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Offender and family member perceptions after an offender-focused hot spots policing strategy

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how both offenders and their families perceived their interactions with police and whether there were negative consequences of the offender-focused strategy that was implemented in a hot spots policing experiment.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from interviews of 32 offenders and 29 family members are examined qualitatively for themes to evaluate how the strategy was carried out and how it impacted offenders' behavior and both groups' perceptions of the police detectives and the strategy overall.

Findings – The results show that there was overwhelming agreement by both offenders and their family members that the police detectives who contacted them treated both groups with dignity and respect. After the contact was over, the offenders appeared to commit less crime, followed probation more closely, and had positive feelings about what the police detectives were trying to do. Improvement of the offenders' relationships with their families was an unanticipated finding indicating a diffusion of benefits of the strategy.

Practical implications – The results suggest that when procedural justice principles are used in an offender-focused police intervention, positive impact can be achieved without negative consequences.

Originality/value – This is a rare example of an in-depth evaluation of the perceptions of offenders and family members contacted through a hot spots policing offender-focused strategy.

Keywords Procedural justice, Hot spots policing, Offender interviews, Offender-focused strategy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The National Academy of Sciences report on proactive policing, released in November 2017, concludes that hot spots policing is effective in reducing crime (Weisburd and Majimundar, 2017). However, a concern of both hot spots policing supporters and critics is that the strategies used have potentially negative consequences for the relationships between police and the community (Braga and Weisburd, 2010; Kochel, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2006). That is, by increasing their presence in small, high crime areas, police risk citizens feeling targeted and/or increasing their fear of crime.

In their Campbell Review of hot spots policing, Braga *et al.* (2014) conclude that there is very little research on community reaction to hot spots policing strategies and even less on how those detained, stopped, or arrested in hot spots react to the hot spots policing strategies and the police. Examining the research more broadly, Weisburd and Majimundar (2017) assert, based on limited research and correlational studies, there are strong negative associations in the attitudes of individuals who are the subjects of aggressive law enforcement tactics such as stop, question, and frisk, and proactive traffic enforcement. Consequently, it is important for research in this area to determine an intervention's impact, not only on crime and disorder, but also on the perceptions and behavior of those citizens involved either directly or indirectly.

As a result, this paper presents selected findings from a process evaluation of the offender-focused intervention implemented in crime hot spots through a partially blocked random controlled trial in one city[1] (Santos and Santos, 2016). The evaluation is based on

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data collected in qualitative interviews of offenders and their family members who had been contacted during the intervention. The goal is to examine both groups' perceptions and potential consequences of the offender-focused intervention.

Background: offender-focused hot spots policing experiment

This section provides background to the current study with an overview of the experiment (Santos and Santos, 2016) – specifically, a description of the offender-focused strategy as well as the selection of the offenders and the strategy implementation. The remainder of the paper covers the evaluation and interview methodology, analysis results, and implications of the current study.

Offender-focused strategy

The intervention tested in the experiment was based on criminology of place research that consistently shows that offending is "tightly coupled" to place (Weisburd *et al.*, 2012), and offenders are more likely to commit crimes relatively close to where they live (Bernasco 2010; Bernasco *et al.*, 2015; Bernasco and Nieuwbeerta, 2005). Specifically, the offender-focused strategy was implemented for multiple offenders living in residential burglary and residential theft from vehicle hot spots. The goal was to deter offenders from committing crimes in order to reduce crime in the hot spots where they lived. This experiment was unique compared to other hot spots studies as it isolated the offender-focused response and did not test other responses typically studied in hot spots studies, such as directed patrol. This response was implemented for specific offenders at their homes and by name, but not generally implemented across the hot spot.

In addition, the offender-focus strategy was less focused on apprehension and more on deterrence. Other offender-focused experiments have concentrated on apprehension and enhanced prosecution. In these studies the police interacted with offenders on the street in crime hot spots (Groff *et al.*, 2015), in jail, in the courtroom (Abrahamse *et al.*, 1991; Martin and Sherman, 1986), at the police department, and/or in other public forums (Braga and Weisburd, 2012). The strategy examined here is different. The police contacted offenders where they lived to influence their perceptions of risk of being apprehended in the neighborhood where they lived and not necessarily to build a better case for arrest or prosecution. Through continual contacts by the police, the goal was to deter criminal activity by getting offenders to understand that police knew where they lived and recognized them, their family, and associates. In addition, the police could be driving in the neighborhood and visiting their homes at unpredictable times. Another purpose for visiting offenders' homes was that police could interact with family members, when they were present, to encourage them to deter offenders' criminal activity as well.

