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Alcohol outlets, social disorganization, and robberies: Accounting for neighborhood characteristics and alcohol outlet types

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ABSTRACT

We estimated spatially lagged regression and spatial regime models to determine if the variation in total, on-premise, and off-premise alcohol outlet¹ density is related to robbery density, while controlling for direct and moderating effects of social disorganization.² Results suggest that the relationship between alcohol outlet density and robbery density is sensitive to the measurement of social disorganization levels. Total alcohol outlet density and off-premise alcohol outlet density were significantly associated with robbery density when social disorganization variables were included separately in the models. However, when social disorganization levels were captured as a four item index, only the association between off-premise alcohol outlets and robbery density remained significant. More work is warranted in identifying the role of off-premise alcohol outlets and their characteristics in robbery incidents.

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1. Introduction

Robbery is a serious violent crime that involves “the taking or attempting to take valuable commodities from a person by force or with a threat of force” (United States Department of Justice, 2010). Although the average financial loss in robbery victimizations is relatively insignificant \$877.00 (United States Department of Justice, 2010), robbery is a serious violent crime due to the unexpected encounter between the offender and the victim. Prior literature suggests that high availability of alcohol outlets and greater social disorganization contribute to higher concentrations of robbery (e.g., Bernasco and Block, 2011; Bernasco et al., 2013; Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995; Smith et al., 2000). However, the research in this area has left two areas that need further exploration.

The first relates to the alcohol outlet typology. Broadly defined, alcohol outlets are places that are licensed to sell alcohol beverages. Alcohol outlets are commonly disaggregated into on-premise (i.e., places that sell alcohol beverages that are meant for consumption while visiting the place, such as a bar or restaurant) and off-premise (i.e., places like liquor and convenience stores that sell alcohol beverages that are meant for consumption elsewhere). Only two studies have examined the

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¹ Alcohol outlets can be disaggregated into on-premise (i.e., places that sell alcohol beverages that are meant for consumption while visiting the place, such as bars or restaurants) and off-premise (i.e., places such as liquor or convenience stores that sell alcohol beverages meant for consumption elsewhere).

² This concept captures neighborhood level characteristics, such as ethnic heterogeneity, poverty, residential instability, and single-headed households, which taken together reduce social cohesion in the area and the ability of community residents to realize common goals.

association between different types of alcohol outlets (on-premise, such as bars and restaurants, and off-premise, such as liquor stores) and robberies. These studies have suggested that different types of alcohol outlets have different association with robberies (Bernasco and Block, 2011; Bernasco et al., 2013). Understanding the associations that different outlets have with robberies is essential to determining appropriate policy responses.

The second relates to the issue of measurement of social disorganization. The concept of social disorganization captures neighborhood level characteristics, such as ethnic heterogeneity, poverty, residential instability, and single-headed households, which taken together reduce social cohesion in the area and the ability of community residents to realize common goals (Shaw and McKay, 1942). A few studies measured social disorganization as an index comprised of several variables, while the majority of prior studies have examined the association between individual social disorganization variables estimated separately. The issue of measurement is important because prior studies in this area have produced different findings depending on which measure they utilized, making it difficult to fully understand the relationship between social disorganization and robberies. Therefore, this study further explores the association between different alcohol outlets and robberies in the city of Milwaukee, WI, and examines how different measures of social disorganization affect the findings.

1.1. Theoretical perspectives

Two broad types of social ecological theories, place-based and social integration (Gorman et al., 2013), can explain spatial distribution of robberies. First, place-based theories (such as routine activities or crime potential theory) suggest that some neighborhoods may be attractive to motivated offenders because they bring about a flow of vulnerable victims who are suitable targets for robbery and have ineffective or absent guardianship (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Motivated offenders travel from one place to another during the course of their daily routine and assess opportunities for robberies within their awareness space (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1993). As they take note of opportunities to victimize vulnerable victims, they are cautious about the opportunities upon which they act. If they act upon opportunities that are within their neighborhoods, they risk the possibility of being recognized by their victims. If they act upon opportunities outside of their neighborhood, they risk the possibility of appearing to be out of place (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1993). Some offenders choose to act upon opportunities that exist along edges between different parts of the city (e.g., wealthy and poor, white and minority), where they are less likely to stand out. Accordingly, robberies may occur on the edges between wealthy and poor neighborhoods where there is an opportunity for victimization of vulnerable victims and where there are absent guardians. Additionally, robberies may occur in neighborhoods with high availability of alcohol outlets, which serve as social attractors (Parker, 1993). Alcohol outlets can either attract crime by bringing a flow of unguarded vulnerable victims or generate crime by providing public places that are easily accessible to the public (e.g., places that are located on main street, or near public transportation stations) and lack place managers (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995; Eck, 1995). For example, neighborhoods with high availability of bars produce intoxicated patrons who are vulnerable victims at closing time, while liquor stores lack effective guardianship once the patron leaves the premise and becomes vulnerable. Liquor stores themselves also may be suitable targets when only one store clerk is present but may be unsuitable for robbery when customers or multiple store clerks are present. Alcohol outlets may also contribute to robbery by being part of an environmental landscape that already provides situational opportunities for victimization. For example, a majority of commercial robberies have occurred in convenience stores that were located near major transportation route, on a lightly traveled street, and in an area with retail activity (Duffala, 1976).

The second broad type of social ecological theory, social integration theory, argues that some neighborhoods may be conducive to robberies because they are socially disorganized (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Such neighborhoods are marked by poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, and population turnover all of which reduce social cohesion of the area. Socially disorganized neighborhoods lack collective efficacy necessary to exert influence over the behavior of community members or events in their community (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson et al., 1997, 2002). As such, those neighborhoods may be unable to control the behavior of their community members and may also lack political influence to control and limit opening of alcohol outlets in their communities. Additionally, socially disorganized neighborhoods are often in close proximity to central downtown business district, and the proximity to downtown is associated with crime rates (Park and Burgess, 1924; Shaw and McKay, 1942).

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Alcohol outlets and robberies

Research on alcohol availability and resulting alcohol related problems is rich within epidemiological and public health literature. Within this rich body of literature, alcohol outlets are commonly disaggregated into on-premise (i.e., places that sell alcohol beverages that are meant for consumption while visiting the place, such as a bar or restaurant) and off-premise (i.e., places like liquor and convenience stores that sell alcohol beverages that are meant for consumption elsewhere) (e.g., Ornstein and Hanssens, 1985). The epidemiological and public health literature suggests that alcohol availability plays an important role in negative health and social outcomes. First, alcohol outlets contribute to alcohol consumption, alcoholism, and related health problems. For example, per capita on-premise alcohol license was positively and significantly associated with consumption of distilled spirits and of beer across the nation (Ornstein and Hanssens, 1985). Additionally, the number of on-premise alcohol outlets per 100,000 persons was associated with per capita consumption and alcoholism rate,

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