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THE INFLUENCE OF DISORGANIZED NEIGHBORHOODS ON DELINQUENCY

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ABSTRACT

Socially disorganized neighborhoods are those characterized by disadvantaged residents and a lack of resources. Research shows that disorganized neighborhoods can have higher crime rates. The objective of this study was to determine if students from socially disorganized neighborhoods report higher rates of delinquency. The data stem from a joint university self-report survey on delinquency from students in a Juvenile Delinquency course at South Dakota State University and a Juvenile Justice course at California State University, San Bernardino. The surveys were collected by each classes' respective professor. Results indicate that few students came from disorganized neighborhoods yet many engaged in occasional delinquency. This suggests the relationship between neighborhood setting and criminal offending of juveniles in that context is a complicated phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Crum, et al. (1996) found that neighborhoods in disadvantaged (e.g. lower income, limited resources, inadequate housing conditions, high rates of unemployment and crime, and a lack of adult role models) geographic locations or with residents of a disadvantaged economic status may be a contributing factor in exposing youth to drugs and subsequent drug use. They conducted a longitudinal study in which middle-school-aged participants self-reported how frequently drugs were offered to them. Participants who lived in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods reported being offered drugs more often than students who lived in advantaged neighborhoods (Crum, et al., 1996).

Chung and Steinberg (2006) studied a sample of 488 participants, all males aged 14 to 18 years old, to determine the influence of neighborhood characteristics, parental practices, and connection with adolescents of the same age range to juvenile delinquency. The majority of participants were from low socio-economic statuses and were minorities living in impoverished areas. Other studies (Brody et al. 2001; Krivo and Peterson, 1996; Wikstrom and Loeber, 2000) have also shown that the function of communities play a role in the amount of delinquency. Residents of urban communities were surveyed and reported that the concentration of poverty and "ethnic heterogeneity" were related to higher rates of deviance because of the social disorganization it caused (Chung and Steinberg, 2006).

More recently, the link between parental supervision and neighborhood disorganization has been examined. It has been determined that two potential influences contribute the most to serious juvenile delinquency. First, the "outer system" (Chung and Steinberg, 2006), the neighborhood and peer influence, because of the proximity and opportunity; as the Broken Windows Theory states, if a neighborhood is in

disarray, the members of the community feel less of a need to care for their city (Vold, et al., 2002). This is especially true for disadvantaged adolescents who often engage in opportunistic delinquency. The second influence is the “inner system” (Chung & Steinberg, 2006), meaning the family, the relationships within the household, and the values and norms enforced by the household. The relationships between neighborhood, familial, and peer stimuli on individuals have a significant effect on the levels of deviant behaviour and delinquent attitudes within disadvantaged, minority adolescents (Chung and Steinberg, 2006).

Butcher, et al. (2015) observed that a high level of violence in communities was related to negative social relationships. They also reported that throughout the United States, positive social relationships and support helped to minimize violence among the youth.

Chambliss (1973) concluded that the Broken Windows Theory played a prominent role in how teenagers are viewed in the eyes of authority figures, such as teachers and police officers. The Saints were defined as juveniles from upper class areas with nice neighborhoods, good homes, higher income families, and better support systems, whereas Roughnecks were the opposite; from lower income housing, impoverished neighborhoods, and disorganized areas of living. Saints were more delinquent than Roughnecks; however, authority figures perceived the latter as more deviant because of their low social status. Based on examination of the Roughnecks’ behavior patterns, arrest records, and delinquent behaviours, Chambliss (1973) reported on how disorganization among neighborhoods influenced delinquent behavior and how friendships and peers played a role in how juveniles conduct themselves as compared to their peers of a higher socio-economic status. About the Saints, Chambliss (1973: 188) remarked:

The local police saw the Saints as good boys who were among the leaders of the youth in the community. Rarely, the boys might be stopped in town for speeding or for running a stop sign. When this happened the boys were always polite, contrite and pled for mercy. As in school, they received the mercy they asked for. None ever received a ticket or was taken into the precinct by the local police. ... More important, the urban police were convinced that these were good boys just out for a lark.

Yet when describing the relationship between the Roughnecks and the police, Chambliss (1973: 190) stated:

[T]he [feelings towards the] police undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that the police would sporadically harass the group...the police shared the view of the community in general that this was a bad bunch of boys. The best the police could hope to do was to be sensitive to the fact that these boys were engaged in illegal acts and arrest them whenever there was some evidence that they had been involved. Whether or not the boys had in fact committed a particular act in a particular way was not especially important.

