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Local gangs and residents' perceptions of unsupervised teen groups: Implications for the incivilities thesis and neighborhood effects

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current work responds to calls for more conceptual clarity in disorder and incivility models, and for closer ties between gang and neighborhood effects research. Focusing on the perceived incivility that is pivotal to the dynamics of several theories in community criminology—unsupervised teen groups—and adopting Messick's (1995) unified perspective on construct validation, the current work examines ecological and psychological impacts of street gang set spaces on these perceptions.
Methods: Survey responses of over 900 residents in 55 census block groups in the northeast quadrant of the District of Columbia were combined with census data and expert assessments of gang set spaces.
Results: Residents living in closer proximity to gang set spaces, within and beyond their neighborhood, reported more problems with unsupervised teen groups. This held true even after controlling for social integration.
Conclusions: Results support Hunter's (1978) distinction between general social disorder and specific correlated manifestations thereof, like incivilities, and Thrasher's (1926) view of gangs as consequences of social disorder, furthering our understanding of this key social incivility.

The incivilities thesis, first articulated by the late James Q. Wilson (1975) in the mid- 1970s to explain then-novel high fear of crime levels, states that symbols or signs of incivility—a set of neighborhood physical conditions reflecting a lack of care or maintenance and neighborhood social incidents where residents or public space users engage in behaviors that are either inappropriate for the time and setting, physically or verbally aggressive, or suggestive of alcohol, drug, or mental health concerns—cause a range of unwelcome consequences for individual residents and public space users. The incivilities thesis has evolved in several directions over the past four decades. Although the broken windows version (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) of the incivilities thesis is perhaps the best known, other versions (Garofalo & Laub, 1978; Hunter, 1978; Lewis & Salem, 1986; Skogan, 1990) have taken the thesis in different directions: added new outcomes, multileveled it, added ecological as well as psychological forces, and created dynamic longitudinal components. In addition to this "conceptual drift," there has been confusion about the label for this central construct (Taylor, 2001, p. 94). "Researchers have not arrived at a common vocabulary" (Kubrin, 2008, p. 205) when discussing incivilities.

Beyond symbols of incivility, signs of incivilities, and incivilities, terms applied have included "neighborhood problems," "disorder," and "signal disorder." In the past two decades the vocabulary has shifted to include labels that are just "disorder" (Skogan, 1990), some type of disorder such as "public disorder" (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999), "signal disorder" (Innes, 2004), or umbrella labels signifying a wide range and scale of social and physical environmental cues such as "the disorder continuum" (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999, p. 414). The earlier noted "conceptual drift" persists. "Variability in how disorder is understood and conceptualized across studies is the rule rather than the exception" (Kubrin, 2008, p. 205).

In addition, variability in how incivilities are *operationalized* across studies is problematic. Some studies include non-Part I but "serious" crimes, such as selling drugs in public or using drugs in public (for a partial list of specific incivilities across studies see Gau & Pratt, 2008). This problem, and the consequent theoretical challenges introduced, was first pointed out by Rosenfeld (1994) while reviewing Bursik and Grasmick (1993):

> Disorder theory predicts that fear is elevated and community controls are eroded by neighborhood conditions that are not 'intrinsically crime-related' … however, the conditions of disorder mentioned by the authors … are criminal offenses or carry legal penalties … We are left, at best, with an explanation specifying that small crimes can lead, directly or indirectly, to bigger crimes. The logical problem underlying this approach is underscored by the magnitude of the empirical association … between [ecological] indicators of incivility

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> and disorder on the one hand and community crime rates on the other. This degree of measurement redundancy renders the development of meaningful causal models nearly impossible. (pp. 1388-1389)

Kubrin (2008) succinctly reiterates this concern when she asks "should researchers conceptually distinguish, if at all, between disorder and crime?" (p. 205)

The current investigation takes up a focused variation of Kubrin's (2008) important question. It reframes it in light of Hunter's version of the incivilities thesis which distinguished between disorder as a broader condition and more specific manifestations of this disorder, including symbols of incivilities and crime. It focuses Kubrin's (2008) question by centering on one specific perceived incivility: residents' perceptions of the degree to which rowdy or problematic (and thus presumably unsupervised) teen groups create problems in their neighborhood. This is a crucial incivility for several reasons. It is not a crime, thus avoiding Rosenfeld's (1994) concern. Second, it is a pivotal indicator not only for the incivilities thesis, but also for the basic systemic model of crime (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Finally, it is an indicator about which substantial questions of meaning persist (Veysey & Messner, 1999), including questions of construct validation. Kubrin's (2008) question is also focused in a second way here: the relationship between local street gangs and this incivility, rather than crime and this incivility, is highlighted.

