



Focused Deterrence in the Criminal Justice System

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Abstract — This brief analyzes the effectiveness and potential consequences of focused deterrence strategies currently used in the United States. It proposes policy reforms to improve the use of focused deterrence strategies in reducing crime.

Keywords — crime reduction, law enforcement, prosecution, recidivism, resource allocation

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Focused deterrence throughout history has produced measurable reductions in gun violence in cities where it has been implemented with fidelity. However, its weaknesses are not conceptual but institutional: results depend on sustained funding, durable political commitment, and genuine trust between police departments and communities they serve. When resources are re-directed together to other priorities or programs scale faster than their support structures, short term gains are quickly reversed. For example, Chicago's experience with Project Safe Neighborhoods illustrates this directly, as effects observed in target areas weakened as the program expanded without proper investment.

II. OVERVIEW

Focused deterrence is a crime reduction strategy that concentrates enforcement and support resources on the small number of individuals and groups responsible for a disproportionate share of serious crime. Rooted in deterrence theory, this

brief signals and pairs a clear warning about legal consequences with direct communication, community involvement, and access to social services. The pulling levers model made by Boston Operations ceasefire in the 1900s. The approach has since spread to cities across the United States and has more recently been adapted to non-violent contexts. This brief seeks to examine the strategy and policy options to reduce violence among targeted populations, but also shows that gains erode when programs expand or are sustained without adequate resources.

III. HISTORY

Focused deterrence emerged from deterrence theory, which argues that crime can be reduced when potential offenders perceive that the costs of offending outweigh the benefits. Rather than applying enforcement broadly, focused deterrence concentrates resources on the small number of individuals or groups responsible for a disproportionate share of serious crime. The strategy combines has historically targeted law enforcement with direct communication and community involvement, along with access to social services.

The most influential example was Operation Ceasefire in Boston, developed through the Boston Gun Project during the mid-1990s.

Researchers and law-enforcement officials identified groups involved in youth gun violence and communicated a clear message: continued violence would trigger a coordinated response from multiple agencies. At the same time, participants were offered employment assistance, counseling, and other support services. This became known as the “pulling levers” approach because authorities used multiple interventions rather than relying solely on arrests or incarceration. Evaluations of the program linked it to significant reductions in youth gun violence and helped establish focused deterrence as a widely studied crime-prevention strategy.

The model later expanded to cities across the United States. One example was Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) in Chicago, which combined federal prosecution, focused policing, offender notification meetings, and community partnerships to reduce gun violence. Research found that some PSN components were associated with reductions in violence in the original target areas, although those effects weakened as the program expanded without corresponding increases in resources. These findings highlighted the importance of implementation quality and sustained support when applying focused-deterrence strategies.

Focused deterrence continues to evolve today. A 2026 Marshall Project report described how cities such as Tucson, Arizona, are adapting the strategy to address low-level offenses associated with homelessness. Similar to earlier violence-reduction efforts, the approach combines clear legal consequences with offers of housing assistance, treatment, and other social services, illustrating how focused deterrence has expanded beyond gun violence while maintaining its core emphasis on targeted intervention and support.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

As the policy is implemented, policy problems arise when resources are taken away and are allocated to other programs. Many failures of focus deterrence strategies come from a lack of commitment when it comes to the policymakers and leaders. As a result of this, many of the short-term gains made in the initial successes of the program are quickly erased. Additionally, the strategy of focus deterrence requires commitment from the community. No one person can alone address the issues at hand, and continued effectiveness hinges on visibility and willing engagement of the community. The role of community groups in this aspect is to educate itself in how the police department will better serve the community. This requires both the community and the police department to trust each other.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

As this section has meticulously described, focused deterrence strategies introduce a unique approach to encouraging lawful behavior and creating a negative association with crime through consequences. Yet, in order for this approach to effectively reach its intended populations, it is critical for established policy to contribute to creating an environment in which these strategies can be effectively executed. Through this lens, policy options in this area are concentrated in fostering the creation of the enforcement, research and service-based bodies necessary to this approach.

One policy option includes the creation of legislation that introduces some sense of obligation to financially fund the technological systems supporting focused deterrence strategies. For example, spatial awareness technology may be used to specifically identify high-risk locations of crime. In the case of gun violence, it may be employed to precisely recognize places where such activity is prevalent, prompting law

enforcement to allocate resources to those areas. A way that this technology may be funded is through the National Institute of Justice, which is funded by the United States Department of Justice. Policy connected to the National Institute of Justice, potentially mandating or encouraging its funding, can allow local law enforcement to receive the money they need to support crime mapping in their independent regions.

Expanding on the occurrence described above, transparency is a crucial ethical consideration that must be paired with crime mapping to ensure its rightful use. Policy that works to develop a group of skilled workers to build upon and construct mechanisms to enforce transparency can serve to make these systems more widely available, and therefore, allow them to contribute to improving crime rates. This prioritization of transparency can make the technology appear more community-based, and less of an interference with personal privacy, a concern that may be associated with the approach.

Another aspect contributing to an effective enforcement of focused deterrence strategies includes the important role of community members. When a sense of community is present, it may be considered that neighbors can contribute to supporting one another and reducing crime. It may not always be that such members naturally exist in a community, which introduces the potentially critical role of social workers. Policy that is specifically focused on financially supporting social worker systems, potentially introducing economic incentives to participate, can help create a population that can take on this role to uplift citizens.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Since focused deterrence programs have been launched in multiple US cities like Boston and

Chicago, they have shown clear signs of reducing violence among their targeted populations. However, the success of such programs correlates with the resources they are allocated, and expansion without additional resources have produced lackluster results.

This brief suggests the introduction of financial obligations to fund focused deterrence programs through legislation as well as increased transparency within operations and involvement of community members as key elements of continued success for focused deterrence programs in the US.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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