

COMBATING CRIME AND CITIZEN ATTITUDES: A STUDY OF THE CORRESPONDING REALITY

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of crime deterrence projects such as increased street lighting in ghetto environments has been questioned. The present study not only examines whether increased street lighting in fact reduces crime, but also investigates the attitudes towards local government of citizens who live within that particular environment. The findings illustrate that it would be advisable for governments to address citizen attitudes before undertaking certain crime prevention projects.

Since the late sixties there has been an increasing focus on crime, its ramifications in the community, and the corresponding reaction by government to eradicate the problem. The literature abounds with attempts to prevent crime, especially through the use of such concepts as "impact areas" or "high crime areas," and through the advocacy of technical and administrative innovations such as increased street lighting and foot patrols. The philosophy of such terminology mandates local governments to an active role in combating crime.

In this mandate, city governments provide services, among them safety and protection, to meet the needs of urban residents. Many times these residents have few or no

established communication lines with governmental officials. The problem is aptly identified in *The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (1968:284), which stated, "There are two groups of people that live constantly with the problems of the city: the public officials and the poor, particularly the residents of the racial ghetto."

The San Diego Model Cities Program (1970) further described widespread beliefs associated with the extension of governmental control and influence, specifically with the police. The study cited several factors that the ghetto community felt were contributing to the insensitivity of police toward minorities—what Kuykendall (1970) refers to as "negative contact situations." Those listed included the consideration of police and their tactics as symbolic of white justice that was further heightened through harassment and higher arrest rates.

Clark and Sykes (1974) reported that two general sources of controversy center on the police as a symbol of government. The first concerns itself with the representativeness and responsiveness of local governments and their police services. The second source of controversy concerns whether decisions on the focus of police services are most appropriately made by professional police personnel or by politicians, who are allegedly more sensitive to community concerns.

Both points identified above play an important role in determining citizen attitudes. The key to peace and order in the community depends on the responsiveness of governmental institutions to the needs and demands of its citizenry (Ostrom and Whitaker, 1973). Studies by Jacob (1970) and Klyman and Kruckenberg (1974) have indicated a wide variation in attitudes when one examines community perceptions of police. The data indicate that ghetto residents generally possess negative attitudes about police tactics.

In examining issues related to the above governmental (police) and community relations, it is imperative to examine the structural nature of the problem and the reality that lies behind it. The present study attempts to investigate such issues.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Hypotheses

This research project was designed to test the hypotheses that: (1) increased street lighting is associated with a reduction in crime, and (2) that this highly visible policy action on the part of the city government would lead to improved citizen attitudes toward city government, the police, and the safety of their neighborhood.

To test these hypotheses, the researchers focused attention on one specified neighborhood (hereafter referred to as Impact South Area) in Fort Worth, Texas. The Fort Worth City Council had decided that in June, 1973, Impact South Area would receive a threefold increase in street lighting, completely unannounced. A pretest and post-test design was devised to measure citizen attitudes toward the city government, the police, and the safety of their neighborhood. Additionally, crime statistics were aggregated for the Impact South Area from January, 1971, to June, 1974.

Methodology

Sample Selection and Analysis. Immediately prior to the light installation, a dozen police trainees (black and white) were briefed on survey research techniques and sent into the Impact South Area to administer attitude questionnaires to specific addresses

that had been preselected randomly by the researchers according to standard sampling techniques. The interviewers dressed in casual street clothes and informed the respondents that they were conducting a survey for a university professor (which was true). Respondents were assured that the questionnaire was voluntary and confidential, and that it would take only ten to fifteen minutes of their time. The interviewers sought adults and did not interview anyone under age sixteen. A post-test was administered under identical circumstances seven months later. The pretest was administered to 111 respondents; the post-test to 118 respondents for a total $N = 229$.

