

Implementation as Intervention: Can Changing Management Practices Strengthen Policing in Chicago?

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Abstract

How and why do management practices vary, and can changing them increase output? These questions have been easier for economists to answer for private-sector firms than for the public sector. In this paper, we examine what happens to output following the staggered introduction of new management practices across parts of one large, particularly important public agency: the Chicago Police Department (CPD). These management changes, called Strategic Decision Support Centers (SDSCs), did not increase available officers but made better use of data and technology to target resources more effectively. We measure the SDSCs' impact using a synthetic controls design, creating for each treated police district a comparison district resembling it. Because treated districts are outliers in the district-level crime rate distribution, we encounter challenges applying existing methods: they either fail to produce a similar comparison district or do so in a way that may compromise the reliability of the estimates. We propose several modifications to existing methods to address these shortcomings, and modify existing inference procedures to handle cases where there are few comparison units. We find that the SDSC in the 7th police district serving the Englewood neighborhood, historically one of the most violent in Chicago, decreased shootings by 26 percent. This seems to be accompanied by a shift in police focus towards higher social cost crimes (gun arrests) and higher risk people (arrests of those with open warrants), and an increase in community policing as measured by more recorded "positive community interactions." We do not see statistically significant changes in other districts. The results suggest it is possible to raise public-sector output without large changes in inputs under the right conditions; understanding what those conditions are is an important priority for additional research.

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1 Introduction

How and why do management practices vary, and can changes in management improve output? This has been the topic of a growing body of research in economics, which has shown that private-sector firms vary enormously in their management practices (e.g. [Bloom et al., 2017](#)). In principle, this could arise if optimal management strategies are contingent on a firm’s environment and none are uniformly better than others. But the available data suggest that certain management practices are associated with improved performance, firms facing less competition are less productive and well-managed on average, and that improving a firm’s management practices can raise its productivity.¹

What about the public sector? Voters clearly care about outputs like safety, education, and health produced by the public sector, which in the United States account for over one-third of total GDP. But since these outputs are often a function of many factors beyond what agencies do, isolating the relative contribution of agency performance to output may be difficult for voters. In addition, voters do not choose policy for one agency but rather a slate of policies affecting multiple agencies. If agencies operate inside their production frontier, then improving their management practices may be a way to increase output and improve social conditions without substantial increases in additional resources. While this has been the focus of research for decades (e.g.

The University of Chicago Crime Lab is a privately-funded, independent, non-partisan academic research center founded in 2008 to help cities identify the most effective and humane ways to reduce crime and violence, and the harms associated with the administration of criminal justice. We are grateful to the Chicago Police Department for making available the data upon which much of this analysis is based. We thank the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their support of this work, and AbbVie, the Joyce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the McCormick Foundation, and the Pritzker Foundation for their support of the University of Chicago Crime Lab and Urban Labs, as well as Susan and Tom Dunn, Ken Griffin, and Ira Handler. We thank Rowan Gledhill, Riddhima Mishra, Michael Ridgway, and Noah Sebek for assistance with the data analysis, and Nikolay Doudchenko, Michael Robbins, and Kaspar Wuthrich for sharing helpful code with us. For useful comments we thank seminar participants at the University of Pennsylvania, NBER 2018 Summer Institute, NYU Wagner, and APPAM. Finally, and most important, we thank Roseanna Ander, Sean Malinowski, Marjolijn Bruggeling-Joyce, Anthony Berglund, Heather Bland, Trayvon Braxton, Amanda Dion, Mariah Farbo, Noe Flores, Jaureese Gaines, Brendan Hall, David Leitson, Kevin Magnan, Emma Marsano, Jacob Miller, Ashley Orosz, Paulina Pogorzelski, Daniel Rosenbaum, Zoe Russek, Thomas Scholten, Lauren Spiegel, Diamond Thompson, Michael Thompson, Matthew Triano, and Yida Wang for helpful conversations and comments, and for all of their work implementing the SDSCs themselves. All opinions and any errors are our own and do not necessarily reflect those of our funders or of any government agencies.

¹ See, e.g. [Bloom and Van Reenen \(2007, 2010\)](#); [Syverson \(2011\)](#); [Bloom et al. \(2013, 2018\)](#)

Wilson, 1989; Lynn, 2011), empirical work is complicated by, among other things, the difficulty of drawing inferences from agency-wide management changes over time or comparisons across agencies. As a result, as Lynn (1987, p. 187) argued, “knowledge in this field will always and necessarily be more conjectural and intuitive than normal social science.”

We examine this topic by studying the staggered introduction of management changes across one large and important public agency, the Chicago Police Department (CPD). These changes, known as Strategic Decision Support Centers (SDSCs), were implemented through a partnership between CPD, the chief of staff of the Los Angeles Police Department at the time (Sean Malinowski), and our research center (the University of Chicago Crime Lab). The SDSCs encouraged better use of data to target police deployments on the highest risk places and people, and to track community policing efforts. This is an interesting case study in part because so much public attention is focused on a key CPD “output,” public safety, which was a top public concern even before the city’s unprecedented 60 percent spike in homicides in 2016 that helped motivate the SDSC changes.² Second, the problem of gun violence is substantively important given its implications for, among other things, disparities in life expectancy between blacks and whites within the U.S., and between the U.S. and other developed countries.³ Third, police are important for controlling crime: additional police reduce crime while simultaneously reducing arrests.⁴ But given the budget constraints on many cities and states, particularly those where crime is most pronounced, knowing if we can improve output without more spending is important for policy.

While the staggered introduction of these management changes across different parts of CPD is helpful for understanding their impact, in practice measurement of these impacts turns out not to be straightforward. In February 2017, the first SDSCs opened in the two Chicago police districts with the highest violent-crime rates—the 7th district on the South Side (the Englewood

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/gun-violence-police-reform-loom-over-chicago-election/2019/02/17/765d0106-306e-11e9-8ad3-9a5b113ecd3c_story.html

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Centers for Injury Prevention and Control, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System.

⁴ See, e.g. Levitt (1997, 2002); Di Tella and Schargrodsky (2004); Klick and Tabarrok (2005); Evans and Owens (2007); Draca et al. (2011); Machin and Marie (2011); Owens (2013); Chalfin and McCrary (2018); Mello (2019); Durlauf and Nagin (2011)

neighborhood) and the 11th district on the West Side (Garfield Park)—before expanding to four additional districts in March 2017. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) was not an option given the pressing public safety crisis facing Chicago and the need to prioritize the highest-violence districts for reform. And with only 22 police districts in the city, a regression discontinuity design lacks adequate statistical power.

Any approach to measuring the effects of the SDSCs must deal with the fact that the SDSC districts have persistently high levels of violent crime relative to other districts and experienced unusually large increases in violent crime immediately prior to the SDSCs' adoption. Comparing SDSC districts and non-SDSC districts creates the risk of confusing the true causal effect of the intervention with simple mean reversion. In principle, one solution to guard against this source of confounding is to construct comparison districts with similar levels and trends in crime rates during the pre-treatment period, as is the goal of the synthetic controls approach.

However, synthetic controls methods have difficulty accommodating treated units that are outliers relative to the comparison units, as is the case in our setting where SDSC districts have higher levels of crime than non-SDSC districts. The most commonly used synthetic controls estimator, introduced by [Abadie et al. \(2010, hereafter ADH\)](#), imposes rigid restrictions on the weights that so-called donor units can receive to limit extrapolation beyond the support of the data. A newer estimator from [Doudchenko and Imbens \(2017, hereafter DI\)](#) replaces these rigid constraints with a more flexible, data-driven approach. However, the way this new estimator chooses key parameters may lead it to assign weights to donor units on the basis of statistical noise rather than a shared relationship with the treated unit (overfitting). Doing so could undermine the ability of the resulting synthetic control to recover the counterfactual for the treated unit and lead to misestimation of the treatment effect.

We explore the issue of overfitting in synthetic controls and modify existing methods to guard against it. Two modifications concern the role of covariates. Applications of the [ADH](#) estimator often rely on the full pre-treatment series of outcome observations to estimate weights; as [Kaul et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrate, this renders other covariates used in the estimation irrelevant. The [DI](#)

estimator leaves out covariates altogether. First, we propose using covariates to limit the pool of donor units to those with characteristics similar to those of the treated unit before assigning any donor weights. Second, we propose a way to fit a synthetic control to multiple outcomes simultaneously, such as a primary outcome in addition to secondary outcomes, mechanisms, and covariates. This helps reduce the risk of overfitting and yields a single synthetic control for understanding the role of mediating mechanisms in the observed treatment effect on the primary outcome. The last modification is to the [DI](#) estimator itself, aiming to make it more robust to overfitting by prioritizing out-of-sample prediction accuracy. Unlike the original estimator, the version we propose uses a time series cross-validation technique to choose parameters governing weight selection that minimize prediction error in one-step-ahead forecasts.

We also modify the standard synthetic controls inference method, which involves creating a distribution of placebo effects to which the observed treatment effect is compared. But when there are few comparison areas as in our case (16), the placebo distribution is sparse and the number of potential p -values is small. An observed effect that is close to a placebo effect may, under different realizations of the data, receive substantially different p -values, limiting our ability to tell whether the observed effect is an outlier or not. We address this problem using a resampling method that increases the density of the placebo effect distribution. We effectively increase the number of comparison areas by resampling with replacement the smaller and more numerous geographic areas (police beats) located within the larger and more limited geographic areas available (police districts). [Robbins et al. \(2017\)](#) use a similar permutation technique to construct artificial comparison areas from *random* assortments of blocks, but then must adjust their estimates to correct for the fact that the treatment unit they study is a contiguous area, unlike the artificial comparison areas. Our method sidesteps this issue by using a resampling process that preserves the geographic structure of the real comparison areas.

We find that the 7th district experienced a sizable change in the outcome of primary concern to CPD and the public: shootings, which declined by 26 percent, an effect that is statistically significant even after accounting for multiple comparisons. This occurred despite no evident

increase in the number of officers working in the 7th district. We try to detect changes in officer productivity by fitting a single synthetic control to multiple outcomes simultaneously, which suggests the decline in shootings was accompanied by increased emphasis on high-risk people and places: increased traffic stops, gun arrests, and arrests of individuals with open warrants, plus more recorded “positive community interactions.” While some of these estimates are imprecise, they suggest the drop in shootings may have been due to changes in officer behavior, not total resources.

Results from the other SDSC districts are more mixed. The 11th district, for example, saw shooting victims decline by 14 percent, but this reduction is not precisely estimated, nor is it robust when a single synthetic control is fit to multiple outcomes simultaneously. Estimates from other districts are either imprecisely estimated or not credible due to the poor fit of the synthetic control, particularly in the last pre-treatment year of 2016. Whether these findings suggest that these other districts were already operating on their production frontier and could not benefit from improved management practices, or whether the management changes take effect with some lag, we cannot definitively say with our data. But two pieces of evidence are at least suggestive of a broader SDSC effect: officers in SDSC districts made much greater use of police video cameras to initiate arrests, and recorded much higher levels of self-reported positive engagement with the community.

These results raise the possibility that under the right conditions it is possible to generate large and rapid changes in public agency output with little change in inputs. Each SDSC costs approximately \$2 million to install and operate for one year, which is less than 1 percent of the department’s annual budget of \$1.6 billion. By comparison, in just the 7th district alone in 2017, the SDSC is estimated to have prevented 75 shooting victims; at an estimated social cost of \$1.6 million per gunshot injury in the U.S. ([Cook and Ludwig, 2000](#); [Ludwig and Cook, 2001](#)), this implies a very favorable ratio of benefit to cost even if the SDSCs had no effect at all in the other districts. Given the persistence of social problems that are facing cities and states all across the U.S., together with their massive fiscal problems—including \$4 trillion in unfunded pension obligations—

understanding the conditions under which we can improve public-sector performance without additional spending is an important priority for future research.⁵

2 Background on Crime in Chicago

Chicago struggles with a violence problem faced by many U.S. cities.⁶ The vast majority (90 percent) of Chicago's homicides are committed with a firearm. Rates of gun homicide account for most of the variation in overall homicide rates across cities, while the rates for non-gun homicide are remarkably similar (Figure 1). The geographic and demographic concentration of gun violence in Chicago produces striking disparities. Most of the city's violence occurs in marginalized neighborhoods on the city's South and West Sides (Figure 2).⁷ In 2018, just ten of Chicago's 77 neighborhoods, containing only 15 percent of the city's population, accounted for half of the homicide victims. Though the overall homicide rate per capita that year was 20.7 per 100,000 residents, the homicide rate for black men aged 15-24 was 230 per 100,000, almost six times higher than for Hispanic men and 34 times higher than for white men the same age.

Though Chicago has long had the reputation of being a large city with a high rate of serious violence, the long-term picture is more nuanced. Figure 3 shows the homicide rates per 100,000 residents in Chicago and two of its peer cities, New York City and Los Angeles, over the last 130 years. One striking feature of this graph is how similar homicide rates for all three cities have been for most of this period; as recently as the early 1990s, they were virtually indistinguishable. But equally striking are two notable periods of divergence, during which Chicago experienced much higher homicide rates than its peers: the 1920s during the Prohibition era, and the current period.

The recent gulf between Chicago and its peer cities reached its widest point in 2016 due to an unusually large (60 percent) increase in homicides from the previous year, which was the impetus

⁵ See, e.g. https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/the_impending_pension_problem and Novy-Marx and Rauh (2011, 2014).

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2017/jan/09/special-report-fixing-gun-violence-in-america>

⁷ The geographic patterning of gun violence in Chicago closely mirrors the geographic patterning of racial and income segregation across the city's neighborhoods; see Appendix Figures 1 and 2.

for the SDSC intervention. The causes of the increase are unclear (Kapustin et al., 2017):

- Social conditions such as poverty and segregation, commonly cited as reasons for Chicago’s violence,⁸ may partially explain its high level going into 2016 but seem inadequate for explaining the sudden increase that year.
- Other hypotheses focus on changes that occurred immediately prior to the increase, such as the sharp decline in street stops conducted by CPD (Cassell and Fowles, 2018). However, in addition to conflicting evidence about the relationship between street stops and violent crime,⁹ the large number of changes involving CPD that occurred in a short period time in late 2015 make it impossible to determine how much any single change contributed to the violence increase.¹⁰

3 Management Changes at the Chicago Police Department

In this section, we describe the management changes introduced by the SDSCs and how they helped CPD implement its proactive policing strategy. Like most large police departments in the U.S., CPD adheres to a strategy of proactively preventing crime by concentrating resources on the places and people at high *ex ante* risk for it. Implementing this strategy requires both a technology infrastructure—systems to collect historical data on criminal activity, for example—and the organizational capacity to use this infrastructure to develop and execute preventative policing missions. The SDSCs expanded this organizational capacity.

⁸ See, e.g. NPR’s interview with a number of leading advocates and researchers in Chicago: <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/03/492549546/examining-the-reasons-for-chicagos-violence>

⁹ For example, the rate of street stops in New York City declined by over 95 percent from its peak in 2011 in response to legal challenges, with no attendant increase in the city’s homicide rate.

¹⁰ On November 24, 2015, the dash cam video of the shooting of Laquan McDonald by CPD officer Jason Van Dyke was released; on December 1, 2015, CPD Superintendent Garry McCarthy was fired and Mayor Rahm Emanuel created the Chicago Police Accountability Task Force; on December 7, 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division opened a civil pattern or practice investigation into CPD; on December 9, 2015, Mayor Rahm Emanuel delivered a speech criticizing decades of police corruption; on January 1, 2016, the consent decree between the ACLU and CPD went into effect, requiring an independent evaluation of CPD practices and procedures, and introducing a new Investigatory Stop Report (ISR) that officers were required to complete after every street stop; also on January 1, 2016, Illinois SB1304 went into effect, also requiring police to record information about each investigative street stop and to issue a receipt after each such stop.

3.1 Proactive policing

The core of the modern proactive policing strategy has three components (National Academies of Sciences and Medicine, 2018, p. 2):¹¹

- concentrate police resources on high-risk places
- concentrate police resources on high-risk people
- improve relations with the community and emphasize police problem-solving

Virtually all large police departments, including CPD, implement some version of this strategy with varying degrees of fidelity. Given scarce police resources and the concentration of *ex ante* crime risk in a small number of places and people, focusing resources on those high-risk places and people is both an efficient strategy for reducing crime, and one that may reduce the collateral costs of enforcement to the community. And more generally, better police-community relations can improve residents' sense of "legitimacy" about the law, which is thought to encourage their adherence to it.

A common place-based component of a proactive policing strategy is "hot spot" policing, where additional resources are concentrated in places at elevated risk of violence. Several RCTs in the U.S. suggest that increased police presence leads to fewer crimes in the locations that are targeted (e.g. Braga, 2007). However, these studies often do not measure, or lack the statistical power to detect, whether hot spot policing prevents crime or merely displaces it to areas with a smaller police presence. One exception is Blattman et al. (2017), who find evidence of displacement for property crimes in an RCT in Bogotá, Colombia.

Similarly, person-based components of a proactive policing strategy operationalize the insight that certain individuals may pose a higher risk of involvement in crime than others. For example, certain individuals on probation or parole may receive additional scrutiny from the police, who leverage the fact that the terms of their release often require their compliance with conditions such as observing a curfew or refraining from having drugs or guns at home.¹²

¹¹ For additional details on proactive policing, see Appendix A.

¹² Another so-called "focused deterrence" approach is to conduct sessions, known as "call-ins," during which known

Finally, efforts to improve police-community relations are also thought to reduce crime by improving residents' sense of "legitimacy" about the law. If residents regard the police as more legitimate, then this theory suggests they will hold stronger beliefs that laws should be followed regardless of the potential for punishment for breaking them, thereby reducing crime (Tyler, 1990). The police can employ different strategies for improving perceptions of their legitimacy, including treating residents fairly and explaining what they are doing and why, or enhancing "procedural justice" in policing. A different objective for community policing is to increase cooperation with law enforcement, a key input into the successful arrest and prosecution of those who engage in serious violence. This is particularly important in Chicago, where the clearance rate for homicides is below 20 percent, and the rate for non-fatal shootings is even lower.¹³

Despite being at the core of CPD's strategy, the Department's implementation of proactive policing had at least three shortcomings:

- First, the Commanders of CPD's 22 police districts had limited access to information they could use when deciding where and how to deploy their officers on a daily basis. The analysis that did occur was performed at headquarters and yielded mostly static deployment plans that were not tailored to each district's unique needs, resulting in officers "just patrolling randomly" and "riding around rubber-necking on the street waiting for something to happen."¹⁴
- Second, Commanders lacked a process for incorporating the information available to them into deployment plans, often relying on informal consultations with officers that occurred in passing and that did not afford the Commander a systematic view into the district's recent criminal activity.

or suspected gang members are informed of heightened penalties for continuing to engage in violence and offered social services. A quasi-experimental study of an earlier version of CPD's call-ins suggests they may reduce crime in Chicago (Papachristos et al., 2007). However, it is unclear whether this study is capable of isolating the effects of the call-ins due to the difficulty of finding a suitable comparison group.

¹³ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2018/2/9/18316995/murder-clearance-rate-in-chicago-hit-new-low-in-2017>

¹⁴ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2017/3/29/18358635/violent-crime-falls-in-2-districts-run-by-the-johnson-brothers>

- Finally, the Department lacked any metric for tracking the frequency of officers' positive engagement with the community.

3.2 Changes introduced by the SDSCs

The SDSCs are a set of organizational changes complementary to CPD's prior investments in data infrastructure and technology, allowing it to better implement a proactive policing strategy.¹⁵ As [Bloom et al. \(2017\)](#) note, the effect of technology on the productivity of firms is much larger when paired with complementary managerial structures. This is true in public agencies as well, and police departments in particular, as documented by [Garicano and Heaton \(2010\)](#) using the well-known example of CompStat, a technological and managerial innovation that saw widespread adoption across police departments. Relative to the technology itself, which is often standardized and adopted quickly as its price falls, any accompanying internal restructuring can take longer to achieve ([Bresnahan et al., 2002](#)). Indeed, by the time the SDSCs were introduced, the Department had a robust data collection effort and had developed multiple software tools to analyze these data. However, lacking the organizational structure to train officers on how to use these tools and explicitly assign them to do so, they were seldom used.

The SDSCs seek to address each of the shortcomings in CPD's implementation of proactive policing identified earlier. First, the SDSCs significantly increase the information made available to Commanders by creating a role specifically to provide it: a civilian crime analyst.¹⁶ The analyst, who is trained on all of CPD's existing software tools, develops analytical products describing recent patterns of criminal activity in the district. An example is presented in [Figure 4](#). In 2017, the Commander of the 7th district asked the district's analyst to examine data on stolen vehicles, which are often used to commit shootings, to determine if there was an underlying pattern. The analyst identified a cluster of 18 cars recently stolen from the adjacent district and all recovered near the same intersection. Based on this information, the Commander ordered increased patrols that led

¹⁵ For additional details on the SDSCs and their deployment, see [Appendix B](#).

¹⁶ During the initial roll-out of the SDSCs, staff at our research center, the University of Chicago Crime Lab, served in the civilian crime analyst role.

to the arrest of an individual with an extensive history of motor vehicle theft and a connection to an unsolved quadruple homicide.

