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Mobile police community office: a vehicle for reducing crime, crime harm and enhancing police legitimacy?

Sarah Bennett[1] (iD) · **Mike Newman**[2] · **Michelle Sydes**[1]

Abstract

Objectives A key objective for police is to develop innovative and adaptive methods to efficiently maintain public safety and foster strong police–community relations. The Queensland Police Service (QPS) designed the Mobile Police Community Office (MPCO), a purpose-built van with many of the same facilities of a police station, and trained MPCO officers to engage with members of the public using principles of procedural justice. This paper reports on whether the MPCO can be a "vehicle" to reduce crime, crime impact and enhance police legitimacy in crime hot spots in Brisbane, Australia.

Methods We matched 24 hot spots based on crime and location characteristics. Within pairs, hot spots were randomly assigned to either the existing police response or the existing response *plus* the MPCO for two days at prevalent crime times/days. A public survey assessing perceptions of police legitimacy was administered during deployment. Our study compared official crime counts for a period of two months pre-/post-deployment date for experimental and control hot spots. We developed a crime impact score using QPS offense level descriptions and corresponding Queensland legislation penalties as an additional efficacy measure.

Results We found a modest yet insignificant decrease in crime between the pre- and post-intervention period and no significant difference in crime impact scores. While some argue that hot spot policing can reduce legitimacy, we found no evidence to support this claim.

Conclusions The MPCO is well received by the community and further research is needed to better understand its potential deterrent effect on crime.

✉ Sarah Bennett
   sarah.bennett@uq.edu.au

1   School of Social Science and ARC Centre of Excellence in Children and Families over the Life, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD 4072, Australia

2   Queensland Police Service, Roma Street, Brisbane, QLD 4000, Australia

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Introduction

The Mobile Police Community Office (MPCO) is an alternative approach to community engagement and hot spot policing led by the Queensland Police Service (QPS). The MPCO is a fully functioning police office on wheels—a van equipped with essential resources so that officers can conduct most station duties, which can be directed to high priority areas (e.g., a crime hot spot) during prevalent times of the day. Furthermore, the MPCO has an accessible and inviting interior so that police can meet with members of the public as required. Targeting crime hot spots and using procedural justice policing, the QPS aim to use the MPCO as a "vehicle" to efficiently maintain public safety in priority areas while enhancing police legitimacy.

The MPCO project is founded on two substantive areas of research—hot spot policing and police legitimacy. Hot spot policing has been the subject of considerable attention as a policing strategy to effectively target priority areas and traditionally involves an increased or focused police effort toward reducing crime within a concentrated geographical space (e.g., street segment). However, gaps in hot spot policing research exist. One such gap is the effect that hot spot policing has on reducing *crime harm* in Australian communities, in addition to crime counts and crime types. Using measures such as sentencing guidelines, penalty points or resource costs (e.g., relating to the criminal justice system, insurance/industry recovery, victim surveys) to estimate the social costs of crime is rapidly gaining momentum in criminological research in the UK and US (Brand and Price 2000; Ratcliffe 2015; Sherman et al. 2016; Sullivan et al. 2017); however, the translation and application of existing harm indices within Australian hot spot policing research has not occurred.

Another area warranting further research is the relationship between hot spot policing and resulting perceptions of the police—specifically police legitimacy. Hot spot policing research has clearly identified benefits associated with crime reduction when police resources are targeted to areas of high crime, generally in the form of increased police visibility. These benefits can, however, be offset by a reduction in police–community relations when the increased police presence is not applied legitimately (Kochel 2011; Weisburd and Telep 2014; Weisburd et al. 2010, 2011).

In the sections that follow, we provide a short summary of research literature on hot spot policing, crime harm and police legitimacy, and how they relate to the goals of the MPCO project. We then present our methods and results, followed by a discussion on whether the MPCO is a promising strategy for reducing crime/crime impact and enhancing legitimacy in crime hot spots.

