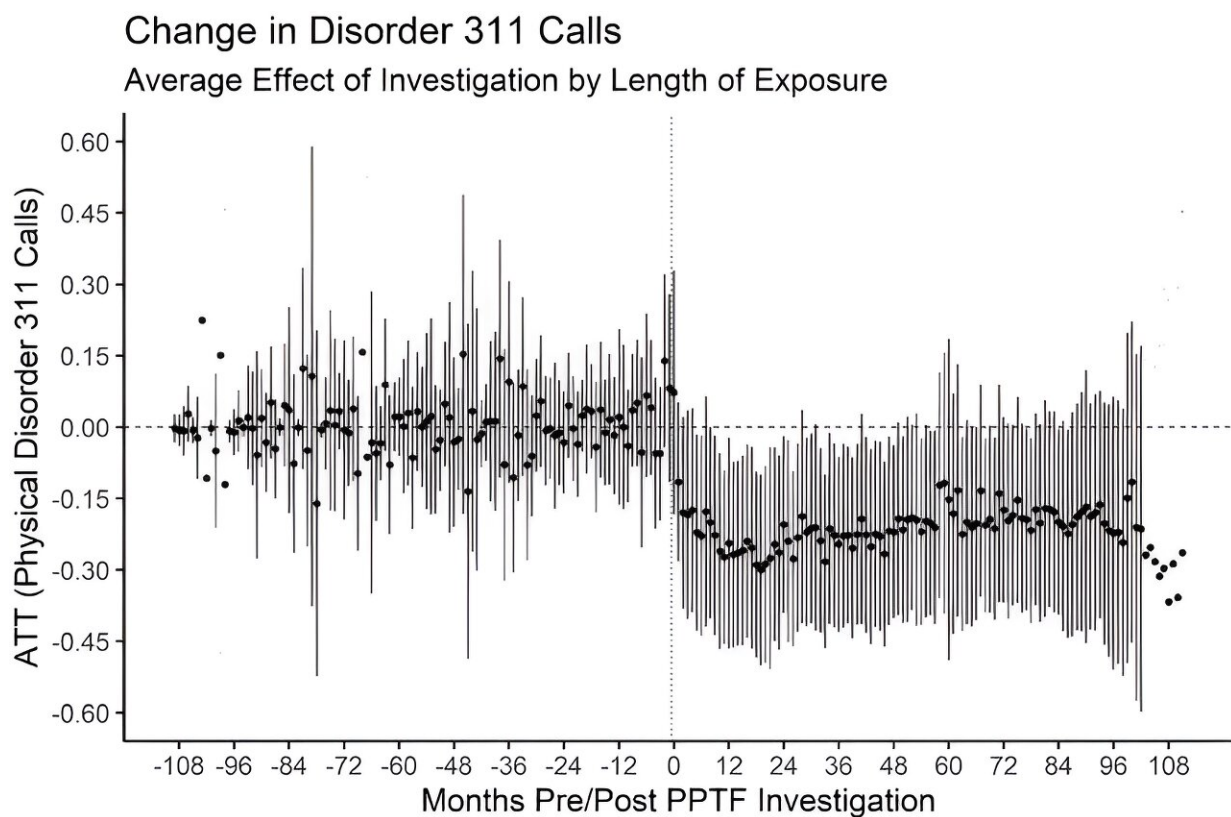


# Boston's approach to 'problem properties' could help improve cities across the US, new research finds

February 13 2024, by Cody Mello-Klein



Dynamic impact of PPTF investigations on 311 calls, with 95 percent confidence intervals, reporting physical disorder at a property. Credit: *Criminology* (2024). DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12361

Communities across the country have been trying to tackle "problem properties," centers for crime, violence and other public safety concerns. For the first time, research proves how effective these strategies can be.

For years, communities across the country have been trying to tackle "problem properties," specific addresses that are centers of crime, drug use, violence and other public safety hazards. Despite how widespread problem properties are, there hasn't been any evidence to prove that intervention efforts work—until now.

A recent comprehensive assessment of Boston's Problem Properties Task Force [published](#) in *Criminology*, using almost a decade's worth of data, is the first of its kind to show how effective these strategies can be. Boston's approach, which focuses on collaborating with landlords to create custom solutions that avoid policing an entire community, not only reduces crime on the property but in the surrounding neighborhood as well, according to the analysis.

"What we find in the paper is, very simply, that the interventions do lower crime and disorder at the target property and it's sustained over many years, through the end of our analysis, which is almost a decade's worth of data," says Dan O'Brien, author of the paper and a professor of public policy and urban affairs and criminology and criminal justice at Northeastern University.

Boston established its Problem Properties Task Force in 2011 with the aim of identifying so-called "problem properties" across the city, amounting to 408 properties investigated between 2011 and 2019. Representing more than a dozen city departments and agencies, the [task force](#) focuses on holding property owners responsible and giving citizens a way to address quality-of-life issues on the properties.

The way Boston's system works is when a property receives at least four

valid complaints in 12 months, it gets put on the task force's radar as a problem property. These complaints come from both city agencies and the public, giving the public a chance to let the city know where areas of need are.

There is then a follow-up investigation by the task force that can result in a formal notice for the property owner. The notice includes information about the issues on the property and a request to contact the task force and local law enforcement and inspection services.

The idea is that these officials can then work with the property owner to create a custom plan to address these issues in a way that makes sense for the specific situation on that property with the help of the person who has a vested financial and legal interest in doing so.

In case the carrot doesn't work, the ordinance establishing the task force also gives city officials a pretty big stick to help get landlords on board.

"When that letter is sent by legal, it basically says, 'If you have another 911 call or 311 call that requires us to send either police or inspections [staff] to your property, you are going to get billed for those personnel, thousands of dollars per visit,'" O'Brien says. "There's some other legalistic stuff about the right to put a lien on that property if fines are not paid on time."

The results speak for themselves, O'Brien says. Not only did the task force's work reduce crime and disorderly conduct on the property itself, it also addressed one of the primary critiques of these strategies: If the city targets only one property, won't crime just get displaced to other parts of the neighborhood?

"In fact, it leads to drops in crime at other properties on the same street, indicating that these places really are burdens on the local community,"

O'Brien says. "Intervening on [these properties] and rehabilitating them is actually not only getting rid of crime at the property itself but it's benefiting everyone around it, beyond just the exposure to the building itself."

It's a different, more targeted approach to crime management than strategies like traditional community policing. O'Brien says it's more in line with the concept of problem-oriented policing, which identifies problems with the stakeholders who are directly affected by it in order to collaboratively create a solution.

It's an approach that O'Brien thinks sidesteps the polarizing debate around policing and, if implemented in more communities, could potentially be embraced by a broader range of people.

"You maintain public safety by targeting very efficiently and effectively the places that are most burdensome to the [local community](#) without over-policing all of the people who live there, without assuming that every individual, every household, every group in the community is generating [crime](#) and disorder," O'Brien says.

"It gives us a bit of a middle way or even something that's outside of that debate where you can be efficient, you can be effective and you can be respectful of the communities that you're trying to support."

**More information:** Michael Zoorob et al, Pacifying problem places: How problem property interventions increase guardianship and reduce disorder and crime, *Criminology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12361](#)

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