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# Disentangling the reciprocal relationship between change in crime and racial/ethnic change

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research has found that racial/ethnic change and residential instability are positively related to neighborhood crime. However, the process of racial/ethnic change differentially influences crime above and beyond residential instability. While both processes affect crime through the disruption of existing social ties, racial/ethnic change has additional consequences for crime by heightening racial/ethnic tensions and undercutting cross-group interactions. This means racial/ethnic change is a different process than residential instability, and suggests that neighborhoods experiencing high rates of instability and high rates of racial/ethnic change may be particularly susceptible to crime. Therefore, we examine the influence of racial/ethnic compositional change on change in crime across different levels of residential instability. Further, we argue that demographic change and crime may be influencing each other *simultaneously*: increases in the crime rate and racial/ethnic compositional change impact each other at the same time. To capture this process, we employ a structural equation model (SEM) that accounts for the reciprocal and simultaneous relationship between racial/ethnic change and violent and property crime rates in Los Angeles, California between 1990 and 2000. We also account for the influence of change in spatially proximate communities. Results show robust evidence that increases in racial/ethnic change contributes to greater violent and property crime rates, but the reciprocal influence of crime on racial/ethnic change is contingent upon the degree to which a neighborhood is experiencing residential instability and crime type.

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## 1. Introduction

While research on the role of neighborhood structure and crime has flourished over the past few decades many studies still rely on cross-sectional analysis that examines neighborhood processes in equilibrium. Recognizing that neighborhoods change over time, Kirk and Laub (2010, pg.442) refer to this lack of attention to neighborhood dynamics as “one of the more intriguing puzzles” in macro-level research. Building largely upon Shaw and McKay (1942) original focus on the *growth* of the city, more recent work examines how communities *change* over time (e.g., Becker, 2016; Hipp, 2010a, 2010b). Importantly, neighborhood processes are interconnected such that factors that produce crime in neighborhoods are also likely outcomes of crime itself. This suggests that the relationship between crime and neighborhood structure is *reciprocal*: crime is an outcome of changes in neighborhood structure, but crime is also a motivator of neighborhood changes (Bellair, 2000; Chamberlain, 2016; Hipp, 2010a, 2010b; Kirk and Laub, 2010; Liska and Bellair, 1995; Liska et al., 1998).

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These processes of neighborhood change are multidimensional and interconnected. That is, when one neighborhood characteristic begins to shift, this impacts the stability of other characteristics in the neighborhood such that change in one mutually reinforces change in the other. Crime and residential instability are two such factors. However, different forms of residential instability have differential effects on crime (e.g., Boggess and Hipp, 2010), and racial/ethnic change can be considered a distinct form of instability (Flippen, 2001). Indeed, crime can impact residential mobility patterns: crime affects residents' fear (Liska et al., 1988; Markowitz et al., 2001), which may spur residential out-migration (Cullen and Levitt, 1999; Sampson and Wooldredge, 1986). Importantly, the ability to exit or enter a neighborhood may be constrained by race/ethnicity due to discrimination in the housing market and household preferences (Bobo and Zubrinsky, 1996; Crowder, 2001; Harris, 1999; Turner et al., 2002). Thus, crime-induced mobility contributes to changes in the racial/ethnic composition of a neighborhood (Hipp, 2010a, 2010b; Liska and Bellair, 1995; Liska et al., 1998). As the neighborhood composition fluctuates, mechanisms of informal social control such as social ties and networks are weakened, thereby increasing crime (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Rosenfeld et al., 2001). Over time, these neighborhood processes perpetuate one another, suggesting that changes in crime and racial/ethnic change are mutually embedded in one another.

However, the *process* of racial/ethnic change may differentially impact crime above and beyond residential mobility or migration generally. Both racial/ethnic change and residential instability affect crime through the disruption of existing social ties, but racial/ethnic change may have additional consequences for crime. If racial/ethnic change results in increasing diversity this may increase social distance, and homophily may mitigate social ties between unlike others and perpetuate microsegregation across racial categories (Tach, 2014). Thus, strong ties within-group may thwart cross-group networking that is necessary for community-wide crime control efforts. Further, the degree to which increasing diversity elicits competition over physical space or symbolic boundaries may result in increasing between-group conflict and violence (Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995, 1996). This suggests that racial/ethnic change may be capturing a different process than residential instability generally, necessitating an explicit examination of racial/ethnic change, and how racial/ethnic change is directly linked to crime *in addition to* residential instability alone. Further, this suggests that neighborhoods experiencing high rates of instability and high rates of racial/ethnic change may be particularly susceptible to crime.

Extant studies, however, look at the influence of crime on *future* structural changes and do not examine how structure and crime may be influencing each other *at the same time*. For example, an increase in crime might trigger residential instability if renters break leases or homeowners with underwater mortgages abandon houses (Malpezzi and Wachter, 2005). As a consequence of this crime-induced residential outmigration, networks of social control among residents are broken. This in turn might further catalyze instability, establishing a cycle of crime and neighborhood decline. These neighborhood changes form a system playing out in tandem: the process of residential instability and the breakdown of social ties is *concurrent* with the process of increases in crime. This is different than lagged effects over annual (e.g., Boggess and Hipp, 2010; Hipp et al., 2009b) or ten year (e.g., Bursik and Webb, 1982; Morenoff and Sampson, 1997) durations often used in existing empirical studies, as these models effectively treat neighborhood structure in one year as independent of crime in the same year. Thus, given the contemporaneous nature of the relationship between change in crime and neighborhood structural changes, it is important to consider the simultaneity between population change and change in crime. It may be particularly important to examine this relationship within the context of racial and ethnic shifts specifically given that crime can have race-specific impacts (Cullen and Levitt, 1999; Hipp, 2010a; Liska and Bellair, 1995; Liska et al., 1998; Morenoff and Sampson, 1997; Xie and McDowall, 2014).

To that end, this study builds upon current research on the reciprocal relationship between neighborhood structural conditions and crime by examining *simultaneous* changes in the racial/ethnic compositions of neighborhoods and changes in crime in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> We argue that crime is both an outcome of neighborhood change and a motivator of neighborhood change — specifically racial/ethnic compositional change. We do not posit that it is the change in one racial/ethnic group in particular that is tied to changes in the crime rate, but rather the dynamics of population change caused by shifts in the racial/ethnic composition in general that are detrimental for neighborhoods, and that these fluctuations impact changes in crime above the negative consequences of residential instability more generally.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. The effects of residential instability and racial/ethnic change on crime

Studies examining neighborhood context and crime consistently find that impoverished neighborhoods characterized by high residential instability and greater racial/ethnic heterogeneity are more vulnerable to higher crime rates (e.g., Krivo and Peterson, 1996; Morenoff and Sampson, 1997; Sampson and Byron Groves, 1989). As conceptualized within the framework of social disorganization theory, these factors restrict social interaction among residents, which in turn impedes informal social control and order maintenance, reducing the willingness to intervene on another's behalf (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974; Sampson et al., 1997). Neighborhood racial and ethnic composition and residential instability are particularly salient (Bellair, 1997; Sampson and Byron Groves, 1989) because residents are less likely to develop meaningful

<sup>1</sup> Although some may argue that Los Angeles is unique in its demographic and population shifts during this time, this manuscript defines racial/ethnic change in a manner that is not group-specific, which makes it generalizable to most other areas undergoing shifts in the racial/ethnic composition of neighborhoods regardless of which categories of race or ethnicity are changing.

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