Background literature

Hot spot policing is arguably one of the most tested policing responses to a tendency for crime and victimization to disproportionally and consistently concentrate within a relative few geographic locations. A crime hot spot is characterized by a cluster of criminal offenses within a small geographical area such as a city block, street segment,

building or specific address (Braga 2007; Braga et al. 2014; Braga and Weisburd 2010; Sherman and Weisburd 1995; Weisburd and Telep 2014). The offenses in these clusters/hot spots vary depending on the features of the place and the situational opportunities for crime (Telep et al. 2012). Traditionally, hot spots create a tremendous drain on police resources and compromise community wellbeing. This has led to a range of strategies (with associated evaluations) aimed at reducing crime in these micro-areas (see Braga 2007; Telep et al. 2012).

Research conducted over the last few decades consistently shows that police can reduce and prevent crime and disorder when they direct increased resources, and particularly increased police presence, to target crime hot spots at the peak (e.g., most crimes) times of the day (Braga 2007; Braga and Weisburd 2010; Eck and Weisburd 1995; Kochel 2011; Sherman 1997; Telep et al. 2012; Weisburd and Eck 2004). Traditionally, hot spot policing research measures change in crime counts and crime type; however, the inclusion of measures to estimate the social impact or harm of crime is rapidly being adopted as a *complementary* tool to assess the impact of an approach on the community (Ariel et al. 2016; Bland and Ariel 2015; Ratcliffe 2015; Sherman et al. 2016). Such measures aim to take into account not just the occurrence but the seriousness or harmfulness of offending so that not all crimes are "counted" equally. Quantifying the individual and larger social costs of crime is a complex undertaking, and any such measures will likely still underestimate the less tangible effects of crime such as the emotional and physical impact of crime on victims (Brand and Price 2000). Sherman et al. (2016) argue for the use of fixed legal frameworks for classifying crime harm (e.g., regulatory or statutory guidelines) that can take into account different crime policies (see also Sullivan et al. 2017). The tool developed for this research is not a crime harm index that individually assesses the total value of harm to society for each offense. Accurately assessing crime harm in this way was beyond the scope of this project. As a result, the Queensland Crime Impact Score was developed as an operational tool that can be used to re-categorize offenses with unequal weight dependent on their seriousness. The seriousness of an offense was determined by the recorded penalties in legislation. For example, in Queensland legislation, an assault is currently prescribed as up to 14 years imprisonment, while a public urination offense is 4 penalty units, reflecting Queensland socio/legal ascription of harm for these offenses. Each penalty unit in Queensland is valued at AUS$121.90 (current from 1 July 2016).

In addition to measuring the impact of hot spot policing strategies on crime and crime impact, the majority of hot spot policing research does not consider how an increased police presence within high crime areas might influence community perceptions of police (particularly perceptions of police legitimacy, satisfaction with police, and perceptions of police effectiveness) and fear of crime (Kochel 2011; Weisburd et al. 2011). For example, the strategic concentration of police resources in predetermined high crime locations can, on the surface, appear to unfairly target particular places and people and undermine police–public relations (Goldkamp and Vîlcică 2008; Kochel 2011; Kochel and Weisburd 2017).

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that perceptions of police legitimacy are important to effective policing. Specifically, research suggests that the *manner* in which police engage with the public can shape perceptions of police legitimacy and in turn elicit greater cooperation and compliance (Mazerolle et al. 2012, 2013a; Tyler 2004). When the police interact with the public in a procedurally just manner—communicate

with people fairly, respectfully, neutrally, trustworthily and allow for people to voice their concerns—the public view police as legitimate and are more likely to voluntarily comply with laws and cooperate with police directives (Hinds and Murphy 2007; Mazerolle et al. 2013b; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 1988, 2004; Tyler and Huo 2002). Consequently, police legitimacy research suggests that the *quality* of police–citizen encounters, coupled with police effectiveness (e.g., police are seen as fixing the problem), offers the best long-term outcomes for society. In a randomized controlled trial exploring community perceptions to hot spot policing, Kochel and Weisburd (2017) found that residents receiving direct patrol hot spot policing experienced a short-term negative impact on perceptions of trust and procedural justice in comparison to standard police practice. The authors suggest that applying procedural justice during hot spot policing may reduce these initial negative consequences.

