



Formal controls, neighborhood disadvantage, and violent crime in U.S. cities: Examining (un)intended consequences



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 October 2015

Received in revised form 23 December 2015

Accepted 24 December 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Formal social controls

Neighborhood disadvantage

Violent crime

Community crime

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the intended and unintended effects of formal social controls on violent crime within and across U.S. cities.

Methods: Using data from the National Neighborhood Crime Study, we assess whether greater police arrest activity and jail incarceration risk are associated with lower violent crime rates across cities. We also investigate whether greater use of these formal social controls exacerbates the relationship between extreme neighborhood disadvantage and violent crime.

Results: Results from multilevel analyses show that some formal controls (jail incarceration risk) reduce violent crime across cities, but other formal controls (police arrest activity) amplify the relationship between extreme neighborhood disadvantage and violent crime within cities.

Conclusions: Two main conclusions can be drawn from our analyses. First, we found evidence that some formal controls do reduce violent crime, while others do not. Second, our results support scholars' arguments that formal controls have unintended consequences (e.g., Clear, 2007, 2008; Rose & Clear, 1998), specifically, by amplifying the effect of extreme neighborhood disadvantage on violent crime.

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Introduction

The regulation of crime in communities is a process that is owed to both informal and formal social controls (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Clear, 2007; Sampson, 1986). Researchers of community crime have focused primarily on the crime-reducing effects of informal social controls such as social ties, community organizations, collective efficacy, and so forth (e.g., Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997), with much less attention to the effects of formal social controls (e.g., police, jail incarceration) (Clear et al., 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Sampson & Loeffler, 2010; Wildeman & Western, 2010). Additionally, much of the research on formal controls has focused primarily on the consequences of state imprisonment (e.g., Kovandzic & Vieraitis, 2006; Levitt, 1996; Western, 2006) as opposed to the effects of more localized formal controls such as police and jails.¹ Such formal controls may reduce city crime rates (Sampson, 1986); however, they may also impact the neighborhood processes (e.g., informal controls) that affect neighborhood crime rates within cities, thereby having unintended consequences, such as higher crime, in these areas (Clear, 2007; Rose & Clear, 1998). Further, because formal controls such as police and jail incarceration may be applied differently within and across cities

(Klinger, 1997), their impacts on crime rates may be different for various types of communities, particularly disadvantaged ones (e.g., Clear, 2007; Rose & Clear, 1998). In this study, we assess the impact of formal controls (police arrest activity, jail incarceration risk) on rates of violent crime across U.S. cities, as well as whether these formal controls affect the relationship between extreme neighborhood disadvantaged and violent crime within cities.

Formal controls in communities

As sources of social control, both formal and informal controls ultimately function to regulate behavior; however, some scholars have suggested that formal controls do not necessarily reduce crime in all cases, nor in all types of communities. Clear and his colleagues (Clear, 2007; Rose & Clear, 1998) have offered the most precise theoretical expectations regarding the potential "unintended consequences" (e.g., higher crime, reduced capacity for informal social control) of formal controls for certain types of neighborhoods. The core argument put forth by Clear and colleagues has suggested that while formal controls are typically expected to reduce crime rates within communities (a direct effect), they may actually *increase* crime if they impede the capacity of communities to regulate crime themselves through the use of informal control (a moderating effect). Rose and Clear (1998) explained that coercive mobility, or the forced removal of neighborhood residents through the use of formal controls (such as arrest), may exacerbate the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and crime

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because it disrupts the ability of the informal social controls (e.g., social ties between residents, family supervision) in these areas to work properly. In other words, relying too heavily on the police or incarceration to reduce crime may undermine the ability of informal controls, such as families, to control crime (Clear et al., 2003; Frost & Gross, 2012; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Rose & Clear, 1998). Further, this effect is expected to be most pronounced in areas characterized by *extreme* levels of disadvantage, primarily because the informal controls that are available in such areas are already depleted and/or strained (Clear, 2008; Clear et al., 2003).

A few studies have examined Clear's expectations empirically (Clear, Rose, & Ryder, 2001; Clear et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2004a, 2004b; Lynch et al., 2002; Sabol & Lynch, 2003), but these studies have: 1) primarily focused on imprisonment as a formal control—not police or jails; 2) used data from only a few cities; and, 3) not focused on the impact of formal controls within extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods in particular. In the current study, we attempt to fill these gaps by examining the direct effects of city formal controls, as measured by police arrest activity and jail incarceration, on violent crime rates across 90 cities in the U.S., as well as the moderating effects of formal controls on the relationship between extreme disadvantage and crime within cities. We assess whether formal controls have intended consequences for cities (e.g., lower crime rates), but unintended consequences for some neighborhoods (e.g., extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods) within those cities.

