



Foster care, geographic neighborhood change, and the risk of delinquency



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2015

Received in revised form 25 March 2016

Accepted 26 March 2016

Available online 6 April 2016

Keywords:

Foster care

Geographic neighborhood change

Delinquency

ABSTRACT

Background and purpose: Previous studies report that foster care placement is associated with an increased risk of delinquency. Yet it remains unclear which aspects of the placement experience increase the risk of delinquency. The current study addresses this knowledge gap. This study investigates the relationship between geographic neighborhood change and the risk of delinquency for adolescents in foster care settings. Based on findings from the neighborhood effects literatures, we hypothesize that moving to a neighborhood characterized by concentrated disadvantage and residential instability is associated with increased risk of delinquency.

Methods: The design for the current study is longitudinal. The sample is comprised of 145 foster youth from two birth cohorts, one born in 1983 and one in 1984, in Chicago, Illinois. The sample was 92% African American and 52% male. Overall, 11% had an official juvenile arrest. We used data from multiple sources, including the 1990 census data and administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Cook County Juvenile Court. To measure neighborhood change, we calculated a difference between children's home and placement neighborhoods on ten census variables: percentages of households in a given neighborhood that were below the poverty line, neighborhood households on public assistance, female-headed households, unemployed population, and persons <18 years old, African American, Latino, foreign-born, residents living in the same house as five years earlier, and owner-occupied homes, all of which are commonly used in neighborhood studies. We identified two factors within the neighborhood variables—concentrated disadvantage and residential instability,—and used the two-factor scores in the following analysis. We conducted a Cox regression to model time to first arrest.

Results: The results indicate that moving to a neighborhood with high residential instability significantly increases an individual's risk of juvenile delinquency. In addition, two subgroups—male foster youth; and all foster youth with an experience of neglect—are significantly more likely to be associated with a formal delinquency petition.

Conclusions and implications: The current study is unique and builds the knowledge base with regard to the placement of children and adolescents in substitute care settings. The findings indicate that the neighborhoods in which children are placed do matter in terms of their outcomes, and thus they should be considered in the placement decision process. This finding is consistent with the “person-in-environment” concept advanced by social work professionals.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Victims of child maltreatment show a higher risk of juvenile delinquency than their nonmaltreated peers (English, Widom & Brandford, 2002; Ryan & Testa, 2005; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993). The increased delinquency

risk is especially true for maltreated youth placed in substitute care settings (Doyle, 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Many studies examined the effects of the characteristics of settings on delinquency. Most of them focused on placement instability and placement type, and identified placement instability (Baskin & Sommers, 2011; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000b; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2003; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005) and congregate care (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2003; Ryan, Marshall, Herz, & Hernandez, 2008) as risk factors. Findings on the relationship between kinship care and delinquency have been mixed (Rubin et al., 2007; Ryan, Hong, Herz, & Hernandez, 2010). Yet to date, no study has examined how the geographic changes associated

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with foster placement may contribute to juvenile delinquency among foster youth. The current study addresses this critical gap in the literature.

1.1. Neighborhoods and juvenile delinquency

Numerous studies have found that neighborhood conditions such as institutional resources, social disorganization, and social norms, are associated with delinquency in the general population (Abrams & Freisthler, 2010; De Coster, Heimer, & Wittrock, 2006; Grunwald, Lockwood, Harris, & Mennis, 2010; Mennis & Harris, 2013; Mennis et al., 2011; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005; Shaw & McKay, 1942). As early as 1942, Shaw and McKay published an empirical study on five big cities such as Chicago. The authors reported that juvenile delinquency was concentrated in neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization.

Three mechanisms have been identified in the literature to explain the relationship between neighborhood conditions and juvenile delinquency: institutional resources, social disorganization, and social norms. "Institutional resources" refers to schools, recreation centers, daily routines, learning activities, and places of employment opportunities. While most previous studies examining the mediation function of institutional resources focused on their effect on educational achievement, several studies have examined juvenile delinquency. Using data from 44 Denver, Colorado neighborhoods, Kingston, Huizinga, and Elliott (2009) found that higher-poverty neighborhoods have less effective social institutions (e.g. schools, transportation services, police, and medical services), which leads to higher delinquency rates.

