



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

What We Actually Know About Law Enforcement Intelligence Centers

Key Takeaways

- Crime gun intelligence centers (CGICs), real-time crime centers (RTCCs), and crime information centers (CICs) show evidence of improving criminal investigations, particularly clearance rates for violent crimes. Fusion centers, despite being the most studied center type, have not been rigorously evaluated.
- Most existing research on these centers is methodologically weak, and the majority of studies are unable to determine whether these centers caused changes in outcomes.
- Crime information centers have the strongest evidence to date for reducing crime, rather than simply helping solve crimes after the fact, although this evidence comes from a single city.

Why This Matters

Law enforcement agencies across the country have built different types of centers, including fusion centers, CGICs, RTCCs, and CICs, to combine crime analysis and technology in one place. Agencies are increasingly turning to these centers partly because violent crime has risen sharply in many cities in recent years while police staffing has dropped to historic lows, leaving departments with more work and fewer resources. Although all four center types have different missions, they share the goal of improving crime prevention and investigation.

Despite how common these centers have become, there has been little research regarding their effectiveness. Researchers have separately studied technologies used within these centers, such as surveillance cameras and gunshot detection systems, but those studies do not tell us whether the centers themselves are effective as organizational structures. This study fills that gap by reviewing all the available research on these four center types together, examining both what has been studied and how well it has been studied.

How the Study Worked

The researchers conducted a broad search for any published or unpublished research that evaluated one of the four center types, using Google Scholar to capture both academic journal articles and gray literature such as government reports, theses, and practitioner publications. After narrowing an initial pool of 301 publications down to those that collected data to assess how a center functioned or performed, the researchers identified 41 publications representing 34 unique studies.

Rather than simply summarizing each study's conclusions, the researchers also scored every study using a standard 1-to-5 scale that rated methodological quality—that is, how confidently a study could demonstrate that a center caused a change in outcomes. A simple before-and-after comparison without any comparison group scores low on this scale, although a study that compares trends in a center's jurisdiction with those in a similar area without a center scores higher. Across all 34 studies, only 4 reached a score of 3, and none reached a 4 or 5, meaning the field still lacks the strongest possible study designs. This approach allows the researchers to weigh stronger evidence more heavily than weaker evidence when judging what is known.

What Was Learned

- **Fusion centers are the most studied but the least rigorously evaluated center type.** Eighteen of the thirty-four studies focused on fusion centers—more than any other type—yet every study used a weak before-and-after design with no comparison group. Most of these studies found that fusion centers improved information sharing across agencies, but they also found that centers often faced resource constraints and that law enforcement partners did not always use the centers' products.
- **CGICs show the clearest evidence for gun crime investigations.** The two most rigorous CGIC studies, conducted in Washington, DC, and Phoenix, found that cases with a confirmed ballistic match were significantly more likely to be cleared after a CGIC was created, although these centers did not show a clear effect on overall violent or gun crime rates.
- **RTCCs improve case clearance, but findings are mixed.** A rigorous study in Miami found that cases assisted by the RTCC had 66 percent higher odds of being cleared than similar cases without RTCC assistance. However, less rigorous studies from other cities found mixed results regarding crime clearances and other outcomes.
- **CICs have the strongest evidence for both solving and preventing crime.** Both studies of CICs, conducted in Chicago, used a more rigorous method that compares trends over time between districts with and without the centers. One study found measurable crime reductions in districts after a CIC was implemented, and the other study found that CICs increased clearance rates for violent crime, property crime, and overall crime.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest takeaway for practitioners is that CGICs, RTCCs, and CICs show potential for improving criminal investigations, particularly for violent crimes, but the evidence supporting fusion centers remains too weak to draw firm conclusions about their effectiveness. Agencies considering whether to create or expand one of these centers can find some support in the research for CGICs, RTCCs, and CICs, but should treat fusion center effectiveness as still largely unproven.

The researchers caution that even the more research-backed center types have only been rigorously studied in a small number of cities, such as Washington, DC, and Phoenix for CGICs; Miami for RTCCs; and Chicago for CICs, so it is unclear whether these results would hold up elsewhere. The authors also note that most studies focused only on investigative outcomes such as case clearance, leaving open questions about whether any of these centers prevent crime from occurring in the first place.

Source article

Peterson, B. E., & Lawrence, D. S. (2025). The nexus of data and technology: A scoping review of established and emerging law enforcement intelligence centers. *Police Practice and Research*. Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2025.2478851>

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