The police department leadership felt that it was very important to have a positive relationship with the community, even with those who had broken the law and were the focus of additional attention by the police. Thus, the detectives implementing the intervention were to treat the offenders with respect and give them the benefit of the doubt. The purpose was for the detectives to deter offenders from criminal activity, not to elicit negative perceptions of the police. Consequently, the detectives deliberately took a helpful and collaborative approach with offenders as well as their families and were mindful to treat them with respect.

Selection of offenders

To identify the long-term crime hot spots for the experiment, one year of residential burglary and residential theft from vehicle incident data were aggregated by census block. Clusters of census blocks were merged together so hot spots were consistent in square mileage and numbers of reported crimes. Environmental factors such as interstates, major

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roadways, canals, lakes, rivers, etc., were used to determine hot spot borders in a way that created informal neighborhoods. A total of 48 residential burglary and residential theft from vehicle hot spots were identified across a 120 square mile area and assigned to a treatment or control group through a partially blocked randomization design[2]. Three blocks were identified based on the number of crimes per offender (living in the hot spot). This process resulted in 6 high crimes per offender hot spots, 13 medium crimes per offender hot spots, and 5 low crimes per offender hot spots, in each group.

Importantly, offenders were not randomly selected for the intervention, but all offenders identified in the treatment hot spots were eligible for the intervention. This ensured that the dosage of the offender-focused strategy was as high as possible to impact the level of crime across the treatment hot spots in comparison to the control hot spots where no offender-focused strategy was implemented.

Specific offenders were identified who would be most likely to commit residential burglary and residential theft from vehicle. Thus, individuals who had been arrested for residential burglary and theft from vehicle crimes in the previous year or who were convicted offenders on active felony probation with a prior burglary arrest were selected. A meta-analysis by Bennett *et al.* (2008) indicates that drug users are three to four times more likely than non-drug users to commit burglary as well as other types of crime. Therefore, individuals who were non-violent convicted offenders on felony probation for drug offenses were also identified, because they may have the potential to commit burglary and theft from vehicle.

Strategy implementation

The strategy was implemented for 151 offenders in 24 treatment hot spots for 9 months from October 2013 to June 2014. To carry out the strategy, the police department assigned two full-time police detectives to contact offenders. One full-time crime analyst supported the strategy, and all three were supervised by a police commander (this author) who was also the project director of the experiment. The detectives were trained in procedural justice concepts and the importance of adhering to its tenets. Specifically, the training included discussion of procedural justice principles, such as citizen participation, police neutrality, treating citizens with dignity and respect, and police having trustworthy motives (Mazerolle *et al.*, 2012, 2013).

Each of the two detectives was assigned 12 of the 24 treatment hot spots, and they were responsible for carrying out and recording any activity related to offenders in their areas. The detectives recorded all contacts and activity (i.e. arrests, probation violations) in a specifically designed database which was used to track activity, hold the detectives accountable, as well as conduct analysis.

In the first interaction with each offender and/or family member (i.e. spouses and parents), the detectives were not accusative but asked in a friendly manner whether the offender had any information about crimes recently occurring in the area. In each subsequent contact, the detectives would begin by asking offenders and family members how they were doing and if they needed anything. Depending on the response, the detective would provide guidance if help was needed and then talk to them about refraining from criminal activity. The conversations would ebb and flow depending on the offender's circumstance as well as the nature of the detectives' previous contacts with that family. Consequently, the detectives did not follow a specific script, but in every contact they took a helpful and respectful approach following the tenets of procedural justice. Importantly, two seasoned detectives with very good people skills were chosen for this project.

