

Crime, place, policy, and politics

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ABSTRACT

Over several decades, a robust body of empirical evidence has developed concerning crime occurring at specific locations, often referred to as “hot spots” (NASEM, 2018). Among researchers, it is well understood that there are efficiencies associated with attending to these geographic crime concentrations.

In this “review of reviews,” we examine systematic reviews of place-based anti-crime strategies, discuss the policy implications of this research, and examine the obstacles associated with disseminating place-based and other research findings in an era increasingly defined by political polarization. We also explore how these obstacles might be overcome.

Our examination of 17 systematic reviews demonstrates that (1) the large majority of place-based interventions have meaningful impacts on crime and violence, (2) these strategies do not substantially displace crime to nearby areas, (3) the effect sizes associated with these interventions are typically described as modest to moderate, and (4) the place-based strategies that feature policing generally have larger effects than those that feature green space, urban upgrading, or situational crime prevention strategies.

From these findings, we draw the following commonsense conclusions: when using place-based strategies to fight crime, policymakers and practitioners should target the places where crime concentrates and use a combination of enforcement and non-enforcement approaches that feature community-oriented problem-solving.

Despite the apparent simplicity of these findings, translating them into policy is challenging due to communication gaps between researchers and policymakers and also political constraints. While researchers may have limited options in addressing the latter challenge, the former may be overcome by using clear, direct communication that aligns with the public’s apparent preference for balanced approaches to crime reduction. Future research should focus on refining these findings, improving communication about them with policymakers, and ensuring that they are implementable in real-world settings.

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the science, policy, and politics of place-based crime prevention. Place-based crime prevention strategies generally focus on specific geographic areas known for high rates of criminal activity (Eck and Guerette, 2012). This approach emphasizes addressing the conditions and challenges within these relatively small areas to prevent crime, rather than directly targeting individuals or groups.

It is now well-established that crime clusters in and around small groups of places. The National Academies of Science Committee on Proactive Policing notes a history of research confirming the concentration of crime by place stretching back to the nineteenth century, concluding that modern research shows that crime concentrates at “a microgeographic level” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering,

and Medicine, 2018). David Weisburd argues that the concentration of crime is a “general proposition of universal validity,” akin to the laws of gravity or buoyancy (Weisburd, 2015). Quantitative criminologists have observed that crime concentrations are documented so frequently that the finding is “nearly axiomatic” (Vaughn et al., 2011).

The recommendations following from this finding generally involve identifying crime “hot spots” and directing resources towards them (Braga, Turchan, et al., 2019; Braga, Welsh, et al., 2019). Place-based strategies often involve increased law enforcement presence, which can mean heightened police patrols or dedicated units for policing particular areas. One of the best known and most researched of these policies is hot spots policing, where additional officers are deployed to high-crime locations (Braga, Turchan, et al., 2019; Braga, Welsh, et al., 2019). The specific type and dosage of policing necessary to make these

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interventions work in practice varies by context. Some studies suggest that temporary deployment of patrol officers is best, while others suggest focused teams are more effective (Groff et al., 2015; Koper, 1995).

Some place-based strategies avoid law enforcement, instead focusing on improving the physical environment of crime-prone locations (Cassidy et al., 2014; Sadatsafavi et al., 2022; Shepley et al., 2019). “Cleaning and greening” abandoned infrastructure is one well-known example of this approach (MacDonald et al., 2021). Other place-based approaches leverage partnerships between law enforcement, local businesses, non-profit organizations, community groups, and others. Business Improvement Districts, with privately employed security personnel, are a notable example (MacDonald et al., 2010).

In the public arena, however, conversations concerning crime are quite different. Hundreds of experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations demonstrate the benefits of addressing crime concentrations, yet these findings are largely ignored in favor of superficial political debates about whether to be “tough” or “soft” on crime in the most general terms (Weisburd & Telep, 2011). “Tough” approaches favor traditional law enforcement agencies while “soft” strategies emphasize supports, services, and treatment by non-law enforcement organizations (Abt, 2019). In Latin America, for example, such discussions contrast *mano dura* (firm hand) with *mano amiga* (friendly hand) and *mano extendida* (extended hand) approaches (Wolf, 2011).

In addition, current conversations about crime tend to split along geographic and demographic lines that, in the United States for example, divide “red” from “blue” states and residents of rural areas from those living in cities. Both sides emphasize efforts to address the “root causes” of crime but differ sharply in which causes to address, with conservatives focusing on family and cultural values while progressives emphasize guns, poverty, mental health and substance abuse problems, educational and vocational needs, economic inequality, and structural racism (Chambliss, 2018). Crime, both in the United States and abroad, has historically been a politically charged issue. In the United States, after a brief detente during the Obama administration, crime is now once again politically contentious (Brenan, 2022).

To better educate policymakers and the public in this polarized atmosphere, researchers must communicate more effectively than ever, and do so in nonpartisan terms. They should make efforts to state their findings (and their confidence in those findings) in ways that are comprehensible to non-specialists. Researchers should work to communicate about science in nonpolitical, value-neutral ways whenever possible. Reviews like this one are one method for summarizing and informing policymakers and practitioners about a diverse research literature in a relatively straightforward manner. In the next section, we describe our empirical strategy.

2. Meta-review of place-based crime prevention strategies

2.1. Methodology

What does the science say about place-based crime prevention? To answer this question, we examined systematic reviews of place-based crime and violence reduction strategies. A systematic review uses predetermined and explicit methods to identify, select, appraise, and combine the results from individual studies in a clear, unbiased, and systematic manner (Abt, 2017). A meta-analysis combines quantitative data from individual studies using established statistical methods. These reviews and analyses are designed to overcome the generally low statistical power of individual studies and they usually have greater generalizability.

