Focused Deterrence and Social Service Provision: Avenues for Future Research

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Abstract

Focused deterrence is a policing strategy that offers an incredibly unique solution to violent crime. In addition to heightened sanctions and other traditional deterrence techniques, these interventions make use of positive incentives by providing high-risk offenders with access to social services. However, this aspect of focused deterrence has been largely overlooked in the literature. This paper provides a closer look at the social service component of the focused deterrence model, arguing that positive incentives and their relationship with crime must be examined more rigorously. Potential theoretical explanations for this relationship are discussed, as well as possibilities for future research. This is directed towards facilitating a more complete understanding of both the focused deterrence model broadly and the provision of social services in particular.

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Introduction

Focused deterrence is a multifaceted, preventative police intervention that targets high-risk violent offenders (Braga et al., 2018). The effectiveness of the focused deterrence model in reducing violent crime among this population has been demonstrated by Braga et al. (2019) in their most recent Campbell Systematic Review. As a result of its success, numerous variations of this strategy have been implemented by law enforcement agencies throughout the country. The strategy itself involves increased communication with and scrutiny of targeted offenders, heightened policing and enforcement efforts, community mobilization, and the provision of social services (Braga et al., 2019; Engel et al., 2011; Kennedy, 1997). The simultaneous application of both positive and negative incentives makes focused deterrence an incredibly unique approach to crime prevention. However, much less is known about the use of social services and the potential impact they may have on crime (Engel et al., 2011). This may be at least partially attributed to the fact that many studies in this area have focused on measuring aggregate changes in crime, while failing to sort out the specific mechanisms that contribute to crime reduction (Schnobrich-Davis & Gardner, 2018).

This paper addresses the dearth of research on the use of positive incentives within the focused deterrence model. There have been very few studies that provide thorough discussions of social service provision and even fewer empirical evaluations of the relationship between social services and crime. Calling attention to this gap in the literature represents a critical step towards developing a better understanding of focused deterrence in general and the use of positive incentives in particular. To this end, the paper begins by separating the deterrence-inspired sanction techniques from the theoretically distinct social service element. Next, it explains the focused deterrence model in more detail by highlighting notable examples in practice. This is followed by a discussion of the ways in which prior research has failed to properly investigate positive incentives. The paper concludes by exploring directions for future research and potential explanations for this gap in the literature.

Theoretical Background

The foundations of criminal deterrence rest on well-established theories regarding the use of punishment as a technique of dissuasion (Apel, 2013). More specifically, deterrence refers to the notion that individuals are responsive to the certainty, severity, and swiftness of sanctions (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). This can be traced back to 1764 when Cesare Beccaria argued that an individual's self-interested motivations to engage in criminal activity must be hindered by the inevitability of punishment (Paternoster, 2010). Since then, research focusing on the role played

by punishment in deterrence theory has influenced a wide variety of criminal justice policies and practices. The most obvious example is the use of imprisonment and other forms of incapacitation to deter criminal behavior (Drago et al., 2009). As it relates to policing practices, deterrence theory manifests itself in the idea that "the police represent perhaps the government's most credible threat of criminal sanction in the form of apprehension" (Kane, 2006, pp. 187-188).

Another component of deterrence theory is the expected utility model of criminal behavior (Apel, 2013). This focuses on the ways in which individuals weigh the risks and benefits of crime. The model suggests that individuals are willing to commit crimes when the anticipated returns of criminal behavior, discounted by the risks of punishment, are greater than the anticipated returns of law-abiding behavior. In other words, it is assumed that the threat of swift and certain punishment can raise the costs of criminal behavior. From the viewpoint of the state, the costs associated with punishment will ideally outweigh the potential benefits derived from criminal behavior. This also relies upon effective threat communication. Generally speaking, deterrence policies are most successful when potential offenders have little to no difficulty understanding them (Kennedy, 1997). If a jurisdiction decides to increase the penalties for engaging in criminal activity, this must be communicated to potential offenders without ambiguity.

In contrast with deterrence theory and its emphasis on punishment, some argue that individuals may also be responsive to positive incentives (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017). Examples of positive incentives typically include vital social services such as employment opportunities, housing assistance, educational programs, and substance abuse treatment. Evidence for a negative relationship between positive incentives and reoffending can be found in research on post-incarceration reentry support programs. Berk et al. (1980) demonstrated this in an evaluation of a program that provided unemployment benefits to individuals immediately following their release from prison. These individuals were provided with modest payments—often less than $100 a week—in an attempt to facilitate the transfer to a non-criminal lifestyle. The authors found that these payments reduced recidivism rates among individuals in the program.