Second, the SDSCs introduced a daily briefing for the Commander to incorporate the information supplied by an analyst into deployment plans. The briefing follows a standard format and includes information such as:

- recent crime trends and high-profile arrests
- high-priority open warrants
- deeper analyses into areas of interest, including those raised at previous briefings
- an overview of available discretionary resources and their current deployment locations

The output of the briefing is a set of missions ordered by the Commander, along with information for dissemination to field units. Missions can vary in their complexity, ranging from dispersing trespassers at businesses associated with violence to heightened patrol activity for the anniversary of a slain gang member's death. The information produced by the SDSC is shared with officers during roll calls at the start of each watch. For example, in one district, SDSC officers prepare a binder with the high-priority open warrants discussed in the briefing for tactical officers to review.

Finally, and coinciding with the SDSCs' introduction, the Department began collecting data on the frequency of officers' positive engagement with the community. Called positive community interactions, these are self-reported by an officer in the field after she has engaged in such an interaction. This metric was prioritized and began being tracked as part of the Department's CompStat process beginning in 2017.

4 Synthetic Control Approach

An RCT to measure the impact of the SDSCs was not an option due to the public safety crisis facing Chicago in early 2017, which resulted in the City prioritizing for reform the police districts experiencing the most gun violence. Nor is it likely that SDSCs' impact could be measured using

a regression discontinuity design because Chicago is divided into only 22 police districts.¹⁷

The decision was made by the city to first pilot the SDSCs in the 7th and 11th districts, located on the South and West sides, respectively, and among the districts that have long experienced some of the highest levels of violence in Chicago. Build out of the physical SDSC rooms was complete by February 2017. Within weeks of becoming operational, the Department and the City decided to expand SDSCs to the four remaining so-called Tier 1 districts: the 6th, 9th, 10th, and 15th districts, in addition to the 7th and 11th. By mid-March, the SDSC rooms in all Tier 1 districts were operational.

To understand the effects of this staggered management roll-out, we turn to a non-experimental panel data evaluation method to estimate the SDSCs' effect on gun violence: synthetic controls. Unlike a standard difference-in-differences estimator, which implicitly assigns equal weights to all control group units,¹⁸ the synthetic controls method uses pre-treatment data to assign individual weights to each control group unit, such that their weighted sum—the synthetic control—resembles the treated unit in its pre-treatment characteristics.¹⁹ Due to the variability in how districts implemented the SDSC intervention, we apply this method separately to each of the six Tier 1 police districts that received an SDSC in 2017. We return to this implementation variability in our discussion of the results, as it may provide a source of leverage to better understand what specific police activities are most useful in reducing crime.

4.1 Synthetic controls: intuition and pitfalls

Before describing how we apply the synthetic controls method to our setting, we first outline the intuition behind the method. We pay particular attention to the issue of overfitting, which we describe below, and which we suspect will become more common as this method is applied to

¹⁷ As noted by [Schochet \(2009\)](#); [Wing and Cook \(2013\)](#), and others, regression discontinuity designs have much lower statistical power to detect treatment effects than RCTs.

¹⁸ In settings where treatment occurs at different times in different units, difference-in-differences may not assign equal weight to all control group units (e.g. [Goodman-Bacon, 2018](#)).

¹⁹ In most applications of the synthetic controls method, the pre-treatment characteristics of interest are the observed values of the primary outcome. We return to this point later in the section.

increasingly large datasets with many observed and untreated units.

The synthetic controls method, introduced by [Abadie and Gardeazabal \(2003\)](#) and [ADH](#), relies on pre-period observations of the outcome of interest for the treated unit and a set of untreated donor units. Based on these data, the method chooses a weight for each donor unit such that the weighted sum of donor units' observations in each pre-period is close to that of the treated unit. For one treated unit ($j = 0$) and J donor units ($j = 1, \dots, J$), using the observed outcome of interest (Y_{jt}) in the pre-periods ($t \leq T_0$), a synthetic controls estimator chooses a vector of weights $w = (w_1, \dots, w_J)$ to solve an objective function like the following one:

$$w^* = \arg \min_w \sum_{t=1}^{T_0} \left(Y_{0t} - \sum_{j=1}^J w_j Y_{jt} \right)^2 \quad (1)$$

The synthetic control tries to mimic, as closely as possible, the pre-period observations of the treated unit. The implicit assumption is that, by ensuring a good “pre-period fit,” the synthetic control’s post-period observations ($t > T_0$) provide a good counterfactual for the missing potential outcome observations of the treated unit in the absence of treatment ([Rubin, 1974](#); [Imbens and Rubin, 2015](#)). This assumption is crucial for the validity of the synthetic controls method, but it is impossible to test directly. Instead, when it is applied in practice, the validity of a synthetic control is typically judged by how closely it mimics the pre-period observations of the treated unit, rather than how reliably it is able to recover the missing potential outcome observations of the treated unit ([Abadie et al., 2015](#)).²⁰

Good pre-period fit is an important but potentially misleading indicator of a synthetic control’s ability to reliably recover the missing potential outcome observations of the treated unit. A good fit may arise when a synthetic control places weight on donor units that share no underlying relationship with the treated unit but have similar pre-period observations due to idiosyncratic errors. Such donors are chosen on the basis of noise and may not provide any useful signal

²⁰ “The credibility of a synthetic control depends upon how well it tracks the treated unit’s characteristics and outcomes over an extended period of time prior to the treatment” ([Abadie et al., 2015](#), p. 500).

about the future potential outcome observations of the treated unit, threatening the assumption underlying the validity of the synthetic control. This risk of overfitting is likely to grow with the size of the candidate donor pool, which increases the odds that one or more donors will appear to be a good match for the treated unit due to noise and be assigned weight as a result.

As a stylized example, consider a treated unit with an outcome of interest determined by a vector of unit-specific characteristics, \mathbf{X}_0 , in each period; a treatment effect, α , in post-periods; and an idiosyncratic error:

$$Y_{0t} = f(\mathbf{X}_0, t) + \mathbb{1}[t > T_0]\alpha + \varepsilon_{0t}$$

The objective of the synthetic control is to recover the treated unit's missing potential outcome observations, $f(\mathbf{X}_0, t)$ for $t > T_0$, using a weighted sum of donors. Suppose there is one signal donor unit available ($j = 1$) with shared unit-specific characteristics ($\mathbf{X}_1 = \mathbf{X}_0$), and $J - 1$ noise donor units available with different unit-specific characteristics ($\mathbf{X}_j \neq \mathbf{X}_0, j > 1$). Let the outcome of interest for all donor units be determined by:

$$Y_{jt} = f(\mathbf{X}_j, t) + \varepsilon_{jt}$$

The pre-period observations of the noise donors will likely differ from those of the treated unit due to their different unit-specific characteristics, but some may be similar due to their realizations of the stochastic error term.²¹ In contrast, the pre-period observations of the signal donor are likely to be similar to those of the treated unit, but for different realizations of its stochastic error term. Further, the signal donor's post-period observations are, in expectation, equivalent to the missing potential outcome observations of the treated unit. Therefore, the optimal vector of donor weights, $\mathbf{w} = (w_1, w_2, \dots, w_J)$, is $\mathbf{w} = (1, 0, \dots, 0)$. However, there is no guarantee that a synthetic controls

²¹ A donor may also have outcome observations similar to those of the treated unit for reasons other than realizations of the stochastic error term. For example, consider two neighborhoods experiencing low rates of crime: one is socioeconomically advantaged and has low police presence, the other is disadvantaged but has high police presence that deters criminal activity. Both may appear to be plausible candidate donor units for a treated unit also experiencing low rates of crime. However, depending on the socioeconomic conditions and police presence in the treated unit, one donor may be better able to recover the counterfactual than the other, underscoring the potential importance of considering not only pre-period outcome observations but also covariates in assigning donor weights.

estimator will recover this weight vector, particularly if the number of noise donors is large, the length of the pre-period is short, or the variance of the stochastic error distribution is high.²² In trying to match the pre-period observations of the treated unit using those of the available donors, the synthetic control may overfit by assigning weight to noise donors, undermining its ability to predict the missing potential outcome observations of the treated unit in the post-period.

Although we are not the first to point out this issue, guidance for applied researchers on how to guard against it is lacking. For example, ADH and Abadie et al. (2015) warn about the potential for “interpolation” bias if the candidate donor pool contains units with characteristics different from those of the treated unit. However, they offer no recommendation on how to choose candidate donors for the pool. Instead, the estimator that ADH propose seems to incorporate this insight: part of how it chooses weights is to minimize the distance between a vector of characteristics for the treated unit and a vector of characteristics for the synthetic control.²³ But this vector of characteristics can (and in practice often does) include the full set of pre-period observations of the outcome of interest, in addition to other covariates. As demonstrated by Kaul et al. (2018), when the full set of pre-period outcome observations is included, the addition of other covariates proves to be irrelevant; the ADH estimator, by ultimately seeking to minimize the mean squared error between the outcome observations of the treated unit and the synthetic control during the pre-period, ignores the covariates.²⁴ In other words, in many applications of synthetic controls, the donor pool may contain units that differ substantially from the treated unit, yet the estimator

²² For example, holding other factors constant, as J grows very large, so too does the probability of a noise donor with pre-period outcomes that are, by chance, closer to those of the treated unit than the signal donor: $\sum_{t=1}^{T_0} (Y_{0t} - Y_{jt})^2 < \sum_{t=1}^{T_0} (Y_{0t} - Y_{1t})^2$ for $j > 1$.

²³ The ADH estimator relies on a nested optimization for choosing weights. The inner optimization chooses a donor weight vector, W , to minimize the distance between the treated unit and the synthetic control in X , a covariate vector containing candidate predictors, and potentially pre-period observations of Y , the outcome of interest. The outer optimization chooses a matrix, V , that assigns predictor weights to each element of X when choosing W . For a given value of V , $W^*(V)$ is the optimal donor weight vector chosen by the inner optimization. The outer optimization chooses a V^* that minimizes the distance between the treated unit and the synthetic control in Y , using the donor weight vector $W^*(V^*)$.

²⁴ As Kaul et al. (2018) note, there are alternatives to including the full set of pre-period outcome observations in the vector of characteristics, such as including their average or the last pre-period observation. These alternatives increase the likelihood that the synthetic control assigns weight to donor units with similar covariates to the treated unit, in addition to those with similar pre-period outcome observations. However, it is unclear how to choose from among these ad hoc approaches, each of which discard potentially useful pre-period outcome data.

discards covariate information when selecting weights.

4.2 Synthetic controls: choices that may affect overfitting

In selecting a synthetic control that can reliably recover the counterfactual, a researcher faces choices in several areas about how best to incorporate the available data, both pre-period outcome observations and covariates. We focus on three areas where the decisions made can affect overfitting: the choice of the candidate donor pool, the choice of the estimator, and the choice of how many outcome variables to use when fitting a synthetic control. Each of these is described in greater detail below.²⁵

Although mentioned as a possible strategy by [ADH](#), limiting the candidate donor pool to units with characteristics similar to the treated unit is a technique that appears to seldom be used in practice.²⁶ Instead, researchers commonly include all available donor units in the pool, perhaps in part because synthetic controls is often applied in settings with few available donor units to begin with. Rather than limiting the donor pool, researchers typically rely on the inclusion of predictor covariates when applying the [ADH](#) estimator to guide its choice of donor unit weights—which, as noted above, [Kaul et al. \(2018\)](#) find to be irrelevant when paired with all available pre-period observations of the outcome of interest, as is often done.

An alternative approach is to limit the candidate donor pool prior to choosing the weights. For example, techniques from the matching literature, like propensity score estimation, exist to address a similar problem: finding control observations comparable to treatment observations

²⁵ A fourth factor that affects the likelihood of overfitting is the length of the pre-period. All things being equal, a longer pre-period reduces the likelihood of noise donors being assigned weight by a given estimator. However, in most settings, researchers already use all the pre-periods in the data they have available. It may be possible in some contexts to obtain additional outcome observations measured at shorter time intervals, but doing so can result in a noisier outcome measure, potentially offsetting any benefit from this approach.

²⁶ One example is [Billmeier and Nannicini \(2013\)](#), who estimate the impact of economic liberalization on a country's real GDP per capita. Because their study includes cases of economic liberalization from countries all over the world, they consider two approaches to choosing the candidate donor pool for each treated unit: limiting donors to other countries in the same region as the treated country (type A), or not limiting donors to only countries in the same region (type B). While the authors acknowledge the trade-offs between these two approaches, they nevertheless rely on the type B donor pool to generate their treatment effect estimates in cases where the pre-period fit using the type A donor pool is poor.

when there are multiple dimensions on which their similarity can be assessed. Using available baseline covariate predictors, one could estimate a propensity score for each donor unit and limit the candidate donor pool to those with scores within some bandwidth around the treated unit. If sufficient pre-period data are available, they can be used to inform the bandwidth choice. In addition to guarding against overfitting, limiting the size of the candidate donor pool, particularly when it is large relative to the number of available pre-period outcome observations, increases the likelihood of there being a unique solution to the synthetic control estimation.

Another choice that can affect the degree of overfitting is that of the estimator used to generate weights. Recent developments in panel data causal inference methods provide researchers with alternatives to the canonical ADH synthetic controls estimator.²⁷ We consider one such alternative: the estimator proposed by DI. The choice of estimator bears on the issue of overfitting in several ways, but we focus here on how they differ in the restrictions they place on the choice of weights. Restrictions impose a ‘cost’ to assigning non-zero weight to a donor. In the stylized example of signal and noise donors, when assigning weight is costless and the goal is to produce a good pre-period fit, the estimator will be unconstrained; it will assign weight to noise donors if they can improve pre-period fit, even marginally.²⁸ When assigning weight is costly, however, the estimator will first assign weight to donors that are similar to the treated unit across the full series of pre-period outcome observations, which are more likely to be signal donors.

The ADH estimator imposes weight restrictions that make it unsuitable when the treated unit is an outlier relative to the candidate donor pool, as is the case in our setting. The two restrictions imposed by ADH are that weights must be non-negative ($w_j \geq 0$) and sum to one ($\sum w_j = 1$). Together, these conditions restrict the synthetic control to fall within the convex hull of donor units and limit extrapolation outside the support of the data. As a result, if the treated unit is an outlier and falls outside the convex hull of the donor units, the ADH synthetic control will exhibit poor pre-period fit.

²⁷ See, e.g. Athey et al. (2018); Ben-Michael et al. (2018); Powell (2018); Arkhangelsky et al. (2019).

²⁸ If the number of donor units exceeds the number of pre-periods, the resulting fit from an unconstrained estimator will be perfect.

In contrast, the [DI](#) estimator produces a synthetic control with better pre-period fit when the treated unit is an outlier by relaxing the [ADH](#) constraints. However, it may be more susceptible to overfitting because it does not consider covariates. Instead of requiring weights be non-negative and sum to one, the [DI](#) estimator uses a flexible, data-driven approach—elastic net regularization—to assign smaller weights to each donor unit and assign non-zero weight to fewer donors. Specifically, the [DI](#) estimator chooses both a vector of weights and an intercept to solve:

$$(\mathbf{w}^*, \mu^*) = \arg \min_{\mathbf{w}, \mu} \sum_{t=1}^{T_0} \left(Y_{0t} - \mu - \sum_{j=1}^J w_j Y_{jt} \right)^2 + \lambda \left(\frac{1-\alpha}{2} \|\mathbf{w}\|_2^2 + \alpha \|\mathbf{w}\|_1 \right) \quad (2)$$

Unlike the [ADH](#) estimator, the [DI](#) estimator imposes no direct constraint on the weights, which can be negative and sum to any value; instead, their value is indirectly constrained by an elastic net penalty term that prioritizes weight vectors with fewer non-zero ($\|\mathbf{w}\|_1 = \sum |w_j|$) and smaller ($\|\mathbf{w}\|_2^2 = \sum w_j^2$) entries.²⁹ Furthermore, the [DI](#) estimator does not incorporate covariates in any way, which allows for the choice of an intercept term but may make it particularly susceptible to overfitting.³⁰ We return to this point below when we discuss how we apply the [DI](#) estimator, including a modification we make intended to guard against overfitting.

Finally, the choice of how many outcome variables to use when fitting a synthetic control can also affect overfitting. Until now, we have assumed a single outcome of interest, as is the case in most applications of synthetic controls. However, fitting a synthetic control to multiple outcomes simultaneously reduces the likelihood of assigning weight to noise donors, if the idiosyncratic

²⁹ The magnitude of the elastic net penalty, and the relative weight placed on the Lasso and ridge regression terms, are determined by a pair of hyperparameters (α^*, λ^*) chosen through a cross-validation procedure. In this procedure, for a given pair of (α, λ) , first estimate a weight vector and intercept for each donor unit j : $(\hat{\mathbf{w}}(j; \alpha, \lambda), \hat{\mu}(j; \alpha, \lambda))$. Then, using the estimated weight vector and intercept, calculate the predicted post-period ($t > T_0$) outcome series for each donor unit: $\hat{Y}_{jt}(\hat{\mathbf{w}}, \hat{\mu}) = \hat{\mu}(j; \alpha, \lambda) + \sum_{i \neq j}^J \hat{w}_i(\alpha, \lambda) Y_{it}$. Finally, calculate the cross-validation error across all donor units as the average difference between the observed and predicted post-period outcome series: $CV(\alpha, \lambda) = \frac{1}{J} \sum_{j=1}^J (Y_{jt} - \hat{Y}_{jt})^2$. The values of (α^*, λ^*) minimize this cross-validation error.

³⁰ As noted by [DI](#), the [ADH](#) estimator does not permit the choice of an intercept because the inner optimization it uses to choose a donor weight vector, W , seeks to minimize the distance between the treated unit and the synthetic control in X , a covariate vector containing candidate predictors that may be qualitatively different from each other. An intercept would create a fixed difference between the treated unit and the synthetic control for all covariates, violating scale invariance. In contrast, the [DI](#) estimator only seeks to minimize the distance between the treated unit and the synthetic control in pre-period observations of a single variable, Y , the outcome of interest.

errors across outcomes are uncorrelated or weakly correlated. Intuitively, if a donor unit's realizations of one outcome are similar to those of the treated unit due to idiosyncratic errors, it is less likely that realizations of a different outcome are also similar to those of the treated unit.

Fitting a synthetic control to multiple outcomes simultaneously has a second benefit as well. When the researcher can observe both a primary outcome of interest and secondary outcomes representing potential mediating mechanisms through which the treatment may affect the primary outcome, obtaining a single vector of synthetic control weights facilitates interpretation of those mediating mechanisms. For example, consider an intervention intended to reduce mortality through the provision of health insurance. The synthetic control used to estimate the treatment effect on mortality (primary outcome) will likely differ from the synthetic control used to estimate the treatment effect on health insurance receipt (secondary outcome). This makes it difficult to know whether a reduction in mortality is due to greater health insurance receipt, since the two effects are derived from comparisons with two different synthetic controls.

Fitting a synthetic control to multiple outcomes simultaneously turns out to be relatively straightforward. Using the [DI](#) estimator as an example, for outcomes $n = 1, \dots, N$, the estimator chooses a $1 \times J$ vector of weights and a $1 \times N$ vector of intercepts to solve:

$$(w^*, \mu^*) = \arg \min_{w, \mu} \sum_{n=1}^N \frac{1}{T_{0n}} \sum_{t=1}^{T_{0n}} \left(\frac{Y_{0nt} - \mu_n - \sum_{j=1}^J w_j Y_{jnt}}{\frac{1}{J} \sum_{j=0}^J Y_{jnt}} \right)^2 + \lambda \left(\frac{1-\alpha}{2} \|w\|_2^2 + \alpha \|w\|_1 \right) \quad (3)$$

Relative to the original [DI](#) estimator in equation (2), this version replaces the mean squared error (MSE) term with a mean squared percentage error, to reflect the fact that the different outcomes Y_{jnt} may be scaled differently. Failing to account for these scale differences will implicitly give greater priority to weight vectors that minimize the errors of outcomes with larger absolute deviations.³¹ In practice, one can operationalize this approach by providing the DI estimator with $N * T_{0n}$ pre-period observations, with each set of T_{0n} observations corresponding to a different outcome, a

³¹ An adjustment is also made to account for the possibility that each outcome Y_{jnt} may be observed for a different number of pre-periods, T_{0n} .

technique similar to one used by [Robbins et al. \(2017\)](#).³²

4.3 Synthetic controls: application to the SDSCs

We start our evaluation by applying the [ADH](#) estimator to each SDSC district. Because our focus is their impact on gun violence, we use a count of shooting victims as our primary outcome, scaling by a district's population to account for differences in size.³³ Reliable data on shooting victims are available going back to 2010, providing us with 14 biannual pre-period observations through the beginning of 2017 when the first SDSCs were implemented in the 7th and 11th districts.³⁴ We use all of the available pre-period outcome observations when initially applying the [ADH](#) estimator and, consequently, do not incorporate any covariates; we revisit the role of covariates as we modify the synthetic controls approach to our application as described below.

The [ADH](#) synthetic control is unable to produce a good pre-period fit (Figure 5, using the 7th district as an example). This is not surprising: the SDSC districts are outliers compared to the 16 donor districts, the [ADH](#) estimator constrains the synthetic control to be within the convex hull of the donor districts, and it does not permit an intercept. Improving this situation will require either turning to a more flexible estimator or finding a candidate donor pool with donor units experiencing levels of gun violence more comparable to those of the SDSC districts.