The detectives also conducted curfew checks on the offenders with correctional sanctions, which was the primary mechanism for regular and legitimate contact with these offenders. If there was a curfew violation, the detectives' primary goal was to

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talk to the offender and/or the family to reinforce the importance of following probation and doing the right thing. The detectives typically did not arrest offenders for curfew unless they deemed it was necessary to reinforce the importance of following the sanctions.

The home visits occurred primarily in the evening on random days during the week. The detectives wore agency polo shirts with their badges and guns and drove unmarked police vehicles. For safety, the two detectives went together to all home visits, which ensured consistency in the content of their discussions, manner, and tone of the contacts. However, each detective was responsible for determining the best response for his assigned offenders, making other contacts, and entering contacts into the database. Other contacts were made over the phone with the offenders, family members, and other criminal justice professionals, such as probation officers, prosecutors, and judges to discuss the offender's status, when applicable. The detectives were responsible for implementing all proactive contacts unless they asked for assistance from other members of the police department for a specific circumstance (e.g. patrol, gang unit); however, this was rare.

During the nine-month treatment period, the two detectives contacted 151 offenders who were primarily white men (70 percent) between 18 and 35 years old (69 percent). The detectives contacted around six offenders in each hot spot and interacted with each offender between one and two times per month. Some offenders were not contacted each calendar month, but all offenders were contacted throughout the entire nine-month intervention period unless they were incarcerated or moved out of the treatment hot spot. The detectives were in each hot spot about four to five times per month, which entailed driving through the neighborhood to visit offenders' homes and making contact with the offenders or family members directly.

Finally, the experimental findings show that even though there was a 21 percent decline in residential burglary and residential theft from vehicle crimes in treatment hot spots when compared to the control hot spots, the difference was not significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. In addition, offenders living in the treatment hot spots had an average of 1.54 arrests during the pre-test period and 0.49 in the intervention period, which was a 68 percent reduction and statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (Santos and Santos, 2016).

The current study

To complement the experiment's results, this study seeks to fill a gap in hot spots policing research with an examination of the offender-focused strategy's implementation and whether there were any "backfire" effects (Weisburd, *et al.*, 2011). This is not a comprehensive process evaluation of all aspects of the implementation of the intervention, but is an examination of perceptions of offenders and their family members contacted during the intervention. Family members were included since many of the offenders lived with their parents and spouses, and they too were contacted during the intervention. Three questions guide the research and focus on the nature of the response and its impact on the individuals. They are:

RQ1. Did offenders and their family members perceive the intervention implementation as it was perceived by the police who implemented it?

RQ2. What were the consequences of the intervention for the offenders' behavior?

RQ3. What were the consequences of the intervention for the offenders' and family members' perceptions of the interactions with the police?

Interview methodology

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to evaluate the implementation of the intervention itself and to explore if contact with the police detectives, concerning the offenders'

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possible criminal activity, had negative consequences. That is, did the unusual amount of attention from the police detectives result in offenders and family members having negative feelings toward the detectives regardless of their previous perceptions of the police in general? Interviews were conducted one time after the nine-month intervention period. A pre/post design was not used since the offenders did not know or interact with these detectives before the intervention, and a pre-test would not have provided meaningful information in this particular context.

In terms of the research questions, it was thought that offenders contacted most frequently would be more likely, of any of the offenders, to have negative feelings about the police detectives since the amount of contact was unusual and unsolicited. Therefore, a purposive sampling method (Creswell, 2013) was used to identify offenders for the interviews. Since it was important to identify any negative consequences of the intervention, offenders who had the most contact with detectives were selected. Even though the detectives had the goal of contacting all offenders the same amount, variations occurred because offenders were not always home. The interviews were conducted by this author who was accompanied by a police detective to assist taking notes but who was not one of the detectives who had implemented the strategy. Neither I nor the detective had any previous contact with the offenders. We were dressed in business casual clothing and conducted interviews inside the offenders' homes without making appointments, much like the program detectives conducted their face-to-face contacts.