Both pre- and post-test samples were characteristic of the Impact South Area, i.e., overwhelmingly black (98 percent), low-income (63 percent earned \$4,000 a year or less, only 5 percent earned \$9,000 or more), poorly educated (67 percent had not finished high school), older (73 percent were over thirty; 23 percent over sixty-five), and long tenured (only 5 percent had lived in the area less than five years). The samples were almost evenly balanced on all personal data except for the fact that the pretest sample was 49 percent male where as the post-test sample was only 39 percent male. Thus, the sample was fairly typical of many stable, traditional minority areas, but somewhat atypical of the larger, more recent urban "ghettos" that tend to have a somewhat younger and more transient population. On the one hand, one might expect less "radical" opinions from an older, more stable population; but on the other hand, one also might expect to encounter long held and relatively intractable attitudes of cynicism and negativism on the part of a populace that was accustomed to being shunted aside and ignored (Jaros. Hirsch, and Fleron 1968; Klyman and Kruckenberg. 1974).

THE IMPACT OF MASSIVE STREETLIGHT INSTALLATION

Crime Rates: Reality

To evaluate the impact of higher intensity illumination on crime, a statistical comparison of selected criminal activity was developed for the Impact South Area, an adjacent area with similar demographic characteristics, and the city as a whole. Statistics collected from January, 1971. through May. 1974, on homicide, rape, robbery, assault, burglary (private residence), theft (bicycle), theft (automobile accessories), breaking and entering (auto), theft (from persons), and theft (auto) were aggregated and examined for the three areas mentioned above.

A comparative analysis of criminal activity within the three areas six months prior to and six months immediately after activating the streetlights revealed a 31 percent decline within the impact South Area, compared with an increase of 5 percent in the adjacent control area, and an increase of 17 percent in the city as a whole. When statistics for the one-year period immediately preceding and following the light installation are examined, it is revealed that criminal activity within the Impact South Area declined 22 percent compared with an increase of 9 percent for the control area and a 1 percent decline in the city as a whole. Furthermore, analysis of crimes solely against property showed a 39 percent decrease overall for the Impact South Area, with a 37 percent decrease in burglaries of private residences and a 50 percent decrease in auto thefts. However, robbery increased by 50 percent and there was no overall change in crimes against the person.

TABLE 1

CRIMES AGAINST PERSONS AND CRIMES AGAINST PROPERTY IN IMPACT SOUTH AREA

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Crimes Against Persons</i>		<i>Crimes Against Property</i>	
December, 1972- May, 1973	Homicide	2	Burglary (Private Residence)	76
	Rape	4	Theft (Bicycle)	3
	Assault	11	Auto Accessories	0
	Robbery	10	Breaking and Entering (Auto)	1
	TOTAL	27	Theft from Person	2
			Auto Theft	18
			TOTAL	110
June, 1973- November, 1973	Homicide	1	Burglary (Private Residence)	48
	Rape	1	Theft (Bicycle)	0
	Assault	10	Auto Accessories	1
	Robbery	15	Breaking and Entering (Auto)	8
	TOTAL	27	Theft from Person	1
			Auto Theft	9
			TOTAL	67
Percentage Change from Previous Period		0%		-39%

From the above analysis, it would appear that decreases in criminal activity in the Impact South Area were closely connected with increased street illumination. This relationship is particularly evident in crimes against property, and the declines in general were far greater than would have been expected from an analysis of other areas and from the crime trend in the area the preceding year. These findings also tend to support common wisdom and recent theories concerning methods of deterring criminal activity in urban areas. However, an examination of selected criminal activity for 1972 and 1973 indicated a steady drop in crime rates in the Impact South Area at least a year prior to the streetlight installation. This fact, combined with actual increases in certain crime categories after installation, cast considerable doubt on whether the increased lighting had any causal effect at all. Thus, the hypothesis that street lighting can be associated with a reduction of crime is highly tenuous.¹

Attitudes: Perceptions of Reality

General Attitudes. In general, attitudes concerning city government, the police, and the perceived safety of the Impact South Area leave much to be desired, but probably are not atypical of the attitudes of persons living in the low-income, high-crime, black

TABLE 2
SELECTED CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Impact South Area</i>	<i>Percentage Change</i>	<i>Adjacent Area</i>	<i>Percentage Change</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Percentage Change</i>
1971	370	—	98	—	17,089	—
1972	270	-27	84	-14	15,736	-8
1973	225	-17	88	+5	15,426	-2
December, 1972- May, 1973 ^a	137	—	41	—	7,053	—
June, 1973- November, 1973 ^b	93	-31	43	+5	8,241	+17
May 1, 1972- May 1, 1973 ^c	261	—	80	—	15,175	—
June 1, 1973- June 1, 1974 ^d	205	-22	87	+9	15,004	-1

^aThe six months immediately before activating the streetlights.

