

Understanding Crime and Place: A Primer for Local Leaders Implementing Place-Based Crime Initiatives

There are many reasons to focus on specific places when fighting against crime in a community. A location won't move and often has a steady set of characteristics, so researchers have an opportunity to study how and why crime occurs regularly at that place and targeted place-based anti-crime and quality-of-life strategies can have an impact over a relatively short period of time. It can be possible to identify "who owns crime" at a place—that is, who is in charge of a location (owner, manager, or other) and can be compelled to come into compliance with the law with persuasion or penalties, including to the loss of property. In contrast to focusing on criminality in offenders, focusing on the criminality of places can be more efficient, and potentially more cost-effective, because there are fewer targets.

For community-based organizations, local social service agencies, residents, and other leaders in Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program (BCJI) communities, the concept of focusing on high crime areas might make intuitive sense. It is also useful, however, to understand how the study of crime and place, sometimes called environmental criminology, is supported by research and experience.

Environmental criminology includes a focus on examining how the geographic or physical characteristics of a place can make that place more susceptible to criminal activity, and then how those opportunities can be altered or removed to reduce crime. "Routine activities theory," for example, suggests that crime only happens when a victim and a motivated offender meet at the same place and time, in the absence of capable guardianship. If we remove one of these elements, the crime cannot occur. Traditional policing focuses on the offender. Place-based crime prevention efforts aim to change and/or remove the opportunity for crime in locations where crimes are known to occur relatively frequently.

Typical of academic research, environmental criminology defines its terms very specifically and carefully measures the impact of programs and initiatives. Partners from universities and law enforcement may use the terms and concepts from this research when suggesting strategies and ideas, or present case studies or datasets that reference these ideas. This paper provides the basics on the state of the art of what is known about place-based crime and initiatives to reduce it, giving an overview of the terminology of the field and how a researcher understands the basic building blocks of crime and place.

The BCJI Approach

These powerful themes run through all BCJI projects.

DATA-DRIVEN

BCJI targets crime hot spots – often streets, properties or public spaces in communities that have struggled with crime for years. Researchers are engaged in the day-to-day work, helping partners examine problems, assess evidence-based solutions, and monitor progress.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED:

BCJI champions active roles for residents in identifying problems, selecting strategies and creating safe and healthy environments.

SPURS REVITALIZATION:

BCJI tackles problem properties, unsafe streets and parks, unemployment, transit barriers and service gaps related to crime.

BUILDS PARTNERSHIPS:

BCJI taps the resources of public, nonprofit and community leaders to bring more resources and different approaches to bear on longstanding crime challenges for lasting change.

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*

What is a Place?

When studying the places where crimes occur, it is very important to be clear about the unit of analysis. When examining crime, there are many potential definitions of “a place,” from a neighborhood or one or more census blocks, to “micro places” such as a street segment, a block face, an intersection, a parcel of addresses, or even one building. Most frequently, the focus of place-based crime prevention is on micro places, and initiatives that are targeted at the neighborhood level often include multiple hot spots within that larger area that are broken up and examined individually.

Using geographic information systems (GIS), researchers can link information about crimes and calls for service to specific addresses and/or parcel data to create a map. Researchers typically refer to the concentration or clustering of crimes in these places as hot spots. The term may indicate a micro place—an actual spot on a map where crime is clustered—or may be used generically to describe other geographic units that appear to be linked to clustering of crime, such as streets/ street segments, blocks, or neighborhoods. When mapping hot spots, analysts should be able to provide information about bandwidth and grid cells, as well a series of maps with different classifications of crime counts/rates. Know that hot spot maps can be manipulated to highlight or hide problems.

When working with a researcher in a project site, it is useful to understand which units of analysis they are planning to examine. Most researchers tend to focus on one particular unit of analysis. For example, David Weisburd and John Eck are both leading proponents of theories about crime and place. Weisburd’s research is typically at the street block level, while Eck studies crime problems at the address or parcel level.