Before turning to estimators that may be better equipped to handle outlier treated units, we first consider whether there are ways of constructing a more diverse candidate donor pool that gives us additional options for matching the treated districts. Relying on the fact that Chicago's 22 police districts are subdivided into approximately a dozen "beats" each (Figure 6), and that

³² Though motivated here, in part, by the desire for a single synthetic control to facilitate comparisons of treatment effects across primary and secondary/mediating outcomes, this approach can be used to include any kind of covariate into the [DI](#) estimator, helping to address the weakness described earlier.

³³ We have access to data on each shooting incident in the city, which provides us flexibility in how we aggregate them. However, we have found that the synthetic controls method performs poorly when time periods are shorter and, correspondingly, many of them contain no shooting incidents for the treated district.

³⁴ The biannual periods are from March through August and September through February. In all calculations and figures, we report monthly averages within each period. Because the first SDSCs opened in February 2017, and expanded to the control districts beginning in January 2018, the last pre-period is from September 2016 through January 2017 (5 months), the first post-period is from February 2017 through August 2017 (7 months), and the last post-period is from September 2017 through December 2017 (4 months).

some of the 16 donor districts contain beats with high rates of gun violence, we redefine our pool as the 196 donor beats within the 16 donor districts. Comparing the shootings per capita of SDSC districts to those of donor districts and donor beats, respectively, we see that the SDSC *districts* are not outliers to the same degree relative to the donor *beat* distribution (Figure 7).

Applying the ADH estimator with the pool of donor beats yields synthetic controls with much better pre-period fit, though still with significant deviations (Figure 8). Though a more diverse candidate donor pool improves the performance of the ADH estimator, it remains true that the SDSC districts are outliers relative to the donor beats in their rates of gun violence.

We next turn to the DI estimator and apply it to each SDSC district, using the pool of candidate donor beats.³⁵ By relaxing the constraints imposed by the ADH estimator, the DI synthetic control achieves a much better pre-period fit (Figure 9). However, we might be worried that, with weaker constraints and so many donor beats from which to choose, the DI estimator achieves this impressive pre-period fit by overfitting, which would compromise the reliability of the synthetic control in the post-period.

This concern is exacerbated in our setting, with multiple treated units that are outliers and may be differentially susceptible to overfitting, because of how the DI estimator chooses two key parameters that govern how weights are determined. As proposed by DI, the two hyperparameters, (α, λ) , are chosen using a cross-validation procedure to minimize error in the post-period among the donor units.³⁶ This procedure yields a single pair of hyperparameters to be used in determining weights for all the treated units, relying only on data from the donor units. This may be particularly problematic here, where our six treated units are outlier police districts on the South and West Sides of Chicago. Furthermore, due to differences in the availability of local non-treated beats in the donor pool, we suspect that some of our treated districts may be more

³⁵ The cross-validation procedure outlined by DI requires estimating a synthetic control for each donor unit to choose the hyperparameters (α^*, λ^*) . Due to difficulty estimating a synthetic control for each donor beat, we instead estimate one for each of the 16 donor districts as part of the cross-validation procedure.

³⁶ This approach relies on the assumption that, absent any treatment effect, synthetic controls chosen for the donor units should closely track their observed outcomes in the post-period. This is a strong assumption, particularly in settings where it is plausible that treatment may result in spillover effects on donor units, as is the case here.

susceptible to overfitting than others.³⁷

We propose a modification to the DI estimator that aims to address these concerns. This modification departs from the original DI estimator by choosing hyperparameters *separately* for each treated unit using a time-series cross-validation technique.³⁸ Unlike the original DI estimator, which chooses hyperparameters that minimize error in the *post-period* among the donor units, the modified version chooses hyperparameters that minimize error in the *pre-period* for just the treated unit in question. The implicit assumption in the modified approach (that treatment has not yet occurred in the pre-period) is considerably weaker than the one in the original DI approach (that the donor units are unaffected by treatment in the post-period). Furthermore, by choosing hyperparameters that minimize prediction error within the treated unit across a series of one-step-ahead forecasts, the estimator builds in some additional protection against overfitting.

We apply the modified DI estimator along with two of the additional safeguards against overfitting described earlier: limiting the candidate donor pool and fitting a synthetic control to multiple outcomes simultaneously. To limit the candidate donor pool, we estimate a propensity score for each candidate donor beat using a vector of characteristics drawn from Census data.³⁹ In the modified DI estimator cross-validation step, in addition to searching over possible values of the hyperparameters (α, λ) , we also search over potential bandwidths that determine how many of the donor beats that are “closest” in characteristics-space to include in the estimation. After

³⁷ Gun violence on the West Side is thought to be driven by the narcotics trade that occurs along the I-290 corridor, while gun violence on the South Side is considered more idiosyncratic and less purposeful in nature, often revolving around personal disputes. This characterization is a gross oversimplification, but it highlights the fact that West Side donor beats may be poor candidates for a South Side treated unit, and South Side donor beats may be poor candidates for a West Side treated unit. Furthermore, three of the SDSC districts—the 15th, 11th, and 10th—encompass most of the gun violence on the West Side, leaving relatively few non-treated West Side districts from which donor beats can be drawn compared to the South Side, where the three SDSC districts—the 6th, 7th, and 9th—have a comparatively larger pool of non-treated South Side donors in the candidate pool.

³⁸ For each treated unit, use a subset of sequential pre-periods as a training set, with the one pre-period following as a test set. For a given value of (α, λ) , estimate a weight vector and intercept using the training set, and use these to predict the outcome in the single-period test set, recording the MSE. Then, lengthen the training set by one period, using the next available pre-period as the new test set. Repeat this process until the last pre-period is the test set. Calculate the cross-validation error as the average MSE across all test sets. The values of (α^*, λ^*) minimize this cross-validation error.

³⁹ Propensity scores are estimated using a logistic regression on the sample of candidate donor beats ($D = 0$) and beats in the treated district ($D = 1$). Predictors include total population, fraction of households with annual income under \$40,000, fraction African American, and fraction Hispanic.

choosing hyperparameters and a donor pool to minimize out-of-sample prediction error, we fit a synthetic control to six outcomes simultaneously: one primary outcome of interest (shooting victims per capita), one secondary outcome of interest (Part I violent felony incidents per capita), and four measures of potential mediating mechanisms (warrant arrests per capita, gun arrests per capita, overall arrests per capita, and traffic stops per capita). For a given outcome n of a treated unit, Y_{0nt} , and the associated synthetic control, $\hat{Y}_{0nt} = \sum_{j=1}^{J^*} w_j^* Y_{jnt}$, we estimate the treatment effect in period t as:

$$\hat{\tau}_{nt} = Y_{0nt} - \hat{Y}_{0nt} \quad (4)$$

Having outlined how we choose our synthetic control and generate treatment effect estimates, we now describe how we assess the significance of those estimates. We start with the placebo test suggested by [ADH](#), in which a synthetic control is calculated for each donor unit, along with a placebo treatment effect. Under the null hypothesis that the donor units are unexposed to any treatment, the estimated treatment effect for the treated unit is compared to this distribution of placebo treatment effects. The fraction of placebo treatment effects greater than or equal to the estimated treatment effect is the p -value.

Due to difficulty estimating a synthetic control for each donor beat, we instead estimate one for each of the 16 donor districts. But this yields a distribution of placebo treatment effects with only 16 values, limiting our ability to assess precisely how extreme the estimated treatment effect is. For example, suppose the estimated treatment effect is close to one of the placebo treatment effects. Under different realizations of the data, this estimated treatment effect may be larger or smaller than the placebo effect, and correspondingly receive p -values that may be substantially different. This limits our ability to tell whether the observed effect is an outlier.

We resolve the inference challenge posed by having too few donor districts through the use of a resampling method. Using the fact that each police district is comprised of individual beats, we create resampled donor police districts by sampling beats with replacement from within each actual donor district. These resampled police districts are slightly perturbed versions of the original donor districts that solve the problem outlined above by providing additional placebo

treatment effect estimates in the neighborhood around each of the original 16 placebo treatment effect estimates. An estimated treatment effect that was just larger than a placebo effect and had a correspondingly low p -value, for example, may now see its statistical significance reduced when re-assessed in the presence of additional placebo effects. Using resampled police districts greatly increases the size the donor district pool for the inference procedure, while preserving the geographic clustering of beats by resampling within districts rather than across them, which may be important in environments in which statistical noise has a strong patterning by place and time.⁴⁰

4.4 Spillovers

One concern worth noting is the potential for bias due to treatment spillover from the introduction of the SDSCs, particularly given the close geographic proximity of some candidate donor units. This potential spillover could operate through several channels. For example, if treatment induces a reallocation of resources across districts, then outcomes of donor districts may be affected by treatment even if they did not receive an SDSC.⁴¹ Even if resources across districts remain fixed, individuals deterred from engaging in crime in SDSC districts may do so elsewhere.

Though important to take seriously, we think the magnitude of any spillover effect is likely to be small for the outcome of interest, for two reasons. First, the SDSC intervention is designed to change within-district resource allocations—which district units are deployed where and when—rather than across-district allocations. As discussed in Section 3, the SDSC provides a district Commander with information, analytical capacity, and a management process with which to implement a

⁴⁰ This is related to but slightly different from the approach employed by [Robbins et al. \(2017\)](#), who generate placebo areas using a permutation technique that groups together many comparison areas that are smaller (block-level) than their treatment area (neighborhood-level). As a result, their placebo areas are random assortments of small comparison areas that lack the structure of the treatment area, requiring them to standardize their effect estimates to guard against the resulting bias. In contrast, we avoid this issue by creating placebo districts using a resampling procedure, wherein we resample beats from existing comparison districts with replacement, preserving the structure of those comparison districts in the process.

⁴¹ The sign of any bias resulting from such a reallocation is ambiguous. If the SDSC reduces violence in a treated district, then resources may be shifted from there to districts without an SDSC. On the other hand, the Department may have an incentive to bolster the SDSC effort by allocating additional officers to those districts.

proactive policing strategy. The district Commander does not have command over the Area units operating in his or her district, nor do GPS data from vehicles in CPD's fleet or attendance records suggest there was an influx of resources into districts, either from the Area or from elsewhere in the city, following the SDSCs' introduction (see, e.g. 7th district, Figure 10).

Second, the primary outcome of interest—violent crime, and particularly gun violence—is among the crimes least likely to be susceptible to displacement by enhanced policing. Gun violence is often tied to a feature of a specific location that is immobile in the short run, such as a lucrative drug-selling corner or the block of a rival street organization member, or it occurs following an altercation. In neither case is gun violence likely to move several blocks away if deterred from occurring in its original location. This is consistent with the available evidence on displacement, which detects adverse spillovers for property but not violent crime (Blattman et al., 2017).

5 Empirical Results

We turn to estimating the impact of the SDSCs on our main outcome (shooting victims per capita) in each of the six Tier 1 districts using the modified [DI](#) estimator described in the previous section. We first estimate a synthetic control for just this outcome for each SDSC district. Then, we estimate a single synthetic control for each district simultaneously for this primary outcome plus five secondary outcomes: Part I violent felony incidents, gun arrests, warrant arrests, overall arrests, and traffic stops per capita.⁴² The first set of estimates serve as our main results for the impact of the SDSCs on serious crime. The second set of estimates serve as both a robustness check and as a way to understand more about mechanisms driving the primary results.

⁴² Part I violent felonies include homicide, criminal sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and aggravated battery. A warrant arrest is an arrest made on the basis of an outstanding warrant being located in the Law Enforcement Agencies Data System database. A gun arrest is an arrest of a person found to illegally possess a firearm or after the use of a firearm in a shooting that did not result in injury to a person.

5.1 Primary outcome: shooting victims per capita

Table 1 reports estimates of the SDSCs' impact on shooting victims per capita in each of the six Tier 1 districts. Because we conduct multiple hypothesis tests throughout this analysis, we correct for multiple comparisons in two ways. First, we control for the familywise error rate (FWER), or the probability of falsely rejecting one or more true null hypotheses (type I error). Second, we control for the false discovery rate (FDR), or the proportion of true null hypotheses that are falsely rejected among the total number of rejected hypotheses ("discoveries"). Controlling for the FWER is generally the more conservative multiple comparison procedure, as it limits the probability of making any type I error. In contrast, controlling for the FDR is generally the less conservative multiple comparison procedure, as it limits the fraction of false rejections among the set of discoveries. We correct for multiple comparisons across districts and outcomes separately for the main and secondary sets of results, reporting multiple comparisons-corrected q -values alongside uncorrected p -values.⁴³

Table 1 shows that after accounting for the number of hypotheses being tested, the impacts on shootings in two of the six districts appear to be statistically significant: a decline in shootings in the 7th district, together with signs of a possible large *increase* in gun violence in the 15th district. To better understand the reliability of these estimates, we consider the results for each district separately in greater detail.

Relative to its synthetic control, the 7th district experienced a 26 percent decline in shooting victims following the introduction of the SDSC. This implies that there were 75 fewer shooting victims in the 7th district during the 11 months of 2017 after the SDSC was introduced than there would have been otherwise. The synthetic control is able to closely match the observed

⁴³ To control for the FWER, we use the Holm-Bonferroni correction (Holm, 1979), which is uniformly more powerful than the classic Bonferroni correction and does not rely on assumptions about the independence of the tests being performed, as does the more powerful procedure suggested by Hochberg (1988). To control for the FDR, we use the Benjamini-Yekutieli procedure, which similarly does not rely on assumptions about the independence of the tests being performed (Benjamini et al., 2001). Both corrections are implemented using the Stata `qqvalue` package. For the main set of results, these corrections account for 6 comparisons (6 districts, 1 primary outcome per district). For the secondary set of results, these corrections account for 36 comparisons (6 districts, 1 primary and 5 secondary outcomes per district).

pre-treatment patterns in the district, and the placebo test makes clear that this reduction is an outlier relative to its placebo effect distribution (Figure 11). Even after correcting for multiple comparisons, this estimate is statistically distinguishable from zero.

In contrast, relative to its synthetic control, the 15th district appears to have experienced a 37 percent increase in shooting victims following the introduction of the SDSC. However, compared to the 7th district, the synthetic control for the 15th district has a noticeably worse quality pre-period fit, particularly immediately prior to the SDSC's introduction when the synthetic control seems to underestimate the observed pattern (Figure 13). This problem is exacerbated when the synthetic control is estimated jointly for the primary and secondary outcomes: the pre-period prediction error increases substantially (Figure 14). These deviations cause the synthetic control to significantly underestimate the true series, partially explaining why we estimate an adverse treatment effect in the post-period.

5.2 Secondary outcomes: Part I violent felony incidents and officer activity measures

To better understand the mechanisms driving the reduction in shootings in the 7th district, we estimate a single synthetic control jointly across both the primary and secondary outcomes: a broader measure of violent crime (Part I violent felony incidents) and measures of officer activity (Table 2). Using this method, the treatment effect for the primary outcome remains qualitatively similar and the fit of the synthetic control remains good (Figure 12). The treatment effect estimates for the secondary outcomes suggest that the SDSC may have reduced Part I violent felony incidents in addition to shootings, and that it led to large apparent increases in several measures of officer activity:

- gun arrests increase by 28 percent
- arrests of people with an open warrant increase by 36 percent
- overall arrests increase by 20 percent
- traffic stops, a source of recovered guns by CPD, increase by 77 percent

Some of these increases predate the introduction of the SDSC, others exhibit a poor quality fit for the synthetic control, and many are not statistically distinguishable from zero after correcting for multiple comparisons. Nevertheless, their co-movement is broadly consistent with a change in the behavior of 7th district officers (specifically increased implementation of the key elements of pro-active policing) that coincided with the district's substantial reductions in violence.

More descriptively, we also see a large increase in at least one measure of community policing in the 7th district following the introduction of the SDSC: positive community interactions (PCIs). There are too few of these citywide prior to the introduction of the SDSCs, so a synthetic control estimate is not possible, but the descriptive trend is nonetheless suggestive. As part of the SDSC roll-out, some district Commanders, particularly then-Commander Kenneth Johnson of the 7th district, made a point of emphasizing the importance of officers engaging in positive interactions with members of the community. Commander Johnson's emphasis that his officers do this may be reflected, in part, in the large increase in the volume of PCIs in the 7th district following the SDSC's implementation, though officers from other SDSC districts followed suit in the second half of 2017 (Figure 16). Of course, we do not mean to suggest that this increase is entirely or even mostly reflective of greater engagement with community members by officers. However, it is noteworthy that this increase was by far the largest in the 7th district, which has the most durable evidence of a substantial reduction in gun violence. This increase in PCIs suggests either a real change in officer behavior, a greater willingness to follow through on the Commander's orders, or some combination of the two that merits further study to understand what role, if any, they played in the serious crime reduction in the 7th district.

One mechanism that we can definitively rule out as driving the reduction in shootings in the 7th district is the number of officers operating there. As discussed earlier and shown in Figure 10, both GPS data on vehicles in CPD's fleet and attendance data provide strong evidence that the aggregate officer resources—measured either as the number of officers reporting for duty or the time officers spent in the field—was unchanged following the introduction of the SDSC.

5.3 Potential longer-term impacts on other districts

The eventual expansion of the SDSCs across police districts, and the diffusion of the management changes they introduce, complicates our efforts to understand what, if anything, happened in SDSC-adopting districts other than the 7th. Did these districts increase output after implementing SDSCs but with a longer lag than the 7th district, so that we miss signs of the increased output during our fairly short-term follow-up window? Were they already operating on their production frontiers when the SDSCs were implemented? Or are these other districts more resistant than the 7th district to changing day-to-day practices in response to the SDSC? In what follows, we bring three data points to bear that suggest some longer-term change in these other districts.

The first involves arrests initiated by officers monitoring the Department's closed-circuit cameras, called Police Observation Devices (PODs). As described in Appendix B, PODs predate the SDSCs, though their number and quality—from standard definition to high definition—both expanded as part of the intervention. Furthermore, the cumbersome software previously available for monitoring the PODs was replaced in SDSC districts by a much easier-to-use platform that made them more accessible to officers. As a result, with each wave of new SDSCs—in Tier 1 districts in early 2017, and in Tier 2 districts in early 2018—the number of POD-initiated arrests increased substantially (Figure 15). Put differently, we see clear signs that use of technology increased in all districts following the SDSCs' implementation.

The second involves officer self-reports of positive engagements with the community, or PCIs. As discussed above, we saw particularly large increases in PCIs in the 7th district following initial implementation of the SDSC there in February 2017, which was much larger than the changes observed in other districts at that time. However, over time, we have gradually seen similarly large increases in PCIs in the other SDSC districts as well. That is, this rough proxy measure of community policing did change in other SDSC districts, but with a longer lag.

Finally, we can extend our analysis of shootings in the 7th district into 2018, the year when the seven Tier 2 police districts also received an SDSC. The expansion of the SDSCs into Tier 2 districts means that many of the comparison units in our analysis of the 7th district treatment effect become

treated themselves starting in 2018. If the intervention has an effect on these other districts, the result should be a narrowing of the gap between the 7th district and its synthetic control. And indeed we do find suggestive evidence of this narrowing of the gap between the 7th district and its synthetic control in 2018 as comparison areas adopt the treatment themselves (Figure 17).

6 Conclusion

We study the impact of a set of management reforms introduced in six high-violence police districts in Chicago. Known as SDSCs, these reforms enabled CPD to make better use of its existing data and technological infrastructure in order to target police deployments on the highest risk people and places.

