Ecological Assessments of Community Disorder: Their Relationship to Fear of Crime and Theoretical Implications

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Researchers suggest that fear of crime arises from community disorder, cues in the social and physical environment that are distinct from crime itself. Three ecological methods of measuring community disorder are presented: resident perceptions reported in surveys and on-site observations by trained raters, both aggregated to the street block level, and content analysis of crime- and disorder-related newspaper articles aggregated to the neighborhood level. Each method demonstrated adequate reliability and roughly equal ability to predict subsequent fear of crime among 412 residents of 50 blocks in 50 neighborhoods in Baltimore, MD. Pearson and partial correlations (controlling for sex, race,
Community disorder is a broad and elusive concept, difficult to define or measure in a way that all would understand and agree with. It refers to social and physical conditions and events in a locale beyond the serious crimes that may be occurring there. These conditions and events may relate to any or all of the following: residents who are no longer able to maintain a satisfactory quality of community life; unregulated, uncivil, or rowdy behaviors observed on the street that may be associated with social conflict; a lack of investment in or supervision over a locale on the part of residents or external public and private institutions, or both; and a degeneration over time in neighborhood-based physical capital, reflected in diminishing quality and/or maintenance of both public and private property.

This article has three main objectives. The first is to present three different methods for measuring community-level ecological constructs. Indicators of community disorder may be drawn from several sources: residents themselves, on-site observations of conditions, or reports from the local media, for example. In the present paper, we present examples of each of these methods.

Our second purpose is to explore and compare each method's ability to predict residents' fear of crime. Theorists have argued for 20 years that community disorder strongly influences residents' concerns for personal safety. By comparing the relative impact of different indicators, we can learn whether the strength of the relationship depends on the type of data collected. Research in this area has tended to rely on the same source of data to measure both fear and disorder: resident surveys. Will we see weaker impacts using other indicators of disorder?