The systematic reviews examined here were identified pursuant to a broader meta-review (review of reviews) of crime and violence reduction strategies. The results from this meta-review will be published separately and address a range of intervention types, including both place-, people-, and behavior-based strategies, among others (Wilson et al., 2024). While the primary outcome for this meta-review was

community violence, our inclusion criteria included general measures of crime and recidivism. Community violence, for the purpose of the meta-review, is violence that takes place between individuals and groups that may or may not know one another in public (i.e. community settings). Reviews that focused specifically on non-violent or non-community violent crime were excluded from this meta-review and thus could be missing here.

The meta-review involved a comprehensive keyword search across 32 academic and other relevant databases and hand searches in 12 key journals (see Appendix for a full list of searched databases and journals), focusing on systematic reviews of interventions addressing community violence. We combined data collected by Abt & Winship’s, 2016 meta-review of community violence interventions with updated data reflecting studies published since the end of their study period. We employed search terms and Boolean logic to cover a wide swathe of potentially related research. The search covered studies published from 1990 to 2023, in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and German, with no geographic restrictions.

Our search strategy was intended to identify all eligible systematic reviews meeting the above eligibility criteria. It consisted of keyword searches of numerous databases and a hand search of selected journals. The keywords and Boolean logic for the database searches was as follows:

Set 1: meta-analy* OR “meta analy**” OR “systematic review” OR “meta review” OR “analytical review” OR “quantitative review” OR “realist review” OR metaanaly*

Set 2: crime* OR “public disorder” OR victim* OR violen* OR delinquen* OR offen* OR police* OR “law enforcement” OR arrest* OR convict* OR gang* OR (community AND disorder) OR (youth AND crime*) OR (youth AND adjudicat*) OR (public AND disorder)

Set 3: interven* OR policy OR policies OR program* OR rehabilitat* OR treatment*

Set 4: Set 1 AND Set 2 AND Set 3 AND published 1990 forward

Eligible studies for this article included systematic reviews with a focus on place-based interventions aimed at reducing community violence. We excluded interventions addressing other forms of violence, such as domestic violence. We also excluded systematic reviews of interventions for which a meta-analysis already existed because we wished to prioritize comparisons that could be quantified. Only the most recent review of a single intervention by a research team that has reviewed the intervention several times was included.¹

Each study was screened for redundancy and coded for inclusion by two coders. Among eligible studies, we coded for review-level characteristics, as well as the results. Review-level characteristics include information on the publication itself (e.g., type of publication, year published, countries of authors, etc.), the intervention evaluated (e.g., target of the intervention, age of people affected by the intervention, intervention characteristics, etc.), and methodology characteristics (e.g., number of studies included, research design employed, etc.).

We used the AMSTAR-2 instrument to assess the quality of the systematic review (see Shea et al., 2017 and <https://amstar.ca/index.php>). It includes items addressing the adequacy of the eligibility criteria, search, study screening, study coding, assessment of risk-of-bias, assessment of publication bias, and meta-analytic methods of analysis, among others. There are 16 total items. We used 10 of these items that were most relevant for our purpose (items 1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11–15). Using a

¹ Some could argue certain reviews included in this article concern strategies that are not place-based. We chose to interpret the term broadly to be inclusive of more evidence. For example, community-oriented, problem-oriented, disorder, and broken windows policing efforts typically have a specific geographic focus.

summed composite score, meta-analyses with a score of 8-10 were rated as high, those with a score of 6-7 were rated as medium, and those with a score less than 6 as low. Note that this is our assessment of the quality of the systematic review and is not an assessment of the quality of the studies included in that review.

At the level of the results, we coded the mean effect sizes and associated statistics, if reported, for primary and secondary outcomes of interest, as well as other characteristics of the results (e.g., type of effect size, meta-analysis method, narrative conclusion regarding the result, etc.). The forest plots below present the results in either the odds ratio (OR) or the relative incident rate ratio (RIRR). The latter is used for place-based studies where the outcome is counts (i.e., number of crimes during a particular time period) and it is not possible to convert these to odds ratios or Cohen's *d* (see Wilson, 2022).

3. Result summary

Seventeen place-based studies were deemed eligible for the meta-review. Thirteen were journal articles, three were Campbell Reviews, and one was a dissertation. All studies were in English, and only one was published before 2010. These studies are summarized below, ordered first by type of strategy, then publication date, and then alphabetically by lead author. The types of strategies include: policing, green space and urban upgrading, and situational crime prevention.

3.1. Policing reviews

3.1.1. Alternative approaches to estimating effect sizes from place-based program evaluations (Braga & Weisburd, 2020)

This meta-analysis evaluated the impact of hot spots policing on crime reduction. The study aimed to update a prior review and reassess the effect of hot spots using a different method of computing effect sizes. The analysis included 53 studies representing 60 tests of hot spots policing programs, including 32 randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Two effect size metrics were used: Cohen's *d* and the relative incident rate ratio (RIRR). The study found that while Cohen's *d* suggested a "small" statistically significant mean effect size (8.1% crime reduction), the RIRR analysis indicated a more substantial 16% crime reduction. The latter is more credible given recent work by Wilson (2022) demonstrating problems with using Cohen's *d* for place-based crime counts. This analysis suggests that hot spots policing may have a more significant impact on crime reduction than previously thought.

3.1.2. Problem-oriented policing (Hinkle et al., 2020)

This systematic review and meta-analysis examined the effectiveness of problem-oriented policing (POP), a proactive strategy that generally follows the SARA model (scanning, analysis, response, assessment). The review included 34 studies that included 34 tests conducted primarily in the United States, with some in the United Kingdom and Canada, and published between 1989 and 2018. Nine of the 34 studies were RCTs. The findings indicate that POP is associated with a significant overall reduction in crime and disorder – a 34% average decrease. This positive impact was observed across various crime and disorder outcomes, targeting problem places and individuals, with diverse intervention types. The review found no evidence of significant crime displacement and some evidence for a greater likelihood of a diffusion of crime control benefits, meaning that the positive effects of the strategy often extended to neighboring areas.

