

THE IMPACT OF HOUSING POLICIES ON COMMUNITY SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION AND CRIME*

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MY PURPOSE IS TO EXAMINE what might be termed the “Crime Effects of Non-Crime Policies.” Crime control is often considered a policy problem only for criminal justice agencies—principally the police—or community crime prevention organizations (e.g., neighborhood watch). But while criminal justice agencies and other community groups are crucial, a broader community or structural perspective points out the roles of other federal, state, and local government sectors not directly concerned with crime. In particular, not enough attention has been paid to housing policies and how they may indirectly affect crime and the community. My interests as a researcher over the last several years have focused on community-level determinants of crime rates, many of which are related to housing policy in important respects. The question I shall address is: Is there any evidence where noncrime policies—especially housing—have adversely affected crime or apparent causes of crime such as social disorganization?

In trying to answer this complex question in a short time space, I shall focus on one of the most important factors related to serious urban crime—public housing projects. Public housing affects all units of government—from the federal to city level, and is implicated in many of the underlying causes of crime. To take but one example, the most violent neighborhood in Chicago is Wentworth, which is dominated by the Robert Taylor Homes. This project consists of 28 16-story buildings housing more than 20,000 people. But while these residents accounted for only about one half of one percent of Chicago’s population in 1980, 11% of the city’s murders, 9% of its rapes, and 10% of its aggravated assaults were committed in the project.¹ Other projects such as Cabrini-Green in Chicago share a similar fate, as do countless projects in our nation’s urban areas. Indeed, the density of multi-

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unit, poor, rental units (a proxy for public housing) is one of the strongest predictors of robbery and homicide—independent of other commonly accepted correlates of crime. What is so criminogenic about public housing, and how do political decisions at the local level exacerbate this situation?

RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY

One factor linking public housing and crime is neighborhood instability. If we trace the history of housing policies in major urban areas we find that many neighborhoods were drastically altered by political decisions not directly concerned with crime. At a very general level we are all familiar with urban renewal and its wholesale uprooting of poor urban communities. In addition, the freeway networks driven through the hearts of many cities in the 1950s destroyed viable, low income, minority neighborhoods.² In this sense the planning and construction activities of government often created “artificial neighborhoods” that upset the stability of city areas.

A good example of this overall process is shown in a recent study of Chicago public housing by Bursik.³ Under Section 8 of the *1974 Federal Housing and Community Development Act*, three programs were initiated to improve housing for the poor. One provided subsidies for existing housing that required extensive rehabilitation. The second provided funds to subsidize the cost of living in units that did not require such work—and more than half of these were single family homes. The third was the construction of public housing projects. Each city was allowed to choose among the alternatives.

In Chicago, as in many cities and as in the 1960s, much of the money went to construction of public housing projects rather than rehabilitation of existing units or subsidies. According to Bursik, the result was a marked relationship with the subsequent degree of instability in an area—neighborhoods experiencing construction were characterized by a large increase in population instability. The construction of public housing thus accelerated patterns of instability that existed in Chicago neighborhoods. This instability in turn strongly increased delinquency rates.

It should not be surprising that the creation of instability would impact on crime. From the classic research of Shaw and McKay⁴ in Chicago in the 1920s to the present day, criminological research has shown that residential instability is an important predictor of crime rates. In fact, research using both cities and neighborhoods as units of analysis has shown residential instability to be one of the most powerful predictors of crime—in most cases more important than such standard sociological variables as poverty and racial composition.⁵

Elsewhere I have examined the consequences of residential instability in terms of community social disorganization.⁶ In general, social disorganization refers to the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and to maintain effective social controls.⁷ One of the most important dimensions of social organization in a community is informal local friendship networks. When residents form local social ties their capacity for community social control is increased because they are better able to recognize strangers and are more apt to guard against victimization.⁸ Moreover, when friendship networks are strong, ability to control delinquency is increased because the behavior of residents in a community is potentially subject to the reactions of all community residents. Hence, the greater the density of friendship networks among persons in a community, the greater the constraint on deviant behavior within the purview of the social network.

Since assimilation of newcomers into the social fabric of local communities is necessarily a temporal process, residential mobility constitutes a barrier to the development of extensive friendship networks, kinship bonds, and local associational ties. In particular, housing projects with high turnover rates impede local social control—residents have difficulty recognizing neighbors and are therefore less likely to be concerned about them or to engage in reciprocal guardianship behavior. I have recently shown the important consequences of residential stability for community organization and crime control, specifically, residentially stable communities increase local friendship networks, which in turn reduces crime rates.⁹ In fact, residential stability was more salient than such traditional factors as poverty and racial composition.

