Restore Rundberg: Targeting Hot Spots

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Ahmed Whitt

Crime is, typically, tightly clustered around specific locations in urban neighborhoods. The disproportionate aggregation of neighborhood disorder into 'hot spots' was a conspicuous point of agreement among the many perspectives shared within the Restore Rundberg team of neighbors, law enforcement officials, social science researchers, social workers, and community engagement professionals from the inception. The more challenging compromise between stakeholders of the notoriously disadvantaged Austin, TX neighborhood has been developing the best intervention to reduce violations in the most problematic areas while also limiting the displacement of crime into others.

As a whole, the neighborhood of Rundberg is the crime hot spot of Austin. Police data affirm local perception. According to 2012 crime statistics, though accounting for only 5% of total residents, the 5.74 square-mile district accounts for 11% of all violent crime and 34% of all prostitution incidents citywide. Safety concerns are magnified by concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage. The median income household income in the area is less than half of the citywide average. Ninety-five percent of enrolled students are classified as economically disadvantaged. Rundberg residents are more likely to rent rather than own their homes than other Austin residents. They are more likely to move out of the neighborhood in less than three years. Like the transient nature of Rundberg residents, cultural barriers between investigators and the population, which includes a large number of recent immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America but also smaller numbers from North Africa, compromises the accuracy of micro-level socioeconomic data in the area.

Tasked with developing a comprehensive intervention to reduce crime and increase community engagement, the Restore Rundberg team collects and analyzes a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources to counteract the challenges posed by the population dynamics. The empirical and theoretical literature that informed the targeted hot spot approach is reviewed briefly. The police intervention components and plans to track progress are discussed.

Literature Review

The relationship between person and place is complex. The Restore Rundberg approach is informed by the "criminology of place," a synthesis of prominent sociological theories that attributes the clustering of crime to the interplay of physical features of environment and the convergence of the population around certain parts of neighborhood (Sherman, 2013; Sherman, Gartin, & Buerger, 1989). Micro-geographies where residents routinely congregate become destinations for likely criminals where certain environmental features (e.g., poor lighting, vacant buildings) reduce the likelihood of being apprehended. Similarly, the social characteristics of a neighborhood, such as lower levels of community engagement and trust between neighbors, are believed to influence the likelihood of crime at smaller units of geography (i.e., blocks, intersections) (Weisburd, Groff, & Yang, 2012). Effective interventions must consider the social dimensions of communities along with the features of the physical environment and the routine activities of residents. The limited effectiveness of one-dimensional policing strategies that only target the criminal activities (e.g., 100% enforcement strategies) may be attributed to narrowly focused objectives.

Multiple experimental studies have shown that focusing police resources to hot spots is effective in reducing incidents in those targeted areas (Braga, 2005; Weisburd & Eck 2004); however, less is known about crime displacement. Recent methodological advancements have allowed researchers to better track outcomes place-based policing strategies with greater geographic specificity. Using geographically information systems and neighborhood data to create a series of dis-

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placement buffers, Ratcliffe et al. (2011) found a patrol intervention conducted in Philadelphia to be effective, controlling for reactive criminal behaviors. A net crime reduction was found in the intervention areas as compared to controls after accounting for a percentage of total crime that was likely displaced from the 60 targeted violent crime hot spots. Aided with advanced statistical capabilities, Braga and colleagues (2011) analyzed findings from the Boston Police Department's Safe Street Team (SST) hot spots policing program retrospectively to confirm that the reduced violent crime were statistically significant without displacing crime away from the 13 targeted hot spots.

The Boston Police Department's SST and the Philadelphia Foot Patrol program serve as intervention models for impacting neighborhood social risk factors while reducing crime. Foot patrols have the dual impact of deterring crime and increasing perceived safety amongst residents by increasing police visibility (Wakefield, 2007). Foot patrols are believed to have a larger net impact in areas of low levels of trust and/or confidence with police. Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment officers worked in pairs from Tuesday morning to Saturday night in two shifts around violent crime hot spots citywide. While patrolling, the officers engaged in community-oriented work, such as speaking to community members, engaging youth at local facilities (i.e., child care centers, playgrounds), and conducting field interviews of pedestrians. The SST officers conducted a series of comprehensive problem-oriented policing strategies. Officer teams focused in three areas: situational/environmental interventions to target the contextual features of that promoted disorder and violence (e.g., removing graffiti, securing vacant lots), enforcement interventions to arrest and to deter individuals the officers identified as committing violent crimes or contributing to a disorderly atmosphere (e.g., focused enforcement on street gangs), and community outreach interventions to stimulate community involvement in crime prevention (e.g., street outreach to homeless). While designing the appropriate intervention approach for the Rundberg community, the Restore Rundberg team first sought to thoroughly understand the crime hot spots and their contextual dynamics.