3.1.3. Street-level drug law enforcement (Mazerolle et al., 2020)

This study updated a 2007 systematic review focusing on the impact of street-level law enforcement interventions on drug crime and drug-related calls-for-service. 26 studies were deemed eligible, 18 provided sufficient data for calculating effect sizes, and four were RCTs. The overall analysis showed that place-level policing interventions significantly reduce drug crime by 22%, though their impact on drug-related

calls-for-service was small by comparison (12%) and not significant. In terms of strategies, both problem-oriented and community-wide approaches were effective in reducing drug crime and calls-for-service. The study concludes that geographically targeted, partnership-based policing interventions are effective in reducing drug crime, emphasizing the need for proactive approaches over reactive ones.

3.1.4. Hot spots policing (Braga, Turchan, et al., 2019)

This meta-analysis assessed the impact of hot spots policing on crime across 65 studies, encompassing 78 evaluations. Twenty-seven of these studies were RCTs. The meta-analysis revealed a mean Cohen's *d* effect size of 0.102 for violent crimes and even larger effects on property, disorder, and drug crimes (0.124, 0.161, and 0.244, respectively), indicating that hot spots policing reduced crime outcomes at treatment places relative to control places. While the mean effect size was smaller for randomized designs, it remained statistically significant and positive. No evidence of significant crime displacement was found; in fact, the results suggested a diffusion of crime control benefits.

3.1.5. Disorder policing (Braga, Welsh, et al., 2019)

This systematic review investigated the effectiveness of disorder policing strategies in reducing crime. The study included 28 experimental and quasi-experimental studies that conducted 30 separate tests of the effectiveness of such strategies, including nine RCTs. The findings show a modest reduction in crime due to disorder policing strategies, with displacement of crime to other areas outweighed by the diffusion of crime control benefits, though the authors were cautious about this interpretation. Community focused and problem-solving approaches were most successful. This systematic review found a mean Cohen's *d* effect size of 0.210 for general crime. The impact was roughly comparable for violent crimes ($d = 0.227$) and property crimes ($d = 0.187$). All three measures indicate a modest but meaningful impact on crime. The study also noted that community problem-solving strategies were more effective than aggressive order maintenance strategies.

3.1.6. Community-oriented policing (Gill et al., 2014)

This systematic review assessed the impact of community-oriented policing (COP) on various outcomes, including general crime and violent crime. Effect sizes could be computed from 19 of the 25 studies, one of which was an RCT. Among the 19 studies, the average effect size, represented as an odds ratio, was 1.053 with a confidence interval of 0.978 to 1.133 ($p = 0.173$). This indicates that, in the case of general crime, COP was associated with a 5% reduction in crime, although this effect was not statistically significant. In the case of violent crime, the average effect size was 1.098, with a confidence interval of 1.015 to 1.188 – a statistically significant result that suggests COP was associated with a 9% reduction in violent crime.

3.1.7. Displacement of crime and diffusion of crime control benefits in large-scale geographic areas (Telep et al., 2014)

This systematic review examined the prevalence of crime displacement and diffusion of crime control benefits in the context of larger geographic areas. Previous studies had focused on "micro-places" such as crime hot spots, generally finding displacement to be rare and diffusion more likely, but here studies were included if they focused on formal social control interventions at larger geographic scales such as neighborhoods, cities, or states, and assessed crime-related outcomes. Interventions were required to explicitly measure spatial displacement and/or diffusion effects. 33 studies were included, of which 20 reported effect sizes; none were RCTs. The findings indicated that spatial displacement of crime is uncommon in medium and large-scale interventions. The average effect size for displacement was 1.069, indicating no significant displacement effect. Similarly, the best-case scenario for diffusion showed an odds ratio of 1.111, suggesting a small and non-significant diffusion of benefits.

3.1.8. Spatial displacement and diffusion of benefits among geographically focused policing initiatives (Bowers et al., 2011)

This systematic review and meta-analysis evaluated the impact of geographically focused policing initiatives on crime. It aimed to understand whether these initiatives displaced crime or diffused benefits to adjacent areas. The search yielded 44 studies that met inclusion criteria. Unfortunately, effect sizes could only be computed for 16 studies, five of which were RCTs. The meta-analysis revealed significant reductions in general crime and disorder associated with these policing initiatives. Specifically, the mean odds ratio for treatment areas was 1.39 with a confidence interval of 1.22 to 1.59, indicating a substantial positive effect in reducing crime in these areas. The meta-analysis found a small but non-significant diffusion of benefits in areas adjacent to the treatment zones.

3.1.9. Broken windows policing (Distler, 2011)

This meta-analysis assessed the impact of broken windows policing (BWP) interventions on crime rates. Searches yielded 11 relevant studies - no RCTs were identified. Analyzing these studies reveals a statistically significant effect of BWP on crime reduction, with a mean Cohen's *d* effect size of 0.102, indicating a modest impact on general crime rates. The analysis also addressed crime displacement and diffusion of benefits, finding more instances of diffusion than displacement.

3.2. Green space and urban upgrading reviews

3.2.1. Vacant lot remediation (Sadatsafavi et al., 2022)

This meta-analysis and benefit-to-cost analysis evaluated the impact of urban vacant lot remediation on firearm violence. It specifically examined the effects of cleaning and greening vacant parcels in urban settings across the United States. Eight studies met the inclusion criteria, none of which were RCTs. All effects were estimated as standardized mean difference-in-differences. The results showed significant reductions in firearm violence due to greening (DID -0.0584, 95% CI: -0.0789 to -0.0379) and gardening interventions (DID -0.0534, 95% CI: -0.0774 to -0.0293). However, mowing interventions did not demonstrate a significant impact on reducing firearm violence (DID -0.0634, 95% CI = -0.1544 to 0.0276). A benefit-cost analysis revealed that the cost savings from reducing firearm violence could recover about 8.2% of the costs in a small city, 10.2% in a medium city, and 21.1% in a large city.