I conducted each interview and approached the offenders as well as the family members as a member of the police department and supervisor of the detectives and the program. I started by telling them that I was there to obtain their thoughts about the interactions with the detectives to determine both how well the detectives were doing their jobs and to assess the overall worth and impact of the program. I also told them that their answers would be confidential and the program had ended, so the detectives would no longer be visiting them as part of this program. It was important to the police department that I was transparent about the program and the purpose of my visit, but we also thought that the offenders and their family members would be more willing to express any negative perceptions if they knew that they were not going to interact with those specific detectives in the future.

Each visit took between 20 minutes and, in some cases, several hours depending on how many people were interviewed and the nature of the conversation. Offenders were asked and responded verbally to questions as we took notes. The questions included a variety of statements using a Likert agreement scale and a series of open-ended questions[3]. All of the interviews were relaxed and friendly conversations about the offender's life and the impact of the program.

The responses of each offender and family member interviewed were written down by the interviewers while on site. The notes were immediately compared for accuracy and entered later into a database for analysis. It was decided that the interviews would not be recorded and transcribed in order to make the interviewees more comfortable with the process. However, while both interviewers took notes, the detective who assisted did not ask any questions, as his sole responsibility was taking accurate and thorough notes.

Interview results

A total of 34 offenders and 29 family members were contacted for an interview. Two offenders refused to participate which resulted in an offender response rate of 94 percent and a total of 61 people who were interviewed. In some cases, the offenders and family members were interviewed separately, but on the same night, and in other cases they were interviewed together. Table I illustrates the demographics of the interviewees compared to those of all the offenders contacted by the detectives.

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	Interviewees ($n = 32$)	All offenders ($n = 151$)
Race		
White	17 (53%)	105 (70%)
Black	13 (41%)	41 (27%)
Hispanic	2 (6%)	5 (3%)
Age		
Under 18	6 (19%)	18 (12%)
18 to 25 years	20 (63%)	72 (48%)
26 to 35 years	2 (6%)	34(22%)
36 and over	4 (12%)	27 (18%)
Sex		
Male	30 (94%)	133 (88%)
Female	2 (6%)	18 (12%)

Table I.
Demographics of interviewees and all offenders contacted

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Over half of the interviewees were white, 69 percent were between 18 and 35, and 94 percent were male. Although the percentages are roughly similar, a higher percentage of black offenders, offenders between 18 and 25 years old, and male offenders were interviewed than were contacted overall. The race and age of family members was not collected but of the 29 family members interviewed, 11 were mothers, 14 were fathers, and 4 were spouses. Specific to the 32 offenders who were interviewed, the detectives made, on average, between three and six contacts with them per month. This was higher than the overall group of offenders who were contacted one to two times per month since, as noted earlier, these offenders were selected purposely because they had more contact with the detectives.

Qualitative analysis methods

The analysis methods used here are two-fold. First, simple descriptive statistics (i.e. percentages) are presented for all Likert scaled questions on the percentage of interviewees who either agreed or strongly agreed with particular statements to provide a sense of the general pattern of the responses for each question. Second, for each open-ended question, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was taken following a method laid out by Creswell (2013, p. 193) that includes:

- developing a list of significant statements from the interviews that represent how the interviewees experience/answer each item;
- taking the significant statements and group them into larger "meaning units" or themes; and
- describing what the participants experienced and include "verbatim examples" (i.e. quotes from the interviews).

Analysis findings

I began each interview by asking the offender and/or family member if they knew why the detectives had contacted them over the last nine months to verify whether the detectives communicated their purpose effectively. While they did not initially know this intervention was part of a research study or an organized program implemented by the police department, every offender and family member said that they knew why the offender was being contacted by the police. The overall theme was that they believed that they were the

subject of extra police attention because they had been arrested and/or convicted of a crime. They also understood that the purpose of the visits was to deter them from committing additional crimes. The following are specific statements made by the interviewees supporting this theme.

Offenders:

- "To check up on me to make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to."
- "To make sure I'm not violating curfew or doing anything wrong."
- "Keep me on the right path; help if they can; and keep me out of trouble."

Family members:

- "To check on him and how he's doing to keep him out of trouble."
- "Checking up to make sure he stays out of trouble to see how school is going."

Next, I made six statements and asked offenders and family members to respond with their level of agreement (i.e. strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree). Figure 1 contains the language of each statement as well as the percentage of each group that answered "agree" or "strongly agree."

