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Civic communities and urban violence

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ABSTRACT

Civic communities have a spirit of entrepreneurialism, a locally invested population and an institutional structure fostering civic engagement. Prior research, mainly confined to studying rural communities and fairly large geographic areas, has demonstrated that civic communities have lower rates of violence. The current study analyzes the associations between the components of civic communities and homicide rates for New Orleans neighborhoods (census tracts) in the years following Hurricane Katrina. Results from negative binomial regression models adjusting for spatial autocorrelation reveal that community homicide rates are lower where an entrepreneurial business climate is more pronounced and where there is more local investment. Additionally, an interaction between the availability of civic institutions and resource disadvantage reveals that the protective effects of civic institutions are only evident in disadvantaged communities.

1. Introduction

Urban areas in the United States have a long history of being plagued with violence and other criminal activity. Consequently, much research has been conducted on community crime rates in urban areas, typically testing social disorganization theory as an explanation for variations in crime rates. Recent work, however, has shifted attention away from the longstanding focus on what Sampson (2000) calls the 'poverty paradigm' toward a focus on the link between the civic climate of local communities and their crime rates. In this perspective, it is proposed that more civically robust communities will be better off and have lower crime rates than civically weak communities. These communities have a culture and social structure promoting local entrepreneurialism, a robust economically independent middle class, a strong matrix of religious and secular institutions to facilitate civic engagement and a locally invested and stable population (Lee, 2008). Each component theoretically contributes to the ability of communities to foster cohesion and efficacy, secure and manage local municipal resources, and prevent a host of crime and public health related problems.

This civic community perspective is distinctive from the social disorganization perspective, which has been used as a central explanation for urban violence, in several ways. First, it recognizes the overlapping relationships between various sectors of society including the social, economic, and religious realms. It recognizes that invested citizens are usually not involved in only one aspect of community life, but instead, involve themselves in the socioeconomic and civic life of the community in many different ways. For example, local business owners are very frequently the citizens spearheading civic initiatives for the benefit of the community. Additionally, this perspective expands the focus from what holds the community together

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to what buffers the community from external forces by focusing on the role of social institutions within a community (Lee, 2008).

In the growing body of research on civic communities, there are several notable deficiencies which this paper attempts to address. Conceptually, little is currently known about the nature of the structural linkages between civic community measures and traditional social disorganization predictors. Theoretical thinking on the interplay between the civic institutional structure and socioeconomic conditions, for example, is simply not very well articulated in extant research. Similarly, empirical exploration and documentation of these relationships remains scant, providing an opportunity for additional research. Finally, the vast majority of prior research focuses on fairly large aggregates such as U.S. counties, and essentially analyzes these relationships across politically defined ecosystems. Little is known though, about how these relationships play out across smaller and more direct proxies for communities within a single socioeconomic ecosystem such as a city.

Given these shortcomings, New Orleans, Louisiana provides a unique location to test the civic community perspective in an urban setting given its recent history, as well as its long struggle with violence. The city of New Orleans is known for its high violent crime rates and is among the most dangerous cities in the United States with a 2008 murder rate of 63.6 per 100,000 people compared to national rate of 5.4 that same year (U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009a,b). Additionally, New Orleans experienced one of the greatest and most rapid losses of population in recent history following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In the year following the storm, only 208,000 of the 455,000 residents populating the parish before the storm had returned (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Organizations, local business owners, homeowners, and other residents closely tied to the city were among the first to return and reestablish connections within and to the community. Thousands of evacuees either never returned or slowly trickled back in once the city had undergone substantial recovery. The distinctive circumstances and reformulation of this urban area gives researchers a unique setting to explore how variation in the civic orientation of communities correlates with homicide rates in the wake of large-scale population disruption.

2. Civic communities

The civic community perspective is a macro-level theory of social control that "focuses on the relationships between economic and noneconomic institutions" (Tolbert et al., 2002, p. 92). This perspective maintains that positive social action is the result of the interplay between cultural and structural factors which form a dense social fabric that is capable of effectively addressing social problems. The civic community perspective generally focuses on the importance of local capitalism and the economically independent middle class, civic institutional structures and their role in facilitating civic engagement, and residential stability and local investment. We discuss each of these in turn below.

2.1. Local capitalism and the economically independent middle class

Mills and Ulmer (1946) first drew attention to the importance of local capitalism for the civic welfare of communities in their report to the U.S. Senate. The report demonstrated that cities comprised mainly of small businesses had a higher level of civic welfare than did big business cities (Mills and Ulmer, 1946). These smaller establishments are usually more invested in the community, both socially and financially, and therefore contribute to the civic culture of the area (Mills and Ulmer, 1946; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Tolbert, 2005 and Tolbert et al., 2002).

The concept of the economically independent middle class is closely linked to the idea of local capitalism. The owners of small firms or businesses are typically self-employed and usually make up the economically independent middle class within a community. These owners are dependent on the community for their personal and business success. When choosing where to do business, owners do not randomly locate. Some owners must situate their business where there is a market for their product or service, regardless of the community context. However, owners with more flexibility may be able to choose a location based on community well-being. These individuals may, therefore, initially choose a location free of problems that could potentially adversely affect their business, including areas prone to criminal activity. However, there is no guarantee that the civic climate of a community will remain constant, and instead may change over time. Because many small businesses cannot relocate as easily as larger corporations, these business owners work to improve or sustain local capitalism and civic well-being in order to either reduce local problems or prevent them from infiltrating the area surrounding their business. These owners are interested in maintaining the civic environment with regard to well-being, including lower crime rates, as they usually "benefit personally as a result of civic improvement" (Mills and Ulmer, 1946, p. 23). These individuals, therefore, remain vigilant, are usually active participants in the community, and often become leaders in civic affairs as they have the education, training, and connections necessary to manage civic efforts (Mills and Ulmer, 1970).

Lyson et al. (2001) referred to those active business leaders as members of the civically engaged middle class. Through their ties to business clubs or other associations and organizations, business owners are able to develop and maintain a network of local supporters (Mills and Ulmer, 1946 and Tolbert et al., 2002). Local owners are also "more likely to provide support, membership, and direction" for other institutions in the community and serve as role models for community youth (Tolbert et al., 1998, p. 405). Moreover, developing these strong networks makes it less likely that the owners of these businesses will relocate during tough economic times, given that they are so engrained in the community. The attachments created to the community by local establishments and their employees, therefore, can be expected to benefit residents while increasing the community's well-being and reducing community crime rates (Tolbert et al., 1998).