3.2.2. Urban green space interventions (Hunter et al., 2019)

This systematic review encompassed a wide range of urban green space (UGS) interventions, including park-based changes, greenway/trail interventions, urban greening, and green built features. 38 studies were included in the review, with a significant portion conducted in high-income countries such as the USA, UK, and Australia. The number of RCTs included was unclear. Because the review was narrative in nature, no aggregate effect sizes are available, but the authors concluded that UGS interventions played an important role in creating a "culture of health" in neighborhoods and communities. Given the absence of quantitative synthesis, these conclusions should be interpreted cautiously.

3.2.3. Green space (Shepley et al., 2019)

This synthesis of evidence analyzed the relationship between urban green spaces and violent crime. Forty-five studies were included, none of which were RCTs. Of the studies that used general violent crime as the outcome of interest, 12 found a negative relationship between greening interventions and crime, 10 found an inconclusive relationship, and four found that greening increased violent crime. Of the nine studies that focused specifically on gun crimes, six found a negative relationship. While this pattern of evidence slightly favors the greening interventions, vote-counts of statistical significance such as this are difficult to interpret at best and misleading at worst. For this reason, no strong inferences

should be drawn from this review.

3.2.4. Poverty deconcentration and urban upgrading (Cassidy et al., 2014)

This systematic review focused on the impact of poverty deconcentration and urban upgrading on youth violence. Ten studies met the inclusion criteria, including one RCT. The three main categories of studies were urban upgrading initiatives, resettlement interventions, and diversification. The strongest positive effects were shown for resettlement interventions. Urban upgrading measures that showed positive effects were improved transport, lighting, buildings, police accessibility, higher vegetation levels, and business improvement districts (BIDs). However, evidence for diversification strategies was limited and less conclusive. No aggregate effect sizes were provided.

3.3. Situational crime prevention reviews

3.3.1. Place managers (Douglas & Welsh, 2022)

This study evaluated the role of place managers in crime prevention. Place managers, such as parking attendants or bus drivers, engage in surveillance as a secondary aspect of their jobs, contributing to situational crime prevention. The authors found six studies that met the inclusion criteria for high-quality evaluation designs, two of which were RCTs. These studies varied in their setting and context, ranging from concierge schemes in residential towers to employee training programs in bars and nightclubs. The review showed mixed results for the effectiveness of place managers in crime prevention. Because this review was narrative in nature, no aggregate effect size was given. Three of the six studies measured displacement of crime, and all found no significant displacement of crime to surrounding areas.

3.3.2. Street lighting (*Welsh, Farrington, & Douglas, 2022)

This systematic review and meta-analysis examined the impact of street lighting interventions on various types of crime. The review encompassed 21 studies, yielding 30 effect sizes, one of which was an RCT. Overall, the results indicated that street lighting led to a significant reduction in total crime. Specifically, the meta-analysis found that street lighting interventions resulted in a 14% decrease in overall crime rates in areas where the lighting was improved compared to control areas. It should be noted that while street lighting had a notable impact on property crimes, its effect on violent crimes was not as pronounced. That said, the review excluded several of the most recent and rigorous studies of street lighting because data was not available or did not reflect specific crime types. These excluded studies showed generally positive results on all crime types, which suggests that the true effect of street lighting on violent crime may be larger than what the authors estimated. Of the included studies, 15 measured displacement, 10 reported no displacement, five reported some evidence of displacement.

3.3.3. CCTV surveillance (Thomas et al., 2021)

This systematic review and meta-analysis examined the impact of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) surveillance on crime reduction. Four of the 84 included studies were RCTs. Effect sizes could be calculated from 80 studies, including the RCTs. CCTV was linked to an average reduction of approximately 10% in crime in target areas compared to control areas. The impact varied by country and setting; in the UK, for example, CCTV was associated with reductions of about 34% for property crime, 32% for vehicle crime, and 15% for violent crime. In contrast, in the United States, mean effect sizes were not significant for these crime types. These effects were not consistent across all countries and depended heavily on contextual factors such as the type of area monitored (e.g., car parks, residential areas) and the nature of monitoring (active vs. passive).

3.3.4. Neighborhood watch (Bennett et al., 2008)

This systematic review, encompassing a narrative review and meta-analysis, evaluated the effectiveness of neighborhood watch programs in

reducing crime. The narrative review included 19 studies covering 43 evaluations and the meta-analysis included 12 studies yielding 18 effect sizes. No RCTs were included. The narrative review concluded that the majority of evaluated schemes indicated Neighborhood Watch was effective in reducing crime. The meta-analysis, using both fixed and random effects methods, associated neighborhood watch with a 16% to 26% reduction in crime, depending on the methods employed.

4. Result synthesis

Given the heterogeneity of interventions, methodologies, and outcomes, a quantitative synthesis of review findings was not advisable. Instead, we organize these findings using the two forest plots below. Specifically, we include only the studies that included a meta-analysis that estimated an average effect size associated with the interventions of interest. These include 13 studies collectively reporting 479 distinct effect sizes. To maintain consistency and to highlight the crime *reduction* impact of the programs, we have inverted the average effect sizes reported in some of the included studies (i.e., reversed the direction of the effect so that favors treatment is below 1 rather than above 1); hence, the numbers reported in the forest plots do not always match the numbers reported by the authors and included in the previous subsection, though the crime impact is the same.

We present outcomes using two different effect sizes: relative incident rate ratios (RIRRs) and odds ratios (ORs). RIRRs are arranged in descending order in Fig. 1; ORs are arranged identically in Fig. 2. Some reviews may have more than one outcome in a figure and may be included in both figures.

RIRRs are based on crime counts both before and after an intervention and reflect the relative change over time between the treatment and control conditions, similar to a difference-in-differences among means.² RIRRs can easily be converted to a percent reduction in crime. For example, an RIRR of 0.75 reflects a 25% relative reduction in crime associated with the treatment ($10.75 = 0.25 \text{ times } 100$). ORs are the ratio of the odds that a binary outcome will occur among some group exposed to a treatment compared to the odds that the same outcome occurs in a group without the treatment. Wilson (2022) lays out the logic and statistical background for RIRRs and demonstrates that they are the effect size of choice for crime counts in place-based crime prevention evaluations. Some meta-analyses of place-based studies have computed a cross-product of crime counts and erroneously called these odds ratios when they are in fact RIRRs. These are labeled as RIRRs in our figures³.

