

EURASIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

www.eurasianpublications.com

SOCIAL ECOLOGY, NEIGHBORHOOD ANALYSIS AND POLICY CHANGES

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Abstract

Trying to explain criminal behaviors, many criminologists point out the importance of the community-level factors influencing crime. Many researchers think that an offshoot, social ecology, sees society as a kind of organism and crime deviance as social pathology. Thus, the community and all levels of residents must be involved and focused in acting together as one, taking appropriate measures to prevent this social pathology. This study employed mixed methods, by using case of Austin neighborhood in Illinois, and evaluating social structure theories. The first part coined as *description* will touch some of social problems the disorganized society is facing with, as well as the importance of collective efficacy in addressing this social pathology. On the second part of this analysis, there is an evaluation of social pathology and collective efficacy.

Keywords: Social, Ecology, Environment, Violence, Community

1. Introduction

In order to analyze the neighborhood in Chicago, based on social disorganization and collective efficacy theory first, it is important to understand the social theories of crime. According to Schmallegger (2006), the social structure theories are termed so, because they explain crime by reference to the institutional structure of society. The Chicago neighborhood-Austin is mostly known for high crime rate and gang violence. The economic disadvantages, low income, lack of education, unemployment, racism and the poverty are some of the factors that characterize the Austin neighborhood. It is important to observe the crime rate and analyze the crime rate statistics and then take into consideration the social organization and social norms to explain crime. According to crime statistics (Academic Dictionaries & Encyclopedias, 2010), Austin suffers from a number of problems plaguing poor inner-city communities across the U.S such as substance trafficking, a huge murder rate and gang activities. Furthermore, due to the numerous infrastructure and transportation problems, many people are seeking better conditions in other suburbs. In 2007, the Chicago Police Department recorded 18 homicides in the Austin neighborhood, making the area the highest in homicide-related incidents in Chicago (Academic Dictionaries & Encyclopedias, 2010). As for density in Austin neighborhood, according to statistics (Illinois and Demographics, 2018) there are 21,196 persons per square mile, and the median age is about 28.28. Apparently, to analyze the social structures of Austin neighborhood, the racial issues and unemployment rate could be good elaboration. Based on *The Peace Corner* youth center in the Austin neighborhood, the African American communities, and other communities are devastated by unemployment, and based on this center (Academic Dictionaries & Encyclopedias, 2010), the area had the nation's seventh-highest unemployment

rate in 2008 with 20.9 percent even before the recession hit. Sixty-six percent of African American aged of 20-24 were unemployed in Illinois, along with 33 percent of Latino youth and 35 percent of white youth of the same age (Bachtell, 2010). Another important aspect of this neighborhood is that there are diverse immigrant groups that belong to different cultures, and they are facing with difficulties of finding jobs, getting education and participating in cultural activities. There is lack of communication between the minority groups, and also barriers of cooperation. Even though the communities living in this area are not only suffering high unemployment rate, but also they do not cooperate with each other, do not communicate and do not take actions to promote social norms. Corin (2010a) explained that in the ethnic heterogeneity people do not get along with each other, and lots of different ethnic groups result in weak networks among people, so intolerance is more of a problem rather than a racial composition.

Many researchers on crime think that the high crime rate in Austin neighborhood derives from lower class segments in society. Another important aspect to be considered is the poor social control over delinquent and criminal behaviors of especially juveniles. Police departments are not proactive in such areas but rather reactive, and the apathy of residents to condemn the criminal activities is present. According to Corin (2010a), formal social control is carried out through government actions, such as police enforcing the laws, while informal social control is done through the actions of residents. Apparently, neither of these formal and informal actions are applied in Austin neighborhood, and therefore the crime rate is high and the positive social changes are slow.

