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# Still BLUE-CRUSHing crime data in Memphis streets | Opinion

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Bill Gibbons (Photo: University of Memphis)

Data-driven policing involves smart use of crime data to deploy law enforcement resources in the right places at the right times to have a maximum positive impact on the crime rate.

New York City was the first major city to implement such an approach in a day -to-day consistent fashion, beginning in 1994. Referred to as [CompStat](#) (short for Compare Statistics), it is credited with creating dramatic reductions in New York's crime rate, moving it from having one of the highest crime rates among American cities to having one of the lowest crime rates.

Beginning in 2006, the Memphis Police Department (MPD) took a chapter out of New York City's successful playbook and began implementing its own local version of data-driven policing, commonly known as BLUE CRUSH (short for Crime Reduction Using Statistical History).

This concept of data-driven policing was included as an evidence-based practice in the original Operation: Safe Community crime reduction plan launched in 2007, the development of which was spearheaded by the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission.

Between 2006 and 2011, the violent crime rate in Memphis dropped by almost 25 percent. And by 2011, the Memphis police force had grown to almost 2,500 officers, meaning more resources to deploy strategically based on crime patterns.

Assessments by the University of Memphis at the time attributed the dramatic reduction in crime to the MPD's data-driven deployment of resources.

In 2012, the MPD began to have a net loss of officers. By 2017, the department had suffered a net loss of over 20 percent of its force. The concept of data-driven deployment suffered as the police department struggled just to make sure every ward in every precinct was minimally covered.

In 2017, newly-appointed Police Director Michael Rallings ramped up efforts at data-driven deployment, taking extra steps to hold precinct commanders accountable for deploying resources in a data-driven manner.

What impact did this renewed, ramped up data-driven approach by Director Rallings have, especially given the MPD's continued shortage of officers?

The University of Memphis Public Safety Institute (PSI) conducted an assessment of the MPD's data-driven practices for calendar year 2017, concluding that those practices did have an immediate positive impact on the level of crime within identified crime "hot spots."

Through the data-driven process used by the MPD, geographic hot spots are selected in each precinct every week based on the number of crimes reported in specified categories (robberies, aggravated assaults, burglaries, auto thefts and thefts from autos).

As part of the assessment, the PSI looked at whether reported crimes in the specified categories declined the week after a hot spot was identified.

The assessment revealed that, when looking at all nine MPD precincts together, crimes in the specified categories decreased within the designated hot spots 100 percent of the time in 2017 (all 52 weeks).

On average, the number of reported crimes in the specified categories decreased in each precinct by 33.3 percent during the week after hot spots were designated.

The Old Allen police precinct had the highest average decrease – an average decline of 55.7 percent in reported crimes. This was followed by the Crump precinct with an average decline of 44.1 percent and the Tillman precinct with an average decline of 43.7 percent.

The Old Allen precinct also had a decrease within designated hot spots 100 percent of the time (all 52 weeks). Three other MPD precincts – Crump, Tillman and Airways – had decreases over 90 percent of the time.

The decline in reported crimes in the designated hot spots does not account for factors such as crime displacement (crime decreasing in one area but moving to another area). In addition, the assessment did not analyze the data to determine the degree to which crime reductions in hot spots were sustainable over time given the MPD's current resources.

In 2019, the PSI plans to conduct an additional assessment that includes an examination of whether crime reductions in hot spots are sustained over time.

Dr. Angela Madden serves as research associate professor for the PSI, with James “Max” Helms serving as research assistant. The full report on the assessment may be viewed on the PSI’s website at [memphis.edu/psi/research/](http://memphis.edu/psi/research/).

As was true with the original Operation: Safe Community plan in the 2007-2011 time period, data-driven deployment of law enforcement resources is a major part of the current Operation: Safe Community plan to reduce crime, the implementation of which is being quarterbacked by the Crime Commission.

*Bill Gibbons serves as executive director of the University of Memphis Public Safety Institute. He also serves as president of the Memphis Shelby Crime Commission, a non-profit entity committed to crime reduction by identifying and promoting best practices.*