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Do police hotspot patrols reduce crime?

Crime 'hotspots'

Crime 'hotspots' are locations identified as having a higher-than-average density of recorded crime incidents.

Crime hotspots have been a focus of crime prevention because:

- People are concerned about them because they are areas of increased crime.
- Reducing crime at hotspots offers potential of better cost-effectiveness for policing.
- Hotspots offer **targeted** CPTED interventions.
- Hotspots offer justification for increased policing and security patrols.

Early CPTED principles suggested crime hotspots might benefit from additional attention by police and/or security patrols.

In theory, crime would be reduced by patrols providing increased **surveillance**, increased **territorial reinforcement** and increased **target hardening**.

Research findings

Research indicates that, in general, police hotspot patrols have no effect in reducing crime risks at crime risk hot spots. The same no effects on reducing crime risks might be also expected to be true for patrols by community safety and security staff

This can be seen, for example, in research findings released from the [US National Institute of Justice Crime Solutions organisation](#) about the [Hotspot Policing Experiment undertaken in Louisville](#). The US National Institute of Justice Crime Solutions is a government body that tests the validity of criminological research and identifies whether potential interventions are 'effective', 'promising' (possibly might have effects in some circumstances) or have 'no effects'.

The Louisville (Ky.) Metropolitan Police Department (LMPD) and university researchers created an experiment to test whether hotspot policing tactics would reduce crime in urban crime hotspots.

Louisville crime hotspots were selected as locations with highest levels of crime. The patrolling consisted of police officers visiting 1-2 hotspot locations close to their patrol beats every 2–3 hours at random times, staying 12–15 minutes at each location.

The findings of US National Institute of Justice Crime Solutions were that 'Hotspot patrolling has NO effect on crime rates'.

From the point of view of CPTED **Routine Activity Analysis**, this finding was not completely unsurprising.

Crime risk is most typically shaped by the routines at the intersection of potential victims, potential criminals and guardians (e.g. police, community safety or members of the public).

Routine Activity Analysis suggests any *routines* of patrols (guardians) will tend to *facilitate criminal activity* by making guardianship *predictable*.

Thus, randomising of timing of patrols is important and hotspot police or security patrols will be more effective if their timing is erratic.

From a **Routine Activity Analysis** point of view the timing of the patrols in the Louisville research above was *pseudo-random* in that it was variable but around a 2–3-hour cycle.

From a criminal's point of view after police have stayed their 12-15 minutes at a hotspot, they would be absent for 2-3 hours.

The level of routine of the police patrolling, although apparently random, is routine enough for criminals to anticipate police patrol attention and undertake crime around the policing routines. Additionally, it is also possible the patrolling approach by the Police offered enough advanced warning (e.g. sight of police vehicle at a distance) that criminals could change plans if necessary.

Conclusions

At the Design Out Crime and CPTED Centre we suggest if hotspot patrols are used, it is important to:

Ensure the **timing** of hotspot police or security patrols are as **erratic** and **unexpected** as possible.

The implications of the [US National Institute of Justice Hotspot Policing Experiment](#) research findings are threefold:

- In general hotspot patrolling is not effective.
- It is a mistake to assume *effectiveness* of crime hotspot patrolling.
- Other crime prevention approaches are more effective and cost effective.

Together, these suggest a better way forward to reduce crime risks at crime hotspots is to identify other CPTED interventions that will be more effective and more cost-effective to reduce hot spot crime risks rather than use police or security patrols.

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