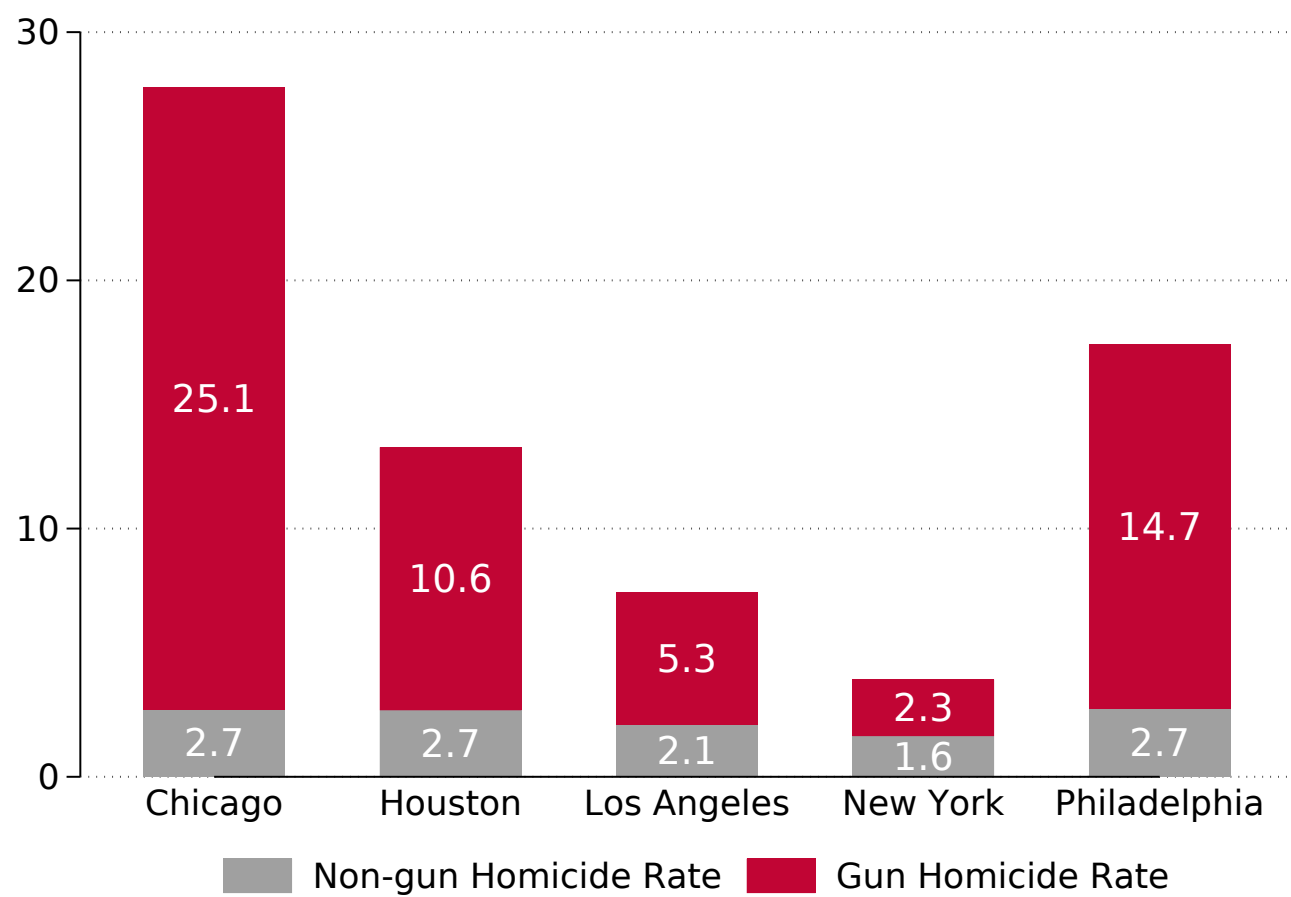
Our results suggest that the SDSC in the 7th district reduced the number of shooting victims there by 26 percent, an estimate that remains statistically significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons. The reduction in violence in the 7th district appears to extend beyond shootings to a larger class of violent felonies, and is accompanied by increases in certain officer activities, such as arrests for guns or of people with open warrants, that suggest a re-allocation of the district's focus toward the highest social cost crimes that the police encounter. These changes were not accompanied by an increase in the number of available officers in the 7th district.

In contrast, violence reduction estimates from the five other districts receiving an SDSC are either imprecise or unreliable. However, several additional pieces of evidence suggest that the SDSCs nevertheless changed the behavior of officers in these districts. Officers provided with an easier-to-use interface for monitoring police cameras in these districts initiated more arrests based on illegal conduct they observed. Further, a prioritization of positive engagement with residents, combined with a greater emphasis on performance-tracking, led to sharp increases in the SDSC districts in self-reported positive community interactions, albeit more rapidly in the 7th district relative to the others. Finally, the expansion of the SDSCs to districts that had previously served as untreated comparison units in our main analysis, and the subsequent narrowing of effect estimates

after this occurred, suggests that their impact was more widespread than just the 7th district.

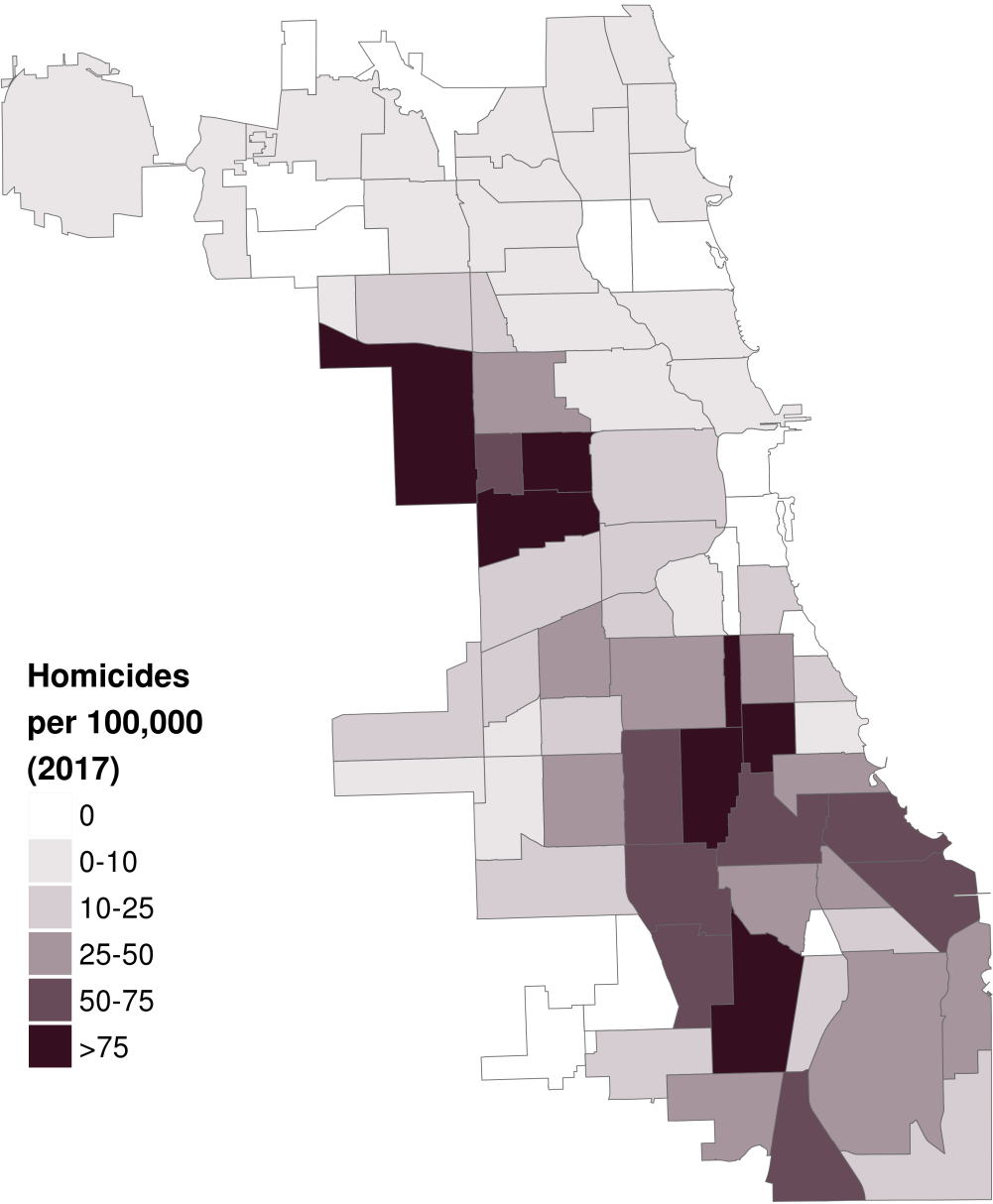
Taken together, the results presented here show that an agency tasked with keeping the public safe may have been operating inside of its production frontier, despite an unprecedented surge in violence and accompanying voter pressure to address this pressing challenge. We arrive at this conclusion because the intervention studied here, the SDSCs, did not provide an infusion of resources (officers), nor did it substantially increase CPD's technological capacity, yet it appears to have substantially reduced gun violence in one of the highest-violence districts where it was implemented. We think the SDSC did this by introducing organizational changes that allowed CPD to make better use of its existing technology infrastructure for carrying out a proactive policing strategy. Given the social challenges facing cities like Chicago and the budget constraints under which they operate, there is great value in gaining a better understanding of whether and how low-cost management changes can increase the productivity of public sector agencies.

Figure 1: Gun and non-gun homicide rates among large U.S. cities, 2016



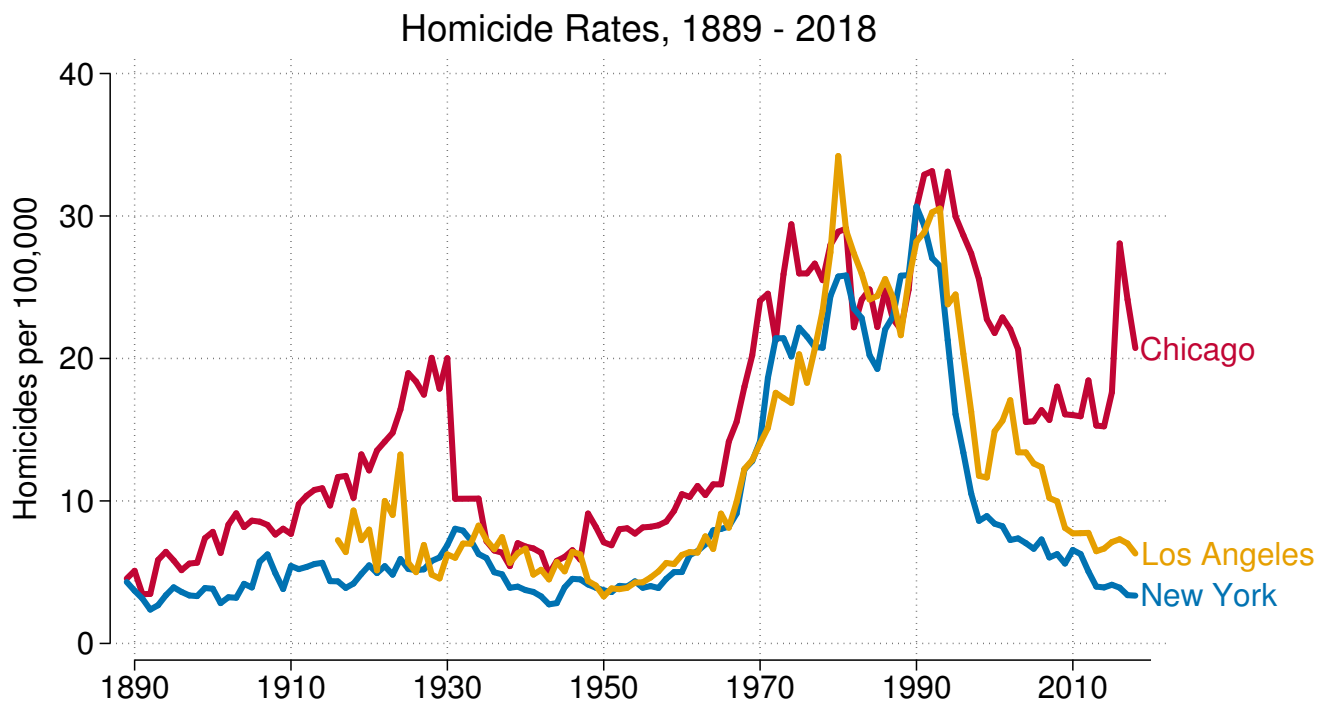
Note: Records provided by the police departments of Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, Houston, and Philadelphia.

Figure 2: Homicide victims per 100,000 across Chicago’s community areas, 2017



Note: Chicago Police Department data.

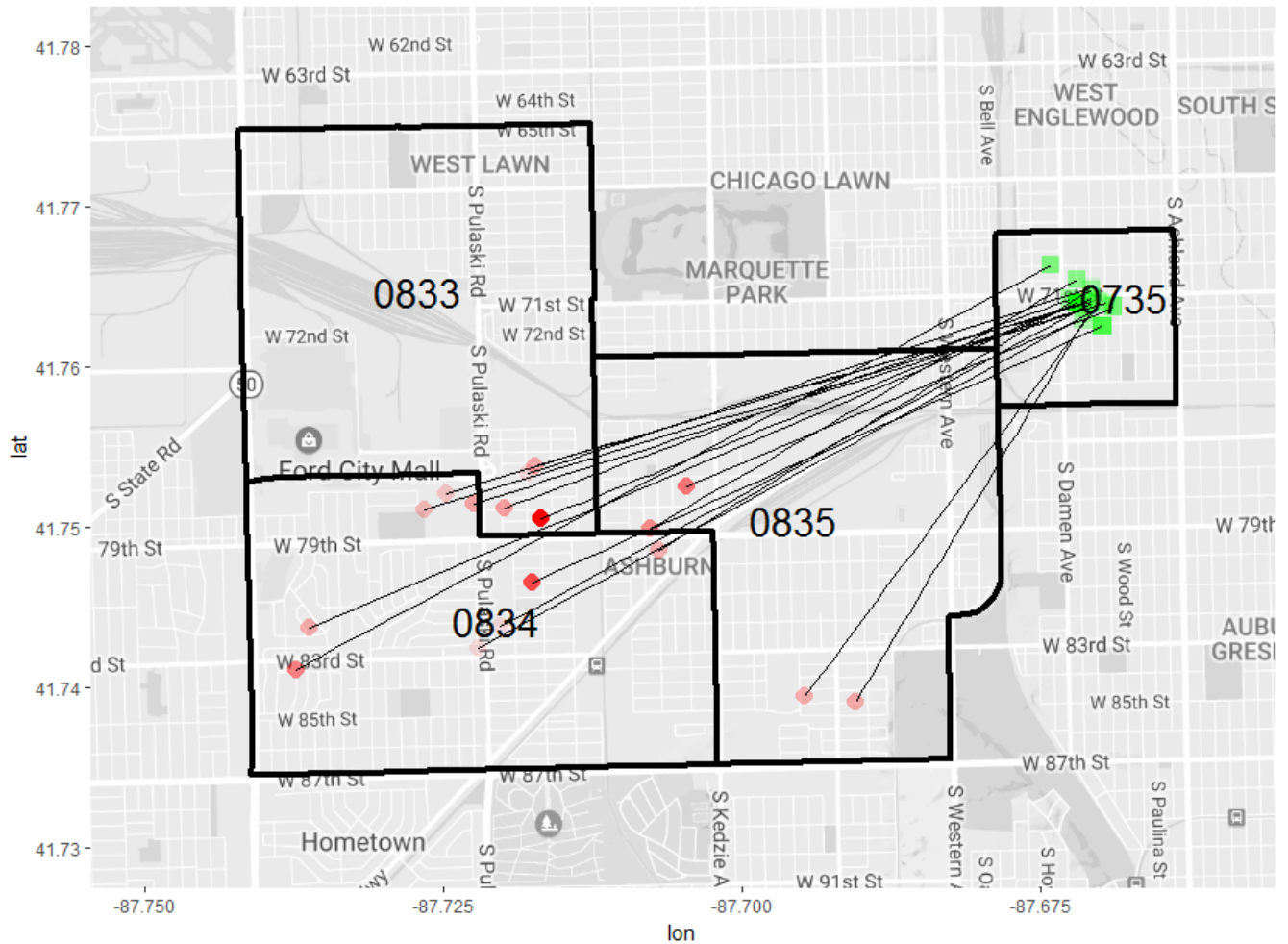
Figure 3: Long-run homicide rates in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, 1889–2018



Note: Chicago homicide data for 1889 through 1930 from the [Chicago Historical Homicide Project](#) at Northwestern University. Chicago homicide data for 1930 through 1959 from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports ([ICPSR 3666](#)). Los Angeles homicide data for 1916 through 1959 from the [Historical Violence Database](#) at the Criminal Justice Research Center, the Ohio State University. New York City homicide data for 1890 through 1959 from the National Institute of Justice ([ICPSR 3226](#)). Homicide data for 1960 through 2017 from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports ([Open ICPSR](#)). Homicide data for 2018 from the police departments of Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles.

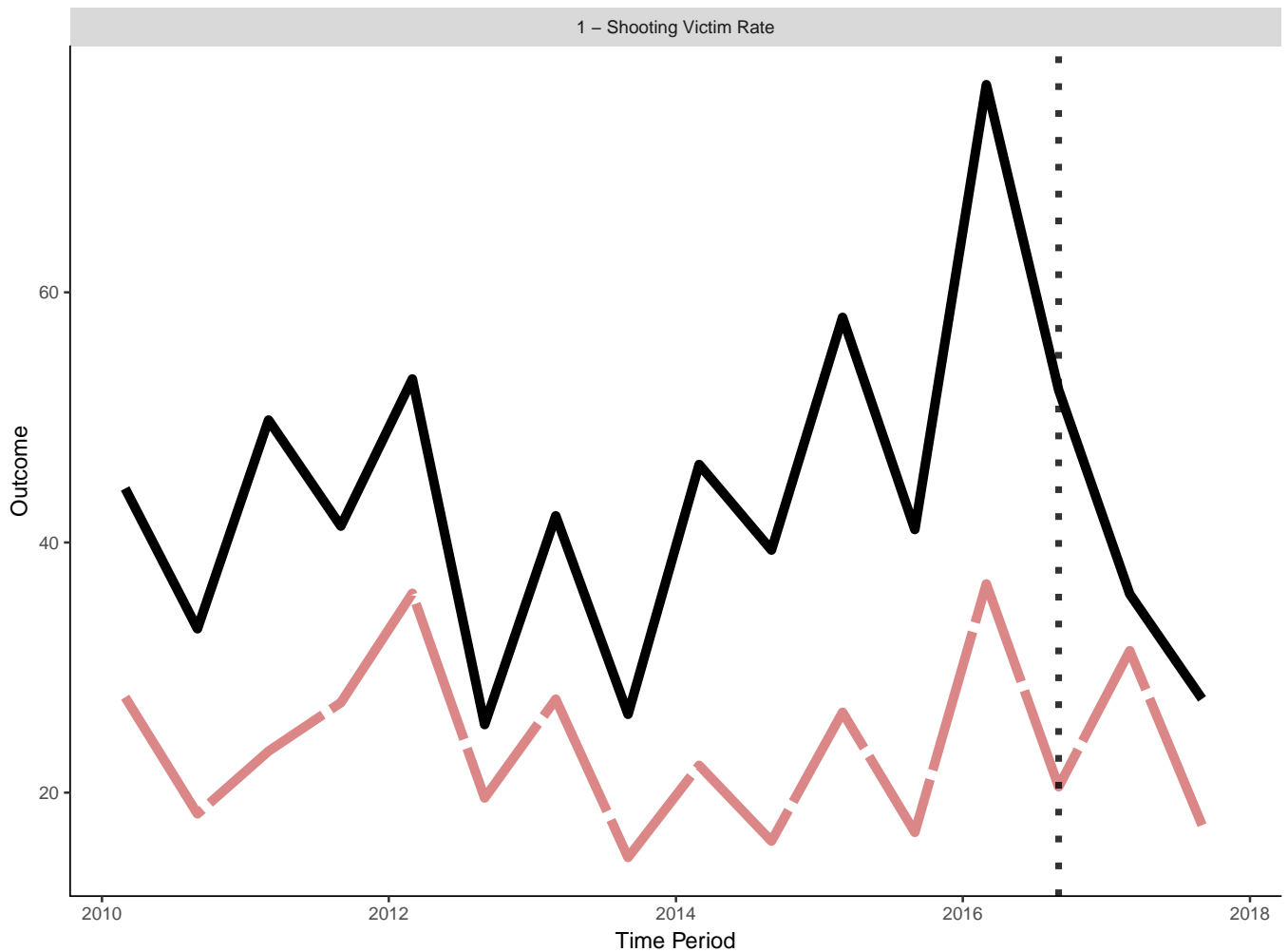
Figure 4: Sample analysis involving motor vehicle thefts from the 7th district

Stolen Vehicles (Red) Connected to their Recovery (Green)
20-Oct to 20-Mar, Darker Shade Indicates More Recent



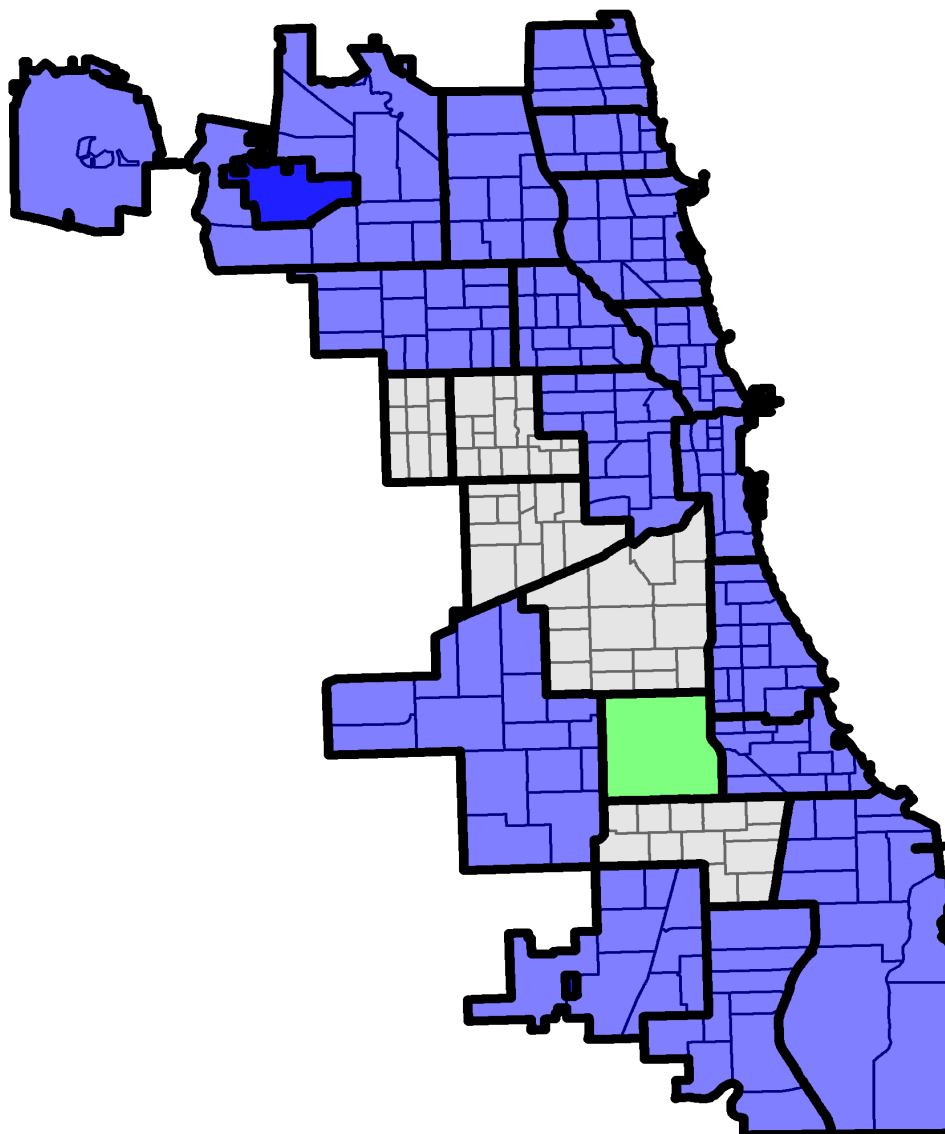
Note: Red dots represent motor vehicle theft locations. Green dots represent motor vehicle theft recovery locations.

