Local Modernization and Crime

The Effects of Modernization on Crime in Middletown, 1845–1910

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This paper examines the impact of industrialization and urbanization on criminal behavior in Middletown during the period between 1845 and 1910. It was this period which demonstrated the most rapid growth and change in the community and which turned Middletown from a pioneer settlement to a modest industrial city. The authors test five hypotheses relating to the relationship of the modernization process to changes in the rates of crime. Data for this study were drawn from official records of the county and city courts with criminal jurisdiction.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent book, Crime and Modernization, Louise Shelley argues strongly that of all extraneous factors, the modernization process has the greatest effect upon levels of crime rates as well as their specific form (i.e., urban vs. rural and person vs. property crimes). Her observations were drawn from national data from a variety of countries and covered the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the specific effects of the modernization process are felt not so much at the national level but rather at the local level, and these effects will vary according to the level of development in the local community. While it could be argued that the United States was well down the road of modernization by the 1850s one should also be aware that many communities were still little more than remote settlements, relatively unaffected by national trends. It is to this point which this paper speaks. What was the nature of crime and how did it change in a single

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community as it was transformed from a settlement of less than 700 people in 1850 to a “modern,” small industrial city by the turn of the century?\(^1\)

**Background of the Community**

No city in the United States has been more studied than Muncie, Indiana. Robert and Helen Lynd began the process with extensive field work in the years 1924–1925 which formed the basis for a seminal study, *Middletown* (1929). They restudied the community in 1935 and published those findings in *Middletown in Transition* (1937). “Middletown III,” a replication of the Lynds’ study of Muncie, begun in 1975 under the direction of Professor Theodore Caplow,\(^2\) has already produced over two score papers, articles, and analyses, and promises to result in many more. Despite the protestations of the Lynds, one of the consequences of their attention was to make Muncie the archetypical American town. It has so remained.

Muncie was the original county seat of Delaware County selected when the county was organized in 1827, eleven years after Indiana became a state. The population of the nascent community consisted of three white men, of whom Goldsmith Gilbert, a transplanted Yankee who had become an Indian trader, was most important. Survival of Muncie was assured because of a successful bid to obtain a connection on the Indianapolis and Bellefontaine Railroad in 1852 (Haimbaugh, 1924). Two years later, the town incorporated. At the time, it had approximately 700 residents.\(^3\) Gradually the community became a manufacturing center in addition to a commercial and governmental one. The discovery of natural gas in the East-Central region of Indiana accelerated the growth of industry by attracting glass manufactures to the area. One of these was Ball Brothers, a company which dominated the local industrial scene in the late years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century. However, the exhaustion of the supply of natural gas at the beginning of the century caused the glass industry to slow its growth rate. Muncie, duplicating the industrial history of other Midwestern towns in the area, grew as a center for heavy industry—foundries, wire and steel, and iron bridges—as well as one for the burgeoning automobile business. “By 1935, half of Muncie’s manufacturing concentrated on automotive supplies” (Jensen, 1979, p. 309). Today, Muncie is an old industrial town whose growth has slowed because of its heavy dependence upon the automobile industry.

Despite its “typical” economic growth, Muncie deviated from other American

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\(^1\)The term “modern” has been overused. Its original meaning had little conceptual content; rather, it referred only to the replacement of the old with the new. In that sense any social change, no matter in which direction, was modernization. However, the term has taken on meanings which are directional. Modern means urbanization, industrialization, bureaucratization, and rapid communication and transportation. It implies large-scale business, increased labor specialization, the growth of administrative organizations based on achievement and designed to perform new political and legal functions, and the diminution of traditional religious and family authority. It includes not only changes in institutions but also changes in values.

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\(^3\)Alexander M. Bracken, Jr., estimates the population of unincorporated Muncie to be 666 in 1850.