

RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTERISTICS AS PREDICTORS OF PERCEIVED SAFETY AND NEIGHBORHOOD VIOLENT CRIME

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ABSTRACT

Neighborhood violent crime is an issue that plagues many communities in the U.S. and throughout the world. In this study the authors examine some of the major predictors of violent crime and perceived safety in a small municipality in a region of the Great Lakes region of the US that has experienced significant population loss and blight. Applying Social Disorganization Theory, neighborhood watch group members in five census tracts; approximately 500 residents were surveyed concerning the characteristics of their neighborhoods and how these characteristics may influence their perceived safety and the violent crimes in their immediate blocks. Using multiple regression and MANOVA this study tested seven hypotheses. The results of this study were consistent with previous research and found that neighborhood disorder significantly predicted perceived safety, neighborhood violent crime severity and neighborhood violent crime frequency. Additionally, neighborhood cohesion was found to increase the perceived safety of residents in this study.

KEYWORDS

Social Cohesion, Social Integration, Community Solidarity, Perceived Safety, Neighborhood Disorder and Violent Crime

1. INTRODUCTION

Violent crime in the US is currently on the rise and the majority of homicides (79%) and suicides (53%) in the United States involved a firearm in 2020. From 2019 to 2020, the overall firearm homicide rate increased 34.6%, from 4.6 to 6.1 per 100,000 persons (Kegler et al., 2022). From the first colonized territories in North America violent crime has plagued American communities. Community violence was initially explained as the by-product of certain characteristics, traits, or attributes found in certain people. Over time researchers and theorists began to examine environmental contributions that appeared to be associated with acute and chronic criminal activities. Previous research using various ecological theories reported that violent crime does not occur randomly but may be correlated with identifiable neighborhood characteristics. Community characteristics posited to be exogenous for higher prevalence rates of crime were socially disorganization, poverty, greater racial and ethnic heterogeneity, and relentless residential transience (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Kubrin, 2009).

Although no community or neighborhood is exempt from violence, larger, more urban municipalities seem particularly vulnerable and at greater risk for episodes of violence (Sampson and Raudenbush, 2001). Social Disorganization Theory, defined as the inability of a community to realize common goals and solve chronic problems posits that crime is aligned on a continuum of social organization (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003). On one end of the continuum, socially organized communities that have high levels of community solidarity, cohesion, and integration, experience lower levels of violent crime. Conversely, socially disorganized communities that are absent or have lower levels of those traits that seem to mitigate violence have higher levels of reported crime (Kubrin, 2009).

Previous research using ecological theories has demonstrated violent crime does not occur randomly but may be related to neighborhood disorder (low levels of social cohesion, neighborhood solidarity, and social integration) and perceived safety by neighborhood residents. Efforts by law enforcement groups, probation and parole and other judicial groups have not decreased the incidence of violent crime. The demographic portrait of violence suggests disproportionate levels in neighborhoods where the residents are mainly African Americans and Latinos, poor, uneducated, and have low homeownership (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Sampson and Wilson, 2020). However, this demographic correlation may be misleading and other demographic and location factors may influence violent crime (Poveda, 2011).

It appears violent crime is higher and more concentrated in some areas of cities than others. Although some researchers identified numerous mediating factors (race/ethnicity, unemployment, education levels, and residency/home ownership) that were correlated with neighborhood violent crime, less is known about possible interactions between the structural characteristics of neighborhoods and the residents who live in those communities (Shaw and McKay, 1942). In this study the characteristics of community solidarity, cohesion, and integration have been postulated to be correlated with neighborhood violent crime. Using the ideology of Social Disorganization Theory, the proposition guiding this study is that neighborhood disorder (lower collective efficacy) directly impacts perceived neighborhood safety and perceived safety directly impacts neighborhood violent crime.