Figure 5: Shooting victims per capita in 7th district and ADH synthetic control, districts as donors



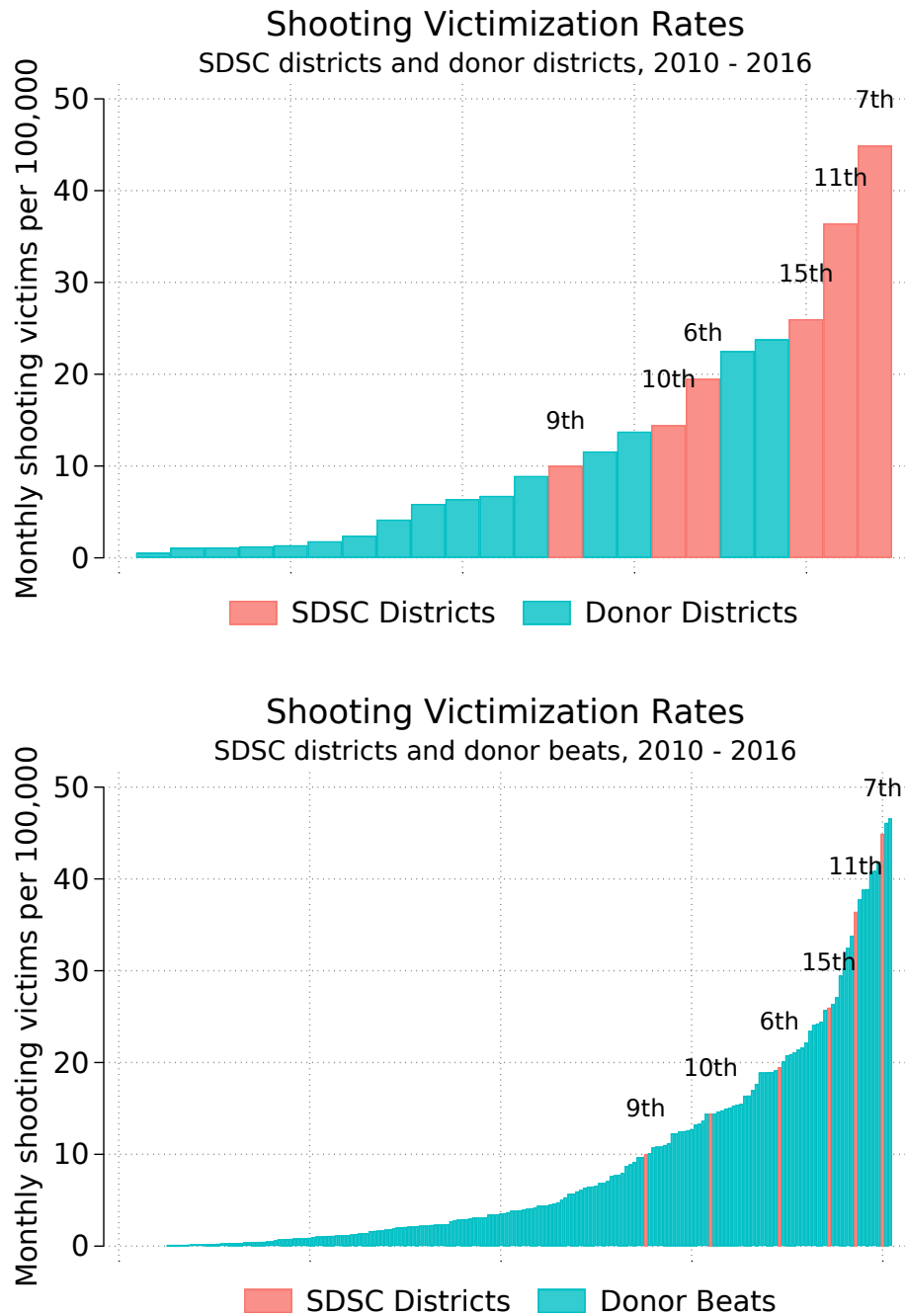
Note: Black line represents biannual average monthly shooting victims per capita in the 7th district. Red line represents synthetic control using the ADH estimator and 16 non-SDSC districts as donors. Dotted vertical line represents last pre-period.

Figure 6: Chicago Police Department districts and beats



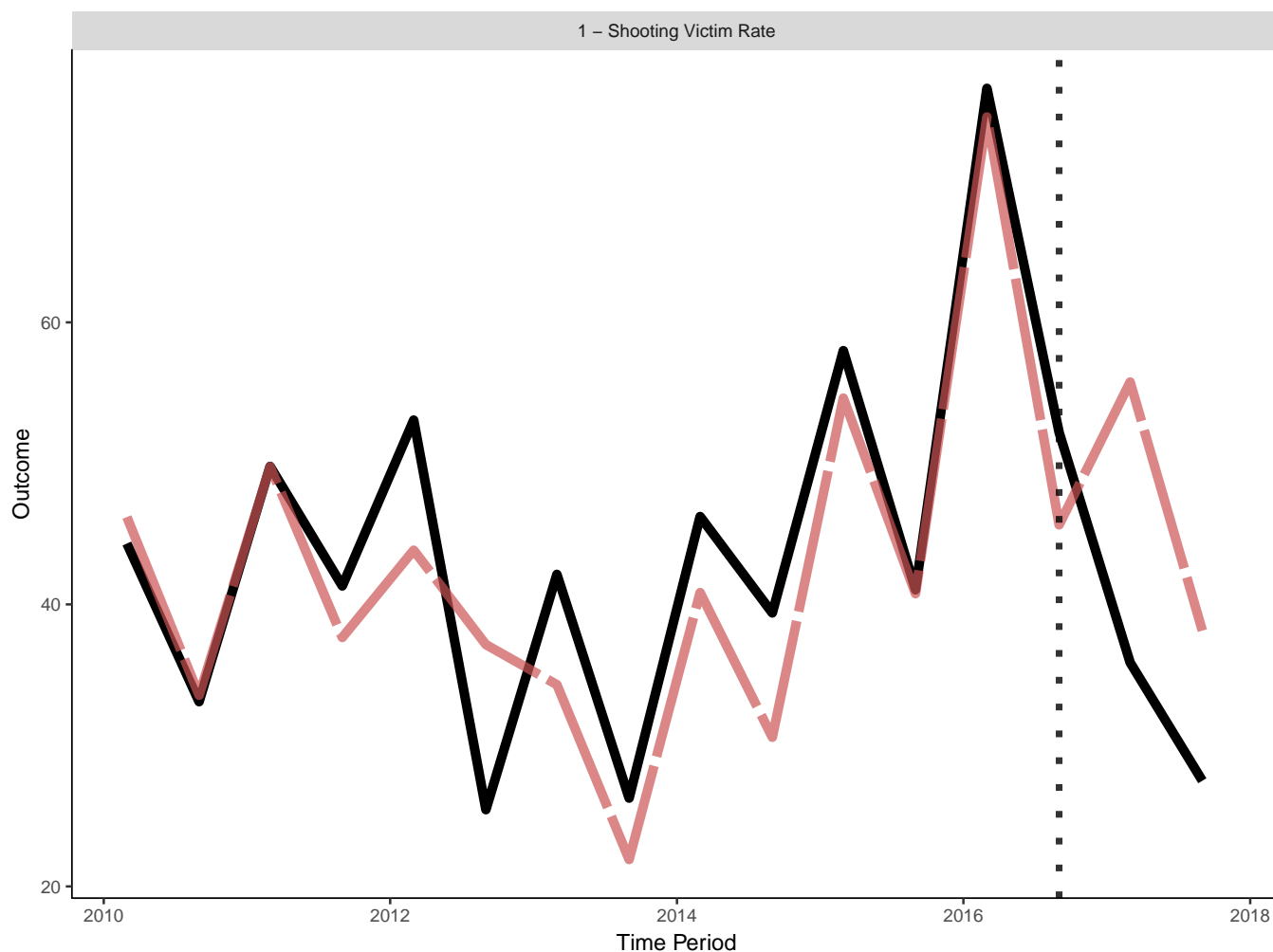
Note: Chicago Police Department district boundaries (bold) and beat boundaries. In this example, the 7th district is shaded green; the other five Tier 1 SDSC districts are shaded gray and excluded from the donor pool; and the 196 beats from among the 16 non-SDSC donor districts are shaded purple and comprise the donor pool.

Figure 7: Distributions of monthly shooting victims per capita



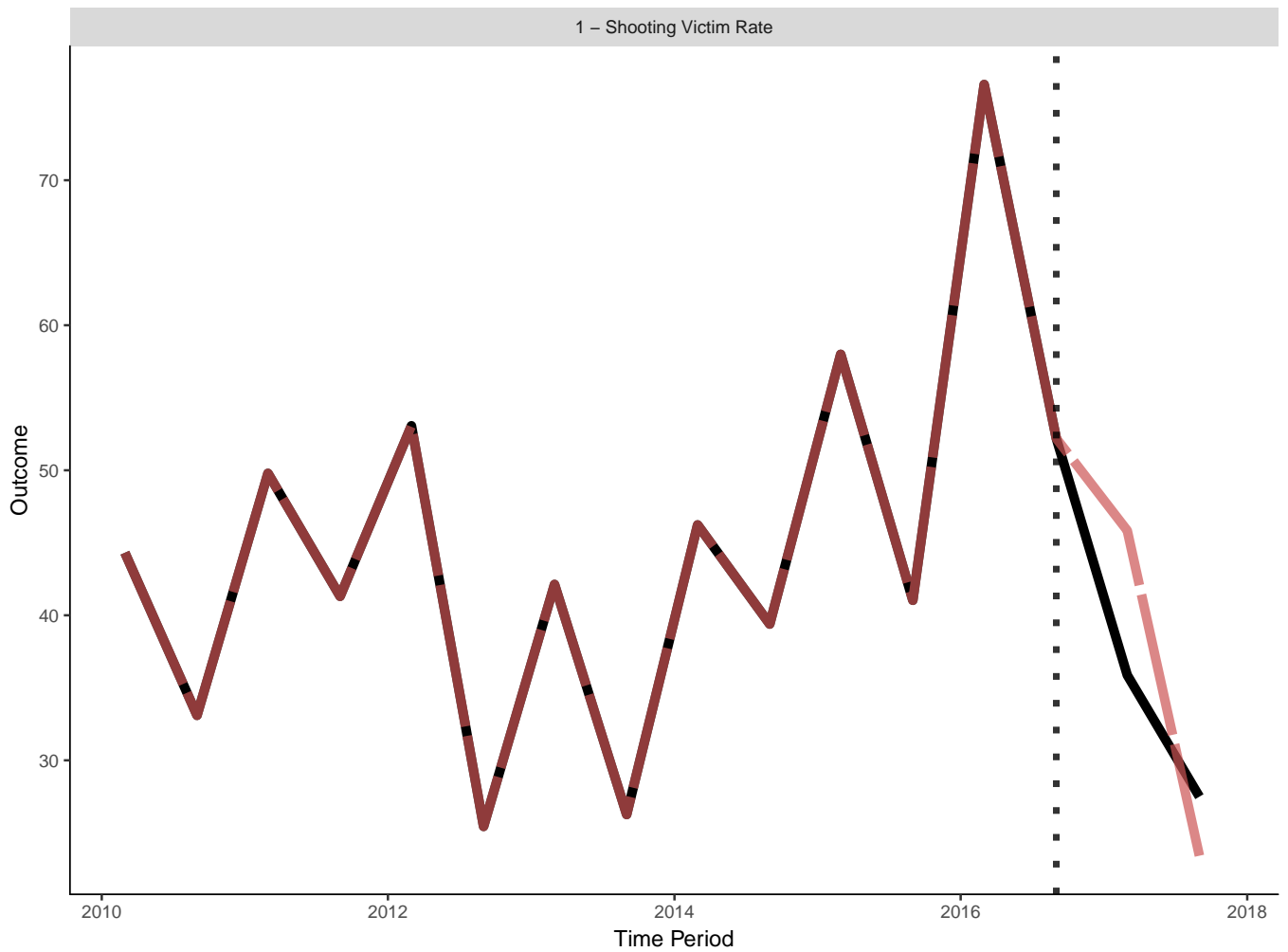
Note: Distributions of average monthly shooting victims per 100,000 in the pre-treatment period for the six SDSC districts vs. the 16 non-SDSC donor districts (top) or the 196 non-SDSC donor beats (bottom).

Figure 8: Shooting victims per capita in 7th district and ADH synthetic control, beats as donors



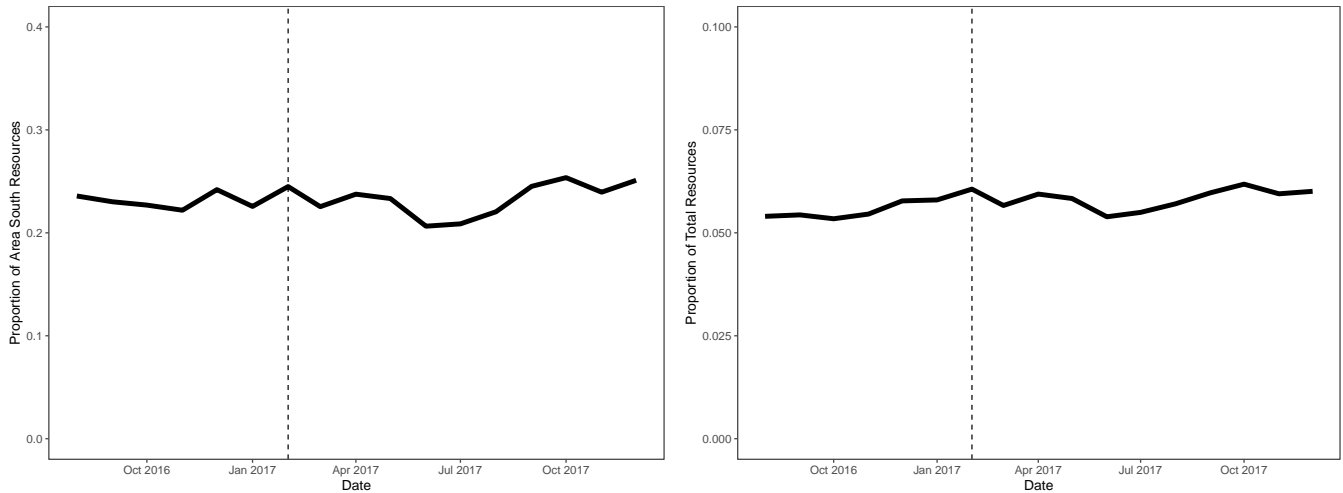
Note: Black line represents biannual average monthly shooting victims per capita in the 7th district. Red line represents synthetic control using the ADH estimator and 196 non-SDSC beats as donors. Dotted vertical line represents last pre-period.

Figure 9: Shooting victims per capita in 7th district and **DI** synthetic control, beats as donors

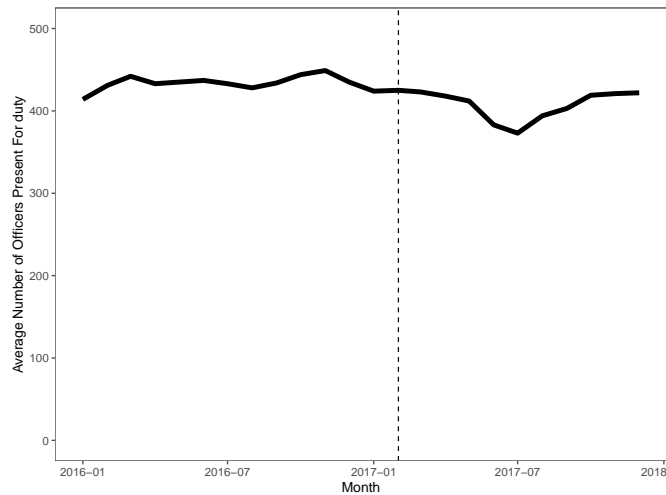


Note: Black line represents biannual average monthly shooting victims per capita in the 7th district. Red line represents synthetic control using the **DI** estimator and 196 non-SDSC beats as donors. Dotted vertical line represents last pre-period.

Figure 10: Officers working in the 7th district



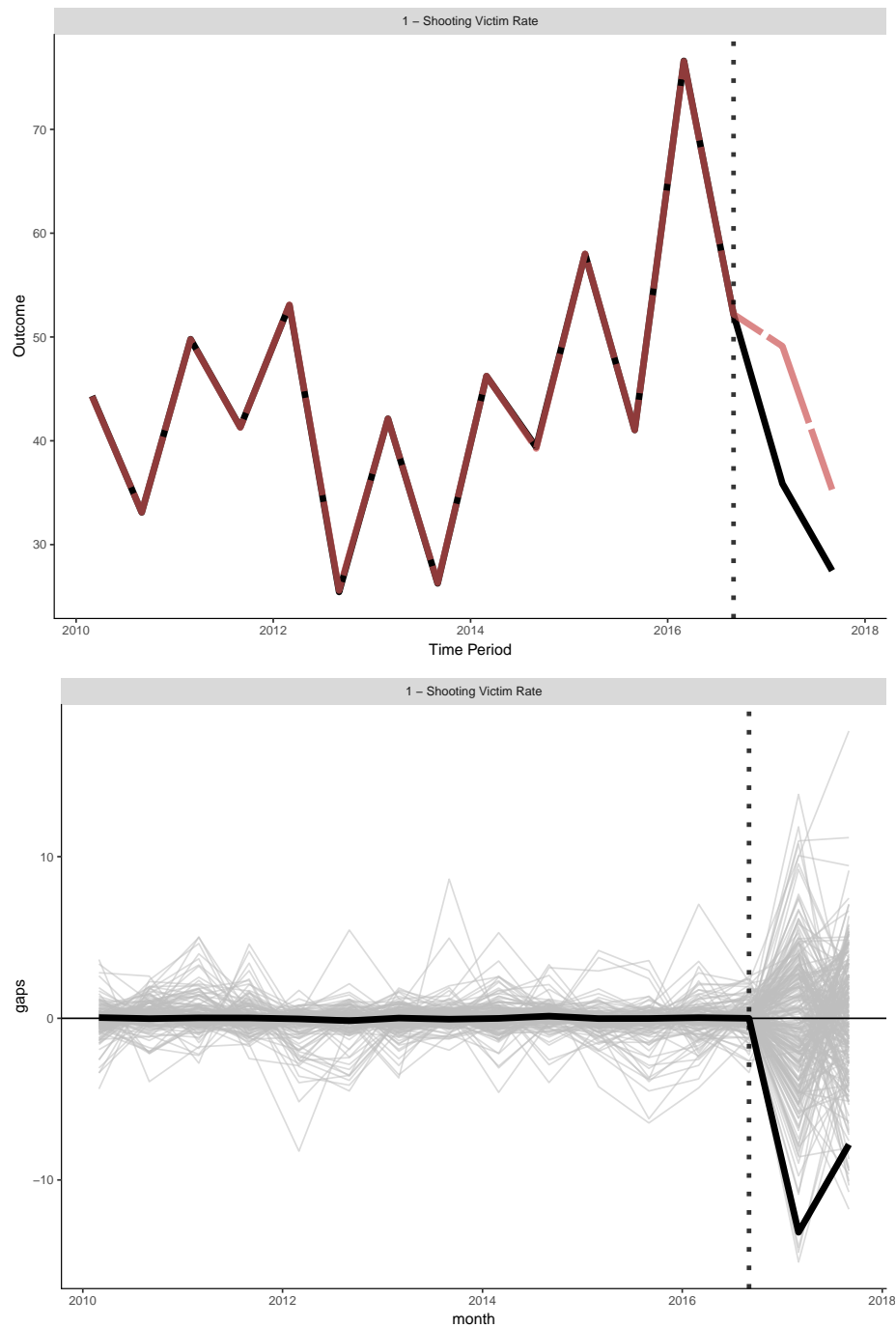
Panel A. Share of all officers in Area South (left) and citywide (right) in the 7th district, GPS data



Panel B. Number of officers present for duty in the 7th district, attendance roster data

