

Zero Tolerance and Aggressive Policing (And Why to Avoid It)

Better Policing toolkit – Rand Corporation

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL261/better-policing-toolkit/all-strategies/zero-tolerance.html>

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Overview

Zero tolerance policing is sometimes known as "aggressive policing" or "aggressive order maintenance" and is sometimes incorrectly tied to "broken windows" policing. A zero tolerance strategy consists of stopping, questioning, and frisking pedestrians or drivers considered to be acting suspiciously and then arresting them for offenses whenever possible, typically for such low-level offenses as possessing marijuana. A defining difference between zero tolerance interventions and other strategies is that zero tolerance strategies are not discerning; the focus is on making stops and arrests to crack down on all types of disorder, generically defined.

Zero tolerance and aggressive policing has been found to produce statistically insignificant changes in crime, on average. It also runs the risk of damaging police-community relations, both locally and even at the national level.

How Effective Is Zero Tolerance and Aggressive Policing for Different Kinds of Problems?

- This strategy is ineffective for **reducing crime in places at elevated risk.**
- This strategy is ineffective for **improving relations with the community.**

Misconceptions About Zero Tolerance

It is understandable why there is widespread support for zero tolerance: Some marquee policing techniques that have been labeled part of “zero tolerance” (or, alternatively, as a form of “broken windows”) are not and actually fall under other policing strategies.

One set of techniques often mislabeled as zero tolerance should actually be grouped with problem-oriented policing in hot spots. These techniques include the following:

- **Crackdowns on specific behaviors that generate fear in the community**, such as intoxication, panhandling, and juveniles intimidating pedestrians. (Other examples include crackdowns on subway turnstile jumpers when that was a form of violent intimidation against others in the station and crackdowns on squeegee artists who often robbed drivers if not paid.)

Tip: Talking to community members to find out crime-generating problems—tips are in the [problem-oriented policing strategy guide](#)—to identify which behaviors are making community members afraid.

- **Crackdowns on disorder-enabling lethal violence**, notably the carrying of illegal guns in very high-violence areas.
- **Changing the built environment to make it feel safer and less hospitable to crime.** Examples include fixing broken windows, removing abandoned cars, and removing graffiti. (This is also known as “crime prevention through environmental design,” which is covered in our [problem-oriented policing guide](#).)

In addition, the following technique that is often mislabeled as zero tolerance should actually be grouped with focused deterrence:

- **Enhanced enforcement against violence and prosecution of those who continue to commit violent acts**, especially after being warned about costs to the community and future consequences (this is covered in the sanctions portion of our [focused deterrence](#) guide.)

Tip: Enhanced enforcement and prosecution are intended as measures against persons who have continued to engage in violence and/or other serious crime after being warned (i.e., not all community residents in the area). Officers should have positive identification of individuals before taking enhanced enforcement actions.

Alternative Strategies

The following strategies are considered more effective than zero tolerance. The first three fall under the umbrella of problem-oriented policing, and the fourth falls under the umbrella of focused deterrence.

- **Alternative 1: Enforcement Against Fear-Generating Behavior:** This would involve crackdowns on specified behaviors that generate fear, with key examples including intoxication, panhandling, and juveniles accosting pedestrians in ways that made those pedestrians afraid—i.e., all forms of intimidation.
- **Alternative 2: Enforcement Against Violence-Enabling Behavior:** This refers specifically to crackdowns on disorder that directly enables lethal violence.
- **Alternative 3: Improvements to the Environment—Fixing Actual Broken Windows:** This refers to addressing signs and indicators that crime is welcome in an area, such as graffiti and abandoned cars.
- **Alternative 4: Sanctions for Those Who Engage in Violence:** The one “aggressive order maintenance” intervention reported to produce a strong reduction in crime consisted of disorder crackdowns, along with “traditional suppression.”

To learn more about this strategy, see the [in-depth essay and references](#).