Collective efficacy was constructed by combining social cohesion, community solidarity, and social integration to conceptualize the construct of collective efficacy as two component processes, neighborhood collective efficacy and organizational collective efficacy, working together

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(Ohmer and Beck, 2006). Neighborhood collective efficacy is described as extant communal belief, trust and cohesion among persons living in the same neighborhood who have shared role expectations for maintaining informal social controls. Organizational collective efficacy, viewed as a neighborhood resident's belief that participation in community organizations and groups, increases the neighborhood's effectiveness in solving problems and improving neighborhood living conditions (Pecukonis and Wenocur, 1994). Collective efficacy and neighborhood disorder are thought to be predictors of violent crime. The more organized a community, the more likely that community experiences low levels of neighborhood violent crime. Communities that suffer high levels of neighborhood violence are believed to have low levels of collective efficacy.

1.1 Social Cohesion

Communities typically have lower crime rates when there are shared positive norms and values, strong ties, and frequent social interaction among residents. According to the tenets of social disorganization theory, socially disorganized communities have low levels of community solidarity, social cohesion, and are less socially cohesive (Kubrin, 2009). Moreover, these communities tend to be more unstable due to low levels of homeownership and residential mobility, experience a greater level of poverty, and are more racially/ethnically heterogeneous. Both researchers affirmed that social disorganization is the inability of the ruling power of the social structure to realize common values of its individual and maintain active social control (Bursik, 1988; Kubrin, 2009).

Therefore, social disorganization impedes the development of formal and informal ties to solve common problems in societies. Breakdowns in social control mechanisms contribute to community conflicts. Many scholars have concluded that high rates of economic deprivation led to higher risk of homicide in a geographical area (Nieuwbeerta et al., 2008). Results of the research suggested that neighborhood social cohesion and socioeconomic deprivation could be impacting homicide risks. When there is a lower level of social cohesion in a neighborhood the probability of homicide for the inhabitants of the area is increased. Interestingly, greater police presence did not increase social cohesion and reduce the level of violent crime. There is a need to better understand the importance of social integration for making relations between perceived safety and neighborhood violent crime.

1.2 Social Integration

The term social integration was first used by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He alleged that society exerted a force on an individual, which helped to shape individual opinions, beliefs and norms. Social integration helps individuals understand each other through ongoing participation in community activities (Bursik, 1988; Kubrin and Wo, 2016). It is believed that homogeneous communities interact with each other with greater frequency than heterogeneous communities. The amount of social interaction is posited to affect the strength and salience of perceived safety.

1.3 Community Solidarity

Community solidarity is defined as a sense of oneness and the belief that community problems can be confronted collectively. Community solidarity arises from the need to make a group to address common responsibilities and interests. This involvement of citizens can increase the effectiveness in community strategies to solve community problems, such as neighborhood violence (Kubrin, 2009; Pecukonis and Wenocur, 1994). Most important when evaluating solidarity is to determine the residents' level of confidence in their capacity to make a difference. Individuals or groups intervene in the social control of the neighborhood and in their shared expectations connected with mutual trust and social cohesion that lie under the definition of neighborhood collective efficacy (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999).

Sampson & Raudenbush concluded that citizens are not willing to step forward in neighborhoods where individuals do not feel safe, do not trust each other and where their norms and values are not clear (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). The authors asserted that collective efficacy develops the bridge between cohesion and mutual benefit. Chavis and his colleagues believed that non-members of neighborhood block associations have low levels of collective efficacy (Chavis et al., 1987). In addition, it was also suggested that block member associations were more involved in collective activities of anti-crime strategies. Variables such as friendship, kinship unities, availability of neighborhood services and organizational involvement have strong positive association with neighbor collective efficacy (Sampson, 1997). Where there exists higher levels of social

cohesion and trust among neighbors there are more chances, they will cooperate with each other and will be willing to intervene to achieve common goals (Sampson and Raudenbush 2001).

1.4 Neighborhood Disorder

Neighborhood disorder is an important variable that impacts neighborhood violent crime in communities. Neighborhood disorder is associated with resident low levels of social cohesion, neighborhood solidarity, and social integration. People are more likely to commit crimes as a result of high levels of neighborhood disorder. The poor condition of their houses and the general appearance of neighborhoods is related to extant amounts of social integration, social cohesion, and community solidarity. Factors that contribute to neighborhood disorder are the effects of poverty, demographic heterogeneous neighborhoods, residential mobility, and levels of education and unemployment (Bursick, 1988; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Kubrin, 2009; Poveda, 2011).