Our synthesis excludes another common effect size, Cohen's *d*, because different place-based evaluations may use different units of analysis (e.g., individuals, police precincts, neighborhood blocks). Cohen's *d* is meant to standardize mean effect sizes, but for estimates to be comparable across studies, they must share a unit of analysis, such as people. Furthermore, the unit of analysis must be discrete and not an arbitrary chopping up of a continuous variable, such a chopping up time into weeks or months.

In addition to study authors, treatment/program type, outcomes, and effect size, the forest plots also indicate the number of studies, the number of studies that were RCTs, and AMSTAR-2 ratings to help the reader assess the strength of review findings.

In Fig. 1, of the eight intervention outcomes measured as RIRRs, seven show results favorable to treatment. Interventions that involve active coordination between residents and police, such as neighborhood watches and POP, have the largest effect sizes. Interventions that rely on changes to enforcement strategies alone, such as hot-spots policing, have moderate effect sizes. Interventions that rely on creating green space,

urban upgrading, or situational crime prevention have the smallest effect sizes.⁴

In Fig. 2, of the 12 intervention outcomes measured as ORs, 11 show results favorable to treatment, although only 10 are statistically significant (i.e., have a 95% confidence interval that does not include the null value of 1). Similar to Fig. 1, interventions that rely on policing strategies have moderate effect sizes, whereas interventions that rely on creating green space, urban upgrading, or situational crime prevention have smaller effect sizes.

In both Figs. 1 and 2, it is difficult to discern a clear relationship between outcome type (general versus violent crime, for example), the number of studies, the number of RCTs, AMSTAR rating, or effect size.

To summarize, we observe the following: (1) the large majority of place-based interventions included here have statistically significant impacts on crime and violence, (2) these strategies do not substantially displace crime to nearby areas—to the contrary, such areas tend to benefit in terms of crime reduction, (3) the effect sizes associated with these treatments/programs are typically described as modest to moderate, and (4) place-based strategies that feature policing generally have larger effects than those that feature green space, urban upgrading, or situational crime prevention strategies.

5. Policy implications of meta-review findings

There are at least four major policy implications that can be drawn from this body of research. First, policymakers and practitioners should focus attention and resources on the locations where crime concentrates. A substantial body of evidence marshaled here and elsewhere clearly demonstrates that crime and violence disproportionately concentrate in micro-locations known as “hot spots,” and that strategies targeting these concentrations can be effective. The evidence also demonstrates such strategies do not substantially displace crime or violence to nearby areas. In fact, crime is often reduced in surrounding areas as well. These findings are documented in the reviews analyzed here and are not limited only to policing (Telep et al., 2014; Braga et al., 2019, b; Bowers et al., 2011; Hinkle et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2021; Douglas & Welsh, 2022). Others have reached these same conclusions as well (NASEM, 2018; Sherman, 2007; Weisburd, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2011).

That said, it should be noted that some forms of crime appear more responsive to suppression efforts than others. Targeting illicit drug markets, for instance, has been associated with little displacement of crime to other areas and occasional diffusion of benefits (Weisburd et al., 2006), but the geographic area in which enforcement is concentrated seems to matter. Mazerolle et al. (2020), for example, found that drug enforcement activities are more effective when addressing larger areas, such as neighborhoods or entire communities, than smaller, micro-level locations like street corners or individual buildings, though defining and measuring displacement and diffusion becomes more difficult over larger areas.

Second, in crime-prone locations, policymakers and practitioners should work to aggregate the individually modest but collectively robust effects of multiple place-based (and other) strategies (Abt & Winship, 2016). Because the effects of most anti-crime strategies are modest, leaders may need to implement several strategies in the same place, at the same time, in order to achieve greater impact. Concentrating efforts on crime-prone locations is also cost-efficient and administratively feasible (Braga & Weisburd, 2020). Public and private institutions responding to crime and violence often lack the capacity to sustain population-wide or even neighborhood-level interventions, but such institutions can create impact by concentrating their resources where

² For drug crime, the reported mean RIRR was 1.29 and for calls-for-service it was 1.14. These were converted to a percent as $(1-1/\text{RIRR}) \times 100$.

³ This description is simplified for a general audience. For a more thorough discussion of the method for calculating RIRRs, see: Wilson (2022).

⁴ The largest RIRR effect size was associated with neighborhood watch, a primarily non-police strategy, but the age of the review (2008), the limited number of studies (10), and RCTs (0) detract from our confidence in that strategy. More research in this area is warranted.

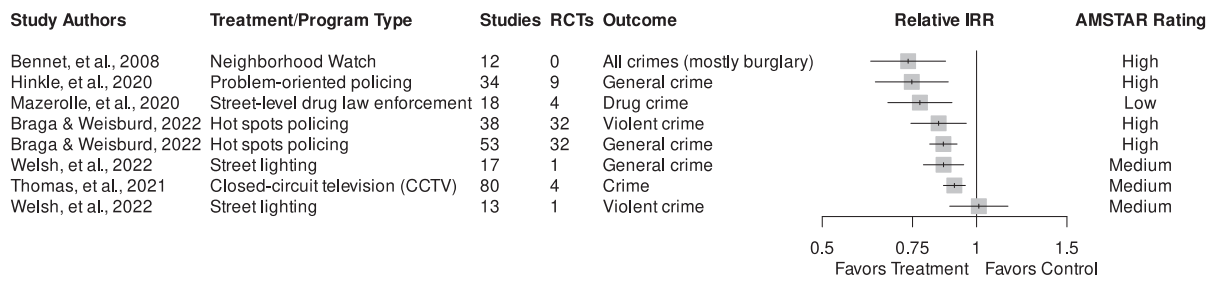


Fig. 1. Forest plot of mean effect sizes by relative incident rate ratio (RIRR).