In 2014, the QPS launched the MPCO—a purpose-built police van from which officers could conduct regular station duties at target crime areas—and provided procedural justice training for all officers operating the MPCO. Unlike enforcement-focused police vehicles, the public could access the interior office, which included seating and kitchen facilities (shown in Fig. 1; see also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYWUPSg7KyM). The MPCO was seen as a vehicle to engage members of the public. Early observations of people who visited the MPCO and completed a survey (n = 1630; response rate 83.92%) during the trial period (November 2014 to March 2015) supported this view.[1] Specifically, the average encounter time between MPCO officers and visitors was 7.58 min, and visitors overwhelmingly "agreed" that MPCO officers were professional (M = 4.72, SD = 0.54), respectful (M = 4.74, SD = 0.53), fair (M = 4.61, SD = 0.66), approachable (M = 4.73, SD = 0.54), and explained procedures clearly (M = 4.64, SD = 0.64) (Bennett et al. 2016). While these earlier results were positive, the current research paper explores whether the MPCO can be a "vehicle" for reducing crime counts, crime impact *and* enhancing community perceptions of police legitimacy in high crime hot spots within Brisbane.

Methods

The MPCO project evaluation occurred between November 26, 2014 and February 24, 2015 and consisted of 26 hot spots matched into 13 test pairs.[2] The QPS identified hot spots in the North Brisbane District[3] that consistently contained a high proportion of reported crime[4] over a 12-month period (July 2013 to July 2014). An audit of crime statistics (counts, offense type(s), offense times, offense location) and location characteristics (e.g., number and type of businesses, residences, transport facilities, population density) found that two of the hot spots possessed unique characteristics that could not

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[1] A short survey was given to young people and adults who visited the MPCO during the trial period. Visitors were asked to rate the MPCO officer on a range of procedural justice measures using a five-point scale scored from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

[2] Consistent with hot spot research, a minimum one block 'buffer' was included between sites (Telep et al. 2012; Weisburd and Green 1995; Weisburd et al. 2006)

[3] To qualify as a hot spot, each location had to have 100 or more reported occurrences (crimes) within the 12-month period

[4] Dr. Gentry White and Assistant Professor Mike Porter developed an algorithm of peak offending periods for each hot spot to assist with pairing and MPCO deployments

Fig. 1 The Mobile Police Community Office (MPCO)

be matched with any other hot spot in the North Brisbane District. They were therefore not included in the analysis. The remaining hot spots were randomly allocated within each pair, resulting in 12 experimental sites, where the MPCO was deployed for a period of two to three days at a time of day/night when peak offending had occurred, based on a review of historical crime data[5], or the control condition. A physical audit of each site predetermined the exact location to park the MPCO to optimize visibility and pedestrian access. Policing occurred as normal in all hot spot locations. For the five treated hot spots that were shopping centers, center management were contacted by phone and notified by email prior to a MPCO deployment to gain permission to park at their center. On these occasions, center management determined the parking location for the MPCO.

One designated QPS Sergeant, with a community policing background, received extensive training in procedural justice and was deployed with the MPCO at every location during the trial. At each hot spot, the MPCO Sergeant was further supported by an officer(s) from the area's patrol group. All supporting officers took part in a 15-min online procedural justice training segment developed by the QPS that included a background on how procedural justice is thought to facilitate legitimacy and the importance senior management place on the adoption of this approach. The MPCO Sergeant monitored the supporting officers' use of the ingredients of procedural justice when engaging with members of the public. The very high reported perceptions of MPCO officers from people who visited the MPCO during its deployment (Bennett et al. 2016) suggests that officers successfully operationalized procedural justice during their encounters with the public.