Those differences can have real-world implications. Smaller units of analysis allow for more targeted problem-solving efforts. Responses to crime at the street block level might focus on increasing the number or duration of police patrols in those areas, while responses to crime at the “hot dot” level could include interventions that focus instead on the capacities of place managers, which can include an apartment building landlord or home-owner, the manager of a property, or in the case of parks or public housing, city departments. These individuals are responsible for setting the tone in

a place and are ultimately responsible for the behavior that occurs there, and strategies can include encouraging them to remove the criminal opportunities, often through situational crime prevention techniques.

What Is the Evidence for Place-based Responses?

Research on crime and place is not new; we have evidence of studies in France back to the 1800s of maps to show variation in property and violent crime rates by socio-economic status in different regions of the country. From the 1920s through the 1950s, the “Chicago School” published several well-known works on the impact of neighborhood on crime, particularly juvenile delinquency. Since the 1980s, the study of crime and place has become much more commonplace, due primarily to the availability and increasing simplicity of GIS tools.

The field has some important findings about the nature of crime that can serve as the bedrock of strategies for reducing the level of crime in a community. In general, we know that crime is not ubiquitous—it clusters at specific places and times, mostly in a very small number of locations in any community. Even in neighborhoods that are considered high crime, research has shown that the entire neighborhood is not crime-ridden—both high and low crime locations can be found within that area and even beside each other.

For all of these reasons, focusing crime prevention efforts on the places with the highest levels of crime is an efficient use of police resources. This can be done by developing a top ten list of current high crime addresses, street segments, or slightly larger hot spots. Alternatively, a community may wish to identify all places that exceed a threshold level of crime during a particular period of time (e.g., three or more crimes during a 30-day period or ten or more crimes during a year), or focus on the place(s) that have historically been the most crime-prone.

How to Tackle Crime and Place

Over the last forty years, the leading researchers in environmental criminology have created a number of different place-based theories and crime prevention techniques that seek to address different aspects of crime. For example, the goal of community policing is primarily to improve police-community relations, including increasing police legitimacy and reducing

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*

fear of crime. In contrast, the main goal of problem-oriented policing is to reduce or eliminate well-established crime problems.

Note that the ability to measure goals can impact the “success” of a program: reduction in crime is relatively easy to count, reduced fear in the community is harder. It is important to determine the goals of the community to determine the correct place-based crime prevention effort for the specific circumstances.

This list gives an overview of the primary place-based crime initiatives, including an idea in some cases of what researchers have found about their effectiveness in achieving their specific goals. As is common with any sort of key word, people may use the terminology around these initiatives without fully understanding the theory behind them. Having a more thorough grasp of the goals, history, and terminology of a proposed initiative will allow a community to best determine if it is a good fit for their circumstances.

Broken Windows

One of the most commonly misused crime and place terms, the broken windows theory was introduced by Wilson and Kelling in a 1982 article in *The Atlantic*. The theory states that when small nuisances and disorder (such as broken windows) are allowed to both occur and fester, it presents an image that the community either does not care or does not have the ability to protect itself, inviting greater crimes to occur.

The original broken windows concept was not the same as the zero-tolerance policing that it is often linked with today. Originally, Wilson and Kelling focused on the police introducing broken windows only in neighborhoods on the cusp of becoming dangerous. Furthermore, in the original framework it was important for the community to define the offenses that were intolerable (not the police): If littering or loitering were concerns, those would be the crimes that were enforced, not all nuisance activities. A meta-analysis of six studies selected for considering the mechanisms of broken windows found that the “strategies do not have a significant impact on fear of crime.... In the one study measuring collective efficacy, there is also not a significant outcome.”

Community Policing

Often very broadly defined, community policing typically involves any form of policing activities that aim to increase interactions between the police and residents and local institutions. A meta-analysis of 37 pre/post examinations of COP projects found that “community-oriented policing strategies have positive effects on citizen satisfaction, perceptions of disorder, and police legitimacy, but limited effects on crime and fear of crime.” Community-oriented policing should not be confused with problem-oriented policing.