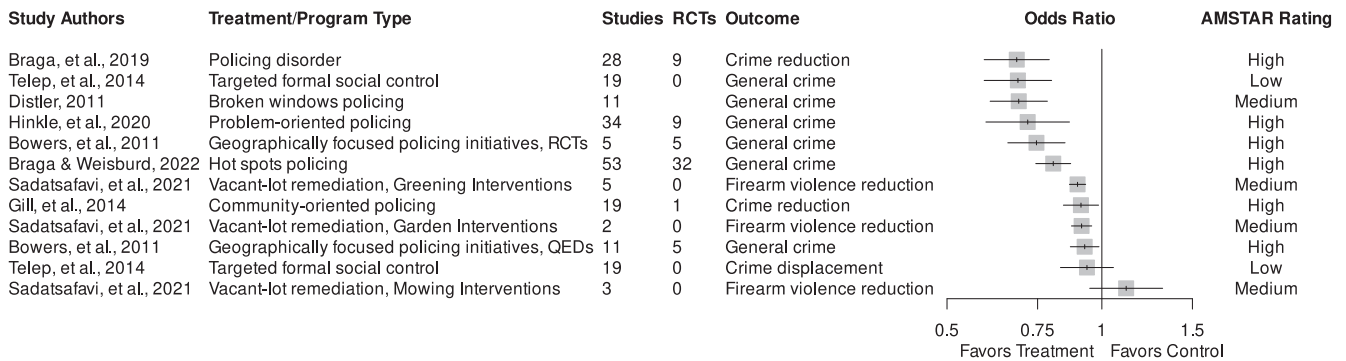


Fig. 2. Forest plot of mean effect sizes by odds ratio (OR).

they will make the biggest difference (Kleiman & Kilmer, 2009). While these additive or potentially multiplicative benefits are logical, they are currently unstudied.

It should be noted that moderate or even modest reductions in crime are not meaningless, even before any aggregation of effects. Supporting Wilson’s (2022) recommendations, Braga and Weisburd (2020) argue that Cohen’s d provides misleadingly small results when calculating mean effect sizes in place-based studies. In contrast, when using RIRR - as we do here - they find a more substantial 16% statistically significant crime reduction. Given the substantial social costs associated with crime, particularly violent crime, interventions that produce even modest reductions in such crime generally pay for themselves several times over (Funder & Ozer, 2019).

Third, in these locations policymakers should adopt place-based policing strategies that emphasize community-oriented problem solving. Given that the most effective place-based anti-crime interventions utilize police, every place-based strategy should include a policing component. Directing additional officers to crime-prone locations is intuitive and backed by strong evidence, but precisely what officers should do once present in these locations is less clear. That said, strong clues can be found in the literature.

Braga et al. (2019, b) found that hot spots policing is significantly more effective when combined with problem-oriented policing, which showed strong evidence of effectiveness in its own right (Hinkle et al., 2020). Braga and colleagues concluded that interventions that pair these approaches held “great promise” and that even “shallow” problem-solving efforts could yield benefits. The study acknowledged several risks associated with “aggressive” hot spots policing and suggested those risks could be minimized by utilizing problem-oriented and situational prevention strategies. This finding was reinforced by Braga and Weisburd (2020) and Bowers et al. (2011).

Braga et al. (2019, b) came to similar conclusions with regard to policing disorder strategies, observing that the largest effect sizes were generated by community and problem-solving interventions, while aggressive order maintenance strategies did not generate significant crime reductions. These findings were further reinforced by Mazerolle et al.’s (2020) review of street-level drug law enforcement and Distler’s

(2011) review of broken windows policing strategies. Furthermore, recent work by Weisburd et al. (2024) suggests that these problem-oriented policing methods might mask further crime-reduction benefits by increasing calls-for-service. Finally, a recent Campbell systematic review by Petersen et al. (2023) cautioned against the net-widening effects and collateral consequences of one specific tactic (stopping and searching pedestrians) in favor of hot spots and problem-oriented policing strategies.

The consistent theme from these reviews is that approaches using community-oriented problem-solving are more effective and have fewer collateral consequences than more aggressive, reactive, and indiscriminate approaches.

It should be noted, however, that Gill et al. (2014) found no statistically significant impact on crime for community-oriented policing interventions even when supplemented with problem-oriented policing methods. This finding may appear to contradict the conclusion above, but community policing has traditionally suffered from a lack of clear definitions and objectives. Police appear to be most effective when partnering with the community to achieve concrete goals like crime reduction rather than pursuing partnerships for their own sake.

Fourth, in these locations, policymakers should select non-enforcement strategies to complement the efforts of police. While interventions like providing green space, upgrading of urban areas, or situational crime prevention strategies generally have smaller effect sizes than policing interventions, they still offer additional benefits in a cost-effective manner.

Interventions like urban greening, as demonstrated by Sadatsafavi et al. (2022) and Shepley et al. (2019), show that investing in environmental improvements can help control violence and improve community wellbeing. These low-cost interventions reduce crime and yield health and environmental benefits, thereby enhancing community quality of life. These benefits were measured on a larger community scale than most studies of hot-spots policing. Thus, the effect at the city level may be more comparable.

Other interventions leverage the participation of community residents and other private actors to reduce crime. As Bennett et al. (2008) suggest, neighborhood watch programs are more effective when they

actively involve the community. Douglas and Welsh (2022) note that place managers such as parking attendants or bus drivers engage in informal surveillance and can contribute to crime prevention. Other place-based non-police options have also shown promise, such as business improvement districts that muster the combined resources of the business community, residents, and government funders to improve neighborhood spaces (Cook & MacDonald, 2011). So far, their benefits seem to be concentrated among public order and other crimes, though research suggests that reductions in low-level crimes may be associated with greater collective efficacy and informal social control, which may lead to lower levels of violence over time (MacDonald et al., 2013; Han et al., 2017; Faggio, 2022).

