

Criminal Justice Policy and Violent Crime in Socially Disorganized Neighborhoods: The Implications for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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Abstract

Emphasizing the spatial distribution of crime, the theoretical model of social disorganization posits that crime and delinquency are related to the socioeconomic composition of communities. More specifically, it asserts that rates of crime are related to the social norms and activities of communities, in that it increases residential mobility, population decline, as well as ethnic heterogeneity. This article examines urban violent crime rates and depopulation in a major metropolitan city, namely Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, through the context of social disorganization theory. Economic decline and issues associated with its occurrence are discussed, and criminal justice policy solutions are offered. Finally, evidence-based policy recommendations that are grounded in a best practices approach are discussed to conclude.

Keywords: Social disorganization; economic decline; crime; criminal justice policy

Introduction

For the last several decades, crime places and rates have been a major focus and cause of concern for policymakers, criminologists, social scientists, as well as concerned members of the general public. During this time, the social and cultural landscape of many American cities and urban neighborhood communities has experienced noticeable changes, primarily in the areas of population decline, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential instability. These changes in the socioeconomic composition of communities have played an integral part in the increased development of socially disorganized neighborhoods.

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Despite this reality, however, the impact of violent crime on rates of residential mobility and population turnover has received only a modest amount of attention from researchers over the years (Morenoff & Sampson, 1997). Although the relationship between community composition and crime rates has been detected, empirical research that addresses the issue is limited. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the impact of violent crime rates and disorder on the structural composition of an American city, namely Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Specifically, the primary research question this article addresses is: "How well does the social disorganization theoretical model explain the relationship between community composition and rates of violent crime?"

A Review of the Social Disorganization Literature

According to Kubrin, Stucky and Krohn (2009), theoretical models of crime and delinquency cannot be fully understood outside of the historical context of the time period. To this end, a brief historical context that draws on the empirical research that supports social disorganization theory is warranted. The theoretical perspective of social disorganization was developed near the beginning of the twentieth century, a period that was characterized by vast economic, cultural, and political changes (Kubrin et al., 2009). During this time period, America was mostly a heterogeneous, diverse society characterized by rapid changes that influenced nearly all facets of life. These persistent changes helped, in part, to lay the foundation for the establishment of the theory.

With its emphasis on crime place, social disorganization theory has become a widely popular theoretical explanation of crime and delinquency, particularly since the early 1990s. The theory suggests that crime and delinquency thrive in communities that are characterized by inadequate levels of social controls as well as social bonds to the community that are either broken or weakened (Wilcox, Quisenberry, Cabrera, & Jones, 2004; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). More specifically, the theory asserts that the structural constructs of residential instability, ethnic heterogeneity, and poverty are all adversely related to informal levels of social control, which, in turn, is positively related to the occurrence of criminal behavior and disorder (Warner & Rountree, 1997; Hipp, Tita, & Greenbaum, 2009; South & Crowder 1997). Stated alternatively, communities that are characterized by high levels of residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, and poverty are more likely to contain low informal social control networks, which thus, increases the likelihood for crime to occur.

More recent research on social disorganization and its impact on crime rates have emphasized the role of social capital, collective efficacy, and attachment to the community in which one lives (see, for example, Hirschfield & Bowers, 1997; Taylor, 1996; Warner & Rountree, 1997).

Sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess were instrumental in the advancement of social disorganization theory. In the early part of the twentieth century, Park and Burgess (1925) methodically studied the vast social, economic, and cultural changes that were occurring throughout the city of Chicago. From their direct observations of the changes of the city, they devised the theory of concentric zones. These zones that helped to illustrate the expansion of the city included the central business district, zone in transition, the working-class zone, residential zone, and the commuter zone (Park & Burgess, 1925). Collectively, these zones emphasized the various changes that occurred throughout each level, or zone, of the city of Chicago.

In 1942, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay extended the previous work of Park and Burgess and applied it to the occurrence of crime and delinquency. Drawing from prior research on social disorganization, their primary interest was to examine the relationship between the structural components of a community and rates of delinquency (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Through their studies, they found that, as consistent with the prior work of Park and Burgess, rates of delinquency were concentrated in various areas, or zones, of the city of Chicago. These high crime rates, as determined by Shaw and McKay, were the end product of the structural properties of the community as a whole, as opposed to individualistic characteristics of the community's inhabitants.

More recently, a number of researchers have extended social disorganization theory research by analyzing the spatial dynamics of crime and violence as well as land use in urban, disadvantaged neighborhoods. In their study, Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush (2001) drew from social disorganization theory to examine the dynamics of violence and collective efficacy in the context of neighborhoods throughout the city of Chicago. Utilizing public police records, census data, and survey data from 8,872 residents of Chicago, they found that spatial proximity to the risk of violence was related to actual homicide rates.