Crime Pattern Theory

Introduced several decades ago, crime pattern theory describes how the occurrences of crime are not random, but become possible when the activity spaces of offenders and victims overlap. Activity spaces are the places that we go and the paths that we follow during our daily routines. For example, offenders and victims may both like to visit shopping malls—while at the mall, offenders may identify easy opportunities for crime, such as unlocked cars and unattended purses.

Terms from the theory include “crime generator” (a place where large numbers of people go, providing offenders with potentially large numbers of opportunities) and “crime attractors” (places where offenders go specifically with the intention of committing criminal acts because they know that such activities are not specifically discouraged there). Related to crime pattern theory is the concept of “journeys to crime,” which says that offenders may not set out to commit crimes, but may do so when presented with the opportunity during their daily travel. This would explain why many property or non-violent crimes are committed within a short distance of offender’s homes, their friends’ homes, their school, or even gainful employment.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

To reduce the opportunity for crime by focusing on the design of buildings, communities, and public spaces, CPTED recommends against certain layouts and design elements that the theory says encourage criminal activity by providing hiding and ambush spaces for offenders. CPTED surveys are often provided by police agencies to businesses and/or residences to help the local community “design-out crime.” A wide variety of surveys, recommending safety improvements, can be found online.

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*

Defensible Space

A concept similar to CPTED, defensible space also incorporates a social element: territoriality, a sense of ownership in the environment/community, which is a potential multiplier for the power of CPTED. Defensible space increases recognition among neighbors and others who are regularly in the neighborhood and defines the ownership of spaces. Territoriality, which can be harder to attain than CPTED, adds in elements that work to help neighbors speak up when they see something out of place, turn on their lights at night, or physically own their spaces (e.g., sitting on front porches or park benches).

Displacement of Crime, Diffusion of Crime Control Benefits

When offenders change their criminal behaviors in response to a crime prevention effort, this is displacement of crime. Many people only think of spatial displacement (committing the same crime

at a new location), but there are also other types of potential displacement of crime, including: temporal, tactical (MO), target, and crime type/offense. The flip side to displacement of crime is the diffusion of crime control benefits, when crime prevention efforts reduce crime even beyond their targeted area. This may also be known as a multiplier effect. Like displacement, a diffusion of benefits can also occur in a variety of different forms.

In an examination of 102 projects, researchers found that in three quarters of observations, displacement did not occur and in about one quarter of the instances, there was a diffusion of benefits. When examining only spatial displacement: “when [it] did occur, it tended to be less than the treatment effect,” suggesting an overall benefit from interventions. A later meta-analysis of projects undertaken in medium and large cities, found “no significant overall evidence of displacement or a diffusion of benefits.”



Hot Spots Policing

Hot spots policing is a technique that focuses police attention on problematic micro areas, which can include hot dots (address-level hot spots), hot lines (individual or multiple street segments), and hot areas (potentially involving a few blocks). Once one or more hot spots have been identified, the police develop a targeted response for the crimes that are most common there, based on potential causes and efficiencies in responses. For example, place managers would be involved in hot dot responses, but not hot areas, while collective efficacy may be a focus of hot area responses.

In the paper “The effects of hot spots policing on crime: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis,” researchers found that practice “generates small but noteworthy crime reductions, and these crime control benefits diffuse into areas immediately surrounding targeted crime hot spots.” The paper also found that adding problem-oriented policing to the strategy was even more effective than simply using traditional police actions in crime hot spots.

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*

Place-based Policing

More than simply policing that occurs at a specific location, place-based policing theoretically aims to alter the emphasis of an entire police organization from offenders to the places and contexts where crime occurs. Place-based policing is often linked only with hot spots policing, but it can also include responses informed by problem-oriented policing, community policing, broken windows policing, place management, CPTED/ defensible space, crime pattern theory, routine activities theory, and situational crime prevention, among others.

