Focused deterrence is associated with moderate reductions in crime

A relatively small number of groups and persons are responsible for a disproportionate share of crime. Focused deterrence strategies attempt to reduce offending behaviour for specific types of crime. These strategies are associated with moderate overall reductions in crime.

Crime is not displaced to other areas, rather it is more likely that there is a diffusion of crime control benefits to adjacent areas and similar people and groups.

What is this review about?
Focused deterrence strategies combine law enforcement, community mobilisation, and social services in an attempt to reduce offending behaviour for specific crime types. A key feature of this crime control strategy is that the consequences of continued criminal offending and available social services are directly communicated to targeted subjects.

This review examines the relationship between focused deterrence policing and crime, and gives consideration to the different types of focused deterrence strategies and programme evaluation designs.

What studies are included?
A total of 24 studies of focused deterrence policing interventions were identified. All studies were published from 2001 to 2015. Twenty-three studies were conducted in the USA and one in Scotland. None of the identified studies used a randomised controlled trial design.

What are the main findings of this review?
Is focused deterrence an effective approach to reducing criminal offending among problem persons and groups?

Yes. The available evidence suggests an overall reduction in crime when focused deterrence
strategies are used. The largest reductions are generated by focused deterrence programmes that target criminally active gangs or groups, followed by interventions that target chronic individual offenders and drug market interventions.

Do some programmes work better than others?
Yes. Gang/group intervention programmes have the largest effect, followed by the high-risk individuals programmes, with the smallest effect from drug market intervention (DMI) programmes. DMI programmes are most likely to suffer implementation problems, which reduce effectiveness.

Does crime get displaced to other areas?
No. No studies found significant crime displacement effects into surrounding areas. There is some evidence of the diffusion of crime control benefits.

What do the findings of the review mean?
Findings from this review support the growing use of focused deterrence as a proactive crime reduction strategy. Practitioners and policymakers should continue to implement focused deterrence programmes to address serious crime problems.

The number of studies included in the updated review is more than double the number of studies included in the previous iteration of the review. However, despite the increase in eligible studies, no evaluations utilised a randomised controlled trial design. The growth of focused deterrence warrants more methodologically rigorous programme evaluations and further exploration into the specific components of the strategy, to improve our understanding into how the programme reduces crime.

How up-to-date is this review?
The review authors searched for studies up to October 2015.

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Campbell is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary
This summary is based on the Campbell systematic review ‘Focused deterrence strategies effects on crime: A systematic review’ by Anthony A. Braga, David Weisburd and Brandon Turchan.

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