More Policing Does Matter – Recent Findings from Objective Empirical Research

A perennial budget management issue for all law enforcement agencies is the securing of sufficient staff resources to deliver an acceptable level of service. The Vancouver Police Department, similar to most other police agencies, has been involved in recent and highly public discussions with our elected officials on police staffing levels. In this debate, we have heard from vocal critics who believe that adding more police will not reduce crime.

This article was originally researched in order to back up our belief that more adding officers will reduce crime. This is hard for some to accept and a major reason is that most students of policing over the past three decades have studied the Kansas City Patrol experiment. In the early 1970s, Kansas City was divided into three different patrol districts, each with varying levels of random patrol. A follow-up study on the experiment found no discernable differences in criminal activity, reported crime, and citizen fear of crime. However, a co-author of this study, George Kelling, has often remarked that it is dangerous to generalize from this study and conclude that deploying more police officers is ineffective. The Kansas City experiment examined only random patrols, and many other studies have concluded that while random patrols are ineffective, more modern directed patrol techniques are effective. Kelling is critical of ideologists who believe that until homelessness, social justice, economic inequalities and racism are addressed; the police impact on crime will be negligible.

Kelling is better known as the co-author of Broken Windows (1992), a seminal article that presented the Broken Windows Hypothesis, which posits that addressing minor "quality-of-life" offenses that contribute to public disorder, such as public drinking and urination, would prevent more serious crimes from being committed. Accordingly, the targeting of fare jumpers and petty crime activity was a key tactic employed by Chief William Bratton and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in New York City, where significant decreases in crime were experienced in the 1990s. These new tactics were accompanied by an increase of 6000 police officers (19%) from 1990 to 1994.

Most economic research on crime is based on a model developed by economist Gary Becker (1968) who predicted that individuals would be less likely to commit a crime when police presence increases, because of the increased probability of detection and arrest. Becker's model also factored in the magnitude of the punishment (i.e. sentence length), which is a major public concern but will not be discussed here. A key problem when studying historical crime rates and the size of a police force is that the relationship is not independent. Jurisdictions with more crime spend more on policing, and politicians will increase police budgets when they see or anticipate an increase in crime. This can lead to the paradoxical finding that police and crime levels are positively correlated, and in fact, many studies from the 1980s found no effect, or even an increase when comparing police numbers and crime rates. Economists call this the "simultaneity bias". More current studies have avoided this bias by examining crime rates after the occurrence of independent events (other than increasing crime rates) that increased or decreased police deployments.

For example, economist Steven Levitt, author of the bestseller Freakonomics (2005), observed that police increases occurred in mayoral and gubernatorial election years, but not in off-election years. He then used the timing of the elections to examine crime rates and found that a marginal increase in the police force leads to lower crime rates. More significant effects were observed after "natural experiments" were studied in the wake of terrorist attacks and alerts. *The Economist* magazine reported that the additional police officers deployed in the streets of London following the July 2005 attacks on the public transit system contributed to the reduced crime level in the city. Following the July 7th bombings, crime decreased by 12%, as compared to July 2004 in Camden, Hammersmith & Fulham, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets, Westminster and the City of London, where most of the additional police officers were deployed. In contrast, crime increased slightly in outer London, which did not receive as much extra protection.

In Washington DC, non-public terror alert advisories were quietly accompanied by increased police patrols in the downtown National Mall area where sensitive federal buildings (White House, Congress) were located. Researchers Klick and Tabarrock (2004) concluded that there was strong statistical evidence that more police reduced crime and concluded that an increase of approximately 50% in police presence is expected to lead to a statistically significant reduction of between 12 to 16% in the crime level. During these alerts, other areas of Washington had a statistically insignificant reduction in crime. Notably, this showed that crime was not necessarily displaced from higher policed to lower policed areas.

A similar study was published by economists Di Tella and Schargrodosky (2004) who examined the effects of more policing on crime following a terrorist attack on the main Jewish center in Buenos Aries. In the wake of the attack, in July 1994, all Jewish and Muslim institutions were given 24-hour police protection. The researchers collected data on motor vehicle thefts per block, before and after the decision to provide more police protection. They observed that the blocks that received police protection had 75% fewer car thefts than the blocks that did not have this increased level of protection.

Another "natural experiment" study was conducted by Shi (2005) who studied the Cincinnati Police department following a U.S. Department of Justice investigation of racial profiling. The intense media attention, along with a parallel Federal investigation and subsequent oversight, left officers reluctant to take enforcement action in black neighborhoods, for fear of being accused of racism. Anecdotal and activity data showed that officers cut down on their criminal law enforcement activities immediately after the increased oversight was put in place. For example, drug and liquor law violations (e.g. proactive investigations) decreased by 46% and 76%, respectively. Changes in arrests for domestic violence situations (e.g. reactive investigations) showed little effect.   In other words, while the numbers of officers remained constant, the "volume" of policing in Cincinnati decreased because of the reluctance of officers to engage in proactive street policing. The result of the decreased policing was that monthly felony crime (e.g. violent and property crime) increased by 16%. Shi (2005) notes that "the increase was greater

for robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and auto-theft, arguably the types of felonies which are most sensitive to policing than the rest".

There have been other studies that have examined police numbers and crime over a longer period of time to reduce the simultaneity bias. New York City has long been recognized as a community that has recovered economically and culturally because of increased public safety. Corman & Mocan (2000) analyzed 30 years of data and concluded that a 10% increase in the growth rate of arrests has the potential to cause a 9.4% decrease in the long-run growth rate of robberies, a 2.89% decrease in the growth rate of burglaries and a 2.72% decrease in the long-run growth rate of motor-vehicle thefts. Additionally, they found "robust evidence for the deterrent effects of arrests and police on most categories of serious felony arrests".

Marvell & Moody (1996) collected data from 56 U.S. cities, over twenty years, and found that an increase in the number of police officers does result in a reduction of crime in the subsequent year. They estimate that each additional officer added to a police force located in a large city will prevent an average of 24 serious crimes (i.e. murders, sexual assaults, robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, larcenies and auto thefts). They also conclude that hiring officers in urban areas will reduce crime far more than in smaller towns.

In the Netherlands, Vollaard (2005) examined victimization rates by region. He wrote, "our estimates suggest that a substantial proportion of the decline in crime and nuisance during the period 1996-2003 is attributable to the increase in police personnel". He estimated that a 10% increase in police resources has the potential to reduce property crime and violent crime by approximately 5% and 7% respectively. More specifically, he predicts that a 10% increase in police resources should cause a decrease of 14.7% in burglaries, 7.9% in auto crimes, 6.2% in bicycle thefts, 11.7% in purse thefts, 8.6% in graffiti, 7.6% in public intoxication and 11.1% in noise nuisance. Vollaard (2005) also dispelled the "displacement of crime" concern, by aggregating the overall crime decreases on a regional basis. Similar to the U.S. study, he further concluded that the effects of more police in the Netherlands were more pronounced in urban areas.

A facet that has not been the subject of recent study is the fact that the police are the social service agency of last resort. When downsizing occurs with mental health facilities, street youth programs, and social housing, the police are left to deal with the service calls in relation to street disorder issues, and the associated crime. These are important considerations that affect police workload. However, the focus of this discussion has been on crime rates and policing. Our view is that with the right leadership and direction, each additional officer we deploy will reduce crime and we have obtained public and political support for more officers with a 4.5% increase in sworn officers in both 2005 and 2006. The public wants less crime and adding more police officers is a major step to achieving this.

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