Problem-oriented Policing

POP is a theory that attempts to refocus police from the means of policing (how activities are carried out) to the ends of policing (reducing crime). POP broadly aims to identify long-term problems that are of concern to the police and the community, thoroughly examine the problems and their potential causes, develop multi-pronged responses aimed at eliminating the problem (beyond the traditional response), and then assessing the impact to see if further work is needed.



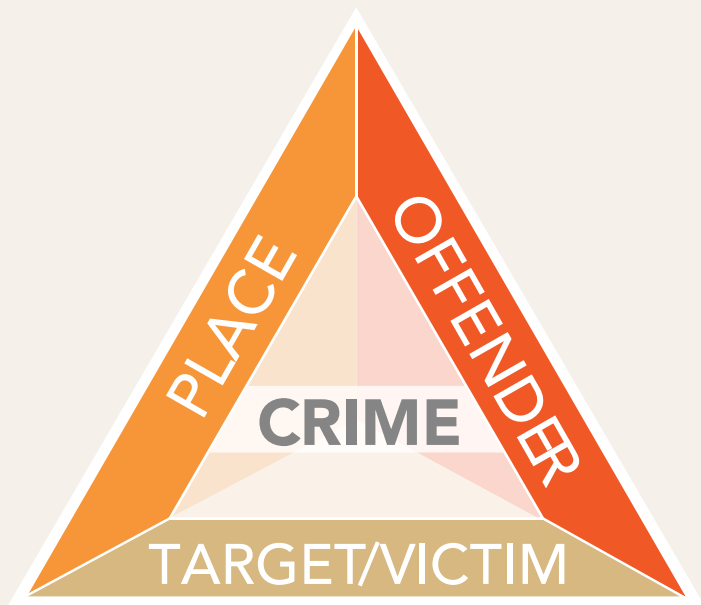
When first introduced, few agencies were willing to try POP because there wasn't a specific step-by-step explanation of the process. Eck and Spelman, working with the Police Executive Research Forum, came up with the acronym SARA, which stands for Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment. After any one step, participants may need to repeat an earlier step (e.g., if a response isn't working, to go back to scanning and analysis to revise problem definition). Note, though, that SARA is not a simple step-by-step guide for conducting POP. Both programs are much more complex than they might initially appear to be.

POP was popular among police agencies in the 1990s and early 2000s, and thousands of POP-inspired projects have been conducted throughout the world. In recent years, many departments have taken on fewer true POP projects but do use some POP techniques to supplement their CompStat, hot spot, or community policing efforts. Unfortunately, due to weak assessment capabilities of most police departments, there are only a handful of true evaluations of POP. A meta-analysis of ten rigorously evaluated POP projects found "an overall modest but statistically significant impact of POP on crime and disorder," and a wider examination of less rigorously evaluated projects found an overwhelmingly positive impact from POP."

Risk Terrain Modeling

A GIS process introduced by Caplan and Kennedy in 2011, risk terrain modeling aims to incorporate past crime events and community features (such as density of bars, parks, bus stops, and liquor stores) to identify where the risk of future crimes is highest. Risk terrain modeling may be viewed as an advanced form of hot spot mapping. However, there are debates as to whether it actually provides an added benefit for planning police deployments beyond what can be gleaned from hot spot maps, as well as whether the process actually predicts future risk or is only a reflection of past risk.

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*



Routine Activities Theory

This theory was originally developed to explain why crime began to increase in the 1950s (and continued to increase) during what was considered to be a prosperous time for the country. As a macro level theory, it suggested that the change in the routine activities of Americans (particularly the increased participation of woman in the workforce and the rise in smaller, inexpensive electronic devices) increased opportunities for crime. As a micro level theory, routine activities can also be used to explain individual criminal incidents, suggesting that the opportunity for crime occurs when a motivated offender and a victim come together at a specific location and point in time without capable guardians who might intervene.

