Book Review

Policing problem places: Crime hot spots and effective prevention

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Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, 312 pp., \$34.95, ISBN: 978-0195341966

Security Journal (2015) **28**, 107–108. doi:10.1057/sj.2012.29; published online 20 January 2014

Policing Problem Places: Crime Hot Spots and Effective Prevention, part of Oxford University Press's Studies in Crime and Public Policy series (Michael Tonry and Norval Morris, editors) is best understood as a summary of the existing research regarding geographically focused or 'hot spots' policing. While the book offers few new insights for readers familiar with the original research, this is the first time the research on hot spots has been collected and presented as one coherent whole.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic, providing this definition of hot spots policing: the application of police interventions at very small geographic units of analysis such as street blocks or addresses. Hot spots policing makes sense because crime is heavily concentrated at very small units of analysis, such as a street segment, address or park. The key to hot spots policing is focusing police interventions at places that experience high levels of crime. Chapter 1 provides a brief history of hot spots policing as well.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into history, more fully describing the crisis in American policing resulting from a combination of increased crime rates and research findings, which suggested that traditional methods did not work. The authors summarize that research and several innovations designed by police departments and scholars designed to address those problems. Hot spots policing is described as one of the few innovations that is well supported by criminological theory, the focus of Chapter 3.

The third chapter summarizes how the concept of place has been developed by the criminological literature. Places are defined as 'very small micro units of analysis, such as buildings or addresses, block faces or street segments or clusters of addresses, block faces, of street segments' (p. 63). Braga and Weisburd describe two case studies of hot spots policing to demonstrate that 'place' can be defined differently depending on the project. The importance of place in the context of modern crime prevention theories is described here as well. Rational choice, routine activities, situational prevention, environmental criminology, defensible space, the broken windows thesis and repeat victimization are all reviewed in the context of the importance of place. The review of these theories is sufficient for unfamiliar readers without being tedious for readers familiar with the literature.

Chapter 4 is a review of the empirical literature supporting hot spots policing. The authors provide a short description of research design and how that could impact the usefulness of studies before describing three comprehensive reviews of hot spot evaluations. Together, these reviews provide powerful evidence that focused interventions at places are effective in reducing crime and related problems. Moreover, one of the often-cited reasons for avoiding place-based interventions, displacement of crime, is much less likely than is commonly

assumed. In fact, the authors summarize research that finds the opposite – diffusion of crime prevention benefits – is more likely than immediate spatial displacement.

Having established the history of hot spots in the context of American policing, the criminological theory that supports focusing on places, and the literature demonstrating the effectiveness of focusing on hot spots, Chapter 5 tackles the difficult problem of what police should *do* at problem places. Braga and Weisburd suggest that the mere presence of a patrol car can prevent crime, at least in the short run, but problem-oriented policing holds the greatest promise for long-term reductions. Problem-oriented policing is described as an analytical approach generally consisting of scanning for problems, analyzing data regarding the problem, responding to the problem and assessing the response (the SARA model). Braga and Weisburd also describe difficulties with each phase of the problem-oriented policing process but argue that even ‘shallow’ problem solving is better than no problem solving. In their summary of approaches, the authors discuss both enforcement (for example, crackdowns) and situational interventions, concluding that departments should strive for situational prevention strategies where possible. Braga and Weisburd include detailed examples and case studies throughout this discussion that keep the topic relevant to practice.

Chapter 6 discusses the intersection of hot spots policing and police legitimacy. The authors review research suggesting that how police conduct business in a hot spot matters: indiscriminately aggressive tactics can drive a wedge between the police and the public. Braga and Weisburd argue that policing strategies that are simply enforcement-based may serve to decrease police legitimacy. Ideally, community policing, including citizen involvement and decentralization of authority within police agencies, should be implemented. The authors describe how difficult and time-consuming this process is.

The book concludes with Chapter 7, which provides a strong argument for hot spots policing as an evidence-based model for crime prevention. A place-based intervention strategy that targets situational opportunities for offending is also more practical for police than trying to change various social and individual factors that are correlated with crime. Braga and Weisburd also describe the operational changes needed to implement this strategy. Chief among these is collection and analysis of place-based data in far more detail than is the common practice today. At the same time, the authors caution against a place-only focus that might limit understanding crime at places. The book concludes with organizational models, such as Compstat, that could be (but often aren’t) used to promote place-based strategies.

The primary value of *Policing Problem Places* is that it is self-contained. Braga and Weisburd provide background information where it is necessary to understand the concepts, including explanations of why a new model of policing was needed. As such, this book could easily serve as a foundation for graduate or undergraduate coursework in academia. For police practitioners, the book could be even more valuable. Simply put, hot spots policing can only work when agencies are capable of recognizing crime concentrations, can creatively apply potential solutions and can evaluate those solutions using multiple criteria. Braga and Weisburd’s book provides all the evidence police managers would need to support creating new or expanding existing crime analysis and problem solving capabilities within their agencies. At the same time, the authors describe practical problems in implementation so that agencies can anticipate difficulties that are likely to occur.

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