Moreover, the results also indicated that high levels of community disorganization in addition to low levels of informal social control and cohesion were significantly related to higher rates of homicide and other acts of violence.

Wilcox et al. (2004) examined the outcomes of land use (business-oriented versus resident centered) on rates of violence within the social structure of communities. For data collection purposes, Seattle police department records, U.S. census data, and survey data of 5,302 respondents were utilized to examine the impact of various types of land use on violent crime and burglary rates within the community structure. The results indicated that various forms of land use had a significant effect on disorder and disorganization within the community.

Stucky and Ottensmann (2009) further examined the relationship between land use and violent crime and whether the linkage between the two constructs was mediated by an intervening correlate, namely the economic characteristics of the community. Utilizing Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data obtained from the Indianapolis police department, they found that certain land uses are related to instances of violent crime, as evidenced through the crimes reported to the UCR. The results also suggested that crimes can either increase or decrease depending on the type of land usage, but the impact of the relationship is largely dependent on the economic characteristics of the community at large.

Depopulation and Violent Crime in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Over the last several decades, various cities, metropolitans, and suburbs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania have undergone major physical and structural changes. One such city, namely Pittsburgh, has experienced considerable amounts of economic decline, depopulation, urban decay, and underachievement. Since approximately the mid twentieth century, the region of Pittsburgh has continued to experience a substantial decline in population. Since this time, the city has lost over half of its original inhabitants, and the trend continues today (Andrews, 2004). The fact remains that residents, especially young adults, are continuing to out-migrate from Pittsburgh to pursue a life and career opportunities elsewhere. But why?

The city of Pittsburgh has faced various economic, social, and ecological problems over time that have continued to plague the region along with its development.

These challenging issues include, but are not limited to, anemic levels of regional growth and development, out-migration of its residents to other regions, and alarming violent crime rates. As previously mentioned, the region of Pittsburgh has continued to experience the decline of its population. As time has progressed, residents of Pittsburgh in particular and Pennsylvania in general have steadily left the region and migrated outward into newer, more vivacious communities.

The most widely regarded assumption of why the city has continued to lose its population is that young adults have been progressively migrating away from the region (Gradeck, 2003). Termed “brain drain”, this trend has been contributed, in part, to urban decline and a lack of meaningful employment opportunities that are available for individuals, especially young adults that live in the Pittsburgh region (The Brookings Institution, 2003). In a region that has been largely characterized by economic uncertainty and the gradual loss of jobs as well as local businesses and manufacturing companies, many young individuals have had no choice but to migrate out of the region to find meaningful work and safe living conditions elsewhere. This trend has contributed to a lack of a young, adept workforce (The Brookings Institution, 2003).

The issue of violent crime rates in American cities, especially Pittsburgh, has long been a major area of concern for policymakers, politicians, scholars, as well as community members. Administered by the Pennsylvania State Police, the 2008 Annual Uniform Crime Report (UCR), *Crime in Pennsylvania*, illustrates that there were a little over one million actual crimes reported by law enforcement agencies throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Of those reported crimes, 347,486 were Crime Index offenses, which are those offenses that are regarded by law enforcement to be the most severe (i.e. homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) and the most probable to be reported to the police by community residents (Pennsylvania State Police, 2008). This figure represents a 2.2 percent increase from the number of Crime Index offenses that were reported to the police the year prior. It also represents a 5.2 percent increase from the number of Crime Index offenses that were reported in 2004 (Pennsylvania State Police, 2008). Overall, these statistics imply that since 2004, the number of Crime Index offenses that have been reported to law enforcement agencies throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been steadily increasing.

Disheartening to many, the fact remains that violent crime rates across Pennsylvania continue to increase as we progress well into the twenty first century.

The city of Pittsburgh has had to confront a number of challenging issues over the last few decades or so. These issues, which include depopulation and high violent crime rates, have not only helped to impede the economic growth and development of Pittsburgh, they have also contributed to neighborhood disorganization as well as high levels of residential instability and ethnic heterogeneity within the region. As such, the city of Pittsburgh, among other regions in Pennsylvania, continues through present day to experience economic hardships and other misfortunes that are making it difficult for the region to return to its prosperous roots.

Economic Decline and Policy Solutions

As aforementioned, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been plagued with a troubling history full of economic and ecological decline, uncertainties, and social hardships. Once filled with prosperity and flourishing industries, Pennsylvania now resembles a case complete with failed promises and lost opportunities. For the last several decades, policymakers have been linking the stark economic decline of Pennsylvania to a variety of factors that inhibit growth and community development. These factors are examined below.

