

The effect of socioeconomic disadvantage and racial isolation on neighborhood homicide

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

In many U.S. cities, poverty, white flight, and segregation have taken root over the past several decades, leaving an environment of social disorganization conducive to violent crime. Yet some inner-city neighborhoods thrive, providing rich cultural experiences and safe environments for their inhabitants. This variation in inner-city neighborhoods is important to understand. For citizens whose communities have not yet been affected by concentrated disadvantage, instability, and racial isolation, understanding these social processes may delay or even ward off their ill effects. For those communities that have been affected, it is only through such understanding that their effects will be overcome.

Social disorganization theory provides a conceptual framework in which to investigate the connection between violent crime and conditions that promote social disorganization: socioeconomic disadvantage, residential instability, and racial isolation. This dissertation analyzes homicide in St. Louis's 588 census block groups for evidence of such relationships. The dissertation employs a hierarchical approach to modeling the data, considering the city's block groups within the context of the 79 socially defined neighborhoods in which they are located. Additional inspections are made for evidence of the effects of public control, as evidenced by the ability of the community to attract and use extra-community resources to address local problems.

These analyses find general support for social disorganization theory. Block groups with higher levels of socioeconomic deprivation and residential mobility tend to experience higher homicide frequencies than their more advantaged or stable neighbors. In addition, block groups in neighborhoods subject to greater racial isolation tend to experience higher levels of lethal violence than those in less isolated neighborhoods.

The dissertation finds mixed support for the effects of extra-community resources on block-group homicide counts. Specifically, the effects of community development grant funding, school funding, and voter turnout are examined. In the presence of voter turnout, neither school nor block grant funding display any evidence of an effect on block-group homicide. Block groups and neighborhoods with higher levels of electoral participation exhibit lower levels of homicide than those with lower levels of participation.