Previous work has examined cross-sectional connections between this perceived incivility and both delinquency and violent crime (Taylor, Harris, Jones, Garcia, & McCord, 2011). That work supported widely shared scholarly expectations that individuals living in higher violent crime or higher delinquency prevalence neighborhoods would report more local trouble with unsupervised teen groups, even after controlling for community structural features. But when *gang* impacts on this key incivility indicator are considered, theoretical expectations may diverge in two ways. First, is the connection ecological or psychological? Street gang set spaces are spatially delimited and census block groups, the neighborhood units used in this study, are of a similar small scale. Thus, street gangs present in a neighborhood could affect residents *generally* in that locale if the dynamic is ecological. Alternatively, what might matter is the context for each individual resident, how he or she is positioned spatially relative to street gang set spaces both within the neighborhood and beyond; the individual's specific spatial context in relation to gangs may affect perceptions of troublesome teen groups. Second, given the literature on gang presence in stable neighborhoods (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Pattillo, 1998; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Taylor, 2001) it is not clear whether the impact of gang context would be variable across neighborhoods. The current study examines both theoretical expectations.

The remainder of the introduction is organized as follows: Hunter's (1978) version of the incivilities thesis is briefly reprised. It makes an important distinction between general social disorder and specific manifestations of it, such as symbols of incivility and crime. This version of the incivilities thesis thereby suggests incivilities and crime are separate but connected. Then three recent works examining connections between perceived incivilities and perceived crime or reported victimization are examined. Inconsistent findings, potential reasons for inconsistent findings, and limitations of these studies are noted. Framing these findings in a broader context pinpoints remaining construct validity questions. Two approaches to the latter, the multitrait-multimethod matrix (MTMM) approach, and the total construct validation approach, are sketched. Following the latter, the relevance of the gang-rowdy teen group incivility link for gauging the meaning of the incivility indicator is described. To specify a conceptual frame for linking this incivility to street gang presence, recent empirical gang work is outlined next, highlighting two particularly relevant threads of gang work—fear of gang crime, and gang presence in stable neighborhood contexts. The implications of that work for shaping expectations about the gang-incivility link are noted. The section closes with specific statements of the two research questions addressed.

Hunter's symbol of incivility framework, and implications

Disorder, symbols of incivility, and crime represent three distinct but related concepts. Both crime and symbols of incivility may arise from a broader structural condition called disorder. Different residents in different communities may assign different causes to observed symbols of incivility in various ways. Another interpretation is local institutions, either within or outside the community, are either unwilling or unable to remediate these conditions. Both symbols of incivility and crime may arouse or elevate residents' fear of crime, but the former pathway is likely more influential—for many urban residents, symbols of incivility are far more prevalent than crime (Hunter, 1978; Taylor, 1999).

Important implications follow. First, if broader conditions of disorder represent macro-level causes of crime and symbols of incivilities, then we would expect a relatively close degree of ecological co-variation. Later work confirmed this (Skogan, 1990; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Turning to the key incivility examined here, work similarly revealed ecological impacts of unsupervised, troublesome teen groups on crime (Lowenkamp, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003; Veysey & Messner, 1999), and ecological impacts of crime, even net of community structure, on this incivility (Taylor et al., 2011). Male serious delinquency prevalence rates also influence unsupervised, troublesome teen groups (Taylor et al., 2011). Second, impacts of symbols of incivility depend on who is interpreting them and what that interpretation is. This symbolic interactionist theme, introduced originally by Wilson (1975) and Hunter (1978), has been highlighted by others (Harcourt, 2001; Innes, 2004).

Perceived crime and perceived incivilities

Three recent studies examined connections between perceived crime and perceived incivilities, empirically assessing at the individual-level a challenge foreseen by Rosenfeld (1994): are incivilities and crime clearly separable? Worrall (2006), using city-centered but not neighborhood-centered survey data from 12 cities, found that neither physical nor social incivilities could be separated from perceived crime in a confirmatory factor model, but perceived physical incivilities could be discriminated from unbounded reports of previous victimization.

Gau and Pratt (2008), using survey data from Eastern Washington, found that perceived social and physical incivilities and perceived crime problems both contributed to one, broad underlying construct. Armstrong and Katz (2010) using survey data from residents in multiple neighborhoods in Mesa, Arizona, found somewhat stronger discriminant validity than seen by Worrall (2006) for perceived incivilities relative to victimization reports. But the results gauging the discriminant validity of perceptual incivilities indicators relative to respondents' perceptions of crime proved inconsistent.

Putting these differences and limitations aside, these works highlight two broader, important points. First, these studies align with Hunter's (1978) symbols of incivilities model. It expects covariation between incivilities and crime both across places, and given its symbolic interactionist frame, across individuals. Whether the studies find that one broad factor provides the best fit (Gau & Pratt, 2008) or that two factor solutions with correlated latent factors work best for some subset of incivilities (Armstrong & Katz, 2010; Worrall, 2006), the underlying constructs are related (Gordon, 1968). Whether they are related strongly enough to create the modeling difficulties anticipated by Rosenfeld (1994) remains to be determined.

Second, these studies highlight the limitations of focusing on patterns of convergent and discriminant validation for establishing construct validity. The MTMM approach to convergent and discriminant validities was originally offered in the context of psychological testing where it might be feasible to obtain assessments from multiple sources