The crime triangle/ problem-analysis triangle can serve as a visual to help explain the micro-level routine activities theory. The initial crime triangle, a single image that identified offender, victim, and time/space, was used to demonstrate that if one of the three elements was absent, a crime would not occur. As routine activities theory and the concept of guardianship has developed, a second triangle has been added that shows how capable guardians may be present to intervene with each of the elements of a crime: the victim, the offender, and the place.

Situational Crime Prevention

Situational Crime Prevention is a process and theory that aims to reduce opportunities for crime to occur. Situational crime prevention is often recognized by its matrix of 25 techniques, divided into five main groups of ways to alter opportunities for crime, recommendations about how to increase effort, increase risk, reduce rewards, reduce provocations, and remove excuses related to committing crime. A more detailed version of the matrix, with in-depth recommendations about how to alter opportunities for crime is available at:

<http://www.popcenter.org/25techniques/>

References/ Recommended Readings

To delve more deeply into the research and theories behind Place-Based Crime Initiatives, consider these leading studies and white papers.

For an extensive list of crime and place readings, view the Crime and Place Working Group Bibliography at: <http://cebcp.org/wp-content/cpwg/Place-Based-Bibliography>

Additional readings, including early editions of the *Crime Prevention Studies* series, may also be found in the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing's Library at: <http://www.popcenter.org/library/>

Introductory

Clarke, R.V. & Eck, J.E. (2005). *Crime analysis for problem solvers in 60 small steps*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Weisburd, D. (2008). Place-based policing. *Ideas in American Policing*, 9. Washington, DC: Police Foundation.

Advanced

Andresen, M. & Malleson, N. (2011). Testing the stability of crime patterns: Implications for theory and policy. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 48, 58-82.

Braga, A. A., Papachristos, A. V., & Hureau, D. M. (2010). The concentration and stability of gun violence at micro places in Boston, 1980-2008. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 26, 33-53.

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*

- Braga, A. A., Papachristos, A. V., & Hureau, D. M. (2014). The effects of hot spots policing on crime: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis. *Justice Quarterly*, 31(4), 633-663.
- Brantingham, P., & Brantingham, P. (1995). Criminality of place: Crime generators and crime attractors. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 3, 1-26.
- Brantingham, P., & Brantingham, P. (1984). *Patterns in crime*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Brantingham, P., & Brantingham, P. (Eds.). (1981). *Environmental criminology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Bureau of Justice Assistance. (2016). *Evaluation & research literature: The state of knowledge on BJA-funded programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- Bursik, R. (1988). Social disorganization and theories of crime and delinquency: Problems and prospects. *Criminology*, 26, 519-551.
- Caplan, J. M., & Kennedy, L. W. (Eds) (2011). *Risk terrain modeling compendium for crime analysis*. Newark, NJ: Rutgers Center on Public Security.
- Clarke, R. (1997). *Situational crime prevention: Successful case studies*. Guilderland, NY: Harrow and Heston.
- Clarke, R., & Mayhew, P. (1980). Designing out crime. *Home Office Research Study No. 65*. London, UK: Home Office Research Unit.
- Cohen, L., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44, 588-605.
- Cornish, D. B. & Clarke, R. V. (2003). Opportunities, precipitators and criminal decisions: A reply to Wortley's critique of situational crime prevention. In M. J. Smith, & D. B. Cornish (Eds.), *Theory for practice in situational crime prevention*, *Crime Prevention Studies*, Vol. 16 (pp. 41-96). Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Eck, J.E., Chainey, S., Cameron, J.G., Leitner, M., & Wilson, R.E. (2005). *Mapping crime: Understanding hot spots*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- Eck, J. E., Spelman, W., Hill, D., Stephens, D., Stedman, J. & Murphy, G. (1987). *Problem-solving: Problem-oriented policing in Newport News*. Washington, DC: Police Executive Research Forum; U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.
- Eck, J.E. & Weisburd, D. (Eds) (1995) *Crime and place, Crime Prevention Studies*, Vol. 4. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Gill, C., Weisburd, D., Telep, C. W., Vitter, Z., & Bennett, T. (2014). Community-oriented policing to reduce crime, disorder, and fear and increase satisfaction and legitimacy among citizens: A systematic review. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 10(4), 399-428.
- Goldstein, H. (1979). Improving policing: A problem-oriented approach. *Crime & Delinquency*, 25(2), 236-258.
- Goldstein, H. (1990). *Problem-oriented policing*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Groff, E. R., Weisburd, D. M., & Yang, S. (2010). Is it important to examine crime trends at a local micro level? A longitudinal analysis of street to street variability in crime trajectories. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 26(1), 7-32.
- Guerette, R.T. & Bowers, K.J. (2009). Assessing the extent of crime displacement and diffusion of benefits: A review of situational crime prevention evaluations. *Criminology*, 47(4), 1331-1368.
- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Jeffrey, C. (1971). *Crime prevention through environmental design*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Madensen, T. (2009). Environmental criminology and crime analysis. *International Criminal Justice Review*, 19(2), 225-226.
- Newman, O. (1972). *Defensible space: Crime prevention through urban design*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Payne, T.C. and Eck, J.E. (2007), "Who owns crime?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Atlanta, GA.

