



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

Fifteen Years of the Smart Policing Initiative: Lessons from Police-Researcher Partnerships

Key Takeaways

- Over 15 years, the Smart Policing Initiative (SPI) funded 96 police agencies to carry out and rigorously evaluate 124 crime-reduction projects, nearly all done with a research partner.
- Many SPI sites reduced crime in measurable ways, and the quality of their evaluations rose sharply over time, from fewer than half of early sites using strong designs to all sites doing so by 2023.
- SPI's value came not only from strategies that reduced crime but also from projects that fell short, which helped researchers understand why policing efforts succeed or fail.

Why This Matters

This article takes stock of what 15 years of SPI-funded work has taught the field about testing and adopting effective policing practices. After the 2008 recession, police budgets shrank while demands on agencies grew. At the same time, there was little rigorous research showing which policing strategies actually reduced crime. One major review of more than 500 crime-prevention evaluations found that many programs had been tested in only one place and that evaluations often measured whether a program ran as planned rather than whether it reduced crime. Reviews of problem-oriented policing found that studies frequently lacked solid comparison groups, making it hard to tell whether the approach worked. Together, this earlier work showed that the field needed more rigorous, outcome-focused evaluation.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance, part of the US Department of Justice, created SPI in 2009 to help agencies test new approaches and learn what works without wasting limited resources. SPI was a competitive award program that provided about \$700,000 over a three-year period to develop and implement a policing intervention to address an emerging or persistent issue in its jurisdiction and utilize a research partner to understand the intervention's effect.

How the Study Worked

This article is an overview of the SPI program rather than a single study; the authors' approach was to review SPI's 15-year history and pull together several existing sources: final reports from funded sites, more than 50 related peer-reviewed journal articles, the action plans each site wrote at the start of its award, and capacity assessments completed by sites since 2011 to gauge their crime analysis skills, research relationships, and community engagement.

From these sources, the authors drew out common themes and lessons across the program. There is one term worth explaining: SPI required each site's evaluation to reach at least "Level 3" on the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods, which meant comparing what happens after a strategy to a comparison group or baseline, rather than just observing one group at a single point in time. This decision made it possible to tell whether a strategy actually led to a change in crime, rather than crime falling for unrelated reasons—and it made SPI's results trustworthy enough for other agencies to act on.

What Was Learned

- **Many sites reduced crime, and the results were backed by solid evaluations.** For example, Dallas saw a 19.2 percent drop in violent crime over two years and a 30 percent drop in crime in targeted hot spots. The Tempe Police Department de-escalation training resulted in trained officers being 58 percent less likely to injure community members when using force. These findings come from individual site evaluations.
- **Research partnerships became the backbone of SPI and grew more advanced over time.** Most research partners did more than evaluate; they helped identify problems, develop new data collection, and guide day-to-day decisions. Over time, their work with sites moved from basic crime mapping to more complex analysis, and some agencies embedded researchers directly in their crime analysis units.
- **Evaluations grew far more rigorous over the program's life.** From 2009 to 2011, fewer than half of early SPI sites used a strong evaluation design. Then from 2013 to 2017, more than 75 percent of sites used a strong evaluation design. All sites in the 2023 group were required to have a strong design. Randomized controlled trials went from rare to common, and the authors credit SPI's sustained investment with helping raise and normalize rigorous evaluation across the field.
- **Projects that fell short still produced useful lessons.** Some sites did not reduce crime, often because of problems putting the strategy into practice. The authors treat these outcomes as valuable for understanding why policing efforts succeed or fail.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest lesson from SPI is that pairing police agencies with research partners can help them test new strategies and learn what actually reduces crime. The program showed that agencies can adopt data-driven, evidence-based practices while rigorously measuring whether those practices work. Over 15 years, this approach produced both crime reductions and a stronger base of knowledge for the field.

The authors are clear that not every SPI project succeeded and that failures carry important lessons about design, implementation, and sustaining change. Looking ahead, the authors recommend that future work in this area focus on understanding why strategies succeed or fail in different settings, measure success beyond crime rates (such as transparency and community satisfaction), and stay current with emerging issues, such as the use of artificial intelligence in policing while weighing concerns about privacy and fairness. They also call for follow-up work that critically examines what separated successful SPI sites from unsuccessful ones.

Source article

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