



# Addressing the “black box” of focused deterrence: an examination of the mechanisms of change in Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods

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## Abstract

**Objectives** Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods focused deterrence program is an effective crime reduction policy. However, similar to other focused deterrence programs, prior evaluations have not empirically established the mechanisms of change believed to underlie the program. The purpose of this paper was to address this gap by examining the influence of offender notification meetings—a key component of the program—on three mechanisms: perceptions of risks associated with future offending, perceptions of police legitimacy, and adherence to community norms.

**Methods** Over a 1-year period, parolees attending the notification meetings were randomly assigned to complete surveys assessing each of the mechanisms immediately before the meeting (control) or immediately after (treatment).

**Results** Parolees in the treatment condition had higher perceptions of risk and police legitimacy compared to those in the control condition. Additionally, they were more likely to judge police as procedurally fair. The groups did not differ with respect to adherence to community norms. Within both groups, perception of risk was positively associated with motivation to stay out of prison. Police legitimacy was also positively associated with motivation for the treatment group, while community norm adherence was positively associated with motivation for those in the control condition.

**Conclusions** This study indicates that the offender notification meetings are working as intended with respect to the underlying mechanisms of change embedded in Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods.

**Keywords** Focused deterrence · Police legitimacy · Community norms · Procedural justice · Corrections · Project Safe Neighborhoods

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Focused deterrence is a family of crime prevention strategies that aim to identify the dynamics of a city/neighborhood that are producing and/or sustaining crime. Once identified, those dynamics are targeted with a multi-faceted strategy incorporating law enforcement, community partners, social service providers, and researchers. While every program is tailored to a specific context, they typically include (1) increased presence of police officers in high-crime areas or among chronic offenders; (2) enhanced prosecution of specific types of crimes or offenders; (3) robust social services aimed at individuals or communities at the nexus of the crime-producing dynamics; (4) increased involvement of community partners directly affected by the crime(s) and/or offenders targeted by the strategy; (5) integration of researchers in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the strategy; and (6) direct communication to offenders about the targeted strategy (see Braga et al. 2018 for review).

These strategies have become more popular since their initial development in large part due to increasing evidence of their effectiveness in reducing crime (Braga et al. 2018). However, prior evaluations have not examined the underlying causal mechanisms driving the crime reductions, despite repeated calls for such work (Braga and Weisburd 2012; Braga et al. 2018). Although the mechanisms believed to underlie focused deterrence effects are founded on well-established criminological theories, the strategies are essentially a “black box” given the lack of empirical verification (Engel 2018). As a result, agencies looking to implement a focused deterrence strategy are largely in the dark about how to develop the most effective and efficient program.

The goal of the present paper is to begin unpacking the mechanism black box of focused deterrence within the context of Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods (CPSN; Meares et al. 2009), one of the longest running and most rigorously evaluated focused deterrence programs in the country. It examines the impact of one piece of the CPSN strategy—offender notification meetings—on the underlying mechanisms at the heart of the program: offenders’ perceptions of risk, beliefs in the legitimacy of the law, and adherence to community norms.

## Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods

The goal of Chicago’s Project Safe Neighborhoods (CPSN) is to reduce gun violence in high-crime areas of the city. It uses a multi-faceted approach encompassing an array of law enforcement strategies, community outreach, and re-entry programs specifically delivered to known gun offenders (see Meares et al. 2009; Papachristos et al. 2007 for program reviews). A central component of these efforts are offender notification meetings—forums—which provide an avenue to reach out to offenders recently released from prison who are responsible for a high proportion of violent gun crimes in the city. Forums are 60-minute sessions in which paroled offenders meet with law enforcement agents, community members, and service providers. Each faction is given approximately 20 min to deliver a direct message to parolees that violence will not be tolerated, law enforcement agencies will respond swiftly and severely to any illegal behavior (especially those involving guns), everyone in the community wants them to succeed in their reintegration, and that services are available to whoever wants them.

To date there have been three evaluations of CPSN’s effectiveness in reducing violent crime. The first evaluation showed an overall 37% decrease in the homicide

rate of those police districts that were targeted by CPSN compared to matched control districts (Papachristos et al. 2007). Although multiple CPSN components were associated with significant declines in gun violence, forum attendance had the strongest effect. A second evaluation assessing the impact on individual offenders showed forum attendance associated with reduced recidivism overall and more time on the street among those that did recidivate (Wallace et al. 2016).