The first two items in Figure 1 address the detectives' manner when interacting with the offenders and their families to determine if the detectives did, in fact, carry out the intervention as intended with procedural justice tenets. The offenders and family members overwhelmingly agreed (91 and 97 percent, respectively) that the detectives treated the offenders with respect, and they all agreed that family members were treated respectfully. They were also asked the following question: "How do you feel about how the detectives have interacted with you in their contacts?" There was a general positive tone from both the offenders and family members, and both groups specifically mentioned that the detectives were respectful, helpful, and were concerned about their welfare and the

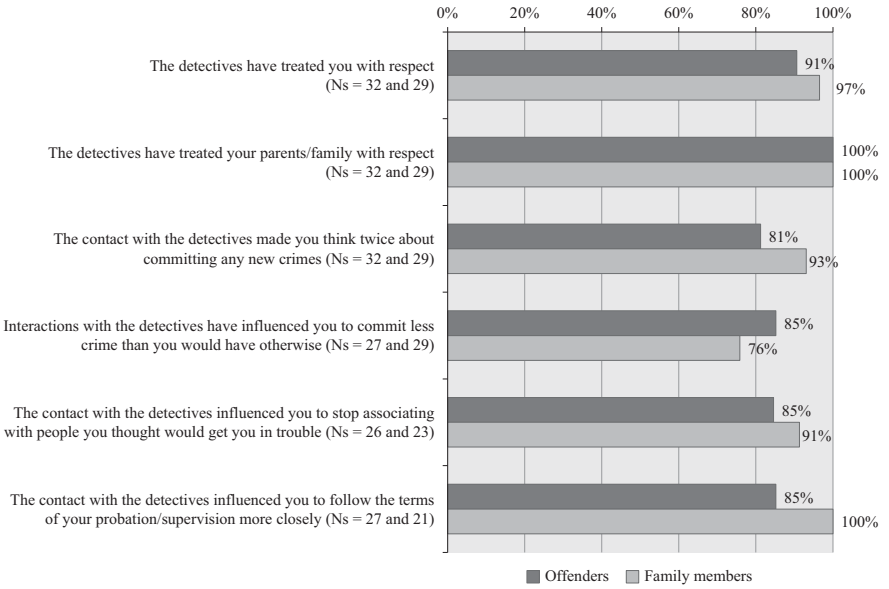

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing to the given statements

Note: Ns, offenders and family members

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offenders not continuing criminal behavior. The following are specific statements supporting this theme.

Offenders:

- "Very genuine; seems like he cared."
- "Make me feel like I'm in check."
- "Didn't really bother me."
- "I liked the detective. It seemed like they cared and wanted me to stay out of trouble."
- "At ease and comfortable with the conversation."

Family members:

- "Make sure he knows it's "not a joke"; follow the rules."
- "Respectful; they came by a little too late but they were good people."
- "Really good; A good thing they are doing; very respectful; came across like they cared."
- "Happy, very happy. It felt they were helping."
- "Doing their job; I'm ok with that."

Two questions were asked how interaction with the detectives influenced the offender's thoughts and behavior related to committing crime. Figure 1 illustrates, again, that the vast majority of both offenders (81 percent) and family members (93 percent) agree that contact with the detectives made the offenders "think twice" about committing new crimes and influenced them to commit less crime than they would have otherwise (offenders, 85 percent; family members, 76 percent).

After each item, the respondents were asked to explain their answers. The overall theme for both sets of responses was that the visits did influence their thinking and dissuade them from criminal activity. While it is unlikely that the offenders would fully admit to committing crimes, based on their immediate reactions to this question, I am confident that most of the offenders were influenced by the detectives. More specifically, their statements support my impressions. These are responses to whether the detectives made them "think twice."

Offenders:

- "Hell, yeah [while laughing]!"
- "Thought of it a few times but didn't."
- "Decided to stop on my own, but detectives helped."
- "It made me think twice because the neighbors would see."

Family members:

- "It helped me make him listen."
- "Really with curfew; it made him understand how serious it was."
- "A probation officer is not as good as the detectives; detectives reminded him that he didn't want to go back to jail."