Welsh et al., 2022 found that enhanced street lighting led to a significant decrease in overall crime in treated areas compared with control areas. The presence of better lighting can increase visibility, thereby acting as a deterrent for crimes that often rely on the cover of darkness. The impact on preventing more serious crimes, such as violent assaults, was less significant.

Thomas et al. (2021) noted that CCTV schemes exhibited a significant but modest crime prevention effect, with crime decreasing by approximately 10% in CCTV target areas compared to control areas. The effectiveness of CCTV is more pronounced in deterring property crimes and less so for violent crimes. The presence of surveillance cameras can act as a deterrent for opportunistic crimes like theft and burglary but may not be as effective in preventing crimes that are less rational or premeditated, such as violent assaults.

This variation in effectiveness underscores the importance of tailoring strategies to the specific type of crime. For instance, strategies that are effective in reducing property crimes or disorder may need to be adapted or supplemented with additional measures when addressing more serious violent offenses.

It is important to note that, for the purposes of this article, we examine only place-based strategies for crime reduction. Of course, there are many other strategy types. For instance, people-based strategies focus on the individuals and groups likely to engage in crime and behavior-based strategies concentrate on behaviors that are likely to trigger criminal acts. As noted by Abt and Winship (2016), a place/people/behavior-based framework can help local policymakers and practitioners quickly grasp that to be most effective, they should focus on where crime happens, who is involved, and how those involved behave.

Admittedly, there are many interconnections between these strategies and the boundaries that separate them are somewhat imprecise. Place-based strategies often have people-based elements, and vice versa, for instance. The differences between these approaches, while real, are primarily a matter of emphasis. With place-based strategies, the primary locus of intervention is the geographic area. With people-based strategies, the key loci are the individuals and groups who are likely to offend, and so on. That said, there is value in analyzing each type of strategy separately, mindful of the limits of such analyses, as each strategy has important conceptual and practical differences.

Exploring such differences is beyond the scope of this article. We offer no opinion as to the relative strengths of each strategy type, except to note there are many people- and place-based interventions that have also demonstrated evidence of effectiveness. In fact, Abt and Winship (2016), Abt (2017), Abt (2019) have argued that to effectively combat community violence, policymakers and practitioners should adopt a combination of evidence-informed place-, people-, and behavior-based strategies.

In summary, we conclude the following: to fight crime using place-based strategies, policymakers and practitioners should target the locations where it concentrates and use a combination of enforcement and non-enforcement approaches that feature community-oriented problem solving. Another way to express this is that place-based anti-crime interventions should be focused, balanced, and fair (Abt, 2019): they should focus on where crime concentrates, use a balanced set of

strategies to address those concentrations, and do so in a manner perceived to be fair and legitimate by impacted communities and other key stakeholders.

6. Challenges and opportunities for translating research into policy

As noted by Laub and Frisch (2016), there are myriad challenges when translating scientific research into policy change, including the frequent disconnect between academics and policymakers, misunderstandings about the quality and applicability of findings, and notably, the exigencies of politics.

In the United States and globally, public discourse concerning crime generally addresses the topic in the broadest possible terms. Distinctions between crime types, subpopulations of victims and offenders, and locations, among others, are often overlooked. In terms of place, conversations about crime generally concern large geographic areas – the nation as a whole, a state, a city, or at best a community or neighborhood. Though some residents are well-informed about crime in their own communities (Shapland & Vagg, 1988), the general public is largely unaware of the disproportionate contributions to crime that certain micro-locations generate.

Policies to address crime are discussed in maximalist terms (Abt et al., 2022). Some pundits call for “cracking down” on guns, gangs, and drugs, while others call for eradicating poverty, inequality, or racism. The quality that these proposals share is that they are largely aspirational, calling for massive changes to social and economic policy without sufficient attention to marshaling the broad-based political support that such changes require in democratic nations.

In addition to extreme breadth, public conversations about crime tend to the extremes in terms of strategies as well (Brenan, 2022; Brennan, 2023). Traditionalists call for “tough” approaches featuring the aggressive use of law enforcement while reformers advocate for “soft” or “fair” solutions that provide resources, services, and supports (Laterzo, 2023). Debates are framed in “either/or” terms, rejecting “both/and” compromises (Berman & Fox, 2023).

Part of the reason these conversations lack nuance is that they concern simplistic questions of moral accountability for crime. Some believe that criminals are entirely responsible for their own actions and blame them accordingly. Others believe that society creates the conditions for criminality and therefore blame institutions, systems, and those who perpetuate them.

Finally, fearmongering abounds in public conversations concerning crime. In the United States, for instance, citizens rarely believe that crime is going down. The only time when most Americans perceived crime to be falling was a brief period in the late 1990s and early 2000s when crime was in fact falling dramatically (Jones, 2023). To make matters worse, much of this fearmongering involves the implicit or explicit use of false, harmful, and stigmatizing stereotypes concerning disadvantaged or otherwise marginalized communities (Muhammad, 2019). Political polarization further exacerbates these challenges, with politicians playing the “blame game” for crime whether rates are rising or not (Hinterleitner, 2018).

In short, while research tells us that the best place-based (and other) crime policies are focused, balanced, and fair, public conversations concerning crime are often unfocused, imbalanced, and unfair.

Even with these challenges, opportunities exist for more effectively translating sound research concerning place-based anti-crime strategies into practice. In the United States, for instance, there is an audience for such information: 73% of Americans believe that police funding should remain the same or increase (Parker & Hurst, 2021), while 65% believe that getting social workers to help police could reduce crime (Hermann et al., 2022). In general, most Americans, and particularly those from poor communities, believe strongly in an “all of the above” approach that features a combination of enforcement and non-enforcement approaches (Fortner, 2015; Miller, 2016; Forman Jr, 2017).

When politicians are willing to listen, researchers should communicate efficiently and effectively to get their points across. They must understand that, unlike academics, policymakers are accountable to the public and suspicious of crime control strategies that involve novelty or risk. They are risk-averse and primarily concerned with effectiveness. They are less concerned with the work of individual researchers than the conclusions that can be drawn from a body of research as a whole. And they want research that gives clear guidance for concrete policy action.

