Curbing Nuisance Motels: An Evaluation of Police as Place Regulators

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For more information about the study see:
Curbing Nuisance Motels: An Evaluation of Police as Place Regulators

This Study

A mixed-methodological approach was employed to evaluate the utility of using police to implement regulatory policy among operators (place managers) of low-budget nuisance motels in Chula Vista. This approach is contrary to conventional reactive case-by-case command and control policies (putting out fires) that have proven expensive, time consuming and ineffective. CFS (calls-for-service) measures were used through the lens of a Problem-oriented policing (POP) framework to assess the impact of this new hybrid strategy.


Means and Ends: Action Research within the POP framework

Policy interventions can symbiotically balance the enforcement of structural change with management of the individual variables that effect it over time. An example of means-based bottom-up conventional crime control strategies include “preventive” actions taken to curb behaviors and modify environments that lead to criminal offenses, i.e., broken windows policing (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Top down ends-based strategies include zero-sum ordinances that force operators to take action, i.e., mandatory car insurance.

Means-based anti-crime strategies in and of themselves have failed to produce sustainable crime solutions over time.

A Hierarchy of Shifting Problem Ownership (Methodology)

The overall research approach included testing multiple levels of “problem ownership” centered on the role and function of operators of low budget motels in Chula Vista.

Stage 1: Outreach
- Make operators aware of the nature and scope of the crime problem

Stage 2: Code Enforcement and Public Accountability
- Using civil mechanisms to enforce codes and “shaming” operators and owners into action using “report cards” and publically distributed ranking reports

Stage 3: Implement a Permit Ordinance
- Using compliance with safety standards to issue permits to operate motels
Findings

Permit-to-operate ordinances produced the greatest reduction in crime.

- Report card outreach, code enforcement and public accountability did not substantially reduce crime.
- Permit-to-operate ordinances resulted in greater crime reduction among Chula Vista motels than the entire project.
- The most troubled properties experienced a 68% drop in CFS (call-for-service) rates.
- From 2003-2009 there was a 70% drop in crime reports at motels.
- The number of hotel rooms in Chula Vista that did not meet safety standards declined from 378 pre-test to 0 post-intervention.
Implications

Ends-based regulations that apply to all facilities equally while providing flexibility for individual circumstances and room for adjustment to address community dynamics holds greater promise for success. This study found clear evidence of behavioral change on the part of motel operators that materially decreased the crime and disorder incidents occurring on their property.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property description</th>
<th>Total CFS count</th>
<th>Percent change$^b$</th>
<th>Median of CFS rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-ordinaln</td>
<td>Post-ordinaln</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>Rooms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study area Chula</td>
<td>15 986 1,016 625</td>
<td>-38.39 0.79 0.46</td>
<td>-41.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vista motels</td>
<td>9 393 362 272</td>
<td>-24.86 1.00 0.43</td>
<td>-57.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Displacement/</td>
<td>6 256 189 150</td>
<td>0.85 0.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diffusion motels</td>
<td>16 953 887 919</td>
<td>-3.61 0.70 0.73</td>
<td>-5.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National City</td>
<td>3 137 173 122</td>
<td>1.30 0.62</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern San Diego</td>
<td>6 313 442 361</td>
<td>1.09 0.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison motels</td>
<td>16 640 445 558</td>
<td>0.66 0.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $^a$The pre-ordinaln federal fiscal year ran from October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006 and the post-ordinaln federal fiscal year ran from October 1, 2007 to September 30, 2008. $^b$A one tail $\chi^2$ test reveals that this overall change is significant ($\chi^2 = 57.49; df = 2; p < 0.001$). $^c$A one-tail $\chi^2$ test indicates that this overall change is significant ($\chi^2 = 10.59; df = 2; p < 0.01$).

Given the fiscal constraints, such initiatives may provide a mechanism to reduce the drain on city resources that festering crime problems cause. By using a POP framework, law enforcement agencies can act as both catalyst and facilitator to bring about real change in the underlying causes of crime.