Intended and unintended consequences of formal controls

Direct effects of formal controls on city crime rates

Formal controls are expected to directly reduce crime levels, primarily by deterring crime or incapacitating offenders from committing future crimes. Wilson and Kelling (1982), for instance, argued that increased police attention to "minor" offenses, such as public intoxication, littering, and so forth might be associated with lower violent crime rates because it sends a message to potential offenders that crime – even minor forms – will not be tolerated.² Stark (1987) observed that more rigorous law enforcement decreased crime and deviance, and suggested that lenient law enforcement practices may unintentionally attract criminals. Wilson and Kelling (1982) also posited that less vigorous policing increases disorder and sends the message that "no one cares" about the area. Increased police arrest activity, then, may impact crime rates because offenders perceive that there is a high likelihood they will be detected and punished for criminal behavior (Sampson, 1986; Wilson & Boland, 1978) or because law enforcement is viewed to be more "proactive" (Kubrin et al., 2010).

Evidence from studies conducted at both the city- and neighborhood-levels of analysis indicates that more stringent policing practices are, in fact, associated with lower rates of crime and violence (e.g., Kane, 2006; Kubrin et al., 2010; Sampson & Cohen, 1988; Wilson & Boland, 1978; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). However, Kubrin and colleagues (2010) noted that prior studies of proactive or aggressive policing may have suffered from underspecification in their empirical models, particularly by failing to acknowledge that police behavior is impacted by macro-level factors such as the social and economic health of a city. Klinger (1997) has theorized that police actions are influenced by environmental factors, and scholars have found that racial (e.g., Kane, 2003; Smith, 1986) and socioeconomic (e.g., Smith, 1986; Sun, Payne, & Wu, 2008; Terrill & Reisig, 2003) characteristics influence police actions, with police potentially being more active in areas with increased racial heterogeneity or lower socioeconomic status. Thus, certain areas of a city may experience more proactive police tactics than others, but the extent to which police behaviors impact various communities differently remains to be determined.

In addition to the police, incarceration may also reduce criminal activity by removing and incapacitating offenders from a city, at least

temporarily suspending their criminal activity.³ Extant studies have examined the effects of incarceration at the state and national level, with the majority of research concluding that large increases in prison populations lead to only slight reductions in crime rates, or are not associated with crime levels at all (DeFina & Arvanites, 2002; Johnson & Raphael, 2012; Lynch & Sabol, 2004a; Marvell, 2010; Marvell & Moody, 1994; Spelman, 2000; Visser, 1987; Zimring & Hawkins, 1988). Perhaps this is because not all offenders have the same risk of being arrested and incarcerated (Visser, 1987), or, because incarceration at the city level is more relevant and meaningful (e.g., better signifies the likelihood of punishment) to potential offenders than incapacitation at the state or national level (Sampson, 1986). Indeed, contrary to evidence on state and national incarceration, Sampson (1986) found that a higher risk of jail incarceration reduced rates of robbery across cities. Very little research has examined the effects of jail incarceration on city crime rates; however, scholars have suggested that incarceration is differentially concentrated throughout areas within cities, with disadvantaged neighborhoods being particularly likely to experience higher rates of incarceration (Sampson & Loeffler, 2010; Western, 2007; Wildeman & Western, 2010). In this study, we examine the impact of police arrest activity and jail incarceration on city crime rates while controlling for important city and neighborhood covariates.

Moderating effects of formal controls on the relationship between extreme disadvantage and neighborhood crime rates

Clear and colleagues (Clear, 2007; Rose & Clear, 1998) have provided theoretical expectations regarding the potential moderating effects of formal controls on neighborhood-level processes, but the empirical validity of these expectations warrants continued investigation (for exceptions see Clear, Rose, & Ryder, 2001; Clear et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2004a,b; Lynch et al., 2002; Sabol & Lynch, 2003). Clear has argued that over-reliance on, or over-use of, formal controls (e.g., policing, incarceration) can undermine the effectiveness of informal social control agents to regulate crime within disadvantaged neighborhoods, which in turn, may lead to increased levels of crime; further, these moderating effects may be most pronounced in areas that are characterized by *extreme* disadvantage because the sources of informal social control may already be limited, strained, or depleted in these areas (Clear et al., 2003; Rose & Clear, 1998; Shaw & McKay, 1942). In partial support of this idea, Clear et al. (2003) found that higher rates of admissions and releases from prisons within Tallahassee neighborhoods were associated with higher rates of neighborhood crime. Following Clear and colleagues (Clear, 2007, 2008; Rose & Clear, 1998), we expect that greater use of formal controls may unintentionally *exacerbate* the relationship between extreme neighborhood disadvantage and violent crime by reducing the number and/or effectiveness of informal social control agents in these areas. While we do not examine these intervening processes directly, we recognize the theoretical mechanisms which we believe to operate when formal controls are vigorously employed in extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods. That is, these linkages explain why the effects of neighborhood disadvantage on crime rates may be exacerbated in cities with greater use of formal controls.

Regarding the number of informal social control agents within disadvantaged neighborhoods, the social costs of arrests and incarceration can be detrimental to local human ecology systems, as incapacitation (both temporarily and long-term) removes individuals from neighborhoods which could otherwise benefit from their presence (Clear, 2007). For example, when a father is arrested and/or incarcerated, the household becomes headed by a single parent, a potential income-earner is removed, and the amount of supervision over children is reduced (Clear, 2008; Parker & Reckdenwald, 2008; Sabol & Lynch, 2003; Western, 2007; Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004). Removal of such an individual may have a broader impact within a neighborhood as well, since social ties between neighbors and the individual are disrupted and a potential income-generating member of the neighborhood is

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