The following are statements from the offenders about whether the detectives influenced the offender to commit less crime:

- "Jail convinced me not to commit crime anymore because I don't want to go back. But the visits did help influence me."

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- "It felt like they knew me everywhere I went."
- "If I were to commit crime, they would have influenced me not to."
- "They were a strong deterrent."

The next statement in Figure 1 addresses offenders' relationships with other potential offenders. Both offenders (85 percent) and family members (91 percent) agree that the interactions with the detectives influenced them to stop associating with people who might get them in trouble. When asked to explain, most offenders said that they did not completely cut off their potentially problematic friends, but did not associate with particular individuals or cut down the time they spent with these individuals. They also reported staying home more often. These statements support this theme.

Offenders:

- "I did still hang out with some, but not the worst ones."
- "Was not associating with friends anyway, but it would have influenced me if I was."
- "[Detectives] never spoke to me about not hanging out with other people; I decided to stop hanging with the wrong people."
- "There is a certain friend I no longer hang with."
- "The detectives did, but my family also played a big role."

Family members:

- "He is not going out as much and telling me he's not hanging out with certain people."
- "It helped me make him listen."

Of those offenders who were on probation ($n = 27$), both offenders (85 percent) and family members (100 percent) agreed that contact with the detectives influenced offenders to more closely follow probation/supervision. When asked to explain, a common theme arose that the detectives visits, especially the fact that they were unpredictable, made them more aware of their responsibilities to their probation. Their statements included.

Offenders:

- "The thought was always in the back of my head that they would check on me."
- "Because of the consistent checks. The detectives never made it routine, so you never knew when they would come by versus probation officer who always comes by the same time and day."
- "It made me feel bad that my family had to deal with cops always coming by the house."

Family members:

- "He was more responsible."
- "He always followed but this gave him an extra push."
- "It scared him into doing the right thing."
- "Having trust with the one detective versus the regular cops."

Another question was asked to examine possible impact of the detective's visits beyond the offenders' criminal behavior and on their daily lives and relationships. The question asked if their relationship (i.e. between the offender and family members) was better than it was a year ago. All but three respondents said yes (58 or 95 percent). When asked to explain, many

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reported that their communication was better because the offenders were home more often and were more open to listen to their spouse/parent. This theme is evidenced by the following statements.

Offenders:

- "Because I'm home more often and I communicate more with my parents."
- "Our family is going to counseling."
- "We have more communication and go out as a family."

Family members:

- "He's staying out of trouble; being a better person; not committing crimes anymore."
- "He listens to me more; we have better communication."
- "He's willing to listen more now."
- "He's spending more time at home and not going out and getting into trouble."
- "It was a strain to get her to follow probation. The detectives helped make her listen to me more."
- "Our relationship has improved and he is more respectful and willing to help around the house."

A final question was asked to solicit any other thoughts about the overall program. While not everyone had any more to add to their previous comments, those who responded were in agreement that the program was carried out professionally and respectfully, and it should continue because they did see changes from before the detectives visited. Overall, the comments were very positive and included.

Offenders:

- "The interaction was very important; It has to be very relaxed interaction."
- "The detectives came across like they cared."
- "It was important to have the same detective to build a relationship."
- "The detectives acted like they were very concerned about our family's well-being."
- "I felt the detectives cared about me. They were respectful. My family relationship has gotten better and the detectives would speak to the family as well."
- "I thought it was very helpful."
- "The program is good and the detectives acted like they cared."
- "I think it works and I would keep it in place."

Family members:

- "I think the interactions were good, the detectives were respectful. I think they deterred my son from committing crime and adhere to his curfew."
- "Detectives made sure he realized how serious the consequences were but were respectful. They spoke to him about other crime, discouraged him from committing crime, and spoke about education."
- "Detectives were very nice and built a rapport. They asked about our family and became friends."
- "I was thrilled to death, really happy, but they didn't come around enough!"

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- "The interactions were perfect. They were respectful and influenced my wife not to commit crimes, follow probation. I recommend to keep the visits random."
- "It's a very good thing."