Measures

Crime and crime impact

QPS statistical services provided complete crime data from the Queensland Police Records and Information Management Exchange (QPRIME) for two months prior to

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[5] Sergeant Kerry McKay had an extensive community policing and victim liaison background and was selected specifically for her strong interpersonal skills. Training included several meetings to discuss the research relating to procedural justice and police legitimacy

and two months post-deployment date. For control sites, we used the matched experimental hot spots MPCO deployment dates. In addition to crime counts occurring within the evaluation period, the research team assessed crime impact by developing and employing a Queensland scoring tool based on the Cambridge Crime Harm Index (Sherman et al. 2016), the Crime Impact Score. Specifically, the research team mapped QPRIME offense level descriptions (OLD) with the specific legislation and corresponding maximum penalty issued in Queensland (AustLII 2017). In the majority of cases, the QPRIME OLD matched directly to specific legislation and an associated penalty. Where there was no direct match with the OLD, the maximum penalty for the most common offense type related to the OLD was used to complete the harm index. These legislated penalties are recorded as fines (in terms of penalty units) or periods of imprisonment for days, months, years or life. To enable a more direct comparison, each of these maximum sentences was reduced to penalty units by allowing 50 penalty units per year of imprisonment. While the 50 penalty unit to 1 year ratio did not hold true for all penalties, it did appear to be the average value applicable and provided a means of scoring each offense so that they were not all equal. Where the statute provided for the imposition of either penalty units or a period of imprisonment, the period of imprisonment was used and then re-converted using the 50:1 ratio. If the legislation provided for a first offense at a lower penalty and a second offense of the same type at a higher penalty, the higher penalty was used. Where the legislation provided for three or more offenses with increasing penalties, a mid-range sentence was calculated.

Perceptions of police legitimacy

The project aimed to assess the impact of the MPCO on public perceptions of police legitimacy and the direct impact of the MPCO on crime. Surveys with reply-paid envelopes were given by police volunteers to businesses, residences and area visitors in a visible radius of the MPCO or comparable target location in the control condition. Survey questions were drawn from a range of reliable and validated legitimacy questions and scales developed in consultation with national and international experts. The survey asked respondents to rate (on a 5-point scale) their general perceptions of police in Queensland on the key indicators of procedural justice (e.g., how fair, respectful, and approachable officers were and how satisfied they were with the encounter). While demographic details were collected, no readily identifiable data (e.g., name, address) were collected on the survey form. However, respondents could provide their name and contact details on a separate form or online link to go into a draw for 1 of 20 $50 gift cards.

Analytic strategy

To assess whether the presence of the MPCO affected recorded counts of crime in the hot spots, we used difference in difference (DID) analysis. By employing DID, we can compare changes in crime over time between the experimental group and the control group. This approach is in line with previous hot spot research (Braga and Bond 2008; Sherman and Weisburd 1995; Weisburd and Green 1995). To determine whether there

was a statistically significant difference in residents' perceptions of police in the experimental group compared to the control group, we analyzed the survey data using a series of *t* tests.
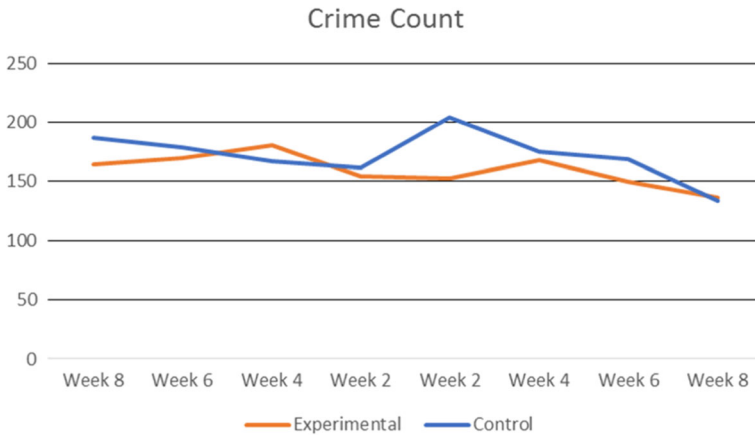
Results

Crime outcomes

The results of the DID analysis are presented in Table 1. Prior to the MPCO deployment, we found no significant difference between the experimental and control condition in the average number of crimes reported to police, although, in comparing the two means, crime appeared slightly higher in the control group (57.92 compared to 55.75). Following the deployment of the MPCO, crime stayed relatively stable in the control group (M = 57.75) but decreased in the experimental condition (M = 51.50). However, these differences were not statistically significant. The DID score (the interaction between time and condition), did not reach statistical significance. Figure 2 provides an illustration of crime counts within the ±2 months observation period.