2. Analysis

Even though there is lack of more statistical data about the degree of crime, and more information about communities, and their cooperation with law enforcement, one would easily conclude that the Austin neighborhood is socially disorganized. Since the unemployment is very high and the median age is young one, the crime can be related to both unemployment and age. However, "sociologists envision crime, delinquency, and deviant behavior as the product of social forces rather than individual differences" (Brown *et al.* 2010, p. 235). Apparently, the communities do not cooperate with each other in trying to prevent crime, while youth do not participate in certain cultural activities. According to Corin, (2010b), beyond being organized as social disorganization theory states, communities also have to be willing and able to engage in informal social control, thus, they have to be organized (collective) toward some shared purpose (efficacy). It is apparent that Austin neighborhood is disorganized and communities and police do not cooperate enough, and there is a lack of self-reporting crime and the victimization. Corin (2010a) mentioned that collective efficacy seemed to reduce the relationships between variables, such as disadvantage and crime, therefore disadvantaged places benefit from being more organized and working together to reduce crime.

According to Schmallegger (2006), it is believed that crime was a normal part of all societies and that law was a symbol of social solidarity, hence, the act was criminal when it offended strong and defined states of the collective conscience. In Austin neighborhood, the crime occurs but when it does occur and victimize one community, the other community or ethnic groups do not condemn it. Based on the statistical data, this neighborhood fits well with the social disorganization theory because there is lack of consensus between ethnic groups, the race and law enforcement agencies. There may be some elements in this neighborhood that may differ from being called socially disorganized, however the majority of factors and events occurring point toward the social disorganization qualification. "Social disorganization depicts social change, social conflict, and the lack of social consensus as the root cause of the deviance" (Schmallegger, 2006, p. 217). One would wonder why social changes can be consider as a factor of social disorganization, however the answer is that with the influx of illegal immigrants in certain neighborhoods. These areas are caught up in swift social changes which contributed to social disorganization. With the increase of illegal immigrants in particular neighborhoods, there is increased crime rate as well, so these social changes contribute to social disorganization.

If there was a good cooperation between the diverse groups in the Austin neighborhood, and the law enforcement was proactive, while the crime rate would be still high then the social disorganization would not fit with this neighborhood, perhaps the strain theory could explain it better. Of course, there is space for criticism of social disorganization theory and its relation to the aforementioned neighborhood. According to Brown *et al.* (2010), the community-level characteristics proved to be the least useful in explaining delinquency rates and that there was no evidence to suggest that crime was higher for groups in economically depressed areas. By this, Brown *et al.* (2010) meant that even though the poverty is emphasized in certain areas and economic conditions are poor, there is still no evidence to suggest that the crime rate is higher than in other developed areas. However, Brown *et al.* (2010) found that individuals who lived in socially disorganized neighborhoods were more likely to associate with delinquent peers than were youth who lived in organized communities. As a result, the gang groups found good conditions to recruit new members in neighborhoods living socially disorganized lives. Furthermore, Brown *et al.* (2010) analyzing research results on correlation of group-level and individual-level correlation study, pointed out that ecological (group-level) correlations cannot substitute for individual-level, because for instance the economic resources of communities associated with rates of crime in those communities does not necessarily mean that the same statistical relationship holds on an individual level. It seems that crime is multidimensional and committed by both group and individual levels, however, critically thinking the group or the community prepares good conditions for certain individuals or groups to commit crimes. Therefore, the social ecology and theories of social disorganization as well as the collective efficacy should never be excluded from explaining crime to its social context.

3. Social Control Critically Thinking

Social control philosophy argues that our bonds to society prevent criminal behavior. Do you think that people fundamentally need social controls to keep them from criminal behavior, as social control theory states? Social control approach apparently is based on the bonds to society to prevent crime, therefore people change their behaviors based on social norms. According to Schmalleger (2006), social control is a perspective that predicts that when social constraints on antisocial behavior are weakened or absent, delinquent behavior emerges. Critically thinking, people need social controls to keep them from criminal behavior as social control states, because, without social control, the society will be degraded. Many individuals avoid behaving in the violation of social norms, because of social condemnation toward such behaviors. Furthermore, according to Brown *et al.* (2010, p. 293) "if left alone, people will pursue self-interests rather than those of society". Brown *et al.* (2010) elaborated that only by intervening and nurturing persons into a controlled social existence can they be fashioned into conformity.

Differential association theory states that delinquent peers influence young people's behaviors, but there is a potential problem with causation here. Do you think people tend to find other people who behave similarly? Or do you think it is more the case that we are shaped by the people we hang out with?