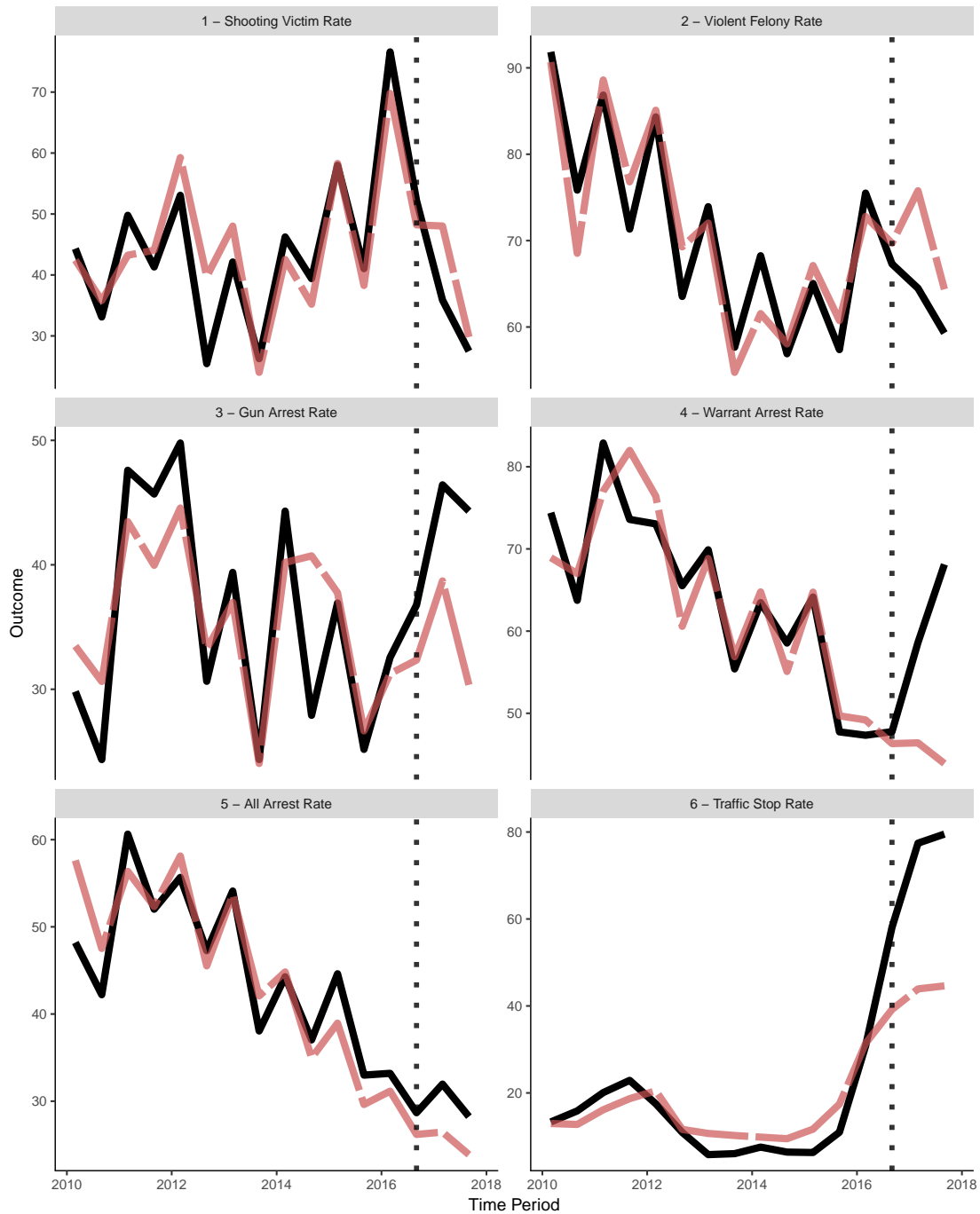
Note: Figures in Panel A show the share of officers (at the Area level and citywide) operating in the 7th district each month, based on data from GPS units located in their vehicles. As a robustness check, the figure in Panel B relies on data from attendance rosters to record the number of unique CPD employees reporting to work in the 7th district.

Figure 11: Shooting victims per capita in 7th district and modified **DI** synthetic control, beats as donors



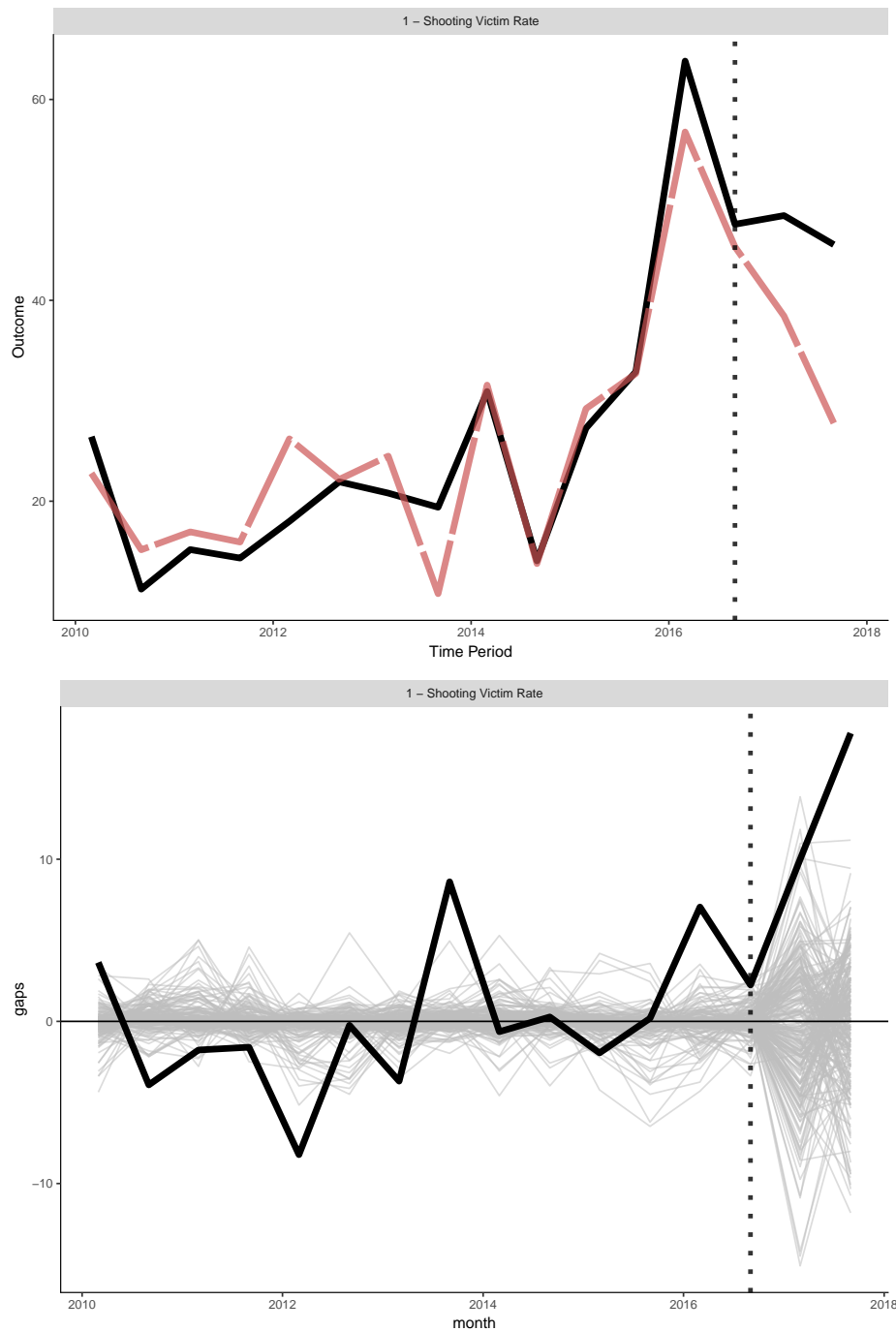
Note: Black line represents biannual average monthly shooting victims per capita in the 7th district. Red line represents synthetic control using the modified **DI** estimator and 196 non-SDSC beats as donors. Dotted vertical line represents last pre-period. Placebo test results plot differences between the a district and its synthetic control, for the 7th district (bold line) and the resampled donor districts (light gray lines).

Figure 12: Primary and secondary outcomes in 7th district and modified DI synthetic control, beats as donors



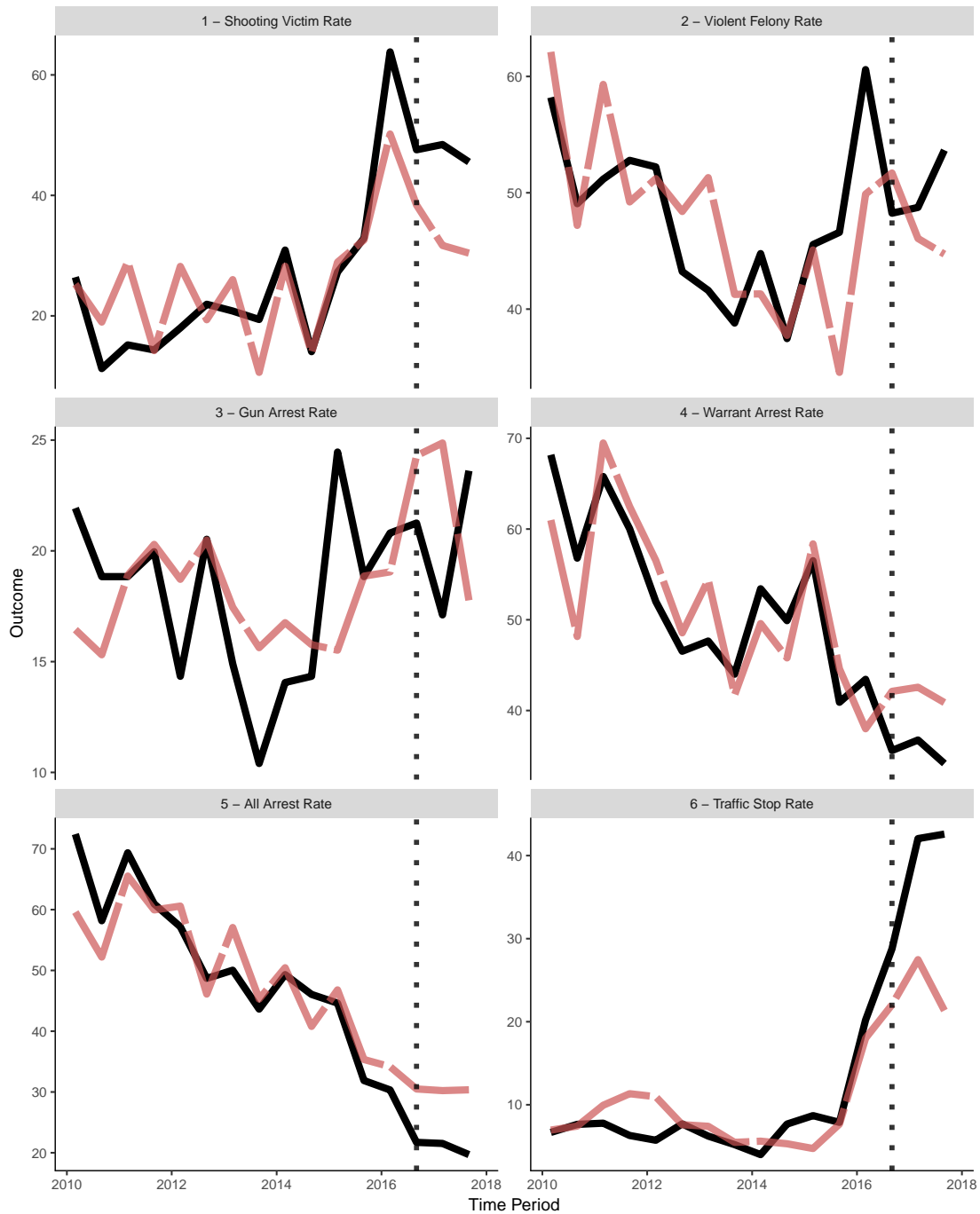
Note: Synthetic control for the 7th district, using modified DI estimator fit to five outcomes (shooting victims per capita, Part I violent felony incidents per capita, gun arrests per capita, warrant arrests per capita, overall arrests per capita, traffic stops per capita) and beats as donors, in red.

Figure 13: Shooting victims per capita in 15th district and modified [DI](#) synthetic control, beats as donors



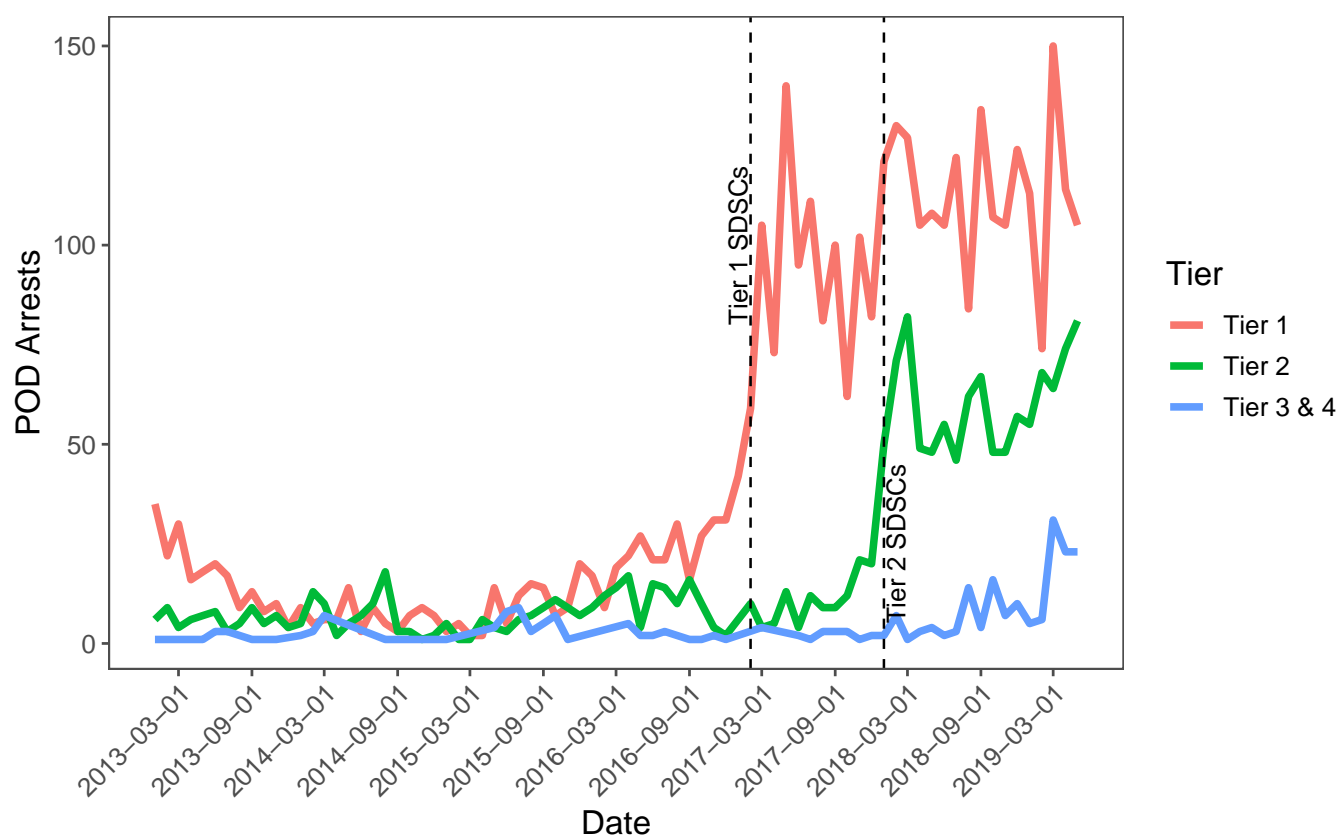
Note: Black line represents biannual average monthly shooting victims per capita in the 15th district. Red line represents synthetic control using the modified [DI](#) estimator and 196 non-SDSC beats as donors. Dotted vertical line represents last pre-period. Placebo test results plot differences between the a district and its synthetic control, for the 15th district (bold line) and the resampled donor districts (light gray lines).

Figure 14: Primary and secondary outcomes in 15th district and modified DI synthetic control, beats as donors



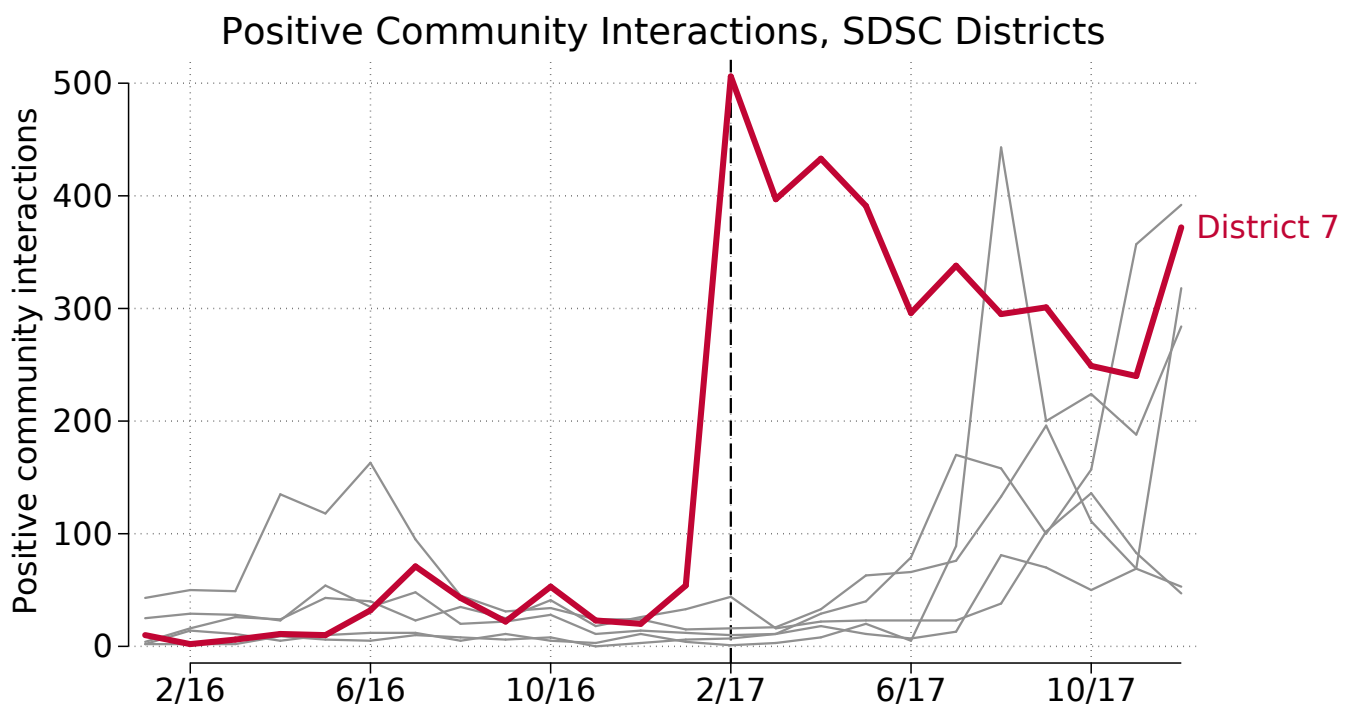
Note: Synthetic control for the 15th district, using modified DI estimator fit to five outcomes (shooting victims per capita, Part I violent felony incidents per capita, gun arrests per capita, warrant arrests per capita, overall arrests per capita, traffic stops per capita) and beats as donors, in red.