We also explored the crime impact pre- and post-deployment of the MPCO. Similar patterns were seen when using the crime impact score and are illustrated in Fig. 3. In the two month period prior to the deployment of the MPCO, the crime impact scores did not significantly vary between hot spots in the experimental and control conditions, although the scores were slightly higher in the control condition. Post-deployment, there was a modest decline in both the control and experimental conditions. These differences were not statistically significant. The DID score was also not statistically significant.

Additionally, we examined the number of crimes recorded (as well as the crime impact score) on the days the MPCO was deployed. Here, we found that the number of crimes recorded in the treatment group was (on average) higher than the control group (2.66 compared to 1.58), yet this difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, we found that the crime impact score was higher in the experimental condition (680.71) compared to the control group (504.33) (n.s.). These offenses were predominantly

Table 1 Results from Difference in Differences analysis of crime (±2 months)

	Total	SE	*t*	*p>*	Impact	SE	*t*	*p>*
Before								
Control	57.92				18,163.58			
Experimental	55.75				15,985.29			
Diff (T−C)	−2.17	21.43	−0.10	0.92	2178.29	5892.76	−0.37	0.713
After								
Control	57.75				16,648.46			
Experimental	51.50				14,687.13			
Diff (T−C)	−6.25	21.43	0.29	0.77	1961.33	5892.76	0.33	0.74
Diff-in-Diff	−4.08	30.31	0.13	0.89	216.96	8333.62	0.03	0.98

Crime Count

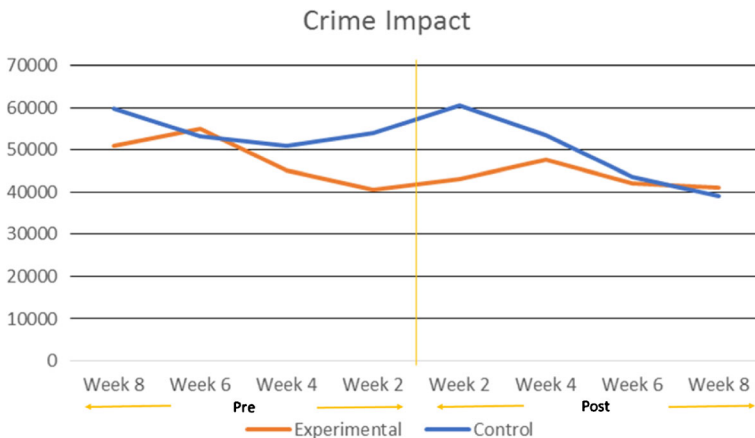Fig. 2 Crime counts in NBD for hot spots at 2-week intervals (±2 months)

counterfeit and shop stealing offenses in shopping centers. Anecdotal evidence implied that notifying center management at shopping centers may also have resulted in the reporting of offenses at the treated sites.

Survey results

In addition to assessing the effect of the MPCO on crime, we also considered whether hot spot residents' perceptions of police differed depending on whether they resided in the experimental or control condition. Previous research suggests that, while hot spot policing may reduce crime in problematic areas, the increased police presence can have a detrimental effect on how residents view police and crime in their local area (Weisburd et al. 2011). To test for this effect, we compared residents' perceptions of procedural justice and police effectiveness as well as their trust in the police and fear of crime. In doing so, Table 2 shows that we found no statistically significant difference between residents who lived in the control hot spots and those in the experimental

Crime Impact

Fig. 3 Crime impact scores in NBD for hot spots at 2-week intervals (±2 months)

condition. In some cases, respondents living in the experimental hot spots viewed police more favourably, with the mean score for both police effectiveness and trust in police higher amongst these residents (yet not significant).