4. Differential Association

Social control approach apparently is based on the bonds to society to prevent crime, therefore people change their behaviors based on social norms. Corin (2010b) elaborated that people with strong bonds to other people, such as parents, peers, relatives and institutions have higher levels of control. Apparently, people that are busy working, and those that are involved in certain community activities create strong bonds with the work they do and reputation that they are controlled by the society and therefore are less likely to commit crimes. Based on many researchers, the social control is necessary because such control will keep the social norms in the mind of majority of people.

The differential association theory states that delinquent peers influence young people's behavior. That is true in most of cases especially when it is in a question of the gang

membership. Juveniles often try to find identity and when they join gangs, they feel like they belong to this group and feel protected. According to Brown *et al.* (2010), analyzing differential association philosophy concluded that values favorable or unfavorable to causal behavior are learned and interpreted in interactions with others. However, Schlegel and Weisburd (1992) elaborated that white-collar criminals learn their behaviors from association with others, while they also learn to rationalizations that help neutralize the normative standards that condemn such behavior. Apparently, people tend to find others who behave similarly; however, in most of criminal cases, people's perception is shaped by differential association. A good example is the college students in a party, while some students would not drink, however, when their peers pressure them to drink, they would drink too. According to Schlegel and Weisburd (1992) based on differential association theory, the more one associates with those with favorable attitudes toward crime, the more likely one is to become a criminal.

Critically thinking, even though many researchers and criminologists emphasized the importance of differential association as a main factor that could lead to crime, still one would wonder where and when the crime will start. If the differential association and learning process of criminal behaviors are considered as the main factors, then where do this learning and association come from? On the other hand, based on social control theory, all attachments or social bonds should reduce the criminal behavior, then one would wonder why a great deal of attachment, for instance, strong bond between gang members, does produce criminal behaviors. Perhaps a more empirical research is needed to determine whether people tend to behave similarly or the association is a key role to produce criminal behaviors.

5. Structural Theories

5.1. Theoretical Explanation of Crime in Neighborhoods

There are different explanations for the occurrence of violence in neighborhoods, and each of these explanations tries to focus on various factors that influence criminal behaviors within the neighborhoods. Apparently, some of the very often mentioned theories about the neighborhood crimes are the social disorganization, subcultural and the "broken windows" theories. Winfree and Abadinsky (2009), on the study on social ecology stated that social disorganization is characterized with weak community controls, which leads to geographic areas with high levels of law-violating behavior. Winfree and Abadinsky (2009), analyzing secondary data analysis on crime, argued that people are not as inherently bad; rather, the problem was the area. According to Brown *et al.* (2010), social disorganization centered around three variables: poverty, residential mobility, and racial heterogeneity. On the other hand, subcultural theories try to explain crime based on subcultural traits some neighborhoods live with, and the cultural deviance is a form of crime that occurs in daily basis. According to Corin (2010b), in subcultural groups there is a distinct set of norms, values, and beliefs that particular subset of the population shares, but does not share with broader culture. Finally "the broken window" thesis "holds that physical deterioration and increase in unrepaired buildings lead to increased concerns for personal safety among area residents" (Schmalleger, 2006, p. 219). Furthermore, Schmalleger (2006) explained that physical evidence of disorder, left unchecked, leads to crime by driving residents indoors and sending a message to would-be offenders that a neighborhood is out of control. In another research, Browning (2004) analyzing disorganization theory of crime through a study of Chicago Neighborhoods Community Survey, on homicide data, and data collected from Chicago Health and Social Life Survey, found that, collective efficacy exerts a more powerful regulatory effect on nonlethal violence in neighborhoods, where tolerance of intimate violence is low. Thus Browning (2004), concluded that, collective efficacy also increases the likelihood that women will disclose conflict in their relationships to various potential sources of support.

From all these theories of crime, subculture theories fit the best in explaining neighborhood-level crimes. What is considered as crime for one subcultural group, may be considered as a legal activity for another, thus, crime is not recognized in the same manner from all neighborhoods. The disputes in neighborhood are often solved by the violence, because violence lives within such subcultural groups that employ it through generations. In

many ethnic groups, the domestic violence is perceived as normal because for instance intimate-partner violence is considered as a private matter not a crime.