Most recently, Grunwald and Papachristos (2017) found that the reductions attributed to CPSN efforts in the first evaluation did not hold over a 10-year period, which they attributed to treatment dilution. Specifically, they pointed to the expansion of the program without concurrent increases in funding or personnel. Whereas CPSN originally targeted two of Chicago’s police districts, its efforts were expanded to six districts given its initial success. This decreased the ability of CPSN to maintain the dosage levels of the forums. At the start of CPSN, there was a forum each month in the two targeted police districts; however, with the program expansion, those two monthly forums had to be split across the six districts on a rotating basis. As a result, each district hosted a forum every couple of months.

## Mechanisms of change

Similar to other focused deterrence programs (Braga et al. 2018), CPSN’s strategy was built, in part, on the theory that to reduce gun violence among offenders, the perceived risks associated with further gun violence must be changed (Papachristos et al. 2007). This is the central purpose of the forums: to deliver a deterrence-based message. During the forums, parolees are told that they are “on watch” and that any transgressions involving guns, no matter how small, will be met with certain and severe punishment. Thus, recidivism is discouraged by increasing the perceived risks of future offending.

CPSN distinguished itself from other focused deterrence strategies by emphasizing the importance of procedural justice and legitimacy (Papachristos et al. 2007). Procedural justice refers to legal authorities treating people in a respectful manner and making decisions in an unbiased way (Tyler 2006). Legitimacy is the perception that the legal system is authorized to regulate conduct, reflected by individuals’ felt obligation to obey legal directives and their sense that legal authorities share their values (Tyler and Jackson 2013). Legitimacy encourages the public to comply with the law and is fostered when legal authorities are procedurally just. CPSN argued that delivering forums in a procedurally fair manner would foster a belief in the legitimacy of the law within attendees, which would ultimately encourage greater compliance (Papachristos et al. 2007).

At the same time, to the extent that procedural justice facilitates the acquisition of group norms and values (Tyler and Jackson 2013), forum attendance was expected to increase the likelihood that offenders would adopt the anti-gun violence community norms espoused throughout the forums (Meares et al. 2009). Thus, the anticipated behavioral effects of the forums were also grounded in an idea of normative change. That is, if parolees were going to become more likely to desist from gun violence, then CPSN needed to encourage their commitment to community behavioral standards.

None of these mechanisms have been empirically established, despite three evaluations over a 10-year period. This gap makes it difficult for CPSN to respond to the two

most pressing problems facing the program. First, it limits the ability of CPSN to use its finite resources effectively. If CPSN knew which parts of the program were affecting the mechanisms, then it could direct its attention to those specific components while reducing or eliminating components that have minimal impact. Second, it limits the ability of CPSN to address the attenuation of the crime reduction effects since the program's inception. On the one hand, this attenuation might be due to a decrease in dosage as funding has been stretched (Grunwald and Papachristos 2017). On the other hand, it might be the program has gone stale in the 10+ years since it began and that the different pieces of it are no longer influencing the mechanisms as they once had.

## Current study

The underlying mechanisms of change at the heart of the CPSN program have yet to be empirically validated. The purpose of the present study was to provide the first step in addressing this evaluation gap. In particular, it focused on the forum component of CPSN for two reasons. First, the forum message was specifically designed to speak directly to each of the mechanisms of change (Meares et al. 2009). Second, prior evaluations have shown that forum attendance was associated with the largest crime reductions (Papachristos et al. 2007; Wallace et al. 2016). If CPSN is affecting behavior via the hypothesized mechanisms, it is most likely to emerge within the forums.

## Method<sup>1</sup>

### Participants

The sample was drawn from the 561 male parolees invited to attend forums from June 2016 to June 2017. To be invited to the forum, individuals had to (1) reside in a police district targeted by CPSN, (2) have at least one weapon-related offense in their conviction history, and (3) be released in the prior nine months. Out of those invited, 440 (78%) actually attended. Of those attending, 337 (77%) agreed to complete the survey. Overall, the sample was approximately 28 years old on average ( $M=27.69$ ,  $SD=7.31$ ) and primarily Black (82.2%) and Hispanic (15.1%). Those who agreed to participate were given a \$10 gift card to a national chain of department stores.

