Assessing the impact of police-order-maintenance teams on crime: An application of the ‘broken windows’ hypothesis

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Assessing the Impact of Police Order Maintenance Units on Crime

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Introduction

Police departments are often tasked with developing practical strategies to reduce serious crime in areas that display a high volume of crime.

High levels of violent crime and disorder characterize certain neighborhoods of northwest Las Vegas, Nevada.

Incivilities are often ignored by police and considered minor in nature. However it may be that quality of life issues are more important to citizens.

Often times, disorderly behavior in an area may be a signal to potential criminals that the neighborhood is “safe” to commit crimes that are more serious in nature.

In April 2009, a collaboration between academics and police personnel announced the deployment of a police order maintenance unit designed to reduce minor and major offenses in these areas.

Drawing on the Broken Windows Hypothesis, the unit combined a detailed crime analysis with extensive police efforts to address specific community problems.

This poster discusses the implementation and impact of the police order-maintenance unit during its operation.

Methods

This study utilizes a pre/post test design testing the Broken Windows Hypothesis.

The design consisted of one experimental area (designated “V” area) and two comparison areas (designated “W” and “U” areas) located in close proximity to the experimental area. All three areas are historically similar according to demographic characteristics and crime rates.

The key independent variable consisted of a team of eight uniformed police officers operating in single officer patrol cars. These officers were specially trained on Broken Windows Policing and were tasked with conducting proactive enforcement (i.e., paying attention to minor offenses) and with developing positive contacts with citizens in the experimental area for a period of 3 months.

Other key variables consisted of a calls for service for major and minor crimes (CFS) and measurements of officer self initiated field activity (SIFA).

Normal patrol levels were maintained in the comparison and experimental areas.

CFS and SIFA were compared between the experimental and comparison areas.

Results

T-tests did not reveal statistically significant differences in CFS for minor and major crimes for the experimental or comparison areas.

There was an observed reduction in major crimes by 18.3 percent in the experimental area. This type of reduction was not seen in either comparison area.

SIFA increased significantly in both the experimental and comparison areas and was found to be statistically significant.

Conclusion

Although the results of the study did not yield results that were statistically significant, police commanders were pleased with the observed reduction in major crimes in the experimental area.

This study allowed the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) to explore different ways to deploy their resources more effectively in places where crime is concentrated.

The study also constituted a move away from “crime fighting” to a more “crime prevention” model with LVMPD by having officers reconnect with citizens.

The order maintenance team accomplished this by more frequently exiting their patrol cars and communicating with citizens in the experimental area to learn the unique problems of the neighborhoods.

Further research on order maintenance policing within LVMPD is required to be able to determine if this type of strategy is effective in reducing disorder and serious offenses in a specific geographical area.

It is also highly recommended that a police order maintenance team be deployed to an area for a longer period of time.