^bThe six months immediately after activating the streetlights.

^cThe year immediately before activating the streetlights.

^dThe year immediately after activating the streetlights.

neighborhoods of our urban areas (see Jaros, Hirsch, and Fleron, 1968; Finifter, 1970; Rossi, Burk, and Eidson, 1974; Banfield, 1974).

As a whole, the respondents: displayed little trust and confidence in city government and the people running it; considered that they had little influence in city affairs; exhibited considerable cynicism toward the police; and perceived their neighborhood to be quite unsafe, with more than one-third holding the attitude that the neighborhood was not as safe as other neighborhoods in the city.

Thus, the project dealt with an area in which people held a rather low opinion of city government in general, and of the police and the relative safety of their neighborhood in particular. The crucial question now becomes: Did any of the attitudes change following streetlight installation, and if so, which ones?

Pretest and Post-test Attitudinal Comparison. In attitudes toward the city government, the post-test respondents seem even more cynical and distrusting of the city than before, with the exception of the question about the running of the city for a few vested interests. Furthermore, having just been granted a visible service (increased street lighting) that the neighborhood council had been requesting for years, one might anticipate feelings of efficacy to increase. Such was not the case in general, although the post-test sample did exhibit slightly more favorable attitudes toward the city being sincerely concerned with helping and serving blacks (but there was only a 5 percent increase in these positive responses).

For post-test attitudes toward the police, perceptions of police honesty fell while perceptions of being treated fairly rose. Perhaps more important, perceptions that the

TABLE 3

RESPONDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD CITY GOVERNMENT POLICE AND NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY

<i>Item</i>	<i>Response Category</i>	<i>Pretest Sample (%)^b</i>	<i>Post-Test Sample f#J^a</i>	<i>Combined Sample (%)^A</i>
<i>City Government</i>				
Trust people in city government ¹	always	63	54	59
	some	29	45	41
	never	8	1	4
People in city government waste dollars ¹	a lot	35	32	34
	some	45	54	50
	not much	20	14	16
People running city government smart ¹	yes	52	54	53
	no	48	46	47
City government run for big interests ¹	yes	72	49	60
	no	28	51	40
Family and I have no say in government ¹	agree	46	49	47
	disagree	30	25	29
	don't know	24	26	24
City government does not care about people in area ¹	agree	49	42	46
	disagree	29	29	29
	don't know	22	19	25
City government truly concerned with helping blacks ¹	yes	67	72	70
	no	33	28	30
<i>Police</i>				
Honesty of police compared to most ¹	more	19	14	17
	same	57	61	59
	less	24	25	24
Likely to be treated fairly by police ¹	yes	62	67	65
	no	38	33	35
Police Department making a sincere effort to reduce crime ¹	yes	68	64	66
	no	32	36	34
Police respond quickly ¹	yes	48	46	47
	no	52	54	53
Police and police department serve neighborhood ¹	avg +	14	7	10
	avg	62	62	62
	avg -	24	31	28
<i>Safety of Neighborhood</i>				
Recommend neighborhood as place to live ¹	yes	67	69	68
	no	33	31	32
How safe feel at night ¹	safe	48	47	47
	unsafe	52	53	53

TABLE 3 *Continued*

How often go out at night	nightly	12	21	17
	4x/uk	24	6	15
	3x/Vk	11	17	14
	2x/uk	6	8	6
	1 or less	48	48	48
Let younger children play outside after dark ¹	usually	13	11	12
	some	15	13	17
	never	69	76	71
Neighborhood safe as any other in city ¹	yes	60	69	65
	no	40	31	36
How safe you think neighbors feel at night ¹	very	4	4	5
	some	47	37	42
	unsafe	49	60	54
<i>General</i>				
City government mostly helps and gives service to people'	yes	64	63	64
	no	36	37	36

¹Percentages rounded off to the nearest integer and therefore may not total exactly one hundred.