It was also observed that juveniles who frequently used drugs were at a higher risk of experiencing social discrimination especially when they originated from a disadvantaged neighborhood (Crawford et al., 2013). Drug users were found to also have a higher chance of maintaining negative relationships, which only increase through drug use or sales or exposure to other environments where drugs are regularly used (Crawford et al., 2013).

This study compared the influence of neighborhood disorganization and influence of friendship or peer groups on delinquent behaviors among students enrolled in Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Justice Systems courses from two universities: South Dakota State University and California State University, San Bernardino. Our hypothesis was that participants who recorded high levels of neighborhood dysfunction would also report that they had participated in illegal activities as juveniles. Additionally, we hypothesized that participants who reported that their friends engaged in illegal activities would also have engaged in illegal behaviors themselves.

PROCEDURES

The goals of this research were to examine the self-reported levels of past juvenile delinquency of students currently enrolled in a college Juvenile Delinquency course. To be clear, students disclosed their criminal behaviors before age 18. This research also focused on neighborhood, school, police, and family factors that may be relevant to juvenile delinquency. To achieve these goals, surveys were conducted in two juvenile delinquency courses at two universities.

Sampling

After obtaining IRB approval (1601010-EXM), participants were selected through convenience sampling. All students enrolled in SOC 455 Juvenile Delinquency at South Dakota State University (SDSU) in the Spring 2016 semester and CJUS 580 Juvenile Justice Systems at California State University, San Bernardino (CSU-SB) in the Winter 2016 quarter were recruited for the study. After the drop/add date passed, students in each course were informed of the project, given a consent form, and given time in class to complete the surveys. Students were advised that the survey was voluntary. Attendance points were awarded on the designated survey day, but were given regardless of survey completion. All surveys were shuffled in a pile before being collected by the professor.

Confidentiality

For confidentiality purposes, any demographic variable where less than four students answered in a particular way were changed so that students could not identify classmates from the survey data.

Survey instrument

The survey was an 80 question document asking about a range of delinquent and related activities and attitudes to gauge student's behaviors prior to age 18. The survey asked about the frequency of substance use, general delinquency, and contact with police. Questions about their friends' involvement and acceptance of delinquent activities were also included. The survey also included a set of questions about the safety and regular activities in their high school and neighborhoods. A few questions about parental oversight were included. The survey ended with a few demographic questions about the respondent.

Sample characteristics

The sample included 55 students, 20 from SDSU and 35 from CSU-SB. Forty percent of SDSU students were male and 100% were white. Forty percent of CSU-SB students were male as well, but 85% were Hispanic, 6% are white, and 9% report their race as other. Interviews were coded and entered into SPSS by the primary researchers [Yingling (SDSU) and Norris (CSU-SB)].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A majority of the participants did not report having their friends or peers encourage them to participate in illegal activities. Three questions were included, such as; “was doing illegal things accepted by your group of friends?” and “was doing illegal things encouraged by your friends?” The answer choices included “yes” or “no.” Sixty-four percent of the participating students reported that their friend group did not encourage illegal activity, whereas 36% did feel that illegal activity was encouraged among their peers. These results did not support the hypothesis that high peer pressure or influence would affect delinquent behavior. Nearly two-thirds of participants report that they felt no peer pressure to engage in illegal activities (Figure 1). However, 58 percent of participants indicated that doing illegal things was accepted by their peer group. This indicates a respect for one’s own (delinquent) choices but no encouragement for law abiding juveniles to engage in crime with a delinquent friend.

