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Examining interactive effects of characteristics of the social and physical environment on aggravated assault

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A B S T R A C T

Prior studies have largely focused on socioeconomic and demographic correlates of neighborhood crime rates. A largely distinct literature has highlighted the criminogenic influence of the built environment. Recent research cross-pollinated these literatures and demonstrated that, controlling for structural socioeconomic disadvantage, an aggregated neighborhood risk of crime (ANROC) measure capturing the influence of the built environment has a strong and robust influence on neighborhood crime rates. Instead of viewing variation in crime as a product of social factors or characteristics of the built environment, the current study advances the literature by exploring an interactive model viewing crime as a product of social factors and the built environment. Conceptually, we describe two distinct processes (attenuation and amplification) by which social structural sources of violence and characteristics of the environmental backcloth may interact. In assessing the salience of these processes, the current study provides a more accurate assessment of how divergent ecological contexts work contemporaneously to influence neighborhood levels of crime. Results of our block-group level analyses of a single city indicate structural disadvantage is an exceptionally robust predictor of crime, but the influence of the ANROC measure is contingent upon levels of socioeconomic disadvantage in the neighborhood at-large.

1. Introduction

The neighborhood context of crime has long been an area of interest among social scientists, law enforcement personnel, policy makers, and residents. An extensive literature base has identified robust correlates of variation in violent and property crime across neighborhoods including: poverty, unemployment, residential instability, and demographic characteristics (Sampson, 2012). Although the criminological implications of mixed land use (residential vs. commercial) has long been a point of concern (Jacobs, 1961; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Taylor, 1988), prior studies have largely focused on the demographic and socioeconomic correlates of neighborhood crime levels rather than elements of the built environment or physical landscape (Land, McCall, & Cohen, 1990; McCall, Land, & Parker, 2010). Recently, a growing body of literature focused on crime forecasting and predictive policing has developed methods of measuring the influence of elements of the built environment on crime in micro places.

Risk terrain modeling (RTM) is a spatial diagnostic technique that allows for the creation of a victimization risk score based on characteristics of the built environment (Caplan, Kennedy, & Miller, 2011; Drawve, Thomas, & Walker, 2016; Dugato, Calderoni, & Berlusconi, 2017; Kennedy, Caplan, & Piza, 2011; Moreto, Piza, & Caplan, 2014).

Recently, Drawve et al. (2016) cross-pollinated environmental and sociologically based criminological literatures by simultaneously examining the influence of social and demographic factors as well as characteristics of the built environment (e.g. businesses, schools, motels, bus stops, etc.) on variation in violent crime across neighborhoods. Specifically, they used RTM to develop a measure of victimization risk at the neighborhood level, an Aggregated Neighborhood Risk Of Crime (ANROC) measure. Results indicated that, controlling for levels of structural socioeconomic disadvantage and residential instability, the ANROC measure was strongly and negatively associated with neighborhood levels of violent crime in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The ANROC measure is an intriguing ecological correlate of crime that extends prior research emphasizing general land use patterns (residential vs. commercial). Jacobs (1961) and Taylor (1988), highlighting competing explanations linking commercial land use and crime, provide ample reason to expect the criminogenic influence of population dynamics and the physical environment are not entirely distinct. Instead of viewing neighborhood crime levels as a product of social factors or characteristics of the built environment (an additive model), the current study investigates an interactive model in which crime is viewed as a product of social factors and elements of the built environment. As such, we assess whether the association between crime

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and structural disadvantage or crime and the ANROC measure are contingent on levels of one another. Conceptually, we describe two processes (attenuation and amplification) by which social structural sources of violence and characteristics of the environmental backdrop may interact. An attenuation process predicts the association between elements of the physical landscape and violence are weakened in disadvantaged neighborhoods. An amplification process suggests a built environment conducive to the development of criminal opportunities may exacerbate rather than vitiate the association between disadvantage and crime. In assessing the salience of these processes, this study provides a more accurate assessment of how divergent ecological contexts work contemporaneously to influence neighborhood levels of crime.

2. Structural disadvantage

A vast literature has highlighted a number of ecological correlates of crime. For example, extant studies have consistently indicated the concentration of overlapping forms of socioeconomic resource disadvantage has a strong and robust association with exacerbated levels of property and violent crime across diverse macro social units (Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Land et al., 1990; Lee, 2000; Lee, Maume, & Ousey, 2003; McCall et al., 2010; Peterson & Krivo, 2010; Sampson, 2012; Sampson & Byron Groves, 1989; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Conceptual mechanisms through which structural disadvantage may drive levels of violence can be culled from a number of theoretical traditions, including social disorganization and strain (Merton, 1938; Shaw & McKay, 1942). The disorganization perspective and the systemic model of community attachment emphasize the detrimental, often criminogenic, effects of an unstable, heterogeneous, and economically depressed population. The concentration of overlapping forms of structural disadvantage leaves communities ineffective at instilling mainstream norms, attitudes, and values into the community at-large and incapable of maintaining effective formal and informal and social control mechanism (Bursik, 1988). Specifically, structural disadvantage endemic in disorganized communities undermines cohesion, organizational participation, and institutional attachments resulting in social isolation and few opportunities to assimilate into mainstream society (Burchfield, 2009; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Sampson, 1988; Sampson & Byron Groves, 1989; Warner, 2014). Wilson (1987, 1996) detailed the extensive macro social consequences of social isolation from mainstream society. Isolation along class lines has undermined the belief among residents of disadvantaged communities that consistent meaningful employment and a middle class lifestyle are viable options. Undermining the community's ability to transmit mainstream culture and embed residents in the legitimate opportunity structure, isolation fosters the proliferation of cultural adaptations that further undermine social organization (Anderson, 1999; Krivo & Peterson, 2000; Warner, 2003).

