

# A number of proactive policing practices are successful at reducing crime

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A number of strategies used by the police to proactively prevent crimes have proved to be successful at crime reduction, at least in the short term, and most strategies do not harm communities' attitudes toward police, finds a new [report](#) by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. However, the committee that conducted the study and wrote the report said there is insufficient evidence to draw strong conclusions on the potential role of racial bias in the use of proactive policing strategies.

"The committee felt that the lack of data on the role of [racial bias](#) in proactive policing was startling," said David Weisburd, executive director of the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University and chair of the committee. "It's critically important that we understand not simply the impacts of proactive policing on racial outcomes, but also how race may impact the adoption of specific types of proactive policing."

Police organizations apply proactive policing practices to prevent and reduce [crime](#), which differs from standard or traditional reactive approaches in policing that focus primarily on responding to crime once it has occurred and on answering citizen requests for police service. In this report, the committee assessed the application and results of such proactive strategies, including their impact on crime, the reaction of communities, whether they are being used in a legal fashion, and if they are applied in a discriminatory manner.

## Impact of Proactive Policing on Crime and Disorder

Overall, the committee found enough evidence to support the adoption of a number of proactive policing strategies, if the primary goal is to reduce crime. The available evidence focused on the localized impacts of crime prevention, such as specific places or individuals, and generally on short-term crime-prevention effects. Relatively little is known about whether and to what extent the strategies will have benefits at the larger jurisdictional level, for example, across an entire precinct or city or across all offenders. Furthermore, the evidence is rarely able to speak about long-term benefits. Key findings include:

Available research suggests hot spots policing - a practice where police focus on locations where crime is concentrated - produces short-term crime reduction effects without simply displacing crime into surrounding areas. Studies tend to find that these programs also have beneficial crime reduction effects in immediately adjacent areas.

A small group of rigorous studies show that problem-oriented policing programs lead to short-term reductions in crime. Problem-oriented policing seeks to identify and analyze 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.

Evaluations of focused deterrence programs show consistent crime-control impacts in reducing gang violence, street crime driven by disorderly drug markets, and repeat individual offending. The available evaluation literature suggests both short-term and long-term area-wide impacts of focused deterrence programs on crime. These strategies 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.

Stop-question-frisk (SQF) - stops in which suspects are questioned about their activities, frisked, and often searched - when implemented as a general, citywide crime control strategy showed mixed results.

Evaluations of focused uses of SQF targeting places with violence or serious gun crimes and focusing on high-risk repeat offenders consistently find short-term crime reduction effects. The report notes a lack of evidence on long-term impacts of focused uses of SQF on crime.

Broken windows policing - a strategy to address small instances of disorder before they overwhelm a neighborhood and to restore afflicted neighborhoods - generate little or no [impact](#) on crime when applied as an aggressive tactic for increasing misdemeanor arrests. On the other hand, interventions that use place-based, problem-solving practices to reduce social and physical disorder have reported short-term crime reduction impacts, the committee said.

Procedural justice policing seeks to impress upon citizens and the wider community that the police exercise their authority in legitimate ways, with the expectation that if citizens accord legitimacy to police activity, they are more inclined to collaborate with police and abide by laws. Because the evidence base is so small, however, conclusions cannot be drawn about the effectiveness of such strategies.

## **Race and Proactive Policing**

In addition to crime reduction and community relations, the committee assessed the potential role of racial bias in proactive policing. The report finds that when police target high-risk places or people, a common practice in proactive policing programs, there are likely to be large racial disparities in the volume and nature of police-citizen encounters.

However, 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 research gaps also leave police departments and communities that are concerned about racial bias without an evidence base that can help them make informed decisions, the report says. It highlights more research on these topics as an urgent need, both for the field to better understand the potential negative consequences of proactive policing, and so that communities and police departments may be better-equipped to align police behaviors with values of equity and justice.

The committee also did not find enough direct empirical evidence to draw any conclusions about the likelihood that particular proactive strategies increase or decrease constitutional violations.

## **Community Relations**

Emerging research suggests that proactive policing strategies that focus on areas with high concentrations of crime, such as hot spots policing, rarely have negative short-term impacts on community outcomes. At the same time, the evidence suggests that such strategies rarely improve community perceptions of the police. There is a virtual absence of [evidence](#) on the long-term and jurisdiction-level impacts of place-based policing on community relations, the report says.

Studies on problem-solving interventions, which seek to identify and remedy underlying causes of crime problems, show consistent small-to-moderate positive impacts on short-term community satisfaction with police. Evidence also suggests that the risk of undesired negative effects from these strategies - known as backfire effects - is low. However, there is little consistency in these strategies' impacts on perceived disorder and quality of life, fear of crime, and police legitimacy. Again, there is little research on long-term or jurisdiction-level impacts.

The report found that community-oriented policing, which involves citizens in identifying and addressing public safety concerns, leads to modest improvements in the public's view of policing and the police in the short term. The committee said these improvements occur with greatest consistency for measures of community satisfaction and less so for measures of perceived disorder, fear of crime, and police legitimacy.

## Research Needs

In addition to the need for more research on racial bias, the committee called for greater investment in understanding which [proactive policing](#) strategies are cost-effective, how such strategies can be maximized to improve the relationships between the police and the public, and how they can be applied in ways that do not lead to violations of the law by [police](#).

Provided by National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

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