1.5 Perceived Neighborhood Safety

Perceived neighborhood safety is an idiosyncratic construct of numerous composite factors such as neighborhood disorder and the frequency and quality of interaction between and among neighbors. It was hypothesized that collective efficacy and perceived neighborhood safety were negatively correlated with neighborhood violent crime. Higher levels of collective efficacy contribute to higher levels of perceived safety. The interactive effects are associated with lower levels of neighborhood crime. The objective of this study was to determine the correlation between collective efficacy and perceived neighborhood safety and their effects of neighborhood crime (Ohmer and Beck, 2006; Pecukonis, 1994).

1.6 Summary

Previous research has demonstrated violent crime may be significantly related to neighborhood disorder, low levels of social cohesion, neighborhood solidarity, and social integration, and perceived safety. Public health policies and intervention strategies must be designed to increase the resident's general sentiment of safety and believe the neighborhood is a safe place to live. Further research is needed to identify the factors aside from neighborhood disorder that impact residents' feelings of safety. This study identified and investigated potential influences of violent crime.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the neighborhood social structural characteristics of social cohesion, neighborhood solidarity, and social integration to determine the extent to which they distinguish variations in neighborhood violent crime. The proposition of the study was that neighborhood disorder directly impacts perceived neighborhood safety and perceived safety directly impacts neighborhood violent crime.

2.2 Research Hypotheses

There were seven hypotheses tested in this study including the following:

H1: Neighborhood solidarity will have a direct, positive correlation with the perceived safety of residents (Kubrin, 2009).

H2: Social integration will have a direct, positive correlation with the perceived safety of residents (Kubrin, 2009).

H3: Social cohesion will have a direct positive correlation with the perceived safety of residents (Kubrin, 2009).

H4: Perceived safety will have a direct, negative correlation with neighborhood violent crime (Shaw and McKay, 1942).

H5: There will be a significant interaction effect of Neighborhood Disorder and Perceived Safety on Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Severity (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; White and Schollaert, 1993).

H6: There will be a significant main effect of Perceived Safety on Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Severity (Sampson and Wilson, 2020; White and Schollaert, 1993).

H7: There will be a significant main effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Severity (Sampson and Wilson, 2020; White and Schollaert, 1993).

2.3 Research Design

Structural neighborhood characteristics alone do not create violence nor isolate resident social characteristics such as race and education contribute to increased crime and violence. The interactions among these variables produce ecological environments and conditions associated with the presence of crime and violence in specific communities (Sampson and Raudenbush, 2001). It was theorized that socially organized communities have higher levels of solidarity, cohesion, and greater social integration among neighborhood residents and hence, less violence, than disorganized communities.

In organized communities, several critical characteristics among residents have been identified which appear to enhance and empower neighborhood members to address common problems. These characteristics are linked to the resident's collective efficacy (Ohmer and Beck, 2006; Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999), the belief that their personal effort with their neighbors and participation in neighborhood organizations contribute to positive communal changes. Within this study collective efficacy is conceptualized as the interaction between social cohesion, community solidarity, and social integration.

Data were collected utilizing a sample of residents living in five census tracts of a small, great lakes city. Members of the neighborhood watch council and neighborhood watch groups assisted in recruitment efforts by posting and passing out flyers in the neighborhood. Flyers were posted in religious institutions, education facilities, and other public agencies and organizations. A convenience sample was used to identify residents living in census tracts one, eight, nine, twelve, and eighteen who were asked to voluntarily participate in this study. Residents completed items from an instrument created by the authors that measured the resident's perception of neighborhood solidarity, cohesion, and social integration (collective efficacy). A multiple regression and MANOVA were used to test the hypotheses. Results and implications for policy review and community intervention strategies to reduce neighborhood violent crime will be discussed.