5.2. The Evidence

Many researchers think that subculture of violence is one of the greatest problems criminal justice is facing. According to Brown *et al.* (2010), when behaviors rooted in the values of one subculture conflict with those of society at large, problems arise. Schmallegger (2006), analyzing subcultural theory, concluded that a large body of systematically interrelated attitudes, practices, behaviors, and values characteristic of lower-class culture are designed to support and maintain the basic feature of lower-class way of life. According to Stewart and Simons (2010), the effect of street code values on violence is enhanced in neighborhoods where the street culture is endorsed widely. Stewart and Simons (2010) suggested that the subcultural conditions lead to a sense of hopelessness and cynism about societal rules and their applications, thereby resulting in a street culture that undermines mainstream conventional norms. Stewart and Simons, (2010) analyzing the research of subculture violence found that both school culture norms of violence, as well as individual-level norms, were predictive of violence. Schmallegger (2006) elaborating research on homicides between racial groups in the Philadelphia found that, at the time of study, non-white men had a homicide rate of 41.7 per 100,000 versus a homicide rate of only 3.4 for white man. These analyses show that homicide is most prevalent, or the highest rates of homicide occur, among relatively homogeneous subcultural group in any large urban community (Schmallegger, 2006). On the other hand, Schmallegger (2006), on his research attempted to explain that many black males learn from early generations to seek status through their ability to harm, intimidate, and dominate others. Brown *et al.* (2010) trying to explain the conflict of conduct norms, took an example of Sicilian father in New Jersey that killed the 16 years old seducer of his daughter, expressing surprise at his arrest since he had merely defended his family honor in traditional way. Apparently, by this, members of subculture are obliged and to some degree pushed to commit crime to defend their honor.

Another point brought by Schmallegger (2006) is that the gang subculture is characterized by violence. That is, the members of gangs grow up, some to become law abiding citizens and others to graduate to more professional and adult forms of criminality. However, the delinquent tradition is kept alive by the age-groups that succeed them. Statistical data on neighborhood violence are pointing out that gangs are the largest violent predators of urban landscape; therefore, gang subculture of committing crimes is one of the biggest law enforcement concerns.

5.3. The Limitations of this Theory

There are limitations to subcultural theories in explaining the crimes because, even though these theories are not to be ignored, there are many factors that lead to crime which are not related to subcultural traits. Despite convincing evidence and examples shown by many researchers, there is lack of empirical data to determine the subculture as a main factor in neighborhood-level violence. According to Brown *et al.* (2010), through empirical tests of subculture violence thesis, found that there is little relationship between stance on machismo values delineated, and self-reported participation in interpersonal violence, leading to conclusion that the values play little or no role as determinants of interpersonal violence. Furthermore, Brown *et al.* (2010), testing a variation not rooted in violence, suggested that angry aggression develops among the truly disadvantaged as consequence of racial discrimination and low social position rather than subcultural tradition. Critically thinking, one would wonder why certain groups or neighborhoods continue to cultivate subculture violence, when the majority of people condemn such violent traditions. On the other hand, others may wonder if the poor living conditions, lack of social development are the true causes of crime rather than traditional aggressive behaviors. Perhaps the social inequality and extreme poor conditions, disadvantaged conditions for certain groups in many neighborhoods are the biggest contributors of the crime. The empirical evidence is the best to prove whether subculture

employs crime or not, however, until then, the subcultural thesis remains one of the best approaches to explain neighborhood violence.

6. Conclusion

Collective efficacy plays a crucial role in addressing crime issues especially neighborhood crimes such as gang crimes. Disorganized societies suffer higher rate of crime, such as street crime and gang crimes; however, this is not exclusive only to disorganized societies as the theories indicate. Many other factors may play a part to crime rates in big cities. In some organized neighborhoods, perhaps there are less street crimes, but more white-collar crimes. It is important to take seriously the issue of addressing crimes in proactive manner.

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