¹Significant at the 0.01 level

¹Significant at the 0.05 level

police department was making a sincere effort to reduce crime in the neighborhood fell by 4 percent; perceptions of quick response time fell by 2 percent; and perceptions that the police department served their neighborhood well declined by 7 percent.

For the critical variables concerning post-test perceptions of neighborhood safety, the evidence is somewhat mixed. Two percent more of the post-test respondents would recommend their neighborhood as a good place to live, and 9 percent more felt that their neighborhood was as safe as any other. However, there was a decided decrease: in allowing young children to play outside after dark: in the number of times respondents ventured out at night (although a higher percentage of female respondents in the post-test sample could account for some of this difference); and in how safe respondents felt at night in the neighborhood. Also, almost half of the sample (49 percent) still ventured out at night only once a week or less. But, while the evidence was mixed, the fact still remained that positive post-test attitudinal increases towards safety were not particularly large and that there were actual decreases in several areas (hardly an overwhelming perceptual recognition of the fact that a service had been rendered and that the crime rate was steadily decreasing in the area).

SUMMARY

This study sought to demonstrate (1) that increased street lighting is associated with decreased criminal activity, and (2) that highly visible policy actions by city government will be reflected in attitude changes on the part of the citizens in the affected area.

There are several limitations affecting this data: (1) random selection, however carefully contrived, does not assure a truly representative sample; (2) there is no absolute guarantee that the pre- and post-test samples are equally matched attitudinally; (3) uncontrolled, intervening variables may be present; and (4) there is always the possibility that historical, ecological, and environmental circumstances peculiar to this small area render generalization to the larger (or even a similar) population a risky proposition.

The first hypothesis does not appear to have been proved. Criminal activity did decrease disproportionately in the target area after intensive streetlight installation, but this decrease must be viewed as part of a general decline in the area over a longer period. Caution also must be exercised in attributing the cause of the post-installation decreases to the lights alone. Other factors (such as unwittingly intense police action) also could be contributing causes. Additionally, a two-year comparison is perhaps too short a period from which to draw solid conclusions.

The hypothesis on attitude changes also must be rejected in the final analysis. In fact, the results of the pre- and post-test attitudinal survey are rather disappointing. Crime obviously was decreasing, yet the bulk of the perceptual data indicates a slight, negative change. Whatever the consequences of increased street lighting, apparently it failed to make much of an impression on the recipients of this particular policy output.

If nothing else, this modest study has demonstrated that reality and perceptions of the same are not always congruent. More importantly, it has demonstrated that the intended impact of a particular city policy may turn out to be questionable at best, unrecognized and unappreciated at worst.

CONCLUSIONS

From this study, one might raise the issue of whether it is better for a city government to work at altering reality or at altering citizens' perceptions of reality, or both. This statement may seem cynical, but as Banfield (1974) and others have aptly pointed out, citizens' expectations of governmental services may be more important than addressing whether or not government can (or does) provide such services (Edelman, 1971; also see discussions of the "Hawthorne effect" in Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). Perhaps the safe (and ethical) solution is to provide both the service and the public information to the residents. Fortified with increased feelings of efficacy and community pride, citizen action could possibly turn the hoped-for effect into a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, one must also entertain the possibility that negative attitudes generated and supported over a long period of time may be difficult or impossible to change, at least in a short period of time. Either way, the problem presents a difficult but important challenge to city government, and one that should be addressed before relations and conditions worsen (see Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; *Time*, August'20, 1977).

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NOTE

¹ The President's task force on science and technology (1967) reported that there was no conclusive evidence that improved streetlighting by itself will effectively reduce crime. Methodologically, there exist many extraneous variables that interfere with definitive conclusions on the effectiveness of such programs in reducing crime. However, in a study of lighting in Kansas City (Caplan, 1976), the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice reported significant decreases in street crime after street lighting improvement. Thus, the evidence is mixed.

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