When speaking to policymakers, researchers should first clearly and concisely communicate the “state of the science” on a particular topic before delving into the results of individual studies. They should make every effort to identify areas of scientific consensus before exploring areas where the evidence is weak, ambiguous, or conflicting. Finally, they should refrain whenever possible from making generic conclusions that more information and research is needed. Such statements are almost always true, but they do not address the need for policymakers to take action.

To communicate most effectively with policymakers, researchers should follow three general principles: synthesis, emphasis, and narrative.

6.1. Synthesis

Scientific knowledge often has limited impact on policymaking because it is inaccessible—spread over thousands of articles, hidden behind paywalls, and written in language that is difficult for non-scientists to comprehend. More time and effort should be devoted to synthesizing knowledge across multiple studies, methodologies, and disciplines, as this article and volume does. The Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations are leading institutions in this area, as are the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. When relevant research is synthesized, its persuasive power is increased. Policymakers are more comfortable relying on the conclusions of a large body of evidence, rather than the results of a single study.

6.2. Emphasis

As it is synthesized, knowledge must be distilled into its simplest and most important elements. To be memorable and usable for policymakers as well as the public, the most important and practical policy conclusions should be emphasized. Prioritizing the most important research findings is critical.

6.3. Narrative

Once knowledge is synthesized and its most important aspects emphasized, researchers and intermediaries should work to tell compelling stories about research they seek to disseminate. Rather than just presenting abstract ideas, they should communicate the human impact of the research they are discussing.

Telling a compelling story does not necessarily mean engaging in advocacy. Researchers should strive for nonpartisan impartiality and credibility, which is their comparative advantage in the policy world. When they delve into advocacy, researchers are generally less persuasive than pure advocates and less credible than colleagues who refrain from such activities.

How do these principles apply to place-based crime policies in the hyperpolarized political discussion of crime, as in the United States? Researchers can begin by setting the table for a discussion of evidence-informed solutions by noting that the general public may have more practical concerns than some might suggest: they want solutions, not slogans. Next, researchers can clearly express the current state of knowledge about “what works” in place-based crime reduction, as we have attempted to do here. Third, they can observe that place-based policies may be less politically charged in the current environment and that consensus around these strategies may be easier to achieve.

7. Limitations

This paper reviews empirical evidence and draws policy conclusions based on professional experience, particularly that of the lead author who worked inside government at or near the highest levels of criminal justice policymaking in the United States for many years.

The limitations of the claims drawn from personal and professional experience are obvious. Our empirical evidence, in the form of a systematic meta-review of place-based crime prevention strategies, despite its rigor and scope, also encounters limitations.

First, the empirical analysis is primarily grounded in systematic reviews and meta-analyses, inherently restricting our scope to studies aggregated in these formats. This approach may overlook specific findings or emerging trends present in individual studies that have not yet been included in broader reviews or those which were excluded for reasons other than failure to meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., inability to share underlying data).

Additionally, a reliance on published literature can raise the possibility of publication bias, where studies with significant findings are more likely to be published, potentially skewing the understanding of the effectiveness of certain strategies. Some but not all of the reviews examined in this article attempted to correct for this bias through searches of “grey” unpublished literature, so this concern is only partially addressed here.

The review also predominantly examines studies conducted in specific socio-political contexts, primarily in urban settings within developed countries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to different contexts. Further, the methodologies employed in the reviewed studies vary, with some relying heavily on quantitative data, which might not fully capture the complex social dynamics at play in crime prevention. Conversely, some studies rely exclusively on narrative synthesis that is susceptible to bias.

These limitations highlight the need for ongoing research and critical evaluation of place-based crime prevention strategies to ensure a comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding of their efficacy.

8. Conclusion

This comprehensive review of place-based crime prevention strategies highlights several implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in the field of criminology. Our meta-review synthesized findings from a wide array of systematic reviews of the effectiveness of various place-based strategies in reducing crime and violence. The conclusions drawn from this review reflect the complexity of crime prevention and the diverse approaches that have been implemented and evaluated.

The evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of place-based strategies in reducing crime. Strategies such as hot spots policing, problem-oriented policing, and environmental modifications like urban greening and improved street lighting have shown significant impacts on reducing crime rates (Braga et al., 2019, b; Hinkle et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2019; Welsh et al., 2022). These strategies do not merely displace crime to nearby areas; instead, they often lead to a diffusion of crime control benefits to surrounding areas (Bowers et al., 2011).

These findings underscore the importance of focusing on specific locations where crime is concentrated. Policymakers and practitioners are encouraged to adopt a multifaceted approach, combining direct policing strategies with community-oriented problem-solving and non-enforcement measures such as environmental improvements. This approach, which integrates enforcement with community and environmental strategies, is likely to yield the most substantial benefits in terms of crime reduction and community well-being (Abt, 2019).

Despite the robust evidence supporting place-based strategies, translating these findings into policy remains challenging. Political polarization, simplistic public discourse on crime, and the gap between

academic research and policy implementation are significant barriers. These challenges necessitate a strategic approach to communication and advocacy, ensuring that the individualized findings from research are aggregated and then effectively conveyed to policymakers and the public.

Future research should continue to explore the nuances of place-based strategies, particularly in understanding the mechanisms through which these strategies exert their effects. Additionally, research should aim to identify the optimal combinations of place-, people, and behavior-based strategies for different types of crimes and settings. There is also a need for continued efforts in synthesizing and communicating research findings in accessible and policy-relevant formats.

The body of evidence reviewed here provides a strong foundation for informed policymaking in crime prevention. The challenge lies in bridging the gap between research and policy, a task that requires not only rigorous science but also effective communication.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Thomas Abt: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.
David B. Wilson: Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Data curation.
Catherine S. Kimbrell: Writing – review & editing.
Richard Hahn: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.
William Johnson: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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