### Design

This study used a between-group experimental design. Random assignment was done at the forum level whereby each forum was assigned to have parolees complete the survey immediately before (control) or after (treatment) hearing the forum message. During the data collection period, 19 forum sessions were administered in the six police districts targeted by CPSN. Participants (and response rates) were approximately

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed method, including a discussion of district selection, design, the randomization procedure, the collection procedure, and specific items, can be found in the supplemental [appendix](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick_Trinkner) available at [http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick\\_Trinkner](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick_Trinkner).

equally distributed between control and treatment with all districts contributing participants to each condition.<sup>2</sup>

## Procedure

In the control condition, surveys were distributed at the start of the forum. In the treatment condition, surveys were distributed near the end of the forum, but before the forum facilitator dismissed the attendees. This was done to reduce self-selection bias in sampling (e.g., excluding those who refused to stay late). Regardless of condition, all attendees were told the purpose of the survey and the risks/benefits associated with participating. It was stressed that the survey was voluntary and that completing or not completing it would have no bearing on the conditions of their parole. To protect participants' anonymity, they were instructed not to write any identifying information on the surveys. Attendees also gave verbal instead of written consent. The survey took approximately 5–10 minutes to administer.

## Measures

With the decision to make the survey part of the forum, it was essential to develop an instrument that did not take an inordinate amount of time to administer. The forums were not to exceed 60 min and it was vital that survey administration did not significantly limit the time to deliver the forum message. As a result, measures were created to capture the core aspects of the constructs with as few items as possible. All items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1: *Strongly Disagree*; 5: *Strongly Agree*) and recoded so that higher scores represented higher levels of the construct. Scales were constructed by averaging responses.

**Procedural justice** A single item was included to assess attendees' expectations about whether the police would treat them fairly if they asked them for help.

**Risk perceptions** To assess attendees' perceptions of the risks associated with further offending, the survey included two items tapping their certainty of capture if they committed a crime and/or violated the conditions of their parole and the severity of punishment if they had a gun when captured. These aspects are the central part of the deterrence message of the forums.

**Legitimacy** To assess parolees' legitimacy perceptions, four items were included assessing parolees' felt obligation to obey the law and their sense of shared values with the legal system.

**Community behavioral norms** To assess parolees' commitment to community behavioral standards, two items were included tapping the extent to which they had similar moral values and beliefs, especially with respect to gun violence, as their community.

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<sup>2</sup> A one-way MANOVA revealed that district did not have significant multivariate ( $F(10, 1304) = .83, p = .68$ ) or univariate effects ( $F_s(4, 331) = .46\text{--}1.33, p = .26\text{--}.76$ ) on the outcomes.

**Motivation** Two items were included assessing parolees' motivation to stay out of prison and their confidence in making the right decisions to ensure this outcome.

**Control variables** Participants reported their age, race, and whether they had previously attended a forum.

## Results

The first step was to assess if the control and treatment conditions were equivalent with respect to the three controls.<sup>3</sup> Race and prior PSN attendance were equally distributed among both conditions. However, the treatment group ( $M=26.80$ ) was significantly younger than the control group ( $M=28.73$ ). As such, age was accounted for in all subsequent analyses.

Next, to examine the impact of the forum, a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run with condition as the independent variable, age as a covariate, and risk perceptions, procedural justice, legitimacy, community norms, and motivation entered as dependent variables.<sup>4</sup> Condition had a significant multivariate effect ( $F(5, 318) = 3.20, p = .008$ , Pillai's trace = .05). Subsequent univariate tests (Table 1) showed that parolees in the treatment condition were more likely to believe police officers would treat them fairly, perceived greater risks associated with further offending, and were more likely to see the law as legitimate compared to parolees in the control condition. The size of these effects signifies a small impact of the forum on parolees' perceptions (Cohen 1988). There were no significant differences with respect to adherence to community behavioral norms or motivation to stay out of prison.

Although the two groups did not significantly differ across all of the psychological mechanisms in absolute terms, this does not necessarily mean that the same factors were motivating each group to the same degree. For example, Papachristos et al. (2007) noted that forums should increase the perceived legitimacy of the law in the eyes of attendees and by extension their willingness to follow both the law and the conditions of their parole. If this is the case, then legitimacy should be a stronger predictor of motivation to stay out of prison in the treatment condition than in the control condition.

Multiple regression was used to examine if this was the case. Here, motivation was entered as the outcome while age, risk perceptions, legitimacy, community norms, and condition were entered as main effects. Three two-way interaction terms between condition and each of the mechanisms were included to examine if their impact on motivation varied across control and treatment conditions. Results are presented in Table 2. Regardless of condition, parolees were more motivated to stay out of prison to the extent that they perceived more risks from further offending. However, the associations among legitimacy, community norms, and motivation varied across the two conditions (see Fig. 1). For those in the control condition, motivation to stay out of prison was positively associated with adherence to community norms and unrelated to

<sup>3</sup> See supplemental [appendix](#).

