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Identifying the nature of risky places for sexual crime: The applicability of crime pattern and social disorganization theories in a Canadian context

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Using both crime pattern and social disorganization theories, the current study investigates the characteristics of those places that experience high counts of reported sexual crime to police.

Methods: Socio-demographic factors, land use, specific sexual crime attractors, and ecological variables are used to predict dissemination areas with high counts of sexual crime within a large city using 2180 founded crime events retrieved from a Canadian police database.

Results: Socio-demographic and ecological factors, as well as the presence of particular sexual crime attractors, characterize these neighborhoods. For example, dissemination areas that have higher percentages of female, male, and single residents, as well as higher counts of rental units, bars, and schools, experience more sexual crimes. Land use does not predict dissemination areas with high counts of sexual crime.

Conclusions: Both crime pattern and social disorganization theories provide a framework within which the nature of sexual crime places can be better understood. This information could be used to empower community members as to the types of places that are the riskiest for crimes of this nature, as well as to create a conversation about interventions that could be put in place at both the secondary and tertiary levels to prevent future occurrences.

1. Introduction

One of the major findings emerging from the field of environmental criminology more generally, and the crime and place literature specifically, is that crime is spatially concentrated. Among the studies that have investigated the degree to which different offense types are spatially concentrated, few have examined crimes of a sexual nature, but of those that have, researchers have found that this type of crime exhibits the highest degree of concentration (see, for example, Andresen & Malleson, 2011; Sherman, Gartin, & Buerger, 1989). Although an interesting finding on its own, the next natural question to emerge is: why? Why is there such concentration of different crime types in very few spatial areas? For property crime, the answer to this question appears straightforward. Residential or commercial burglary, for example, can only occur in places where these types of property are located, and these locations will not change because these targets are immobile. However, for interpersonal crime, such as sexual offending, the answer may be more complex, not only because sexual offenders need to search for “suitable” victims (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1978) who are mobile within their environments, but they also need to find “suitable”

locations to commit the crime that will increase their chances of success while minimizing their risks of apprehension (Leclerc, Wortley, & Smallbone, 2010a). It is perhaps because of some of these complexities that few researchers have investigated the nature of sexual assault places. However, as noted by Ceccato (2014), this information can be useful not only for better understanding how the environment interacts with the offender's propensity to perpetrate criminal sexual acts, but to also better inform potential victims of those places where they may be at a higher risk of sexual victimization. It is also argued here that such an analysis provides an opportunity to empirically test whether or not those places typically cited in sex offender legislation in both Canada and the United States as being high risk, are actually implicated in areas where there are many police recorded sexual crimes. Undoubtedly, this information would not only be useful at a policy level, but it would also aid in prevention efforts. It is the objective of this study, then, to investigate the characteristics of these high sexual crime areas.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

The idea that the environment is implicated in the commission of crime dates back almost two hundred years (Guerry, 1833; Quételet, 1842). As a component of crime pattern theory, the geometric theory of crime is not so concerned with *why* offenders engage in deviant activity, but rather *where* crime occurs given the opportunities available to them within their everyday environments (Andresen, 2010). Once these opportunities become salient to the offender, he then makes rational decisions about how to choose a suitable victim or target, and where the crime is to take place (Rossmo, 2000). Underscoring this theory is the crucial role that the environment plays in determining where individuals travel, the pathways that they use to get there, and how this directly impacts the spatial distribution of crime events. Furthermore, individuals are also restricted by where and how they can travel by the time of day, or day of the week. Because individuals spend the majority of their time engaging in their routine activities at particular nodes, and traveling between them via pathways, they compose what Brantingham and Brantingham (1981) refer to as an “action space”. The more time that individuals spend engaging in criminal and non-criminal activities within their action space, the more information they start to collect about the activities that take place at individual nodes, the areas surrounding them, as well as the individuals who occupy them. This knowledge, then, forms their “awareness space,” and it is within this space that individuals are likely to be victimized, or conversely, hunt for victims (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981).

