

The IACP Research Advisory Committee is proud to offer the monthly Research in Brief column. This column features evidence-based research summaries that highlight actionable recommendations for *Police Chief* magazine readers to consider within their own agencies. The goal of the column is to feature research that is innovative, credible, and relevant to a diverse law enforcement audience.

## Place-Based Investigations to Disrupt Crime Place Networks

By Tamara D. Madensen, Associate Professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Maris Herold, Assistant Police Chief, University of Cincinnati, Ohio, Police Department; Matthew G. Hammer, Lieutenant, Cincinnati, Ohio, Police Department; and Blake R. Christenson, Senior Crime Analyst, Cincinnati, Ohio, Police Department

Crime is not random. Research consistently shows that crime concentrates across places, victims, and offenders.<sup>1</sup> Police administrators who first acknowledged these patterns were also among the first to adopt focused policing strategies: hotspots policing in high-crime places, initiatives to protect high-risk victims, and repeat offender deterrence strategies.

Many focused deterrence strategies disrupt offender networks. Law enforcement uses social network analysis to identify and target specific offenders for enhanced deterrence efforts or incapacitation. Research finds this to be an effective and promising crime reduction approach.<sup>2</sup>

Like offenders, crime places are also networked. Recent advances in research and theory suggest that crime place networks provide the “infrastructure” necessary for offenders to operate illicit markets and engage in violent behavior.

### Crime Place Networks

Crime analysis maps depict places, usually specific addresses, where crime occurs. However, crime place networks extend beyond these locations to include places used by offenders that often remain hidden without further investigation. Crime place networks can include four types of places (CS4):

1. Crime Sites—specific places where crime occurs
2. Convergent Settings—public places where offenders routinely meet
3. Comfort Spaces—private meeting, staging, and supplying locations
4. Corrupting Spots—places that encourage criminal activity in other locations<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 shows a crime place network uncovered by two of the authors (Herold and Hammer) in 2013. One of Cincinnati, Ohio’s, most violent crime sites was an apartment building with a gang-run, open-air drug market operating just south of the building. Gang members would regularly meet in two public convergent settings: a corner market and an area surrounding a community landmark. Nearby private residences were used as private comfort spaces and provided supply and staging locations. An adjacent strip mall contained businesses suspected of serving as corrupting spots by accepting stolen goods and laundering money.<sup>4</sup>

The drug market offender network was identified and disrupted, and key gang members were arrested. Extensive resources were dedicated

to helping the apartment building (crime site) owners make environmental and management changes. Still, the larger crime place network remained intact, allowing the drug market to remain active. Little was known about the importance of place networks at the time. Since then, a place-based investigation strategy has been developed to allow simultaneous disruption of offender and crime place networks.

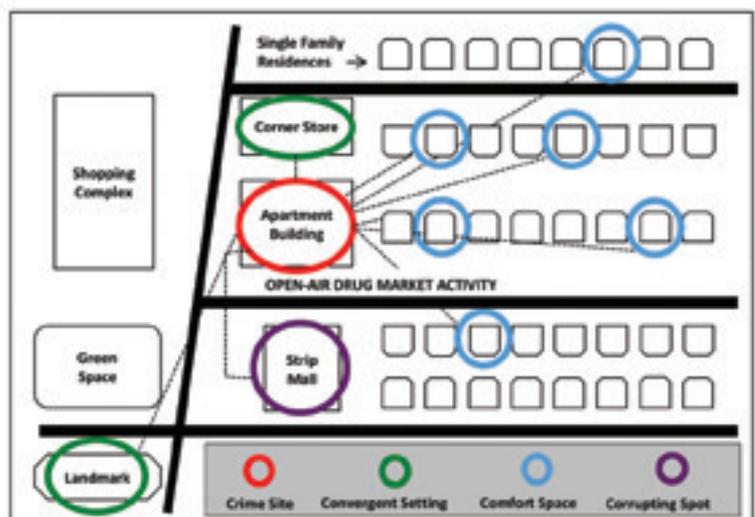
### Investigating and Disrupting Crime Place Networks

The Cincinnati Police Department (CPD) is currently identifying and disrupting Cincinnati’s most violent crime place networks. An initial analysis revealed that 23 geographically small areas, each spanning approximately two square blocks, make up only 1.4 percent of the city’s land mass, but account for 14.4 percent of all Part I crime, 25.7 percent of violent Part I crime, and 42.6 percent of all shooting victims.