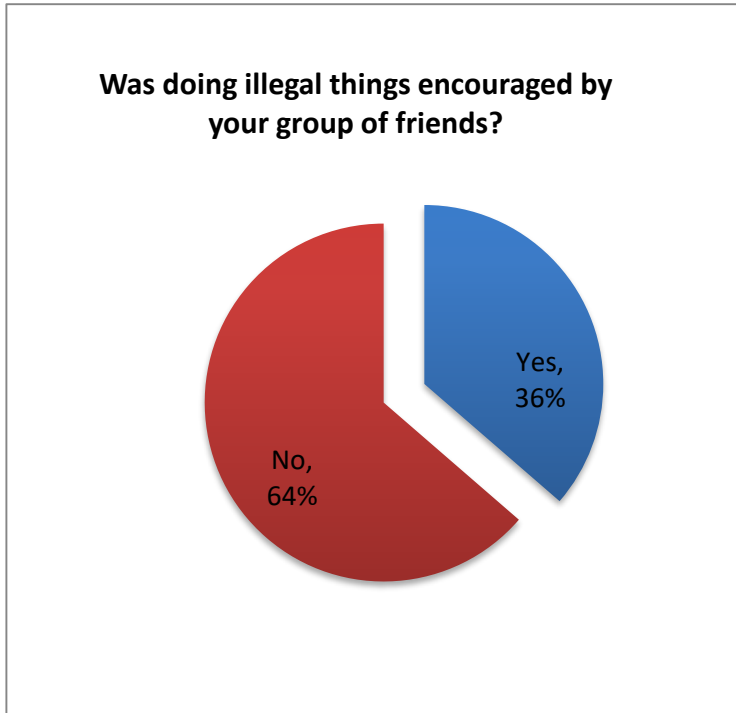


Figure 1: Sixty-four percent of participants reported that their friends did not encourage them to participate in illicit activities.

The relationship between neighborhood disorganization and dysfunction on delinquency offending was also examined. The survey contained twelve neighborhood statements assessing the level of crime, disorganization, and activities observed. For example: “my neighbors noticed when I was misbehaving and let me or my parents know,” “I liked my neighborhood,” and “there was a lot of crime in my neighborhood,” and four answer options ranging from “fully agree” to “fully disagree.” The relationship between juvenile delinquency and neighborhood dysfunction was opposite of the expected hypothesis. The results indicate that higher reported dysfunction in the neighborhood did not result in higher levels of delinquency or deviance. We believed that students who reported that they experienced neighborhood crime, drug sales,

fighting, and other disorganization such as abandoned buildings or graffiti would also report that they engaged in illegal activities as opposed to those who reported more organized neighborhoods.

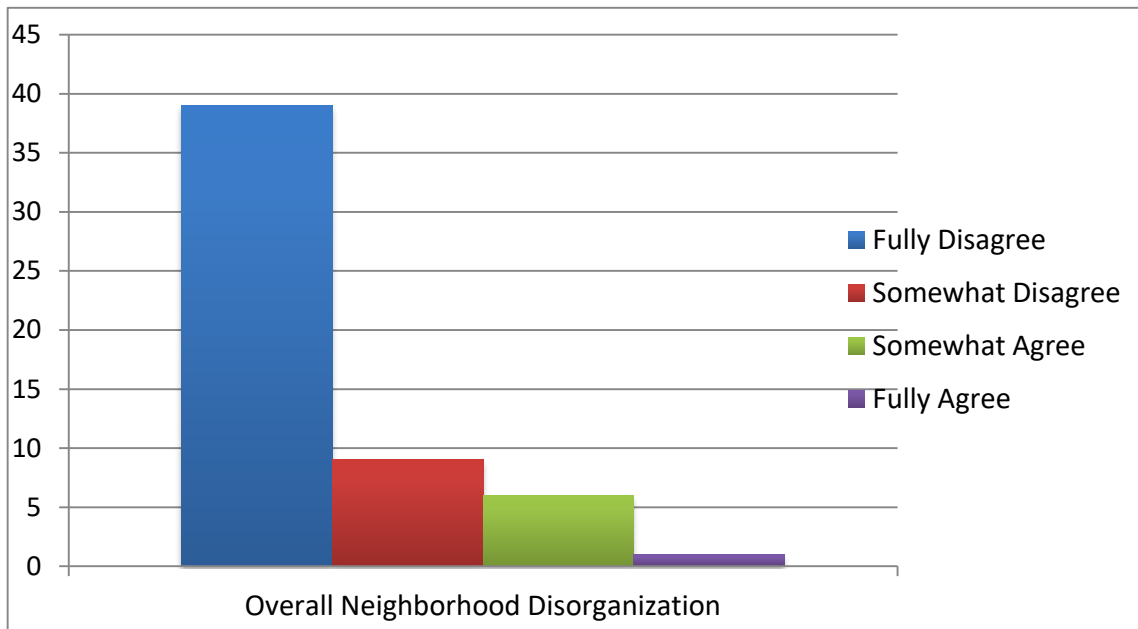


Figure 2: Self-reported agreement or disagreement of statements regarding neighborhood disorganization and delinquent offending.

Seven questions about the respondent’s neighborhood (e.g. there was a lot of crime in my neighborhood; there was a lot of graffiti; people in that neighborhood would be trusted; gangs were a presence in my community) were combined into a scale that described neighborhood disorganization (Figure 2). Overwhelmingly (71 percent), students indicated that they fully disagreed that their neighborhood was disorganized.