Discussion

This paper explored whether the Queensland MPCO can be a vehicle for reducing crime, the impact of crime and enhancing police legitimacy. Our results suggest that, under a small sample size of hot spots, the MPCO had a modest but nonsignificant effect on crime and crime impact. Additionally, the increased police presence appears to have maintained high levels of police legitimacy.

Reflecting on our study, we identified some limitations and directions for future research. Our trial was limited by the resources (1 vehicle) and time available to conduct the trial before the MPCO was due to be officially deployed by the QPS. It is possible that our sample size, a focus on 24 hotspots, was insufficient to find a statistical effect—particularly as counts of crime in Brisbane, Queensland, are relatively low. Therefore, this trial is a modest test, and future research should aim to include a larger sample of hot spots to see if the MPCO can be a "vehicle" to reduce crime counts, crime impact and encourage positive police–public engagement.

Future research should also consider the effectiveness of the MPCO at different location types, specifically, whether the effect of the MPCO varies between entertainment precincts, shopping centers and suburban areas. We suggest that this variability is likely, as the visibility of the MPCO is important in order for it to exert a deterrent effect on potential offenders. Indeed, as shopping centers have multiple entry points, potential offenders may not be aware of the vehicle's presence compared to a roadside location or an entertainment precinct. In this study, we also suspect that by notifying center management (and in turn all business managers) about the enhanced police presence in the experimental hot spots during the treatment periods, store managers may have been more likely to report minor shop theft and fraud (and hence cause an increase in crime/crime impact in experimental sites). Further research should also consider testing whether deploying the MPCO to rural communities that lack regular access to police (or where poor police–public engagement exists) can improve perceptions of legitimacy. Additionally, it would be helpful to know if the treatment period—how long the MPCO is deployed at a hot spot—as well as time of year (the current study included the Christmas and New Year holiday period) can impact measured outcomes.

Table 2 Results from t-tests comparing residents' perceptions

	Control ($n = 118$)	Experimental ($n = 115$)	Diff	t	$p>$
Procedural justice	3.84 (0.06)	3.83 (0.07)	0.01	0.14	0.89
Police effectiveness	3.78 (0.06)	3.87 (0.07)	−0.10	−1.11	0.27
Trust in police	4.08 (0.06)	4.12 (0.07)	−0.04	−0.43	0.67
Fear of crime	2.29 (0.05)	2.26 (0.07)	0.03	0.35	0.72

Recent research by Ariel et al. (2016) suggests that civilian police can have a positive crime reduction effect. This finding has important implications for the MPCO trial as the civilian police may have acted as a positive and visible police presence in control hot spots when they handed out surveys to members of the public. Specifically, the presence of the police volunteers may have contributed to a reduction in crime (and related crime impact) and increased positive police perceptions in the control condition.

When we consider the results presented in this paper alongside our previous findings from people who visited the MPCO (Bennett et al. 2016), we are left with a positive view that the MPCO can be effectively and efficiently deployed to locations with the intent of maintaining or increasing public perceptions of police legitimacy. Can the MPCO be a "vehicle" for crime reduction? This can only be truly answered with further research that addresses the limitations identified through this trial and also considers a process evaluation that includes the cost–benefit analysis of a "mobile" police office in comparison to other policing offices and strategies such as neighborhood police beats.

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Dr Sarah Bennett is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Queensland. Research interests include evidence-based policing, procedural justice and legitimacy and pathways to preventing offending and victimisation. Sarah is a Fellow of the Academy of Experimental Criminology and invests in rigorous research projects and partnerships which directly inform policy and practice.

Mike Newman is a Detective Inspector with the Queensland Police Service and is responsible for the Investigations and Intelligence Training Unit, People Capability Command. He also provides support to the Australia and New Zealand Society of Evidence Based Policing with research interests in evidence based policing, procedural justice and leveraging technology.

Michelle Sydes is a Research Fellow at the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland (UQ) in Brisbane, Australia. Her academic interests centre around urban criminology with particular focus on the relationship between immigration and crime as well as experimental research with corrective services.