Neighborhoods, Social Interactions and Crime: What Does the Evidence Show?

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Talk Outline

• Evidence on Neighborhood-Crime Connection

• What are Neighborhoods, and How do we Conceptualize

• Neighborhood as Place

• Neighborhood as Social Interactions
Neighborhood-Crime Connection?

- Demographics and economic characteristics of areas correlate with crime in expected direction – Across Metro Areas
Neighborhood-Crime Connection?

- Demographics and economic characteristics of areas correlate with crime in expected direction

- And within metro areas, both violent (and victimization) and property crime rates are higher in urban than suburban or rural areas.

- Concern: Many dimensions are themselves correlated with one another. Causality?
Defining Neighborhoods

Spatially Bound Places:

• As physical assets that give value to areas – Economists, Urban Planners, Geographers

• As locus of social interactions influencing social relationships and community identities – Sociologists, Urban Planners, Geographers

• Concepts strongly related but imply different mechanisms of influence on crime outcomes
Research Challenges in Identifying Influence of Neighborhoods on Crime

- Causal Effect or Residential Sorting?

- Chicken or Egg?

- If causal, what mechanism? Neighborhood as physical assets or as social interactions?
Neighborhood as Place

• Rational Choice to Crime

• Decision to participate based on neighborhood incentives/disincentives to crime
Figure 3

Source: Author's Calculations from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.
Neighborhood as Place

• Rational Choice to Crime

• Decision to participate based on neighborhood incentives/disincentives to crime

• Evidence from research on: local labor markets, neighborhood job access, and collective efficacy, other important institutions like schools, churches, etc.
Neighborhood as Place – Problem of Selection

- Response: Randomization – MTO

- Concerns over MTO Results
  - Negative Selection
  - Take up rates
  - Location of move
    - 96th percentile of the poverty distribution to the 88th percentile – But effects likely bigger if moved to neighborhoods with 50th percentile
Intent-to-Treat Effects of the Moving to Opportunities Program

- Streets near home are unsafe during the day: Control Group 39%, Section 8 Group 32%, Experimental Group 24%
- Child has seen someone with a weapon past 3 months: Control Group 10%, Section 8 Group 7%, Experimental Group 3%
- Head or children seen gunfire once a month: Control Group 21%, Section 8 Group 11%, Experimental Group 8%
- Head or children seen people using drugs: Control Group 36%, Section 8 Group 23%, Experimental Group 16%
- Child victimized past 6 months: Control Group 13%, Section 8 Group 10%, Experimental Group 7%
- Household head victimized past 6 months: Control Group 7%, Section 8 Group 4%, Experimental Group 8%
- Property crime past 6 months: Control Group 13%, Section 8 Group 5%, Experimental Group 6%
MTO - Implications

• Important because criminal participation by youth is a big predictor of adult criminal participation.

• MTO - Example of place but is also consistent with story of social interactions
Neighborhood as Social Interaction

Sources:

- Peers - Equal standing, belonging to same group
- Families
- Network Structure – Density, quality, and type of networks
Neighborhood as Social Interaction

Bottom Line:

• Interactions could positively or negatively influence participation in crime depending on quality, strength and density of relationships

• Less attention to questions of causality, especially questions of chicken and egg and sorting
Conclusions

• Strong evidence of descriptive patterns of neighborhood characteristics and involvement in crime (and victimization)

• Growing evidence of causal relationship, but stronger for research in neighborhood as place conceptualization

• Still, a clear need to identify, isolate and measure differing mechanisms that drive neighborhood-crime connection
Residential mobility could work but if social interactions drive behavior, little effect of mobility, even if neighborhood assets increase.

But if neighborhood assets matter and we try to improve peers, families, networks, without improving assets such as community institutions, then little effect.