The role of structural disadvantage and social isolation in attenuating access to the legitimate opportunity structure, particularly the labor market, plays a central role in the Mertonian strain tradition (Merton, 1938). Socialization into the American cultural value system of wealth, status, and success is critical to this theoretical tradition. Ideally, youth are socialized to strive for these goals through institutionally prescribed and law-abiding routes such as hard work, perseverance, and higher education. Unfortunately, the legitimate means by which to attain universalistic, largely pecuniary, success goals are not equally distributed. Moreover, deprivation in the midst of plenty is likely to reduce conformity and exacerbate levels of crime. The real or perceived unavailability of legitimate routes to success among residents of disadvantaged communities leads residents to experience strain, anomie, and ultimately normative deregulation. Residents do not view traditional means as a viable route to success, leaving many in search of alternative, perhaps deviant or criminal, means to attain socially prescribed goals. As noted by Merton, "The dominant pressure of

group standards of success is, therefore, on the gradual attenuation of legitimate, but by and large ineffective, strivings and the increasing use of illegitimate, but more or less effective, expedients of vice and crime" (Merton, 1938: 679).

Concentrated structural disadvantage is a primary cause of anomie and confusion over the acceptability of means to attain universal success goals. Merton emphasized financial sources of strain, which seemingly situates the strain framework as primarily applicable to understanding property as opposed to violent crime. However, there are clear linkages between strain and violence. Status frustration resulting from the inability to meet middle class standards of success through conventional means may lead some to resort to expressive forms of crime, including violence, as a means of rebelling against or exhibiting contempt for mainstream society (Cohen, 1955). Moreover, when conventional means of attaining status and respect are blocked, illegitimate means, such as a willingness to resort to violence to earn respect and resolve interpersonal conflicts, may become normative (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Merton indicated as much by suggesting "certain phases of social structure generate the circumstances in which infringement of social codes constitutes a normal response" (Merton, 1938:672). There is also empirical evidence of the relevance of these processes to interpersonal violence (Chamlin & Cochran, 1995; Maume & Lee, 2003). Further, strain need not be viewed singularly from the perspective of the individual. Agnew (1999) suggests strain and anomie resulting from structural disadvantage could increase frustration and aggression in the community-at-large. In disadvantaged communities, interpersonal contacts and conflicts between strained and frustrated individuals are more likely to result in assaultive and even lethal violence. This is supported by qualitative research on street robbery indicating offenders often choose targets perceived as "flossin" or flaunting their success and status (Wright & Decker, 1997).

3. Physical environment

While structural disadvantage is a stalwart correlate of violence, there are strong advocates for examining the influence of commercial land use and elements of the physical environment on crime (Jacobs, 1961; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Taylor, 1988). Building on these earlier works, an emerging body of literature indicates understanding characteristics of the built environment or physical landscape is critical to a comprehensive understanding of patterns of violent crime across contextual environments. Within this growing body of literature, there has been a push for a focus on micro units (Weisburd, Groff, & Yang, 2012). Further, Environmental Criminology, primarily routine activities theory (RAT) (Cohen & Felson, 1979), rational choice theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1986) and crime pattern theory (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993), has emerged as a guiding framework. Originally developed to explain relations between crime rates and greater activity outside the home, RAT centers on the spatial and temporal convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the lack of effective guardianship. Rational choice posits that offenders contemplate the risks and rewards of a criminal opportunity. Finally, crime pattern theory posits daily behaviors through activity spaces such as nodes (where people spend a great deal of time), paths (routes taken between nodes), and edges (physical or social boundaries) lead to criminal opportunities. Together, these perspectives suggest time bounded routine travel patterns based on daily activities, (e.g. work and recreation activities) influence perceived opportunities for criminal activity and thus the distribution and level of crime (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993; Cohen & Felson, 1979).

The nature of the contextual environment may facilitate crime, however, not all activities or spaces equally influence the availability or willingness of potential guardians nor do they attract offenders or victims. Early research offered competing theses on the influence of mixed land use (residential vs. commercial) on a community's social control capability and thus, the prevalence of crime. Jacobs (1961)

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