Figure 15: Police camera-initiated arrests



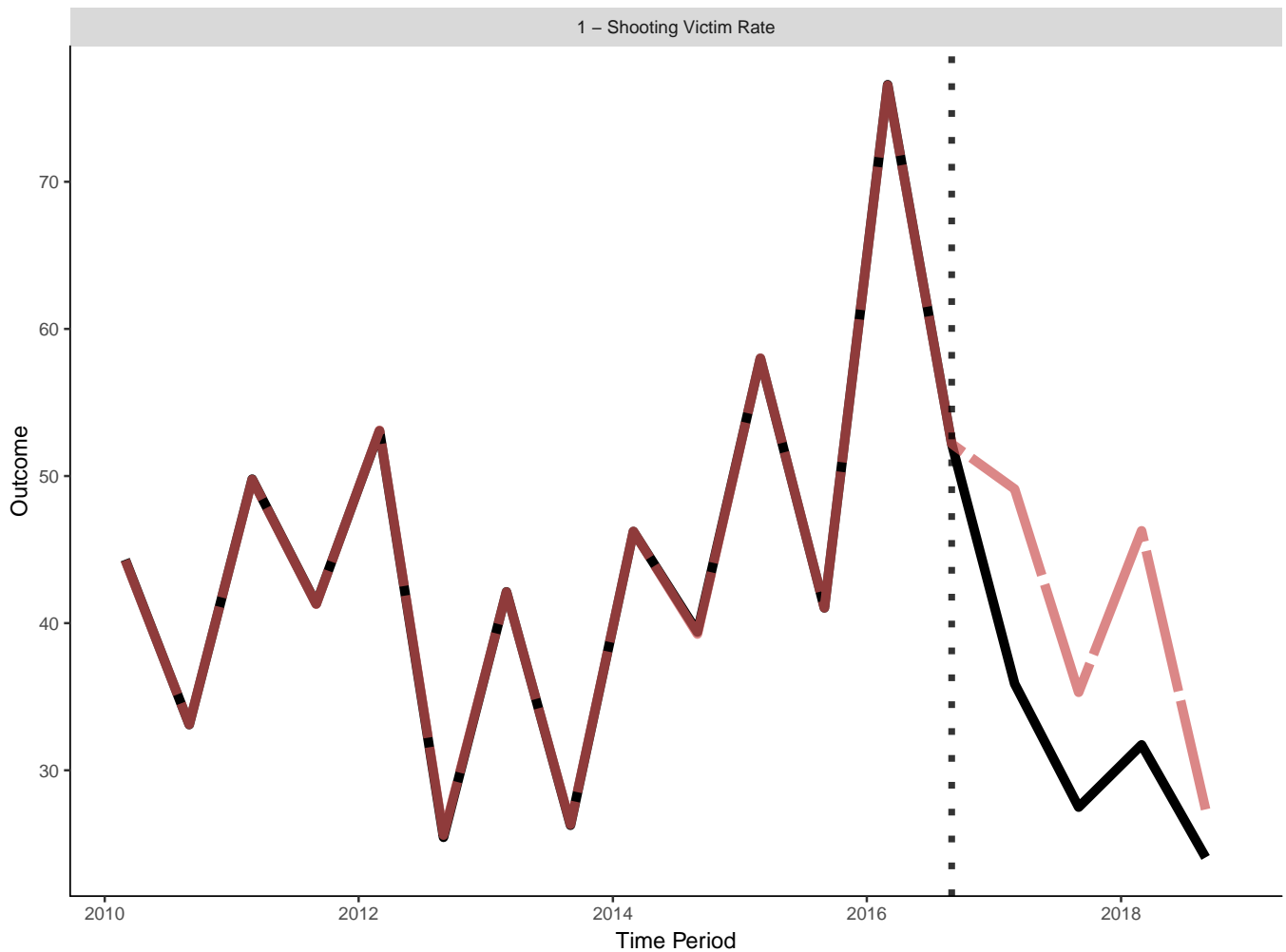
Note: Arrests initiated by officers monitoring POD cameras, by district Tier. SDSCs were first introduced in early 2017 in the six Tier 1 districts, followed by the seven Tier 2 districts in early 2018.

Figure 16: Positive community interactions: 7th district vs. other SDSC districts



Note: Monthly volume of positive community interaction (PCI) calls by officers in Tier 1 districts.

Figure 17: Shooting victims per capita in 7th district and modified **DI** synthetic control, beats as donors (through 2018)



Note: Black line represents biannual average monthly shooting victims per capita in the 7th district. Red line represents synthetic control using the modified **DI** estimator and 196 non-SDSC beats as donors. Dotted vertical line represents last pre-period. Beginning in 2018, districts comprising the synthetic control began receiving the SDSC intervention.

Table 1: Synthetic control results for the SDSC districts: shooting victims

District	Effect Estimate	p -value	q -value	
			FWER Control	FDR Control
6 th	2%	0.543	0.696	1.000
7 th	-26%	0.012	0.061	0.089
9 th	-9%	0.348	0.696	1.000
10 th	39%	0.081	0.243	0.298
11 th	-14%	0.049	0.194	0.238
15 th	37%	0.000	0.000	0.000

Notes: Synthetic control treatment effects using modified [DI](#) estimator and beats as donors. FWER control q -values calculated using the Holm-Bonferroni correction. FDR control q -values calculated using the Benjamini-Yekutieli correction.

Table 2: Synthetic control results for the 7th district

Outcome	Effect Estimate	<i>p</i> -value	<i>q</i> -value	
			FWER Control	FDR Control
<i>Synthetic control estimated separately</i>				
Shooting Victims	-26%	0.012	0.061	0.089
<i>Synthetic control estimated jointly</i>				
Shooting Victims	-21%	0.008	0.267	0.243
Part I Violent Felonies	-13%	0.008	0.267	0.243
Gun Arrests	28%	0.089	1.000	1.000
Warrant Arrests	36%	0.040	1.000	0.669
Overall Arrests	20%	0.142	1.000	1.000
Traffic Stops	77%	0.000	0.000	0.000

Notes: Synthetic control treatment effects using modified [DI](#) estimator and beats as donors. FWER control *q*-values calculated using the Holm-Bonferroni correction. FDR control *q*-values calculated using the Benjamini-Yekutieli correction.

Appendices

A Proactive Policing

The policing strategies used by CPD have generally followed the same arc as the rest of law enforcement in the U.S. Up through the 1960s, the focus throughout the U.S. was largely on “reactive policing”: responding quickly to the scene and successfully investigating the case following a call for service. But starting in the 1960s, departments across the country began shifting their focus to “proactive policing,” which a recent National Academy of Sciences committee on the topic defines as “all policing strategies that have as one of their goals the prevention or reduction of crime and disorder and that are not reactive in terms of focusing primarily on uncovering ongoing crime or on investigating or responding to crimes once they have occurred” ([National Academies of Sciences and Medicine, 2018](#), p. 1). The standard playbook for modern-day proactive policing is ([National Academies of Sciences and Medicine, 2018](#), p. 2):

- concentrate police resources on high-risk places
- concentrate police resources on high-risk people
- improve relations with the community and emphasizing police problem-solving

Proactive policing has been the core of CPD’s strategy for many years, but perhaps not surprisingly given the size and complexity of the organization, CPD’s implementation of that strategy left room for improvement. The management changes we study (SDSCs) are designed to provide those improvements, particularly with respect to concentrating resources on high-risk places and people, but in at least some districts also to promote community policing. In what follows, we discuss the basis for concentrating police resources on high-risk places and people, drawing on evidence from the larger research literature.

A.1 High-risk places

Crime, particularly violent crime, is very geographically concentrated. As a result, it is often suggested that crime prevention resources can be used most effectively by deploying them to

a handful of “high crime” areas. However, it is important to note that, while crime may be concentrated *ex post*, what is relevant for crime prevention is the degree to which the risk of crime is concentrated *ex ante*. For example, suppose that residential burglaries within a city occur at just 2 percent of addresses. If the annual burglary rate in the city is 2 per 100 households, then this concentration of burglaries is not surprising; in fact, burglaries could have occurred, at most, at just 2 percent of addresses within a year. In contrast to this *ex post* perspective, which notes the concentration of crimes after they occurred, the relevant perspective for crime prevention is an *ex ante* one: predict the likelihood that a given address or block will experience a burglary, and prioritize resources to those at highest risk.

One of the most common place-based strategies used by police departments is to concentrate extra police resources on places with elevated risk of violence, sometimes called “hot spot” policing. Departments vary with respect to whether they do this targeting using an explicit statistical prediction model of where crime will occur (e.g. using commercial software like PredPol or HunchLab), or an implicit prediction model of where crime will occur (e.g. using the locations of similar crimes in the recent past). Several RCTs within criminology suggest that increased police presence leads to fewer crimes in the locations that are targeted (e.g. [Braga, 2007](#)).

What has been more difficult to determine is the degree to which hot spot policing actually prevents crime overall, rather than just displacing it to areas with a relatively smaller police presence. Underlying the displacement issue is in part the question of whether the features of a given place can make it unusually criminogenic. While some places surely have such features—such as a street corner used to sell drugs on Chicago’s west side that is adjacent to the access road running alongside I-290, the interstate known as the “heroin highway”—we have limited conceptual guidance, and no reliable empirical evidence, about which factors make some places criminogenic.⁴⁴

The hot spot policing RCTs that have been carried out typically do not find evidence of dis-

⁴⁴ A literature within criminology often labeled under the umbrella of “opportunity theory” suggests the importance of some places in bringing together motivated offenders with suitable targets in situations where there is limited guardianship (e.g. [National Academies of Sciences and Medicine, 2018](#), p. 46).

placement. But they also typically have lower statistical power to detect displacement than to detect impacts in the hot spots themselves.⁴⁵ One of the best recent studies from a methodological perspective is by [Blattman et al. \(2017\)](#), who find evidence of displacement for property crimes, though their experiment is carried out in Bogotá, Colombia, so the applicability of this finding to hot spot policing in the U.S. is unclear.

A related place-based strategy uses technology, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, to help decide where to concentrate police resources in something closer to real-time, as opposed to using statistical models that rely on data recorded with some lag. Cameras can also have other effects on crime as well, such as through potential deterrence and assistance with investigations. The available research suggests the effect of CCTV cameras is a “modest but significant desirable effect on crime” ([Farrington and Welsh, 2008](#), p. 2), with impacts particularly concentrated on motor vehicle thefts, though efficacy may also depend on the other crime-control strategies that are in place. As we discuss below, the use of CCTV cameras is increasingly widespread, including in Chicago.

A.2 High-risk people

Criminologists have known since the birth cohort studies of Marvin Wolfgang in Philadelphia that the *ex post* (realized) risk of violence involvement is very concentrated within the population ([Wolfgang et al., 1987](#)). He found, for example, that about half of all offenses (arrests) were accounted for by 18 percent of the birth cohort. Similar results have subsequently been replicated in a number of other settings. However, as with the burglary example earlier, this is an *ex post* calculation of concentration; it is distinct from, and arguably less useful for crime prevention than, being able to determine which specific youth are at elevated *ex ante* risk for engaging in future

⁴⁵ We thank Justin McCrary for this observation. As a way to see the issue, imagine we have one street block that is identified as a hot spot surrounded by ten adjacent street blocks. If our prior is that crime will be displaced uniformly into the ten adjacent blocks when extra police resources are deployed to the hot spot, then we would need to be able to detect an increase in crime rates in these adjacent areas that is one-tenth as large as the reduction in crime in the hot spot. While the sample size for detecting that displacement effect is ten times as large as for detecting the impact in the hot spot itself, the statistical power for that displacement impact increases only in the square root of the number of displacement areas.

violence.

An example of how police departments operationalize this insight is the practice of stepped up enforcement and surveillance of individuals on probation or parole. Because these individuals are often considered to be at higher risk of committing future crimes, and the terms of their release require their compliance with certain conditions, they may receive greater attention from the police. For example, if suspected gang members are on probation and must observe a curfew or refrain from having drugs and guns at home, the police may use this information to monitor them more closely, with the goal of deterring them from engaging in crime.

A different approach to identifying high-risk people is to develop an explicit statistical prediction model of who will engage in crime, the person-based analog to commercially available place-based prediction tools. The Crime and Victimization Risk Model (CVRM), formerly known as the Strategic Subjects List (SSL), is an example of such a model that was developed by Professor Miles Wernick of the Illinois Institute of Technology for CPD. The CVRM predicts an individual's risk of arrest or victimization for a future shooting or a homicide, relying on predictors such as a person's age at the time of their most recent arrest, incidents in which they were the victim of a shooting, and incidents in which they were arrested for illegal possession of a gun.⁴⁶

The CVRM, and previously the SSL, is used by CPD to help identify people for its "custom notification" program and "call-in" sessions. During a custom notification, an officer and a community group representative refer a person to social services and warn them about the dangers of continuing to engage in risky behavior.⁴⁷ Similarly, call-in sessions involve delivering a message of focused deterrence—heightened penalties for continuing to engage in violence—to a group of individuals, alongside offers of social services.⁴⁸ A quasi-experimental study of an earlier version of CPD's call-ins, implemented as part of the local U.S. Attorney's Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative, suggests they may reduce crime in Chicago (Papachristos et al., 2007). However, it is

⁴⁶ <https://home.chicagopolice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FACT-SHEET-Crime-and-Victimization-Risk-Model-1.pdf>

⁴⁷ <http://directives.chicagopolice.org/directives/data/a7a57bf0-1456faf9-bfa14-570a-a2deebf33c56ae59.html>

⁴⁸ <http://directives.chicagopolice.org/directives/data/a7a57bf0-136d1d31-16513-6d1d-382b311ddf65fd3a.pdf>

unclear whether the research design is capable of isolating the effects of the intervention itself due to the difficulty of finding a comparable comparison group, a point we return to below. A different quasi-experimental evaluation of CPD's use of an earlier version of the SSL finds that being identified by the model is not associated with a change in the likelihood of being a homicide or shooting victim, though subjects are more likely to be arrested for a shooting (Saunders et al., 2016). Here, too, it is difficult to know whether the design is able to credibly isolate the effect of being identified as high-risk by the SSL (e.g. being above some threshold). In assessing the effectiveness of any person-based approach to crime prevention, the results of an evaluation may say as much about the intervention being delivered as they do about the method of identifying the people to receive it.

More work is necessary to understand the potential and limitations of using statistical models that predict individuals' risk to target crime-prevention efforts. For example, one study currently underway in Chicago uses, in part, a statistical model developed with data from CPD to identify men at the highest risk for gun violence involvement and refer them to an intensive social service intervention designed to reduce this risk (Bertrand et al., 2199). Among the issues that researchers and practitioners must contend with are the limitations of the data used to predict risk. For example, in Chicago, the arrest clearance rate for a serious offense like homicide is below the national average, and the arrest clearance rate for non-fatal shootings is in the single digits. This makes it challenging to measure, and therefore predict, alleged perpetration of serious violence. Finally, and relatedly, the risk of offending is likely to be more concentrated than the risk of victimization due to the small number of people willing to become high-volume shooters, based on anecdotal reports from officers at CPD. In contrast, a shooter may be willing to target anyone in an opposing gang and could also end up injuring innocent bystanders in the process, resulting in a diffusion of victimization risk relative to offending risk.

B Structure of the Chicago Police Department and the Strategic Decision Support Centers

In this section, we first provide necessary background on how the patrol function at CPD is structured, since it is patrol that is ultimately tasked with executing any proactive policing strategy. Then, we discuss each area the SDSCs seek to improve, including their status quo prior to the implementation of the SDSCs and how the SDSCs changed CPD's practices. Finally, we describe how the SDSCs were rolled out across the Department's highest-violence police districts.

B.1 Structure of patrol at the Chicago Police Department

Before describing how the SDSCs changed practices at CPD, it is helpful to first understand how the Department's patrol function is structured. CPD has approximately 13,000 officers, over half of whom are within the Bureau of Patrol. To manage the task of patrolling Chicago's roughly 230 square miles, the city is divided into 22 police districts (analogous to precincts in other cities) that each fall within one of three areas: North, Central, and South (Appendix Figure 3).⁴⁹

Each police district is overseen by a Commander who decides how to task the patrol resources at his or her disposal. These resources include beat officers, discretionary officers, tactical officers, and intelligence officers. Beat officers patrol the smallest unit of geography—a beat, usually less than 1/10th the area of the district—and respond to calls for service. Discretionary officers are similar to beat officers, except they can be deployed anywhere in the district; Commanders usually have between 3 and 9 discretionary officers to work with per shift. Tactical officers typically do not respond to calls for service except those that are highest priority (e.g. shots fired), wear plainclothes, and focus primarily on gangs, executing search warrants, and making gun and other high-profile arrests. Finally, intelligence officers gather information from local sources to provide the Commander a more complete picture of crime in the district; they wear plainclothes and typically do not make arrests.

⁴⁹ In addition to encompassing the city's north side, Area North includes downtown Chicago and much of what is considered the city's West Side. Area Central includes part of the near south side, and Area South covers the remainder of the city's South Side.

In addition to units operating within a district that are overseen by the Commander, each Area is assigned its own units that can be deployed across the districts in that Area. Overseen by the Area's Deputy Chief, these include saturation teams, gun teams, and gang enforcement teams. Saturation teams are deployed as-needed to parts of the Area experiencing heightened activity, acting as a rapid-response force. Gun teams are similar to districts' tactical units and focus on gun recoveries and arrests. Finally, gang teams are deployed to areas of gang activity.

Due to their varying size and the nature of crime that occurs there, the 22 districts function like 22 different small towns and cities, with Commanders as their police chiefs. A smaller district like the 15th, covering the West Side neighborhood of Austin, is under four square miles and contains 60,000 residents. A larger district like the 8th, covering several South Side neighborhoods including Chicago Lawn, is roughly 24 square miles and contains almost 250,000 residents (about the population of Buffalo, New York). Some districts experience little violent crime, while others have homicide rates rivaling some of the most dangerous cities on earth. Even among the districts experiencing serious violent crime, its nature can vary significantly: gun violence in West Side districts is reputed to be tied to the narcotics trade operating there, while in South Side districts it is thought to be driven more by interpersonal disputes. As a result, each Commander must develop his or her own strategy to address the concerns in their own district, using the information and patrol resources available to them.

B.2 Available data

Concentrating resources on places and people at high *ex ante* risk requires having access to historical (or, if available, real-time) data on the factors that predict where crime will occur and whom it will involve. Prior to the SDSCs, CPD's infrastructure for recording administrative data was already very robust. The Department's data systems track detailed information about reported crimes, victims, and calls for service, in addition to measures of officer activity ranging from arrests, investigatory street stops (Terry stops), traffic stops, and information on officers' locations from GPS units in their vehicles. These data are relatively clean and well-structured, and in most cases

go back several years.

The SDSCs expanded CPD's data collection in two ways. First, the Department introduced ShotSpotter's acoustic gunshot detection sensors to each SDSC district. Without ShotSpotter, officers typically rely on calls for service to alert them to shootings. According to officers, it is not uncommon for there to be a 5 to 10-minute delay between when a shooting takes place and when someone calls 911 to report shots fired, often with an incorrect address or location for where they think it occurred. Other times, no call is received at all. After ShotSpotter detects a shooting and a human validates the audio recording, an alert is sent to the SDSC room and to the mobile phones of officers containing the incident's precise location as well as the associated audio. In addition to allowing officers to respond more quickly to the scene and gather evidence, ShotSpotter also provides the Department with an additional and more complete source of data about patterns of gun violence in the city.

Second, SDSC districts expanded their use of CCTV cameras, called Police Observation Devices (PODs). Prior to the SDSCs, monitoring of PODs was very limited due to the cumbersome software available for doing so at the time. The SDSCs introduced additional PODs, which now number in excess of 30,000; upgraded many cameras from standard definition to high definition; and, perhaps most important, integrated all of the Department's PODs into an easy-to-use platform called Genetec. Officers in the SDSC room use Genetec to quickly toggle between cameras, rotate their field of vision, and review stored video footage. When officers in the field respond to a situation, or when a ShotSpotter alert goes off, officers in the SDSC room use the nearest PODs to monitor it and provide information to field units.

In contrast to administrative data, information collected from human sources has historically been more difficult to record and make available. District intelligence officers (DIOs), the primary source of human intelligence within a district, often record information on paper that is stored in binders, making it difficult to access. Beat and tactical officers have no system for logging information gleaned while on patrol or from interactions with residents. Detectives, who also gather information pertinent to understanding crime in the district while investigating cases, are

not assigned to districts and do not routinely share their insights with DIOs or patrol officers.

The SDSCs appear to have helped facilitate some additional information collection and sharing, though have probably not changed matters dramatically. The SDSC room itself can serve as a focal point in a district. For example, DIOs or patrol officers sometimes drop by and share pertinent information they have obtained, which is then incorporated into analyses and disseminated within the district. The process of developing a daily briefing, described below, is another mechanism to elicit information about crime from officers. Finally, though not explicitly tied to the SDSCs, the Department has prioritized the collection of data on the frequency of officers' interactions with the community. These data are captured through a call category called a positive community interaction (PCI), which an officer calls in after engaging in such an interaction. The PCI call category has existed since 2015, however it was prioritized significantly, and tracked as part of the Department's CompStat process, beginning in 2017.

B.3 Analytical capacity

Despite having a well-developed data infrastructure, CPD's ability to translate data into analyses useful to Commanders for directing resources was very limited prior to the SDSCs' adoption. Crime analysis was carried out by a handful of officers at headquarters who were responsible for collecting intelligence and identifying crime patterns and trends across all 22 districts. As a result, analysis products tailored to each district's unique needs were not available to Commanders. Furthermore, although CPD made available several home-grown software tools for accessing and summarizing the vast quantity of data it collects, including a powerful mapping tool, these were seldom used by officers in police districts. This underutilization of the available data—either due to the cumbersome user interface of the available software, the lack of specific training on crime analysis, the absence of a role dedicated to performing this function, or some combination of all three—created a type of “last mile” problem that made local crime analysis the exception rather than the rule at CPD.

The introduction of the SDSCs significantly increased the analytical capacity available to district

Commanders. For the first time in the Department's history, a civilian role specifically devoted to crime analysis was created. The crime analyst works alongside officers and the Commander to develop analytical products that describe recent patterns of criminal activity in the district. The analyst is capable of using all of CPD's existing software tools—as well as several new ones created specifically to automate common tasks—to make detailed maps of reported crimes or calls for service, or profiles detailing where individuals with open warrants had recently been stopped. Along with the officers staffing the SDSC room, the analyst helps draft a daily briefing for the Commander, described in further detail below.

An example of the type of work performed by crime analysts is presented in Figure 4. In 2017, then-Commander of the 7th district, Kenneth Johnson, noting that stolen vehicles were often used as a platform for armed robberies and shootings, asked the district's analyst to examine whether there was an underlying pattern to these thefts. The analyst gathered data on the locations from which cars were stolen and the locations at which they were recovered. This identified a cluster of 18 cars that were all recovered near the same intersection in the 7th district and that had been stolen over a six-month period from commercial and residential areas in the adjacent district. The Commander ordered increased patrols in the area where the cars were recovered, and patrol officers were provided information about the pattern. Shortly thereafter, an individual was arrested who had both an extensive history of motor vehicle theft and a close connection to the victims of a quadruple homicide in a neighboring district. The motor vehicle theft pattern subsided after the arrest.