<sup>4</sup> See supplemental [appendix](#) for discussion of controlling type 1 error.

**Table 1** The effect of condition on all outcomes

	Univariate tests <sup>2</sup>			(Estimated) marginal means <sup>1</sup>			
				Control		Treatment	
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$	<i>M</i>	SE	<i>M</i>	SE
<b>Condition</b>							
Procedural justice	11.01	.001	.03	2.91	.09	3.34	.09
Risk perceptions	5.84	.016	.02	3.92	.08	4.20	.08
Legitimacy	7.28	.007	.02	3.71	.06	3.92	.06
Community norms	.21	.650	.001	3.58	.07	3.62	.06
Motivation	.39	.531	.001	4.55	.06	4.60	.06
<b>Age</b>							
Procedural justice	.01	.945	.000				
Risk perceptions	4.84	.029	.02				
Legitimacy	1.10	.295	.003				
Community norms	1.15	.285	.004				
Motivation	10.86	.001	.03				

<sup>1</sup> Age set at 27.74<sup>2</sup> *df* = 1, 324

perceptions of legitimacy. However, the opposite pattern emerged in the treatment condition, with motivation positively associated with legitimacy and unrelated to community norms.

**Table 2** Motivation as a function of condition, mechanisms of change, and their interactions

	$\beta$	<i>b</i> (95% CI)	SE	Sig.
Age	-.12	-.001 (-.001, -.0001)	.0002	.008
Risk perceptions	.40	.29 (.19, .40)	.05	.000
Legitimacy	.02	.02 (-.14, .18)	.08	.824
Community norms	.33	.30 (.19, .42)	.06	.000
Condition	-.26	-.41 (-1.18, .36)	.39	.297
Condition × risk perceptions	.17	.06 (-.09, .22)	.08	.440
Condition × legitimacy	.72	.27 (.06, .49)	.11	.014
Condition × community norms	-.67	-.27 (-.44, -.10)	.09	.002
Constant	–	2.28 (1.75, 2.81)	.27	.000
<i>F</i> ( <i>df</i> )	30.69 (8, 326)			.000
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.43			–

Condition: 0 = control; 1 = treatment

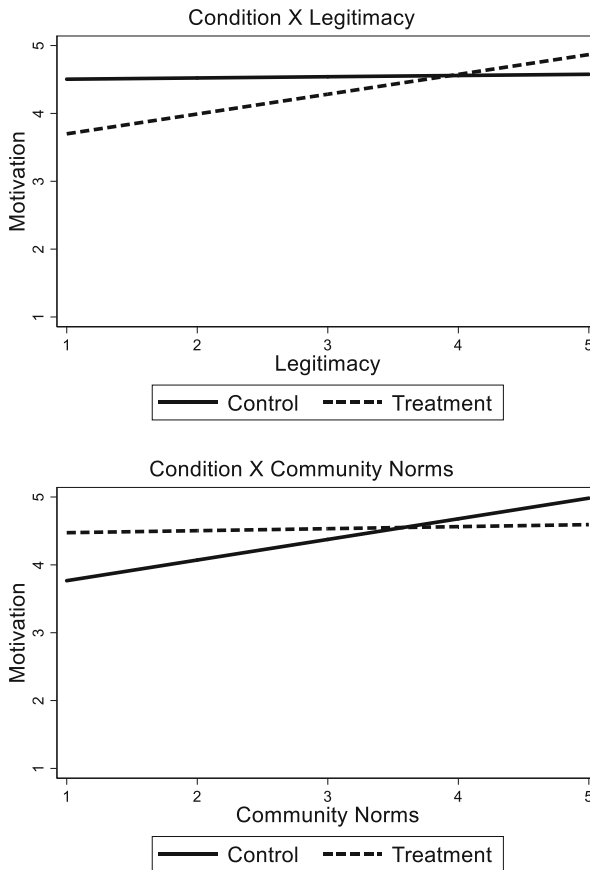


Fig. 1 Motivation as a function of condition  $\times$  legitimacy and condition  $\times$  community norms interactions

## Discussion

The goal of this paper was to examine the influence of Chicago's Project Safe Neighborhoods' (CPSN) offender notification meetings—forums—on the psychological mechanisms of change believed to underlie the program's crime reduction effects. Overall, the results showed that the forums were mostly working as intended. Parolees who completed the survey after hearing the forum message (treatment) had higher expectations of receiving procedurally fair behavior from the police, higher perceptions of police officers as legitimate authorities, and higher perceptions of risk associated with further criminal activity compared to those who completed the survey beforehand (control).