In summary, the analysis of the offender and family member interviews produced many common themes. The offenders and family members knew the purpose of the contacts and saw value in them. They were not apathetic or resentful because of the increased contact but appreciated the show of concern and support. The program impacted the offenders' perceptions and behavior in terms of crime as well as their personal relationships with their families. Family members were even more positive, as many of them felt that the detectives helped "push" the offenders to communicate and listen to them more. Overall, it appears as though these interactions "planted a seed" of deterrence in the offenders' minds and provided families support to encourage their loved ones to refrain from criminal behavior.

The offenders and family members both felt that the detectives were respectful and were appreciative of their motives (e.g. to help them). The detectives appeared to make the offenders think twice about committing crime and hanging out with the "wrong" people, and they took their probation and sanctions more seriously. Family members were very appreciative of the detectives and how they supported their own efforts. They felt that the increased police visits did affect the offenders' criminal behavior and hanging out with the "wrong" people, as well as the offenders' participation and communication with the family.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the study worth mentioning. First, a random sample of the 151 offenders was not conducted, so the results do not represent the entire group of offenders contacted in the intervention. Importantly, however, the intention of this study was to determine whether the intervention was carried out as intended and whether there were negative consequences of the additional contact by police. Therefore, a purposive sample was taken to identify and interview those offenders who had the most contact with the detectives as they would have more information and be more likely to have stronger views about the interactions.

Another potential limitation is that the findings here do not represent all types of offenders. The intervention was implemented for non-violent burglary and drug offenders since the target crimes within the hot spots were residential burglary and residential theft from vehicle incidents. Perhaps different types of offenders, specifically serious, violent offenders, may have reacted differently toward the detectives and had different perceptions of the interactions.

As the interviewer, I was representing the police agency and was not an outside researcher which could have biased some of the respondents. I used an IRB-approved introductory script that clearly stated that the purpose of the interview was to "get your impressions of our program and how you think we are doing." More importantly, based on the interviews, I am confident that the offenders and family members were forthright and did not feel intimidated because we were police employees. My impression was, in fact, the opposite, and they appreciated a police supervisor speaking to them to see if what the police detectives were doing was done correctly. It seemed to give the interviewees the sense that a supervisor, and by extension the police department, cared about how detectives treated them.

Finally, the interviewees were told that the program had ended, and the detectives would not be visiting them as part of this program any longer. As noted earlier, transparency of both the visits and the interviews was important to the police department. However, telling them that this could have influenced their responses, most likely in a

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negative direction since they would not have to face the detectives again. Had the program continued, the respondents may have been more positive as to be "on the good side" of the detectives. However, since the goal was to determine whether there were any negative consequences, telling them about the program ending likely provided more, instead of less, straightforward responses.

Discussion and implications

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to collect data to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Did offenders and their family members perceive the intervention implementation as it was perceived by the police who implemented it?

RQ2. What were the consequences of the intervention for the offenders' behavior?

RQ3. What were the consequences of the intervention for the offenders' and family members' perceptions of the interactions with the police?

What follows is a discussion of the findings and implications related to each question.

Perceptions of the intervention

In their Campbell Systematic Review of police legitimacy, Mazerolle *et al.* (2012, 2013) conclude that police should adopt "at least one of the principles of procedural justice as a component part of any type of police intervention, whether as part of routine police activity or as part of a defined program" (Mazerolle *et al.*, 2012, p. 77). Specifically, they found strategies using at least one procedural justice principle that were focused on offenders resulted in larger effect sizes than strategies focused on victims or the public for both compliance and cooperation. In this intervention, procedural justice was carried out through interactions in which police personnel took a helpful and collaborative approach with offenders as well as their families and treated them with respect.

Because the police detectives interacted directly with offenders and their families, it was important not only to measure what the police did (i.e. number and type of contacts), but also to obtain the perceptions of those they contacted. The statistical findings and qualitative themes that arose from the interviews indicate that the detectives did indeed carry out procedural justice principles in their interactions with offenders and their families. There was overwhelming agreement by both offenders and family members that the detectives treated the offenders and their families with dignity and respect.