2.4 Participation

Approximately 900 surveys were distributed in five census tracts located in a small municipality in the Great Lakes area of the US. Five hundred and two surveys were fully completed for a response rate of 56%, and 500 fully completed surveys were analyzed. Females represented 47.4% of the sample, and males represented 52.4%. The majority of respondents fell into the age 38 and older at (41.6%) group, while (22.4%) were ages 18-22 and (16.4%) were ages 23-27. The ages 33-37 were (10.8%), while the smallest age group was the group age 28-32 at (9%) rate of the age group. The sample was largely made up of Caucasians at 46.4% followed by African Americans at 19.4%.

Most respondents who identified as American were 27.2%. The education data of the sample was largely made up of those who earned a bachelor's degree at 24.7% with the second largest education group including 22.7% who earned a high school diploma/GED. The majority of the respondents (79.7%) had never attended a neighborhood watch group meeting. Moreover, the majority of residents (85.5%) reported they were not currently participating in neighborhood watch groups. The majority of the sample was poor (55.7%), with an annual income of less than \$25,000. The majority of residents (44.6%) reported living in an apartment with home ownership reported at 26.1 % and a significant portion of the sample (13.1%) reported that they do not own or rent.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Multiple Regression

The adjusted R^2 demonstrated how well the model generalizes and ideally, we would like its value to be the same, or very close to, the value of R^2 . The results show the difference between the values is small $(0.067) - (0.061) = (0.006)$. This shrinkage means that if the model were derived from the population rather than a sample it would account for approximately (0.006%) less variance in the outcome.

The Model can be defined as follows:

Perceived Safety = $b_0 + b_1$ Neighborhood Solidarity + b_2 Social Integration + b_3 Neighborhood Cohesion = $3.25 + (0.065 \times \text{Neighborhood Solidarity } i) + (-0.177 \times \text{Social Integration } i) + (0.355 \times \text{Neighborhood Cohesion})$.

The b -values show the relationship between Perceived Safety and each predictor. For these data both predictors have positive b -values indicating a significant, positive relationship. More specifically, as Neighborhood

Solidarity increases, Perceived Safety; as Neighborhood Cohesion increases, so does Perceived Safety. The b -values also show to what degree each predictor influences the outcome if the effects of all other predictors are held constant.

Neighborhood Cohesion ($b = 0.360$): this value indicates that as increases Neighborhood Cohesion by a specific level, Perceived Safety increased by 0.360 of that specific level. This interpretation is true only if the effect of Neighborhood Solidarity is held constant.

Neighborhood Solidarity ($b = 0.065$): this value indicates that as increase Neighborhood Solidarity by specific level, Perceived Safety increase by 0.65 of that specific level. This interpretation is true only if the effect of Neighborhood Cohesion is held constant.

Social Integration ($b = -0.177$): this value indicates that as Social Integration is increased by specific level, Perceived Safety increased by -0.177 of that specific level. This interpretation is true only if the effect of Neighborhood Cohesion is held constant.

The standardized beta values show the number of standard deviations that the outcome will change as a result of one standard deviation change in the predictor. The standardized beta value for Neighborhood Cohesion (0.30) and the standardized beta value for Neighborhood Solidarity (0.55) are different and Social Integration (-0.15) they indicate these variables have different degree of importance in the model and this concurs with what the magnitude of the t -statistics shown. More results of the regression can be found in Table A.1.

3.2 Manova

There was no significant interaction effect between Perceived Safety and Neighborhood Disorder on Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Neighborhood Violent Crime Severity $\Lambda = 0.99$, $F(8, 984) = 0.76$, $p = 0.64$. However, there was a significant main effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Neighborhood Violent Crime Severity, $\Lambda = 0.72$, $F(4, 984) = 44.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$. There was also a significant main effect of Perceived Safety on Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Neighborhood Violent Crime Severity, $\Lambda = 0.96$, $F(4, 984) = 4.70$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$.

