Social Networks 51 (2017) 40–59

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Social Networks

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/socnet

# Neighborhood isolation in Chicago: Violent crime effects on structural isolation and homophily in inter-neighborhood commuting networks

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ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Available online 28 March 2017

*Keywords:*
Neighborhood networks
Commuting
Violence
Social isolation
Homophily
TERGM

ABSTRACT

Urban sociologists and criminologists have long been interested in the link between neighborhood isolation and crime. Yet studies have focused predominantly on the internal dimension of social isolation (i.e., increased social disorganization and insufficient jobs and opportunities). This study highlights the need to assess the external dimension of neighborhood isolation, the disconnectedness from other neighborhoods in the city. Analyses of Chicago's neighborhood commuting network over twelve years (2002–2013) showed that violence predicted network isolation. Moreover, pairwise similarity in neighborhood violence predicted commuting ties, supporting homophily expectations. Violence homophily affected tie formation most, while neighborhood violence was important in dissolving ties.

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A fundamental concern about impoverished urban neighborhoods, highlighted most notably in Wilson's classic works, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) and *When Work Disappears* (1996), is that such neighborhoods and their residents are socially isolated. Wilson defined social isolation as the "lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (1987:60). Isolation limits neighborhood residents' access to jobs, role models, political influence, resources, and other important organizations and institutions. Notably, neighborhood isolation is linked to weakened formal and informal social controls and increased crime and violence (Wilson, 1996). From the early Chicago School until modern times, theorists of crime, social disorganization, and urban distress have focused intensively on communities' *internal* dimension of social isolation, as reflected by inadequate institutional infrastructure, dysfunctional social interactions, and weakened collective socialization within the community (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Sampson et al., 1997) – ideas sometimes summarized as neighborhood social capital (Neal, 2015; Sampson and Graif, 2009b).

Implicit in Wilson's classic definition is the equally important, yet much less studied, *external* dimension of social isolation – the extent to which a community lacks *extra-local ties* to outside jobs, resources, and other organizations and institutions, located in neighborhoods in the rest of the city. Even the most dysfunctional and violent communities may be connected in one way or another to other communities. Regular citizens may routinely cross neighborhood boundaries as they go to work and participate in daily activities (Krivo et al., 2013). Co-offending networks may cross large distances between neighborhoods within a city (Schaefer, 2012). Yet, with few exceptions (Velez et al., 2012; Sampson and Graif, 2009a; Sampson, 2012), little systematic attention has been paid to external isolation. Almost three decades after Wilson's insight, we still know very little about what shapes community disconnectedness from the world and what role violence plays in it. The current study bridges this gap by examining how violence affects neighborhoods' external connectedness to the city-wide commuting network.

Extra-local connections can be highly significant in shaping neighborhood outcomes. Work on public social control underscores how a community's ties to influential external actors can shape the allocation of public services and funds above the neighborhood level (Hunter, 1985) – with important consequences for itself as well as other neighborhoods. For example, an increase in policing resources in one community may cause crime to spill over into nearby areas (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). Neighborhoods that are isolated from the city are thus less able to influence supra-neighborhood decisions (Bursik, 1989; Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). In the same vein, the political economy literature highlights how "as cities grow and government bureaucrats seek sites for devalued projects (for example sewage plants, jails, halfway houses) they look first [..] to poor people's neighborhoods" (Logan and Molotch,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2017.01.007
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2007 [1987]: 113). In low-income neighborhoods, residents do not have the ability to collectively organize in their own interests due to lack of social capital and weak ties to influential people in the city (Logan and Molotch, 2007 [1987]). In contrast, residents of more advantaged and better connected neighborhoods may use their status to influence zoning regulations and the placement of transportation routes.

Investigating the patterns and determinants of neighborhoods' external isolation and connectivity holds strong promise for advancing our understanding of urban processes of neighborhood change and for changing the future trajectory of violent communities (Hunter, 1985; Sampson, 2012). For many distressed neighborhoods, extra-local ties may constitute a way to overcome internal deficiencies and break out of the downward spiral of social and economic distress. To the extent that large groups of people travel to other neighborhoods for work or other activities, they may forge invisible lifelines across space, through which critical information and resources may travel. Understanding how violence shapes neighborhood isolation from larger citywide networks may uncover unique avenues for distressed neighborhoods to gain economic and political leverage to alleviate existing distress (Graif et al., 2014; Velez et al., 2012).

External isolation may weaken residents' bridging *social capital*, otherwise forged through diverse ties at work and conversations with residents of other communities. Inadequate access to extra-local economic opportunities often translates into insufficient access to a broad range of services, such as job training programs, health services, or recreation centers. As individuals and communities miss out on a diverse pool of social and institutional contacts, their social capital weakens (Neal and Neal, 2014; Neal, 2015; Stivala et al., 2016), which in turn will weaken further referrals for jobs and other services. If we do not understand how violence restricts neighborhood embeddedness in the wider social infrastructure of the city, we risk missing the full picture on how the residents of violent communities (the majority of whom are not involved in violence) may draw from extra-local resources to overcome local deficiencies.