In addition to crime analysts, the SDSCs also introduced HunchLab, a place-based predictive policing software. While the analytical products developed by the analysts make implicit predictions about where crime is likely to occur based on recent data and intelligence gathered from officers, HunchLab applies a statistical model to data on prior crimes and calls for service, as well as geographic and other features, in order to make explicit predictions about where crime is likely to occur. HunchLab divides each district into approximately 500-foot by 500-foot cells to which it assigns predicted probabilities that certain crimes will occur, separately for each of the day's

three shifts (watches). Beat officers can access a map on their Department-issued smartphones on which several “mission boxes” are placed on cells with high predicted probabilities; in the highest-violence districts, these mission boxes indicate a high risk of shootings or robberies. Officers are asked to patrol each HunchLab mission box in their beat in three 15-minute intervals, totaling 45 minutes during their shift. In addition, officers in the SDSC room monitor HunchLab mission boxes using POD cameras accessed through Genetec.

B.4 Decision-making processes

Prior to the SDSCs, each Commander had a different process for incorporating information into their decisions about which resources to deploy and how. However, because they lacked access to high-quality analysis of local crime patterns, the resulting deployment decisions were often haphazard. Or, as Commander Kenneth Johnson put it, officers were “just patrolling randomly” and “riding around rubber-necking on the street waiting for something to happen.”⁵⁰ Commanders relied on informal systems to consult with their officers, tactical teams, and other specialized units about deployment plans for that day or that week; these conversations often happened in passing, and rarely offered the Commander a systematic view into the district’s recent criminal activity. To the extent that there was a process in place for shaping patrol’s response to recent events, it most commonly took the form of “post-shooting missions”: increased patrols within a very small perimeter around the location of a recent shooting that lasted between 3-5 days. This type of mission appeared to generate little buy-in from officers, who estimated the likelihood of retaliation occurring in such a small area to be low. As a result, and aided by a lack of follow-up and accountability, mission fulfillment may have been lacking.

The SDSCs introduced a structure designed to give Commanders comprehensive, high-quality information in a consistent format each day for use in making patrol decisions. This structure primarily takes the form of the Commander’s daily briefing, which usually occurs at 1:00PM. Prepared by the SDSC officers, and featuring the work of the crime analyst, the presentation

⁵⁰ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2017/3/29/18358635/violent-crime-falls-in-2-districts-run-by-the-johnson-brothers>

covers:

- recent crime trends and high-profile arrests
- high-priority open warrants
- deeper analyses into areas of interest, including those raised at previous briefings
- a comprehensive overview of available discretionary resources, including Area units, as well as their current assigned deployment locations
- the locations of HunchLab mission boxes

In addition to the Commander, SDSC officers, and the crime analyst, others who attend the briefing include district intelligence and tactical officers, as well as non-district personnel such as Area units and detectives, whose input is valued by the Commander and who can relay information back to their respective teams.

The output of the daily briefing is a set of missions ordered by the Commander and information for dissemination to field units. Missions can vary in their complexity. For example, in response to an active conflict between two gang factions, the Commander may order traffic missions on a busy thoroughfare connecting the rival areas in order to interdict firearms that could be used for retaliatory shootings. An upcoming anniversary of a slain gang member's death might result in heightened patrol activity in areas associated with the gang member's rivals. Recent shootings in the vicinity of a gas station or other private business whose owner filed a criminal trespass affidavit with the Department could result in a mission to enforce the affidavit by entering the premises and dispersing trespassers and others engaged in criminal activity.⁵¹ The information produced by the SDSC room is shared with patrol and tactical units during roll calls at the start of each watch. For example, in one district, SDSC officers prepare a binder with the high-priority open warrants discussed in the briefing for tactical officers to review.

In addition to daily briefings, some districts participate in weekly briefings focused specifically on sharing information about recent shootings. In preparation for these weekly briefings, SDSC

⁵¹ <http://directives.chicagopolice.org/directives/data/a7a57b38-14a39f6a-cc814-a39f-8ee270fffb8fdfe8c.html?ownapi=1>

staff review, in detail, every shooting and homicide that occurred in the district during the past week. Attendees at these briefings include key district personnel, Area units (gang, detectives), and representatives from law enforcement agencies at the County-level (State's Attorney's Office, Probation), State-level (Illinois State Police), and federal-level (U.S. Attorney's Office, FBI, ATF). The goal of these briefings is to assess the likelihood of retaliation following a given shooting, and to focus prevention efforts on those with the highest likelihood of retaliation.

B.5 Rollout of the SDSCs

The impetus for developing and introducing the SDSC model was the unprecedented increase in gun violence that Chicago experienced in 2016. In September 2016, at the request of the CPD Superintendent Eddie Johnson, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) at the U.S. Department of Justice engaged Chief Sean Malinowski, then the Chief of Staff to Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck, to lead a team of law enforcement experts to assess CPD's crime fighting strategy. After several months of site visits and interviews, the BJA team concluded its work and produced a set of recommendations for how the Department could improve its crime fighting strategy, particularly at the district level. These recommendations called for a combination of improvements to physical infrastructure, targeted investments in technology, the systematic use of data to inform deployment decisions, and a streamlined intelligence gathering process. Collectively, these reforms were adopted by the Department and came to be known as the SDSCs.

The decision was made to first pilot the SDSCs in the 7th and 11th districts, located on the South and West sides, respectively. The 7th and 11th districts have long experienced some of the highest levels of violence in Chicago. In 2016, each district saw its homicide rate roughly double, and collectively these two districts accounted for almost a quarter of the city's homicides that year, making them the Department's and the City's top priority. Building out the physical SDSC rooms began near the start of 2017 and was complete by February. Within weeks of becoming operational, the Department and the City decided to expand SDSCs to the four remaining so-called Tier 1 districts: the 6th, 9th, 10th, and 15th districts, in addition to the 7th and 11th. By mid-March,

the SDSC rooms in all Tier 1 districts were operational.

Despite their rapid build-out of the SDSCs, the Department struggled to quickly implement one component of the model: crime analysts. No such role previously existed at CPD, and there was no precedent for how to create and fill it. Further, the City estimated that the earliest it could hire analysts for the Tier 1 districts was June 2017. Because of the crucial role they play in the SDSC model, and because, as late as December 2016, the surge in Chicago's violence showed no signs of abating, CPD asked the University of Chicago Crime Lab to provide civilian analyst support while the City's hiring process ran its course. The Crime Lab agreed to help and identified two of its analysts to work with CPD in the 7th and 11th districts. At the invitation of Chief Malinowski, these two analysts visited LAPD to observe their implementation of a similar data-driven policing model.

The Crime Lab analysts spent the month of January 2017 embedded in the 7th and 11th districts, speaking with officers, participating in ride-alongs, attending roll calls, meeting with Commanders, and familiarizing themselves with the Department's data infrastructure. As the first civilian analysts to work alongside officers at CPD, the Crime Lab analysts created prototypes of analysis products and daily briefings for Commanders, and developed new tools to automate common tasks and make possible others that were too tedious to do previously. By February 2017, when the SDSCs in the 7th and 11th districts were fully operational, the Crime Lab analysts were working with district leadership to use the new technology and existing data sources to monitor changes in criminal activity and gang conflicts in close to real-time. When the SDSCs in the remaining Tier 1 districts opened in mid-March 2017, the Crime Lab deployed more of its existing analysts and hired additional ones to help staff these new SDSCs while the City continued to ramp up its own hiring. Similarly, when the Tier 2 districts' SDSCs began coming online in early 2018, in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 8th, 12th, and 25th districts, the Crime Lab deployed its analysts to staff these as well until the City's hiring process was able to catch up.

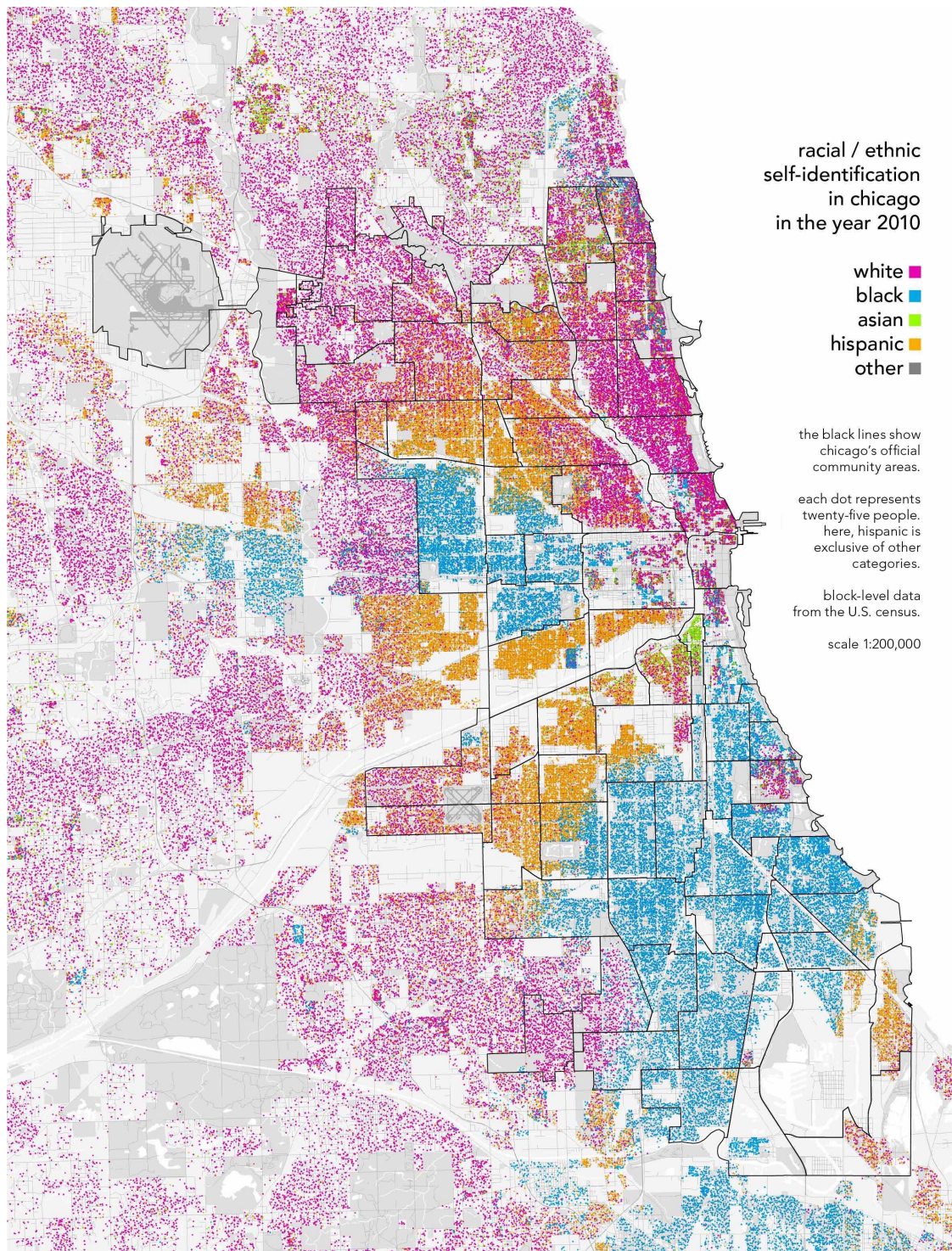
Soon after the SDSC initiative got underway, the Department and the Crime Lab recognized a need for analysis support at the Area level. Approximately 60 percent of CPD's officers work under

the direction of district Commanders; the majority of remaining officers are assigned to specialized units, like gang and narcotics teams, managed by Area Deputy Chiefs. In September 2017, the Crime Lab embedded one analyst in each of the three Areas to work closely with those Deputy Chiefs, providing analytical capacity similar to what was being provided to district Commanders. This was designed to reinforce the district-level SDSCs, with Crime Lab Area analysts looking across district boundaries to spot emerging crime patterns and advising Deputy Chiefs' potential resource deployments.

In addition to providing stop-gap crime analysis capacity to CPD, the Crime Lab analysts provided extensive training to SDSC staff. Initially, this training focused on familiarizing SDSC officers with Microsoft Office software (Word, Excel, PowerPoint) to help them with the preparation of the daily briefing. Over time, however, it came to include training in the Department's existing, but underutilized, data infrastructure and the software designed to access it. When CPD's own crime analysts were hired in June 2017, Crime Lab analysts worked closely with them to share best practices learned during the first few months of the SDSCs' existence. Since then, the Crime Lab has organized several half-day training sessions for CPD's crime analysts, covering such topics as place-based analysis techniques and visualizing geospatial data, and convenes CPD's analysts twice a month to discuss new methods of data analysis, updates to tools and dashboards, and to generate ideas for future trainings.

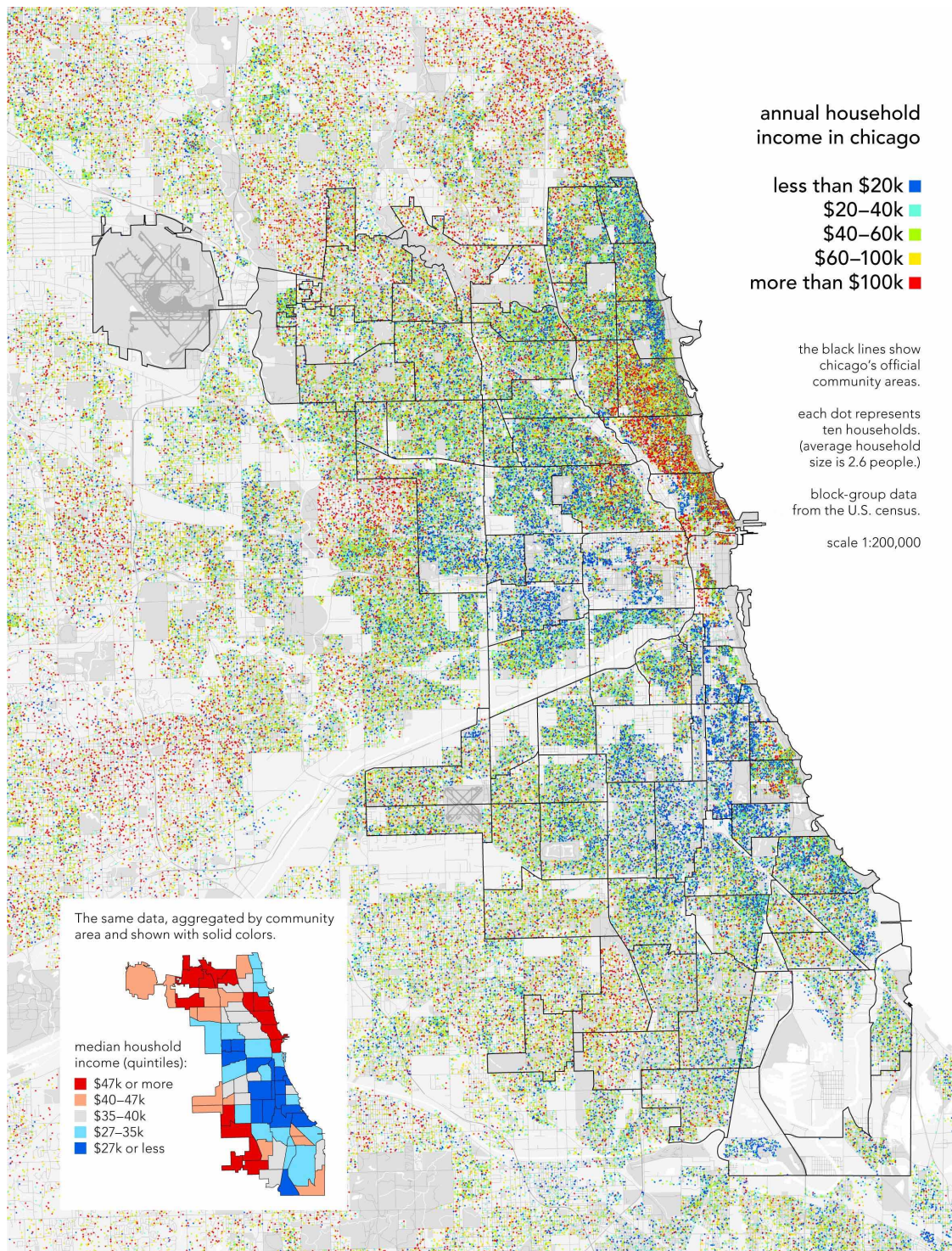
The Crime Lab's role in the expansion of the SDSCs is unique: it provided the organization (and this research team) unprecedented insight into the functioning of the Department, both prior to and after the intervention's launch, while also shaping the intervention itself. The outsize role played by Crime Lab analysts in training their CPD counterparts, the lasting remnants of which include numerous training materials and input incorporated into CPD's standard operating procedures, will continue to have an impact on CPD's SDSCs even after their support ends.

Figure 1: Racial segregation across Chicago's community areas



Note: Bill Rankin (2009). <http://www.radicalcartography.net/index.html?chicagodots>

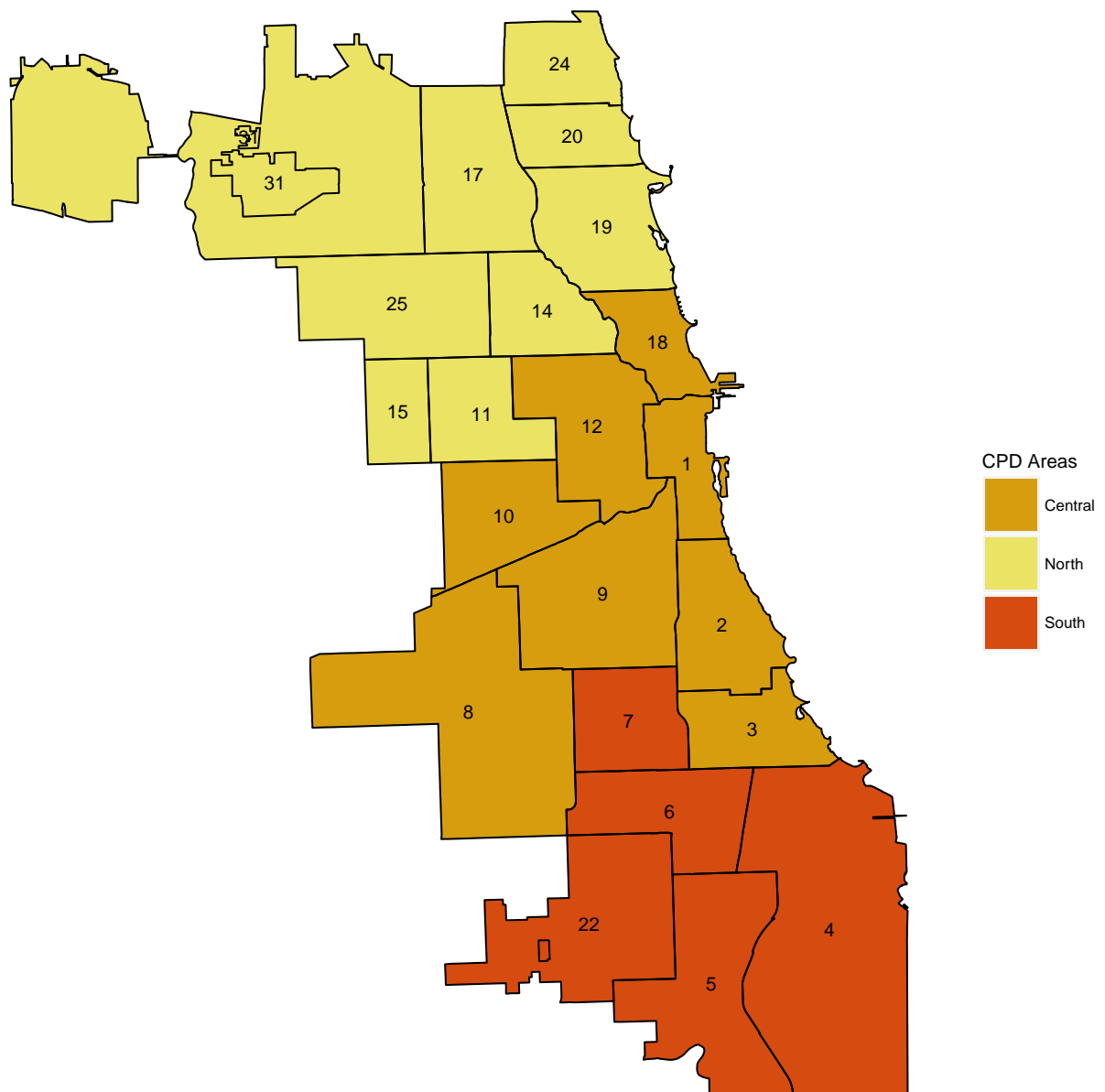
Figure 2: Income segregation across Chicago's community areas



Note: Bill Rankin (2009). <http://www.radicalcartography.net/index.html?chicagodots>

Figure 3: Chicago Police Department patrol areas and districts

CPD Districts and Encompassing Areas



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