Identifying Hot Spots & Developing an Intervention

The crime hot spots in Rundberg were identified via an analysis of aggregated crime data 2007 to 2013 using the Austin Police Department (APD) records management and mapping software. The analysis was limited to homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault, burglary, theft and auto theft. Domestic violence incidents were excluded because existing programs outside the scope of a patrolling intervention were thought to address these incidents directly. The inclusion of property crime was carefully considered. The hot spots shifted toward the large commercial centers with the exclusion of burglary, theft, and auto theft. Ultimately, property crime was controlled for in large commercial spaces (e.g., supermarket, discount retailer) because of the perceived incongruity with qualitative reports from officers and neighbors on the social and physical environmental dynamics of the area.

The final selection of the three targeted hot spots was made by merging the crime data with the qualitative reports. Direct observations from research team members, police, and residents confirmed numerous environmental risk factors, including street drug transactions, prostitution, and gang activity, graffiti, and large swaths of vacant land. Small businesses across all three hot spots (e.g., gas stations, convenience stores, liquor stores) were identified as potential generators and/or receptors for illegal activity. The final three hotspots account for 21% of all crime within the Rundberg areas over the previous year. Approximately 91.5% of the perpetrators were male and 50% were of Hispanic descent. Over the same time period, victims were also more often male (80%) and Hispanic (66%). Each individual hot spot also had unique environmental and crime factors that influenced the team's decision to craft a police intervention that was adaptable across settings.

The first hot spot encompasses the area around the intersection between the major highway and the primary arterial thoroughfare in the neighbor-

hood. Drug sales and prostitution are predominant in area because the road organization allows for direct entrance and exit routes from the highway for consumers. The physical environment, specifically a strip of inexpensive hotels and a 25-acre plot of dense, undeveloped land, presents multiple concealed locations attractive to likely offenders. The second hot spot is a residential cul-de-sac located parallel to a vacant plot of land. Historically, the collection of low-rent multi-units residential properties has attracted high levels of drug and gang activity. A small percentage of property owners in the area are active in counteracting disorder by contributing to the physical upkeep of the area; however, multiple visible signs of deterioration remain, including used condoms, drug paraphernalia, and scattered household trash. The third hot spot is a residential street segment located directly south of the area's major arterial thoroughfare. The primary risk factors are a collection of vacant properties and active nuisance small business (e.g., two liquor stores). Drug trafficking and prostitution are directly linked to the environmental risks. For residents living in close proximity of all three hot spots, there exists an opportunity for better collaboration with law enforcement to identify and eliminate many of the contributing risk factors.

Based on unique features of each hot spot and previous intervention research, the Restore Rundberg team initiated Operation Mobile Walking Beat. Foot and bike patrols of approximately 6 to 8 officers will rotate across the three hot spots in four 6-hour shifts every week during the implementation phase of the project. The patrols aim to deter crime and engage local residents. While patrolling, officers will be tasked with making connections with residents, youth, and business owners. The randomness of the time and location of the patrols will increase the perception of police saturation across Rundberg. The visibility of officers is believed to increase feelings of safety amongst residents and over time increase community engagement. Operation Mobile Walking Beat officers are currently collecting data on community engagement from residents with whom they interact while on patrol. Along with the social environment data collected by Restore Rundberg

researchers, the patrol data will be merged the daily crime incidents and calls for service tracked in each of the three hot spots.

Next Steps: Tracking Outcomes

The challenge for the Restore Rundberg team moving forward will be tracking the effectiveness of Operation Mobile Walking Beat in improving crime and social outcomes across the neighborhood. To? measure the potential for crime displacements, the team will track crime incidents in a secondary set of comparison hot spots in Rundberg believed to have similar contextual features to the primary three. Data collected by patrol officers during the implementation period will allow the team to shift the targets of analysis as local dynamics change. Using geographic information systems, we aim to merge data from other components of the Restore Rundberg project and from external sources to answer meaningful questions about the contextual correlates to crime. For example, do locations identified in the Asset Inventory 'harden' as protective factors due to Operation Mobile Walking Beat patrols? Do fluctuations in Austin Police Department calls for service originating from the targeted areas correspond to City of Austin calls for information (311) during the implementation period? Ultimately, the success of the place-based intervention will depend on our ability to quickly collect and analyze multiple sources of data to inform resource deployment into the three hot spots.

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