Violence may be a significant driver of neighborhood isolation. As a result of violence, communities lose socially mobile residents and successful organizations (Stark, 1987; Morenoff and Sampson, 1997), which take their tax payments and positive role-models elsewhere. Similarly, violence may weaken a community's external connectivity to areas and organizations in the city. The lack of resource inflows into a community because of overall isolation from the citywide resource network or because of differential exclusion from ties to influential areas will affect residents (e.g., reducing funding for street lights) in addition to the high risk of victimization and of children becoming entangled in gangs and illegal drug markets.

The current study analyzes patterns of inter-neighborhood connectivity using information on the location of employers in Chicago matched to the residential location of employees between 2002 and 2013. We investigate the extent to which violence a) increases neighborhoods' disconnectedness from the city-wide network of resources and opportunities or b) contributes to differential disconnection – mostly from other safer, more advantaged neighborhoods but not from other violent neighborhoods. To the extent that violence affects neighborhoods' external network embeddedness, the findings have the potential to advance our understanding of the processes that produce and re-produce social isolation.

## Neighborhood violence and network isolation

Violence may affect a neighborhood's isolation from the city-wide commuting network in multiple ways. Directly, violence increases residents' concerns about the safety of public transportation (e.g., gang presence or illegal drug activity on one's way to the bus stop) (Harding, 2010) and about the reliability of private transportation (e.g., stolen or disassembled cars). Increased victimization risk discourages residents' use of transportation to search for jobs and affects their informal interactions with friends and neighbors for job referrals. Wilson highlights reports from residents of dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago's South Side who feel trapped (1996: 60): "I stay home a lot. Streets are dangerous. Killings are terrible. Drugs make people crazy. [. . .] I'm afraid to go outside. I know people who go to work and leave the music on all day and night." All else equal, these patterns suggest that residents from violent areas may be less likely to commute over larger distances than residents from safer areas. In the aggregate, this contributes to violent neighborhoods becoming more isolated from the commuting network.

Violence inevitably affects a neighborhood's reputation, as repeated media reports of crime in the area remain vivid in the public memory. Stigma associated with neighborhood location has been reflected in numerous historical efforts at "redlining," the practice of classifying certain neighborhoods as risky and denying, or selectively raising the prices of, mortgages, business loans, insurance, and other services for residents of such areas (Massey and Denton, 1993; Pager and Shepherd, 2008). A randomized study (Besbris et al., 2015) across multiple cities has shown that neighborhood stigma (measured as disadvantage and large shares of minority residents – indices often related to violence as well) discourages economic transactions (rates of response to sales posts of used mobile phones on an active online market). Similar patterns may work even more forcefully in shaping employers' interest in job candidates.

Employers are known to discriminate against job seekers with criminal records (Pager, 2003; Pager et al., 2009). If violent communities have a disproportionate number of individuals with criminal records, this would contribute in the aggregate (as a compositional effect) to fewer ties to other communities, increasing neighborhoods' structural isolation. Communities with higher rates of violence likely also contain more residents with criminal records for several reasons. First, a significant proportion of violence is committed within offenders' residential neighborhood (e.g., Tita and Elizabeth, 2005). Second, housing and employment discrimination based on criminal record restricts ex-offenders to few residential options, leading many former prisoners to return to their previous neighborhoods of residence or to neighborhoods that are similarly disadvantaged and violent (Kirk, 2009; La Vigne et al., 2003). Moreover, high concentrations of ex-inmates increase recidivism (Kirk, 2015) and violence (Clear et al., 2003).

Beyond a compositional effect, employers may discriminate based on neighborhood location. Though the effect of neighborhood violence has not been much examined, one study that comes close is Bertrand and Mullainathan's (2004). It used a randomized design to study labor market discrimination in Boston and Chicago by sending fictitious resumes to help-wanted ads in the Boston Globe and Chicago Tribune between 2001 and 2002. They found that living in a neighborhood that was less wealthy, less educated, or less white decreased callback rates. Since these neighborhood attributes tend to be correlated with violence, the findings can be instructive and indicative that neighborhood violence may also decrease extra-local employment.

Employers may worry that residents of violent neighborhoods are more likely to be criminal or to lack a good work ethic; that long commuting distances may render workers tardy, absent, or tired; or that wealthy white local costumers may prefer not to interact with disadvantaged minority workers from violent inner city neighborhoods (Gobillon et al., 2007). Wilson (1996) presents several reports, from employers and job seekers alike, which illustrate

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