Introduction to special issue

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Published online: 12 October 2011
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The Stockholm Prize in Criminology was awarded for the first time in 2006. It is an international prize recognizing outstanding achievements in criminological research and scholarship and has quickly become the most prestigious prize in our field. Dr. David Weisburd, editor of this journal, was the 2010 recipient of this award. Weisburd received this award for his influential series of experiments showing that intensified policing of “hot spots” (small geographic locations with high crime rates) reduces crime. Furthermore, this body of work has established that crime is not simply displaced to surrounding areas. The jury noted “that Weisburd has been a leader among the growing number of criminologists whose evidence shows how the application of research findings can help to reduce not only crime but also the unnecessary impositions on public liberty from policing activities that do not address a predictable crime risk” (<http://www.criminologyprize.com>).

Each year the award is given out at the Stockholm Criminology Symposium, the theme of which is centered around the work of the awarded recipient. Thus, the two major themes for the 2010 Stockholm Criminology Symposium were improving policing and contemporary criminology. This special issue of the Journal of Experimental Criminology is based on selected papers delivered in the symposium that we felt exemplified the theme of improving policing through the integration with knowledge gained in academic works. Each of the selected papers examines some aspect of police practice using experimental or quasi-experimental methods or a meta-analysis of such studies. In our opinion, these studies are at the forefront of experimental policing research.

The lead article by Weisburd and colleagues links hot spot policing with recent literature examining the dynamics of police legitimacy. Using a randomized experimental design, the study evaluated the impact of a police intervention targeting disorder behavior on residents perceptions of police and fear of crime. The findings suggest that recent criticisms of possible negative “backfire” affects of hot spots policing

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may be overstated. The study showed that residents were not aware of, or much affected by, a three-hour-per-week increase of police presence on their blocks.

Also, using a randomized experimental design, Lum and colleagues examined the effectiveness of license plate readers in crime hot spots to reduce auto-related crimes (auto theft, thefts from autos, and other auto-related crimes). The intervention involved the use of a “sweep and sit” approach with a license plate reader in a hot spot during a 30-day period. The study failed to find any general deterrent effect of license plate readers on crime or an offense-specific deterrent effect on auto-related crimes. The authors encourage us to think carefully about how best to use technologies such as license plate readers and point out several reasons why the particular implementation of the technology in this study might account for the null findings.

Johnson and colleagues examined a common critique of geographically focused policing—that it will simply move crime around the corner. In this paper, they systematically reviewed 16 studies that examined the extent to which geographically focused policing initiatives displaced crime, relocating it to other places, or diffused the benefits, reducing crime elsewhere. Meta-analytic methods were used to synthesis the results across studies. The findings suggest that geographically focused policing initiatives that reduced crime in the target area were more likely to diffuse the crime reduction than displace the crime. Thus, the concern that crime will simply move around the corner is not supported by existing data.

The paper by Wilson and colleagues examined a model station’s initiative in the country of Trinidad and Tobago. The reforms were designed to advance services delivered by police stations, focusing on improving police facilities, vehicles, and equipment, enhancing station staffing, and improving basic police work and station management/supervision through training and technical assistance. A key element was the introduction of service-oriented, problem-solving approaches to replace the traditional colonial and post-colonial models of policing. The effects of the reforms on crime and public confidence were assessed using a quasi-experimental comparison group design. The results point to limited but positive outcomes on several key outcomes, especially at stations with better implementation of the reforms.

The study by Amendola and colleagues examined the influence of the shift length (8-, 10-, and 12-h) for police offices on a range of outcomes. The research used a block-randomized design implemented in two large police departments. The study found that the 10-h shift led to a higher quality of work-life for officers and that officers slept more on average than those working 8-h shifts. These benefits were not seen under the 12-h shift, which led to increased sleepiness and lower levels of alertness. The only advantage of the 8-h shift for police officers was increased overtime. Furthermore, there were no health, safety, or performance problems associated with a 10-h shift relative to an 8-h shift. The authors conclude that the 10-h shift appears to be a viable alternative to the traditional 8-h one.

The studies in this volume used highly credible research designs to examine questions and issues central to the daily practices of the police. Collectively, these studies add important new knowledge to the growing literature on evidence-based policing. These studies also illustrate the feasibility of conducting experimental and high-quality quasi-experimental designs with police agencies. Research of this type is not possible without the engagement and participation of law enforcement

personnel; such collaborative endeavors are increasing. We believe that this is a result of the perceived utility of this type of work in improving police practice. We hope you enjoy this special issue of the Journal of Experimental Criminology.

Special Issue Editors

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