Further evidence of this relationship can be found in Uggen's (2000) evaluation of the National Supported Work Demonstration Project. This experiment provided more than 3,000 recently incarcerated individuals with minimum-wage jobs. Many of these individuals were chronic drug users and youth dropouts with a history of frequent unemployment. Uggen found that the intervention was a success among participants aged 27 and older. Although this outcome was not statistically significant among younger participants, the results indicate that the risk of arrest

was around 22% lower for older individuals compared to the control group. Similarly, Lockwood et al. (2012) found that employment and education were the two most important predictors of recidivism in a 5-year study of over 6,000 released offenders in Indiana.

Clark (2015) provides a much more recent example of this effect in an evaluation of the High-Risk Revocation Reduction (HRRR) program in Minnesota. The program offered recently released high-risk offenders a wide range of services, including transitional housing, employment, cognitive-behavioral programming, and transportation assistance. Outcomes for individuals in this group were compared with a control group that only received typical case management services. Clark found that the program significantly reduced recidivism and other negative outcomes for individuals who received the full range of services. Subsidized employment had one of the largest impacts, reducing "the risk of revocation (57% reduction), rearrest (70% reduction), and reconviction (76% reduction)" (Clark, 2015, p. 210). Transportation assistance also proved to be effective, reducing the risk of rearrest by 33%.

It is clear that the enforcement aspect of focused deterrence has been directly influenced by the deterrence literature. However, the use of positive incentives does not fit within this theoretical framework. In fact, according to Paternoster's (1987) conception of deterrence, the threat of sanctions constitutes the entire deterrence doctrine. Nagin (2013) echoes this line of reasoning in an extensive review of the literature, maintaining that the application and threat of sanctions should guide all future deterrence research. This would place the social service element of focused deterrence outside the realm of deterrence theory. Tillyer et al. (2012) note that there seems to be an assumption that the offer of social services represents a path towards more legitimate opportunities. This could be one of the mechanisms linking positive incentives to crime reduction. Such an explanation would align with Sampson and Laub's (1993) characterization of employment and other traditional bonds as components of informal social control.

Another theoretical perspective that might be useful in this context focuses on the relationship between social service provision and enhanced police legitimacy. Indeed, it may be that "a sincere offer of services is perceived as a procedurally just aspect of the focused deterrence message that increases the overall legitimacy of the model" (Clark-Moorman et al., 2018, p. 1424). In addition to improving police-community relations, enhanced legitimacy may even lead to reductions in crime (Higginson & Mazerolle, 2014). This is one of the reasons why Kennedy (2019) has argued that increased legitimacy should be viewed as one of the primary goals of focused deterrence interventions. The potential benefits of increased police

legitimacy highlight the need for more research into the positive incentives provided by these initiatives. If there is truly a connection between social service provision and enhanced legitimacy, both scholars and practitioners should be more concerned with understanding this relationship.

Focused Deterrence in Practice

Focused deterrence originated with Operation Ceasefire in Boston, Massachusetts (Telep & Weisburd, 2012). Implemented in 1996, Operation Ceasefire was a crime prevention initiative designed to reduce youth homicide among a specific group of chronic offenders (Braga et al., 2014). The program was administered by a coordinated group that consisted of law enforcement, youth workers, probation officers, and other members of the community. This group communicated with potential offenders directly, delivering "an explicit message that violence was unacceptable to the community and that 'street' justifications for violence were mistaken" (Braga et al., 2014, p. 115). The message was bolstered with a guarantee that any available judicial sanction would be utilized in response to future acts of violence. The researchers evaluating Operation Ceasefire found that the intervention was associated with a 57% reduction in the number of monthly youth homicides (Piehl et al., 2000).

In addition to this increase in enforcement and punishment, Operation Ceasefire also provided program participants with positive incentives in the form of social services (Braga et al., 2014). These incentives were designed to encourage law-abiding behavior and reward compliance with the new enforcement policies. Gang-outreach workers connected potential offenders with employment services and "ran programs intended both to keep gang youth safely occupied and to bring them into contact with one another in ways that might breed tolerance" (Piehl et al., 2000, p. 72). Although these actions were seemingly taken to increase informal social controls and police legitimacy, this possibility was not initially discussed in much detail (Fagan, 2002). Furthermore, the researchers evaluating Operation Ceasefire did not specifically measure whether the provision of social services contributed to the observed drop in crime.