Separate univariate ANOVA tests revealed that for Neighborhood Violent Crime Frequency and Neighborhood Violent Crime Severity, there was a significant effect of Neighborhood Disorder (low, moderate, and high), $F(2, 493) = 94.94$, $p > .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.28$ and $F(2, 493) = 90.50$, $p > .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.27$. Tukey multiple comparison post-hoc tests further revealed that the largest difference in Neighborhood Violent Crime Severity and Frequency were found between the low and high neighborhood disorder groups. In other words, as neighborhood disorder increased, so did neighborhood violent crime severity and frequency. More results of the MANOVA analysis can be found in Table B.1.

4. DISCUSSION

In reflecting upon the results of this study, there are many elements that are of importance and offer invaluable information as to the dedication that there are many variables that may have an effect on Perceived Safety Neighborhood Violent Crime. With this understanding, the researchers addressed each hypothesis in this study and provide insight into how the results of the study correspond with both previous research and the hypotheses of this study. Hypothesis one was rejected because neighborhood solidarity was not significant. The results of this analysis indicated that neighborhood solidarity was not significantly related to an increase to perceived safety. In other words, a high level of neighborhood solidarity does not have a positive impact on perceived safety in the community.

Hypothesis two was also rejected because social integration was not a significant predictor of perceived safety. In other words, a significant increase in community social integration did not increase perceived safety. Hypothesis three was accepted and indicated that social cohesion had a direct, positive correlation on the perceived safety of residents. In other words, increased social cohesion may increase the perceived safety of residents in this setting. Hypothesis four was accepted and demonstrated that perceived safety had a direct, negative correlation with neighborhood violent crime. In other words, higher levels of self-reported perceived safety significantly decreased neighborhood violent crime frequency and severity in this setting. Hypothesis five was rejected. This illustrated no significant interaction effect of perceived safety and neighborhood disorder on neighborhood violent crime frequency and severity.

MANOVA was used to measure the data collected from the sample to find

this significant influence. In other words, the combination of self-reported perceived safety and neighborhood disorder did not significantly decrease neighborhood violent crime frequency and severity. Hypothesis six was accepted meaning that perceived safety significantly predicted neighborhood violent crime frequency and neighborhood violent crime severity (Liberman et al., 2010). These results were consistent with previous research. Hypothesis seven was accepted. This demonstrated a significant main effect of neighborhood disorder on neighborhood violent crime frequency and severity. This finding indicated that higher levels of neighborhood disorder may be associated with an increase in both the number of violent crimes and severity of violent crimes in this setting. This was a major finding of the study and illustrates the importance of maintaining safe and livable neighborhoods as a means of crime reduction.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the major findings of this study were that neighborhood disorder significantly predicted perceived safety, neighborhood violent crime severity and neighborhood violent crime frequency. More specifically in this setting, increasing levels of neighborhood disorder were associated with decreased levels of perceived safety and subsequently increased numbers of violent crimes and the severity of the crimes. This supports previous research and demonstrates the importance of reducing neighborhood disorder to help residents feel safer. Improved neighborhood social order could potentially contribute to a reduction in the number of violent crimes. A secondary finding for this study was the significance of neighborhood cohesion in increasing the perceived safety of residents. This finding was very important and illustrates the need for communities to develop methods to increase neighborhood cohesion as a method of increasing the perceived safety of residents. This may include encouraging neighborhood block parties, more formally coordinating neighborhood watch groups, and providing incentives for residents to not only socialize with neighbors, but also become involved in the neighborhood. For instance, residents could create a localized park or urban garden on a vacant lot with the assistance of the city and the work could be coordinated by interested residents.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Neighborhood violent crime is an important topic which the researchers and community leaders have to focus on in the future. The high percentage of violent crime in a community should make leaders and politicians think about the solutions for the problem. Violence and crime are complicated problems that demand efforts from government agencies and community actors working together to reduce crime. Future research will concentrate on exploration and examination of factors that are associated with increased neighborhood cohesion. Program evaluation of grass root organizations such as neighborhood watch groups could focus on the activities designed to increase cohesion and move beyond issues of law enforcement alone. Moreover, social policies should support education programs that assist residents identify and structure community models that support positive behavior and cooperative trust (Warner, et.al, 2010). This plan could also be statistically tested to see if there are actual and perceived changes in violent crime.

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