Both offenders and family members were consistent in their responses that the detectives were pleasant in their manner, respectful, and made them feel at ease. They also expressed that the detectives genuinely cared and were there to help. The respondents' positive statements suggest that they were not suspicious of the detectives or were feeling "singled out," but perceived the detectives' motives as neutral, trustworthy, and legitimate.

Outcomes of the intervention

Mazerolle *et al.* (2012) also assert that using principles of procedural justice in police interventions are "likely to not only improve the willingness of citizens to cooperate and comply with directives, but are also likely to reduce reoffending when used in direct encounters with offenders […]" (p. 77). Consequently, it is important to examine the outcomes of procedural justice practices to determine the impact on the offenders' willingness to cooperate with police (i.e. desist criminal behavior). Equally as important is to examine the offenders' and their family members' trust and confidence in the police (i.e. perceptions of the police detectives).

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Analysis of the interviews shows that a large majority of both offenders and family members agreed that the offender "thought twice" about committing new crimes after contact with the detectives. Both groups also overwhelmingly agreed that the detectives influenced the offenders to commit less crime than they would have otherwise, as well as influenced them to stop associating with people who might get them into trouble. Offenders with sanctions appeared to be influenced by the detectives with well over three quarters of the offenders and all of their family members agreeing that the detectives influenced them to follow the terms of probation more closely than they did before the program.

In addition, where the larger group of offenders contacted in the intervention had 68 percent fewer arrests per offender during the nine-month intervention period than the previous nine months (Santos and Santos, 2016), the 32 interviewed offenders saw an even larger decrease with 78 percent fewer arrests. Even though any of these offenders may have continued committing crimes without being caught, these recidivism findings coincide with the offenders' and family members' interview responses.

The results of the qualitative analysis support the fact that offenders and their family members both held positive views of the detectives and expressed a desire for the program to continue, for themselves as well as for other offenders. Finally, an overwhelming majority of offenders and family members agreed that their own relationships were better. Both parents and spouses expressed that their relationships improved because the offenders listened to them more and spent more time at home than before the detectives' contacts. This finding was unanticipated and seems to indicate that the intervention had a diffusion of benefits beyond its original purpose (Clarke and Weisburd, 1994).

Conclusions

These findings help fill a gap in hot spots policing research by examining the nature of a hot spots policing intervention in terms of the quality of the interactions between police and the public, and whether there were backfire effects. The results of this study strongly suggest that the program achieved the desired outcome which was to reduce criminal activity by the offenders without negative consequences. That is, the unusual amount of attention from the police had some positive effect on the offender's behavior, but did not result in the offenders and/or family members having negative perceptions (i.e. backfire) toward the police detectives. The results support the conclusions made by Mazerolle *et al.* (2013) that when procedural justice principles are used in an offender-focused police intervention, positive impact can be achieved without negative consequences.

Even further, the results demonstrate how important it is to hear from citizens who are contacted by police about whether a police strategy is carried out as the police intend and whether it has an impact beyond crime reduction and on the individuals involved. Thus, if, as Mazerolle *et al.* (2013) suggest, police strategies should be implemented with procedural justice principles in mind, then research should also account for measuring whether procedural justice is successfully implemented in the eyes of the citizens being contacted and how these practices impact the individuals themselves.

A final consideration is that doing this type of research may be particularly challenging for hot spot studies in which the tested strategies do not focus on specific individuals. For an offender-focused strategy, like this one, the individuals interviewed were easily identified because their names and home addresses were known through the implementation of the intervention. In place-based strategies where individuals are contacted indirectly or directly, but not by name or address, it will be more difficult to identify and access individuals for interviews or surveys. Regardless of this challenge, to further refine what we know about "what works" in policing and crime reduction, researchers should always consider building in such an evaluation of how the responses are carried out as well as their effect on individuals involved.

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Notes

1. The Port St Lucie, FL Police Department was funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance as part of the Smart Policing Initiative (Santos and Santos, 2014). It is considered a large police agency with 224 authorized sworn positions and 65 civilian employees. The city of Port St Lucie, FL had a population of 170,000 in 2014.
2. Recommended by Weisburd and Gill (2014) for experimental studies with fewer than 50 cases.
3. The survey questions as well as the consent script and methodology were approved by the Florida Atlantic University institutional review board in May of 2014.

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