As Andresen (2010) notes, it is through the geometric theory of crime that the distribution of crimes and, more specifically, certain types of crimes, can be better understood. In theory, sexual assaults are the most likely to take place at activity nodes and along pathways where there is a high convergence of potential offenders and victims. This idea has translated into current policy affecting convicted sexual offenders. Although there are wide discrepancies in sexual offender legislation and its application between the United States and Canada, policies in both countries echo the public's concern that these offenders are at a high risk to reoffend once released from incarceration (Petrunik, 2002). Consequently, the United States has implemented residency restrictions and other forms of spatial monitoring legislation where these individuals are forbidden from coming within a certain distance of activity nodes where children are thought to congregate such as schools, parks, playgrounds, daycare centers, and school bus stops. Although Canada has been more cautious in developing such legislation (Petrunik, 2002), many released sexual offenders are similarly subject to geographic restrictions as part of their conditions of release. Unique to Canada, however, is the practice of recognizance or peace bonds. Section 810(1) of the *Criminal Code* (1985) allows for any person who fears, on reasonable grounds, that another person will commit a sexual offense against a child, to lay a complaint before a judge. If the judge determines that there are reasonable grounds substantiating such a complaint, the defendant must enter into a recognizance and comply with the conditions set forth by the judge, that often include prohibiting the defendant from attending a public park, public swimming area, daycare center, school ground, playground or community center. Thus, the commonality among legislation in both countries is that convicted and, in some cases, potential, sexual offenders, need to be kept away from certain places because of the temptation that they might have to commit a sexual offense against a child.

The majority of studies testing this community protection-risk management approach has been conducted within the United States context, and several problems have been highlighted that question the efficacy of this legislation for preventing sexual crimes: (1) empirical studies that have tested this notion have found that sexual recidivists do not commit their offenses in the locations targeted by this legislation (e.g., Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2007; Tennessee Board of

Probation and Parole, 2007; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2007; Turner & Jannetta, 2007); (2) this legislation is targeted at child molesters, and thus may not apply to crossover offenders or rapists who offend against adult victims who may congregate at activity nodes that differ from those stated above; and, (3) underscoring this legislation is the presumption that sexual crimes occur primarily between strangers when in fact the opposite is true, and thus, activity nodes such as the offender's, or victim's, home may be the primary sites in the majority of cases. For these reasons, drawing upon crime pattern theory, and the geometric theory of crime in particular, to explain the spatial distribution of sexual crime at the micro-level may only be telling the partial story. Thus, the macro ecological theory of crime – social disorganization theory – that proposes that community characteristics have a role to play in the distribution of criminal events, may aid in this understanding.

Social disorganization theory largely emerged from the work of Shaw, Zorbaugh, McKay, and Cottrell (1929) and Shaw and McKay (1942) who were particularly interested in how economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility affected social disorganization among different communities (Kornhauser, 1978) and, by extension, juvenile delinquency in those areas. The working hypothesis was that poor economic conditions within neighborhoods would inevitably lead to population turnover (i.e., residential mobility) because residents would leave as soon as they were able to move to communities with better conditions (Andresen, 2014). High residential mobility then impedes the ability of those living within these neighborhoods to develop friendship networks or other local community ties because these associations take time (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Because of high population turnover, housing in these areas are relatively cheap and thus these neighborhoods are desired by those who have low incomes (e.g., recent immigrants). Because of the racial and ethnic heterogeneity, language and cultural barriers prohibit individuals from communicating and interacting with one another in these communities. As is noted by Bursik (1984), these elements combine to the detriment of a community because of its inability to build formal or informal ties that (a) would allow for individual members to recognize that a problem exists in their community (e.g., crime), and (b) allow them to solve this common problem. Since the publication of Shaw and McKay's (1942) seminal work, researchers in the 1980s and 1990s expanded this theory to include two other community-level factors that were thought to decrease the level of social cohesion and control: family disruption (Sampson, 1987) and urbanization (Sampson & Groves, 1989). The former overlapped with the routine activity perspective (Cohen & Felson, 1979) where it was thought that two-parent families (in comparison to single-parent families) could provide increased guardianship over their children, household property, and general neighborhood activities (Sampson, 1987), thereby resulting in decreased levels of crime. The latter factor, urbanization, was thought to affect social organization in a similar way to that of population turnover; that is, urban communities may be less likely to form kinship ties, friendship networks, and participate in local activities in comparison to suburban and rural communities (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Several researchers have sought to empirically test these five community-level factors and their impact on local violent crime rates (e.g., Browning, 2002; Harries, 1995; Pratt & Cullen, 2005). Despite this, only a handful of studies have applied social disorganization theory to the study of sexual crime in particular (e.g., Baron & Straus, 1989; Gentry, 1989; Peterson & Bailey, 1988; Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Covington, 2010; Whaley, 1999). This is surprising given that an association has been found between the presence of released sexual offenders in a community and its level of social disorganization (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2008; Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006a, 2006b; Suresh, Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Higgins, 2010). Such an association, at the very least, implicates the (potential) role that community-level factors play in the spatial distribution of sexual crime, yet current methods of supervising released sexual offenders (e.g., residency

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