

Network Spillovers and the Social Returns to Crime-Reduction Interventions

Ashley Craig
Australian National University

Sara Heller
University of Michigan

Kenneth Hofmeister
University of Michigan

Nikhil Rao
University of Michigan

Abstract

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are influential in shaping policy to address the massive social harm from crime. Yet crime-prevention experiments typically ignore the possibility of peer spillovers, which could misrepresent interventions' net effects in either direction. To estimate how program effects diffuse or displace across social networks, we combine four existing RCTs in Chicago ($N \approx 12,000$) with multiple administrative measures of social connections between people that capture co-arrest, co-victimization, shared classes, and shared households ($N \approx 2$ million). We quantify network spillovers and explore which social ties matter for criminal behavior. Being exposed to at least one treated peer generates 34-50 percent reductions in crime, concentrated among those who were also in the RCTs. We show that standard intent-to-treat estimates considerably understate both the impact of direct treatment in the absence of peer exposure and the interventions' total social impacts accounting for peer influence; the net violence decline is at least 80 percent greater than implied by the estimates in the original studies, and spillovers sometimes mask actual behavior change entirely. The results have important implications for how we estimate treatment effects in crime prevention, and they expand our knowledge of how people affect each other's criminal decision-making.