Understanding Crime and Place, *continued*

- Payne, T. C. & Gallagher, K. (2016). The importance of small units of aggregation: Trajectories of crime at addresses in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1998-2012. *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society*, 17, 20-36.
- Sampson, R., Eck, J., & Dunham, J. (2010). Super controllers and crime prevention: A routine activity explanation of crime prevention success and failure. *Security Journal*, 23(1), 37-51.
- Sampson, R. (1985). Neighborhoods and crime: The structural determinants of personal victimization. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 22(1), 7-40.
- Shaw, C., & McKay, H. (1942). Juvenile delinquency and urban areas: A study of rates of delinquents in relation to differential characteristics of local communities in American cities. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sherman, L., Gartin, P., & Buerger, M. (1989). Hot spots of predatory crime: Routine activities and the criminology of place. *Criminology*, 27(1), 27-56.
- Spelman, W. (1995). Criminal careers of public places. In J.E. Eck & D.L. Weisburd (Eds.), *Crime and Place. Crime Prevention Studies, Vol. 4*. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Telep, C. W., Weisburd, D., Gill, C. E., Vitter, Z., & Teichmann, D. (2014). Displacement of crime and diffusion of crime control benefits in large-scale geographic areas: A systematic review. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 10 (4), 515-548.
- Weisburd, D., Bernasco, W., & Bruinsma, G.J.N. (Eds) (2009). *Putting crime in its place: Units of analysis in geographic criminology*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Weisburd, D. Bushway, S.E., Lum, C., & Yang, S.M. (2004). Trajectories of crime at places: A longitudinal study of street segments in the City of Seattle. *Criminology*, 42, 283-422.
- Weisburd, D., & Eck, J. (2004). What can police do to reduce crime, disorder and fear? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 593, 42-65.
- Weisburd, D., Eck, J.E., Braga, A.A., Telep, C., Cave, B. et al. (Eds) (2016). *Place matters: Criminology for the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Weisburd, D., Hinkle, J. C., Braga, A. A., & Wooditch, A. (2015). Understanding the mechanisms underlying broken windows policing: The need for evaluation evidence. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 52 (4), 589-608.
- Weisburd, D., Telep, C. W., Hinkle, J. C. & Eck, J.E. (2010). Is problem-oriented policing effective at reducing crime and disorder?: Findings from a Campbell systematic review. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 9, 139-172.
- Wilson, J. Q. & Kelling, G. L. (1982). Broken windows: The police and neighborhood safety. *Atlantic Monthly*, 249, 29-38.
- Wilson, W. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wortley, R. & Mazerolle L. (Eds) (2011). *Environmental criminology and crime analysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is the national technical assistance provider for BCJI, working in cooperation with the Bureau of Justice Assistance. This paper was supported by Grant No. 2012-AJ-BX-K046 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance to LISC. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.