

Authors

Christopher Blattman
The University of Chicago

Donald Green
Columbia University

Daniel Ortega
CAF, Development Bank of Latin America

Santiago Tobón
Universidad EAFIT

Place-based interventions at scale: The direct and spillover effects of policing and city services on crime*

Christopher Blattman Donald Green Daniel Ortega
Santiago Tobón[†]

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Abstract

In 2016 the city of Bogotá doubled police patrols and intensified city services on high-crime streets. They did so based on a policy and criminological consensus that such place-based programs not only decrease crime, but also have positive spillovers to nearby streets. To test this, we worked with Bogotá to experiment on an unprecedented scale. They randomly assigned 1,919 streets to either 8 months of doubled police patrols, greater municipal services, both, or neither. Such scale brings econometric challenges. Spatial spillovers in dense networks introduce bias and complicate variance estimation through “fuzzy clustering.” But a design-based approach and randomization inference produce valid hypothesis tests in such settings. In contrast to the consensus, we find intensifying state presence in Bogotá had modest but imprecise direct effects and that such crime displaced nearby, especially property crimes. Confidence intervals suggest we can rule out total reductions in crime of more than 2–3% from the two policies. More promising, however, is suggestive evidence that more state presence led to an 8% fall in homicides and rape citywide. One interpretation is that state presence may more easily deter crimes of passion than calculation, and place-based interventions could be targeted against these incredibly costly and violent crimes.

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Keywords: crime, violence, police, public services, state building, spillovers, field experiment

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[†]Blattman (corresponding author): University of Chicago, blattman@uchicago.edu; Green: Columbia University, dpg2110@columbia.edu; Ortega: Development Bank of Latin America (CAF), and HESA, dortega@caf.com; Tobón: University of Chicago and IPA, tobons@uchicago.edu.

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