Project Longevity—implemented in New Haven, Connecticut in 2012—provides a slightly better look at the social service element of focused deterrence (Sierra-Arevalo et al., 2017). This intervention was shown to be associated with about five fewer gang-involved homicides a month. Like Operation Ceasefire, the program emphasized direct contact with potential offenders. In addition to an anti-violence message delivered by law enforcement and prominent community members, program participants were offered "housing assistance, high school diploma or general education development (GED) classes, job training, and drug or alcohol

recovery" (Sierra-Arevalo et al., 2017, p. 450). The program made use of an existing network of social services in New Haven to provide support to those who needed it. Once again, although this represents a genuine effort to encourage non-violence through the use of positive incentives, the potential impact on crime was not assessed in the evaluation. In light of this fact, the researchers admit they "cannot conclude that the observed Longevity effect does not overlap with other unmeasured programs, policies, or services" (Sierra-Arevalo et al., 2017, p. 461). This clearly presents the need for more comprehensive evaluations of focused deterrence initiatives that examine the effects of social service provision.

The evaluation of the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV) offers the best insight into the impact of social service provision on crime within a focused deterrence program (Engel et al., 2013). Introduced in 2007, the researchers found that CIRV was associated with a 37.7% decline in group-member involved homicides over a 24-month period. The design of this program emphasized the development of a broad social service network. In addition to a range of typical social services, CIRV offered a cognitive-behavioral treatment to program participants. This provided "an opportunity to address offenders' antisocial attitudes while teaching new skills to effectively manage their environment" (Engel et al., 2013, p. 415). The program also created a gang-outreach group that met with individuals in an attempt to mediate disputes and provide support for the families of victims and offenders. The ultimate goal of the CIRV social service approach was to lead program participants towards an employment-based lifestyle.

The evaluation of CIRV is particularly notable because it measured whether the provision of social services was associated with the program's impact on crime (Engel et al., 2013). In fact, the researchers claim that this analysis was likely the first empirical investigation of its kind. At present, it appears that this is still the case. Although the researchers did not find a relationship between the provision of social services and the observed crime reduction, it is possible that this outcome was affected by problems with implementation. For instance, social service providers were not given permission to access the list of program participants. As a result, the researchers concede that "many of the social services were provided to individuals who were not intended targets of the initiative (i.e. group members)" (Engel et al., 2013, p. 415). This is a serious issue that could have affected the results of the evaluation. A defining feature of the focused deterrence model is the way in which law enforcement resources are directed towards a highly specific group of potential offenders (Roman et al., 2019). After reviewing the evaluation of CIRV, it is clear that social services should be delivered in a similar manner.

Closing the Gap

Considering the implementation issues experienced by the CIRV social service team, there does not appear to be enough evidence to discount the role played by positive incentives in the focused deterrence model. With that being said, it seems as though the results of the CIRV evaluation have been accepted by some as proof that the social service element of focused deterrence is less related to crime reduction than the sanction element. For example, in describing the CIRV program, Clark-Moorman et al. report that "the social service component did not appear to be associated with an overall reduction in violent crime" (2018, p. 1424). Similarly, Corsaro and Engel (2015) state that the initiative "did not find any significant relationship between service provisions and changes in city-level violence" (2015, p. 480). These statements fail to account for the difficulties with implementation experienced by the CIRV providers.

If social service provision remains an integral component of future focused deterrence initiatives, researchers must spend more time investigating it. There is a need for both theoretical and empirical research into the relationship between these positive incentives and crime. Some authors note that there appears to be a 'black box' effect in focused deterrence evaluations, meaning it is not clear which mechanism within the model actually impacts criminal behavior (Trinkner, 2019). As a matter of fact, in one of their many systematic reviews, Braga et al. point out that "nearly all of the focused deterrence program evaluations in this review could be described as 'black box' evaluations where it is uncertain which program elements were most important in generating observed crime reduction effects" (2018, p. 239). Researchers can begin the process of illuminating this black box by designing evaluations that test the effects of social service provision and theorize its relationship with crime.