However, there were no differences between treatment and control with respect to adherence to community norms. This may reflect a measurement issue. The succinct measures used here may not have been sensitive enough to detect changes in such a broad concept. Alternatively, it could be a dosage issue. Whereas legal perceptions are somewhat malleable, changing values takes time, particularly among adults (Tyler and Trinkner 2018). Hence, a 60-minute session may not have been sufficient to reliably change internalized norms. It could also be that forums simply do not influence adherence to community norms.



Finally, motivation to stay out of prison was similar across treatment and control conditions, although the source of that motivation varied. For both groups, higher risk perceptions were associated with greater motivation. However, motivation in the control condition was also associated with greater adherence to community norms, while motivation in the treatment condition was associated with greater legitimacy. This confirms two major theoretical pieces of CPSN: that approaching offenders in a respectful and impartial manner to discuss the risks associated with their offending will increase their motivation to stay out of prison. The lack of an association between community norm adherence and motivation in the treatment group is not necessarily a bad outcome. CPSN designed the forums to deliver a deterrence message in a procedurally fair way (Papachristos et al. 2007). Thus, it is unsurprising that the two mechanisms most associated with that message would be the most important predictors of motivation after forum participation.

## Implications

Despite the 10+ years of CPSN existence, the forum component continues to have the desired effect on parolees’ perceptions of risk, legitimacy, and procedural justice. In this respect, CPSN would be wise to continue directing resources toward maintaining the forums. The results also support Grunwald and Papachristos’s (2017) contention that the attenuation of the CPSN crime reductions is due to funding constraints. Recall that one of the consequences of those constraints was to reduce the dosage (frequency) of the forums across the districts. Forums have small effects on the mechanisms according to the present analysis. Generally, small effects can add up if dosage is high enough but are washed away at low dosage. In responding to the funding constraints, CPSN may have inadvertently lowered the forum dosage below the threshold of effectiveness. This would explain why the initial crime reductions in the two targeted police districts diminished as the program expanded—that is, went from a high dose to a low dose—and why the crime reductions never emerged in the expanded districts—that is, were at low dose from the beginning.

The results also provide insight into focused deterrence as a general strategy. As noted at the outset of this article, a key component of many focused deterrence programs is direct communication with the audience targeted by the strategy. To the extent that such communication resembles the forums tested here, this is an effective way to influence the underlying mechanisms of these programs, at least in the immediate term. More broadly, this is the first study to address the mechanism black box with empirical data. While this study is useful as a first step, it is limited by a narrow focus on a single piece of a multi-faceted program. Although such targeted studies are a useful way to unpack mechanisms in large and/or complex policy interventions (Ludwig et al. 2011), they do not supplant the need to examine the mechanisms at the same scale as evaluations of effectiveness.

## Limitations

First, the study was unable to link the mechanisms of change to parolees’ criminal behavior. Including the present findings, CPSN researchers have shown that (1) forum attendance is associated with lower recidivism, (2) the experience of procedurally fair

behavior is associated with increased legitimacy perceptions among criminals, and (3) forum attendance is associated with increased procedural justice, legitimacy, and risk perceptions (Grunwald and Papachristos 2017). However, there still has not been a single evaluation linking all three of these together. Given that motivation to not recidivate and actual recidivism are not synonymous, this is a critical area to address in future research. Second, given the “on-the-ground” realities of data collection, a survey with more complete and robust measures could not be fielded. While it is unclear if the results would change with better measures, future evaluations should utilize more psychometrically sound instruments. Third, while this study showed differences between those that completed the survey before and after the forum, the methodology did not allow an examination of how long these effects last. Future efforts should try to follow parolees with multiple data collection points for a better assessment of both the short-term and long-term stability of the forum effects, as well as how that stability is linked to behavior. Fourth, this study examined only a single component of the entire CPSN strategy. Thus, it cannot speak to the effectiveness of the other individual components with respect to the mechanisms of change. Given these limitations, it may be most appropriate to view this study as a pilot until future evaluations can confirm the results with more rigorous methodology. This statement does not negate the usefulness of the results, but rather the realities of conducting field research. Such work is essential if focused deterrence policies are to maintain their edge as effective crime interventions.

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