It has been widely documented through the literature that factors such as poor land use, brownfield contamination, vacant buildings, and neighborhood incivilities contribute to disorganization and economic decline within communities (see, for example, Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2004; Stucky & Ottensmann, 2009; The Brookings Institution, 2003). These constructs often lead to population abandonment, community instability, sprawl, disorder, and, in turn, crime. In Pennsylvania, these issues continue to present lasting challenges for policymakers. While various attempts have been made to address these issues, most have proven to be in vain. Accordingly, it is imperative for policymakers as well as practitioners to transform their efforts. Proactive, research-based measures should be undertaken that support community-oriented programs that are designed to revitalize land usage, improve declining infrastructures, and lessen neighborhood incivilities. Implementing such strategies would not only improve Pennsylvania's environmental conditions, it would also provide key social and aesthetic benefits to the Commonwealth.

Another issue that has been attributed to the anemic economic growth and development of Pennsylvania is the persistent lack of efficient community planning. While robust, systematic planning facilitates optimal growth for a community, weak planning often impedes its economic and ecological advancement (The Brookings Institution, 2003). To the chagrin of many, Pennsylvania has had a storied past of inefficient planning initiatives. With its fragmented governmental structure and lack of a strong planning agenda, Pennsylvania is forced to continue to hurdle barriers as it concerns its economic, cultural, and environmental development.

Although troubled by a history of subpar legislative initiatives and lost opportunities, Pennsylvania has the ability to strengthen its heritage and seek out a strategic approach to improve its economy and environmental structures. Rather than continuing down the same path toward neighborhood decay and anemic development, Pennsylvania needs to return to its roots. Obviously, this won't be an easy task, nor should it be. To revitalize itself, Pennsylvania must invest in its economy and infrastructure, develop a strategic, goal-oriented agenda for its future, and implement evidence-based policies into the policy forum that are designed to foster economic growth and development. It is to this area I now turn.

Policy Recommendations

For the last several decades, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has faced a wide variety of economic issues and uncertainties. More specifically, depopulation, violent crime, residential instability, and community disorganization have remarkably plagued the Commonwealth. The city of Pittsburgh, in particular, has experienced a history filled with underachievement and various cultural, social, and physical changes. To address these changes and challenging issues, policymakers have implemented a number of different policies in recent decades into the policy forum. Unfortunately, many of these policies have been counterproductive in the sense that they have failed to accomplish their original goals or objectives. Others have simply failed. Accordingly, it is crucial for a greater amount of evidence-based policies that are grounded in a best practices approach to be implemented into the policy forum. Such an approach is both logical and imperative, particularly in an era in which disorganization and economic decline are becoming commonplace in many of the cities throughout the United States.

In regard to policy suggestions, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should continue to embark on ambitious attempts to improve the overall quality and way of life for its residents. One such research-based program that will assist Pennsylvania in returning to its prosperous roots is Operation Weed and Seed. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (1999), the primary objectives of Operation Weed and Seed are to help curtail violent crime rates, control drug-related acts of criminality, and to foster safe communities in which residents can live and work. The program's philosophy is to "weed" out violent offenders and other lawbreakers from the targeted community and "seed" the neighborhood with enhanced service opportunities and community-based strategies geared towards social growth and development (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).

Based in empirical evidence and a best practices approach, Operation Weed and Seed has long been embraced by the city of Pittsburgh. For several years now, Pittsburgh has engaged in various Weed and Seed activities, which are, as research suggests, providing notable improvements for the region. In fact, in the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Justice conducted a national evaluation of Operation Weed and Seed, in which eight cities, including Pittsburgh, were chosen for evaluation. The Pittsburgh case study examined the activities of the Weed and Seed Program along with its impact on the overall crime rate of various districts in Pittsburgh as well as community perceptions towards the effectiveness of the program. The researchers utilized police data to measure crime rates before and after the implementation of the Weed and Seed program. They also utilized surveys conducted in two separate time intervals to measure the changes in people's perceptions towards the program. Overall, the study found that crime rates had reduced after the implementation of the Weed and Seed program and people's perceptions of safety, police reaction, and quality of life had noticeably improved (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). As such, with its proven track record, Operation Weed and Seed has the ability to continue to improve levels of community cohesiveness, support, safety, and residential stability within the region of Pittsburgh.

In addition, Pennsylvania along with its various communities should invest considerable time, energy, and resources into revitalization programs as well as a stronger plan towards future economic reinvestment. The Brookings Institution (2003) suggests that in recent decades, that there has been a lack of vision as well as a sound planning agenda for Pennsylvania.

To this end, the Commonwealth, along with its various cities and urban neighborhoods, should employ a more organized, focused approach in addressing current economic conditions and subsequently implementing change that will foster lasting widespread growth and development. This approach will allow Pennsylvania to refocus its attention and planning strategies in a manner that will allow for the enrichment of its past heritage and the revitalization of its future.

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