Qualitative studies offer another avenue for fruitful research in this area. Circo et al. (2020) highlight the fact that there seems to be no research on the perspectives of the offenders who participate in these interventions. Schnobrich-Davis and Gardner conducted a qualitative study that gathered data from open-ended interviews with social service providers in a focused deterrence program (2018). Among other findings, they discovered that many social service providers admitted to a difficulty in understanding exactly how focused deterrence initiatives operate. This indicates a lack of communication between service providers, law enforcement, and other program administrators. Corsaro et al. (2009) offer another example of a qualitative design in this context with their mixed-methods evaluation of an intervention in Rockford, Illinois. The qualitative portion of this study consisted of interviews with residents in the targeted neighborhoods, finding that

the intervention was generally well-received. Apart from these two studies, focused deterrence evaluations that utilize qualitative data are almost completely absent from the literature. Future qualitative research examining offender perspectives—of both social service provision in particular and focused deterrence in general—could give practitioners a better understanding of how to deliver these services.

Whether quantitative, qualitative, or theoretical, all focused deterrence research should aim to guide practitioners in program implementation. This is especially true for social service provision, as an excessive emphasis on the sanction element in the literature could potentially lead to an imbalance in the design of new programs. Indeed, Braga et al. (2019) argue that an underutilization of positive incentives could have a detrimental effect on police legitimacy or community relationships. More specifically, "the inappropriate implementation of these programs could exacerbate poor police-community relations and generate collateral harms through the increased surveillance and harsh enforcement" (Braga et al., 2019, p. 244). Without more rigorous investigations of social service provision, those who administer focused deterrence programs run the risk of making these mistakes.

Conclusion

Given the current state of focused deterrence research, it is impossible to estimate the degree to which positive incentives impact crime in this context. This paper has demonstrated how this element of focused deterrence has not received nearly enough attention in the literature. Nearly all evaluations of these strategies fail to identify whether the observed program effects can be attributed to social service provision, sanctions, or both. Program implementation issues negatively affected the one known study that has attempted to sort these mechanisms out. Many others seem to overlook discussions of social service provision altogether. Furthermore, a negative relationship between positive incentives and crime has been hypothesized here, drawing on empirical evidence from post-incarceration reentry programs. This effect is theoretically distinct from the sanction element, potentially producing reductions in crime through informal social controls and enhanced police legitimacy.

At this point, one may feel compelled to ask why researchers have not explored the use of positive incentives more thoroughly. Unfortunately, the answer to this question must be left to some speculation. The focused deterrence model is a unique crime prevention strategy. By offering support through the provision of social services, these strategies are implementing an explicitly non-traditional approach to crime. It is possible that scholars are unwilling to present research that

could be perceived as a challenge against more traditional enforcement and punishment tactics. This reluctance may be warranted in some cases, as law enforcement agencies could be unwilling to work with individuals or organizations that openly contest their crime control practices (Brunson, 2015). In a similar vein, Kennedy argues that the police may be opposed to the idea that enforcement is not the most effective crime control approach in every situation (2019). However, it is important to note that this paper is not advocating for the elimination of traditional enforcement and punishment tactics. No, this is simply an argument for developing a better understanding of positive incentives within the focused deterrence model.

Another explanation cuts slightly deeper. For example, Garland (2001) uses the term "acting out" to characterize overtly punitive criminal justice policies. More specifically, these policies "engage in a form of impulsive and unreflective action, avoiding realistic recognition of underlying problems, the very fact of acting providing its own form of relief and gratification" (Garland, 2001, pp. 132-133). If this is truly the case, it becomes easier to understand how the more punitive aspects of focused deterrence seem to dominate the literature. Following this notion of "acting out", there is clearly something viscerally satisfying about enforcement and punishment. The entire history of crime control in the U.S. and the unrelenting use of sanctions would certainly align with Garland's characterization. This could make it more difficult for researchers who advocate for violence prevention tactics that run counter to such a libidinal phenomenon.

Regardless of the explanation, the focused deterrence literature is incomplete without a proper recognition of the role played by social service provision. This paper represents just one contribution directed at correcting this imbalance, but much more needs to be done. More empirical evaluations measuring the relationship between social services and crime are needed. There is also a need for qualitative research aimed at understanding the perspectives of program participants. Furthermore, the theoretical foundations of positive incentives as a tool for crime reduction must be examined more rigorously. Finally, focused deterrence programs must be designed and implemented with great care. This means finding the proper balance between sanction threats and social services, as well as ensuring those who receive services are the same individuals who were originally targeted in the intervention. Focused deterrence has the potential to revolutionize policing and violent crime prevention through the use of positive incentives. Recognizing this potential is an important step towards fully understanding the focused deterrence model and its impact on criminal behavior.

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