A CPD investigative team is uncovering the violence-facilitating place networks in these locations. In one initial place-based investigation project, this team identified and dismantled the infrastructure facilitating an enduring open-air drug market. Table 1 describes the types of investigative processes that can be used to uncover crime place networks. Investigative findings and collaborations with numerous city departments led to state public nuisance actions and demolition of blighted property, permanent on-street parking restrictions, increased street lighting, and other city department interventions to gain owner compliance at properties providing convergent settings and comfort spaces.

Place interventions started in June 2016 and continued throughout the year. Gunshot victims in this location decreased from 18 in 2015, to 5 in 2016, with no shooting victims reported in the last three months of the

Figure 1: Crime Place Network in 2013



**Table 1: Investigative Techniques to Uncover Crime Place Networks**

<b>Intelligence</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct intelligence briefings with beat officers; detectives; specialized units (e.g., violent crime, gang, vice, homicide); crime analysts; all city departments; and community members, including community service personnel (e.g., postal service), to identify key players and places involved in possible network activities.</li> <li>• Gather intelligence from municipal, state, and federal databases on historical place violations and ownership connections among places.</li> </ul>
<b>Surveillance</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Videotape and photograph the initial and changing physical characteristics and social dynamics of key places.</li> <li>• Conduct ongoing surveillance of place and offender activities (e.g., temporary surveillance cameras, undercover officers).</li> </ul>
<b>Information Sources and Confidential Informants</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop internal and external confidential informants to investigate place activities (e.g., security personnel, management personnel, labor contractors, existing confidential informants).</li> <li>• Train confidential informants to gather place-based intelligence (e.g., manager involvement/knowledge of illicit activities, offender movement among places).</li> </ul>

year. Furthermore, investigators improved police legitimacy by actively soliciting information from residents and delivering on their promise to improve safety without over-reliance on temporary, traditional enforcement tactics (which often increases the likelihood of use of force in historically violent locations). As a result, the community response to these efforts has been overwhelmingly positive.<sup>5</sup>

### Future Strategy

Crime place networks can vary extensively in design and scope. A small theft ring might rely on a single crime site located near one corrupting spot and comfort space, while a human trafficking ring might involve all four types of network places and operate internationally. At the local level, research shows that law enforcement administrators can use crime place network investigations to eliminate criminal infrastructures in persistent hotspots without significant additional resources. Initial findings suggest that this strategy holds great promise for achieving substantial and sustainable crime reductions.

### Action Items

The researchers recommend the following actions for law enforcement agencies:

- Use place-based investigations as the focus of a city-wide initiative to improve community safety, sponsored and funded by the city manager, mayor, and other high-ranking city officials.

- Establish formal partnerships and hold place-based investigations review board meetings with representatives from all city departments to gather place intelligence and leverage intervention resources.
- Partner with city attorneys to address identified nuisance properties and noncompliant owners.
- Create investigative teams, supported directly by the chief executive and designated command staff, with experienced detectives who can gather community intelligence, manage confidential informants, and conduct or coordinate undercover work.
- Educate review board members, investigative teams, and city attorneys on crime place theory and research.
- Train detectives to uncover crime place networks and gather place-based intelligence.
- Develop mechanisms to systematically collect intelligence from community members, patrol officers, and other specialized police units.
- Use or partner with advanced crime analysts to develop methods for identifying and tracking changes in and around micro-location hotspots.
- Integrate place-based investigations with focused-deterrence strategies whenever place and offender networks overlap in time and space. ❖

The authors developed the place network investigations process abbreviated in this article; the following website also offers more information about investigating individual high-crime places: <http://cebcp.org/evidence-based-policing/the-matrix/matrix-demonstration-project/case-of-places>.

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the IACP. The presence of this content in Police Chief does not indicate endorsement by the IACP.*

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>William Spelman and John E. Eck, "Sitting Ducks, Ravenous Wolves, and Helping Hands: New Approaches to Urban Policing," *Public Affairs Comment* 35, no. 2 (1989): 1–9.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony A. Braga and David L. Weisburd, "The Effects of Focused Deterrence Strategies on Crime," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 49, no. 3 (2012): 323–358.

<sup>3</sup>Tamara D. Madensen and John E. Eck, "Crime Places and Place Management," in *The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory*, eds. Francis T. Cullen and Pamela Wilcox (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 554–578.

<sup>4</sup>It is important to note that most places in this neighborhood experienced little to no crime and were not involved in the drug market place network.

<sup>5</sup>This effort was conducted in conjunction with Cincinnati's CIRV focused deterrence strategy. For more information about the methods used to identify violent micro-locations, the crime place network structure, and the specific interventions used to disrupt the network, see <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/police/community-involvement/pivot>.



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