

The Effect of the Seattle Police-Free CHOP Zone on Crime: A Microsynthetic Control Evaluation

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Key Takeaways

- Protestors gathered nightly around the Seattle Police Department's (SPD's) East precinct following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020
- The SPD abandoned the precinct on June 8, 2020 to quell the confrontations, resulting property damage, and injuries to both police officers and protestors
- The Seattle Mayor ordered SPD to disband the CHOP zone and re-occupy the police station on July 1, 2020
- In the immediate CHOP zone the crime total was 132.9% higher than a synthetic control area during the occupation period
- Crime totals were 77.5% higher and 27.8% higher than a synthetic control area in the 2-block CHOP zone and East precinct service area, respectively
- Findings indicate drastic reductions of police presence may harm public safety
- Evidence-based policing may provide a vehicle for meaningful, long-term reform

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Research Summary:

The murder of George Floyd by then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin propelled immediate protests and calls for police reform around the world. Like many cities, Seattle was home to daily protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Seattle's protests stood out from the national activity due to their extreme magnitude and duration, particularly in the context of the Capitol Hill neighborhood.

Protestors frequently gathered around the Seattle Police Department's (SPD's) East precinct, with reported confrontations between police and demonstrators occurring daily. On June 8, 2020, the SPD abandoned the precinct in an attempt to quell the confrontations. An encampment was quickly established in a six-block area encompassing the abandoned precinct. The encampment would come to be known as the "Capitol Hill Occupation Protest" (CHOP). Protesters created a barricade around the perimeter of the area, using wooden pallets and other readily-available objects, which acted as a makeshift jurisdictional boundary for CHOP. Teams of civilian volunteers formed an armed security detail and medic team for the purpose of minimizing reliance on city agencies.

Seattle police officers were sent an email stating they should not respond to any call within the CHOP zone unless it was a "mass casualty event." On July 1, 2020, the Seattle Mayor ordered SPD to disband occupants from the CHOP zone and re-occupy the police station. The order came after 4 shootings (2 of which were fatal) occurred over a 10-day period, which spurred increased calls for CHOP's closure.

CHOP generated widely differing assessments from residents and public officials in Seattle. Where some saw a lawless area that threatened public safety, others saw a vibrant community advancing social justice. The fall of CHOP was met with the same level of disagreement. Some Seattle residents and officials saw the closure as an example of police violence against peaceful protestors, while others applauded what they perceived as a return to safety and order.

The geographically focused, time limited nature of CHOP provided an opportunity for a natural experiment to test the effect of the autonomous zone on crime. We used the microsynthetic control group method to create a control area of weighted street segments that are empirically equal to the intervention area street segments. We explore crime level changes in three separate intervention areas: the CHOP zone, all areas within 2-blocks and including the CHOP zone, and the entirety of the SPD East precinct service area.

Statistically significant crime increases were observed for each of the three intervention areas. The largest increase was observed in the immediate CHOP zone, with the crime total 132.9% higher than the weighted control area during the 24-day occupation period. Crime totals were 77.5% higher and 27.8% higher than the weighted control area in the 2-block CHOP zone and East precinct service area, respectively. Follow-up analyses concluded that no single crime type was responsible for the significant crime increases. The significant crime increase is noteworthy given the short time frame of the CHOP occupation and retreat of police from the area theoretically making it more challenging for crimes to be reported by citizens and/or proactively discovered by officers.

Findings suggest that police abolition, the most extreme form of police defunding, may significantly compromise public safety. Policy makers should support both the evidence-based crime prevention work of police and community-based institutions. Such an approach may achieve currently desired policing reforms without risking crime spikes that can result from drastic reductions of police presence. Wide-scale adoption of evidence-based policing may provide a vehicle for such meaningful, long-term reform.