Social disorganization theory emphasizes the inability of a community structure to embody the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls. Accordingly, neighborhoods characterized by high poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity have limited social control over the behaviors of the residents, and therefore, experience high crime rates. Collective efficacy is an important concept in this theory. It is defined as a combination of social cohesion among neighbors and the willingness of those neighbors to intervene on behalf of the common good (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

Shaw and McKay (1942) first proposed social disorganization theory. Since the 1980s, researchers have started to measure social disorganization directly and test its mediation effect (Elliott et al., 1996; Sampson, 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson et al., 1997). There have been two types of studies, neighborhood-level and multi-level. The first group of empirical studies used neighborhood-level data. Researchers demonstrated that social disorganization mediated the effect of neighborhood conditions on neighborhood delinquency rates at the neighborhood level (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

The second group of empirical studies used both neighborhood-level and individual-level data. These studies benefited from the development of the hierarchical linear model (HLM), which takes into account the dependence between individuals nested within neighborhoods (Raudenbush & Bryk, 1992). HLM separates the effects of neighborhoods on individuals from the effect of individuals and families, and thus reduces selection bias. Using HLM, Elliott et al. (1996) reported that the organizational and cultural characteristics of neighborhoods mediated the effect of neighborhood disadvantages on young people's delinquent behavior and arrest records. The authors analyzed data from Chicago and Denver and reported that informal control accounted for 60% of the variance in problem behavior between neighborhoods in Chicago, and informal networks accounted for 26% of the variance in problem behavior between neighborhoods in Denver. Sampson et al. (1997) also reported that collective efficacy mediated the effects of concentrated disadvantages and residential stability on violence.

Social norm theory emphasizes the effect of subculture on delinquency. Social norm theory was proposed in Anderson's (1999) ethnographic study of neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Anderson found that neighborhood subculture mediated the relationship between

neighborhood conditions and violent delinquency. The high rates of male joblessness, poverty, substance abuse, and the lack of institutional resources in poor inner-city black neighborhoods fostered the violence-prevalent "code of street," a set of informal rules governing public behavior of youth. As the poor inner-city black neighborhoods became alienated from mainstream society and ignored by institutions like the police, the residents relied on violence to defend themselves and earn respect (Anderson, 1999).

1.2. Neighborhood change and juvenile delinquency

Since 1970s, several regional and national residential mobility projects exemplified the US government's efforts to move disadvantaged people out of their original neighborhoods. The most studied projects are the Gautreaux program in Chicago in the 1970s, the Yonkers Family and Community (Yonkers) Project in New York in the 1980s, and the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing (MTO) research demonstration in the 1990s. The Gautreaux program lasted for more than twenty years, and moved 7000 low-income African American families from high poverty, segregated, inner-city Chicago neighborhoods mostly to either Caucasian, suburban neighborhoods (three quarters of participants), or more racially mixed city neighborhoods (one quarter) (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). The MTO research demonstration was a large, federally funded housing experiment that used a voucher system to help families move out of high-poverty areas in five cities across the country: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The demonstration ran from from September 1994 through July 1998 (Goering & Feins, 2003). The Yonkers Project randomly relocated families in public housing—or on the waiting list for it—to new publicly funded housing dispersed throughout the city's middle-income neighborhoods (Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007).

The main assumption of such residential mobility projects is that improving neighborhood opportunities for low-income public housing residents can affect the behavior and life chances of both adults and children, for example, improving school performance and lowering delinquency among children (Goering & Feins, 2003). However, evaluations of the three projects above produced mixed findings. Regarding the Gautreaux program, Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000) compared the outcomes of children moved to suburban Caucasian neighborhoods with the outcomes of children moved to more racially mixed city neighborhoods. They reported that the children relocated to Caucasian suburbs were less likely to drop out of school and more likely to take college-track classes, attend four-year institutions and/or become employed full time. Studying criminal justice data on adults involved in the Gautreaux program as children, Keels (2008) reported that the effects of the program varied according to gender. That is, as compared with their counterparts moved to racially diverse neighborhoods within the city, the suburban males committed fewer criminal offenses, especially drug crime, than did their relocated urban counterparts, while suburban females were more likely to be convicted of a criminal offense than were their relocated urban counterparts.

Although the evaluations of the MTO demonstration reported different effects on males and females, their findings were opposite from the Gautreaux program. Studying administrative data on both juvenile and adult arrests, Kling, Ludwig, and Katz (2005) reported that adolescent boys in the experimental group who moved out of high-poverty areas were less likely to have been arrested for violent crime in the short term, while more likely to be arrested for property crime, report a non-sport related injury, have a friend who used drugs, or to engage in risky behaviors. For adolescent girls, being in the experimental group was associated with substantial reductions in the number of violent crime and property crime arrests.

Fauth and colleagues reported that the effects of the Yonkers Project varied by age group. Using self-report data, they reported that youth ages 8 to 9 in the experimental group benefited more from the project at both two-year (2005) and five-year (2007) follow-ups. That is, they

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