Twenty-one questions about delinquent behavior (e.g. substance use, fighting, shoplifting, downloading media, breaking curfew, etc.) were combined to make a delinquency scale. The response options were a four-point Likert scale (never, a few times, monthly, weekly or daily),

indicating how frequent respondents engaged in delinquent behavior (Figure 3). No students reported offending never or weekly/daily. A majority (51) of students indicated monthly delinquent activities while a small number (4) report a few delinquent acts.

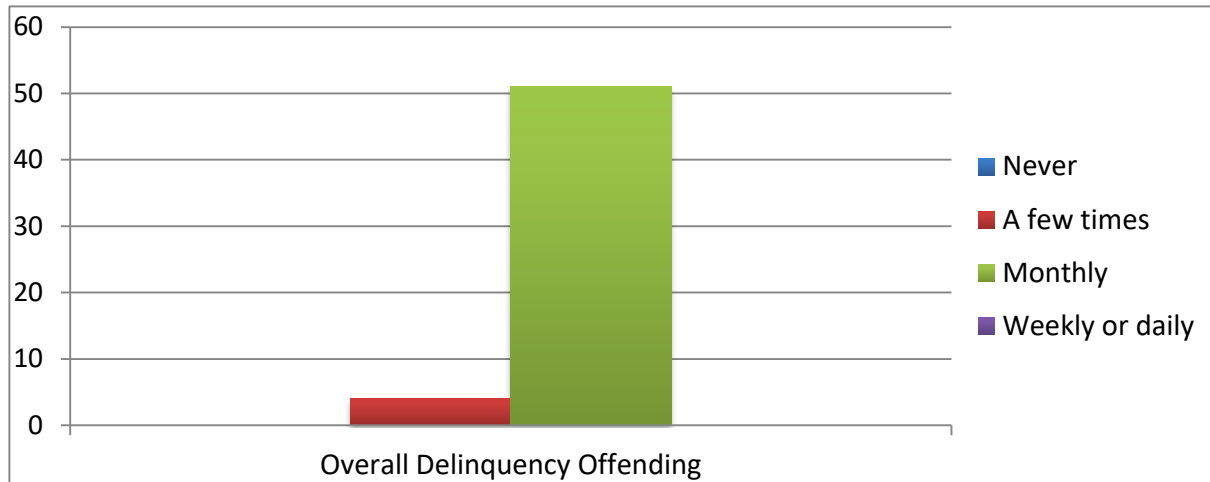


Figure 3: Self-reported frequency of all delinquent behavior.

These results, paired with the results in Figure 1, show that when taking into account the neighborhood and peer influence juvenile delinquency is not solely swayed by friends or environment. Other dynamics are likely to influence why some participants reported that they engaged in delinquent behavior, perhaps the thrill of the offense, what was gained, or reputation/status of offending. These factors are worth exploring in future research. Additionally, the fact that the sample consists of current university students may indicate that the level of offending is not representative of youth from their community. It may be that the current college students engaged in less delinquency in their youth because of their higher education goals.

Future research

Investigators should include a wider variety of geographical locations in future studies. Because the amount of neighborhood disorganization in South Dakota is low, the results may have been swayed by the results from the Midwestern participants. Results may have differed if the study had been conducted longitudinally; high-school-aged students have different behavior and peer networks than college students and these differences may influence how deviant behaviors change through the transition from a grade-school-level education to higher education. Peer groups also change during this time so those results may also alter the total effects.

Although this study did not support our hypotheses that juveniles' delinquent behavior is influenced by the dynamics of neighborhood disorganization and peer groups, previous literature suggests that the two factors hold a large role over patterns of deviance hence this research should be interpreted with caution because of limited sample size. Because our participants consisted of students from two universities, it does not necessarily reflect how neighborhood disorganization or peer influence is associated with delinquent behavior on a broader scale. Survey design is another possible limitation and should be interpreted with caution. There were few questions on the survey regarding friend and peer groups and only twelve regarding neighborhood organization out of a total of 77. Therefore, it is suggested that the questionnaire add questions concerning participants' home lives, schooling (including previous schooling and expected future education), and

personal drive and goals. Future studies should investigate these factors within the general public, such as middle or high school aged students who are pre-university students or young professionals who are older than college-aged rather than specifically college students. Further research could be conducted by studying whether or not individuals show other impulsive behaviors as to measure the amount of personal characteristics that may contribute to delinquent offending.

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