In short, by uprooting residents and increasing instability in selected neighborhoods, government decisions to build public housing increases social disorganization and hence crime rates. Indeed, Bursik¹⁰ notes that in areas where existing housing was subsidized and rehabilitated (hence preserving the community), residents did not feel abandoned by city government. In these areas stability was maintained despite low income and consequently low crime rates ensued. On the positive side this shows that it is possible for government to create conditions conducive to stability.

CONCENTRATION OF THE DISADVANTAGED

Another major factor related to public housing is what William Julius Wilson¹¹ terms concentration effects. Opposition from organized community groups to the building of public housing in their neighborhoods and the

decision to neglect rehabilitation of existing residential units (many of them single family homes) led to massive, segregated housing projects that have become ghettos for minorities and the disadvantaged. In other words, Wilson argues that the social transformation of the inner city has resulted in a disproportionate concentration (or critical mass) of the most disadvantaged segments of the urban black population in a few areas (as opposed to dispersal). For example, census data show that while only 7% of poor whites live in poverty areas, 40% of poor blacks do—and that is stunning. Massey¹² refers to this as “hyper-segregation.”

These changes drastically altered the character of urban black neighborhoods. For most of American history until the 1960s, black urban communities vertically integrated different income and family groups. That is, middle class blacks and intact families resided in the same areas as lower income blacks. But with the concentration of poor blacks in housing projects, social transformation of the ghetto became profound. More specifically, Wilson¹³ argues that the exodus of middle and working class blacks from many ghetto neighborhoods removed an important “social buffer” that could deflect social problems. This argument is based on the assumption that the basic social institutions in the area—churches, schools, stores, recreational facilities, etc.—would remain viable because much of their support came from economically stable and secure families.

However, in the public housing areas of our major cities the concentration of the disadvantaged is clear. Virtually all households in projects fall below the poverty line. Undeniably, family disruption in the black community is concentrated in public housing. In 1980, of the 17,178 families with children living in Chicago public housing projects, only 11% were married couple families.¹⁴ Teen-age pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births are similarly high.

The same is also true for black communities nationwide. My own research of the 171 largest cities in the United States confirms that racial differences are so strong that the worst urban contexts in which whites reside with respect to poverty and family disruption are considerably better off than the mean levels for black communities.¹⁵ Thus, regardless whether a black juvenile is reared in an intact or broken home or a poor or middle class home, he will not grow up in a community context similar to that of whites with regard to family structure and poverty. The point, then, is that regardless of individual characteristics, blacks live in ecologically very different areas than whites, namely, areas characterized by a concentration of low income housing projects with elevated levels of social dislocations. This speaks to the importance of a com-

munity perspective on crime as opposed to “kinds of people” perspective.¹⁶

The concentration of family disruption in black communities, especially in housing projects, underscores an important policy issue. Specifically, there are good theoretical reasons to expect that the concentration of family disruption in poor urban environments is a potential disaster so far as crime is concerned. I have argued that marital and family disruption may decrease informal social controls at the community level.¹⁷ The basic thesis is that two-parent households increase supervision and guardianship not only for their own children and household property, but also for public activities in the community. A century of criminological research demonstrates that most delinquents have delinquent friends and commit delinquent acts in groups. The territorial concentration of young males who lack familial social controls thus facilitates a peer-control system that supports group offending by simplifying the search for accomplices.¹⁸ Indeed, a central fact underlying Shaw and McKay’s¹⁹ classic research was that most gangs developed from unsupervised, spontaneous play-groups. Residents of stable family communities are better able to control such peer-group activities as street-corner congregation (e.g., hanging out) that set the context for delinquency, especially gang-related. Hence, awareness and supervision of peer group and gang activity does not simply depend on one child’s family, but on a network of collective family control.²⁰

Overall, my analysis of large American cities supports this hypothesis and shows that rates of black violent offenses, especially by juveniles, are strongly influenced by variations in family structure. Independent of the major candidates supplied by prior criminological theory (e.g., income, region, size, density, age, and race composition), black family disruption has the largest effects on black juvenile robbery and homicide. Family disruption also significantly increases black adult homicide and robbery.²¹

Perhaps most interesting, the results also reveal that, despite a tremendous difference in mean levels of family disruption between black and white communities, the percentage of white families headed by a woman strongly increases white juvenile and adult robbery offenses. In fact, predictors of white violent crime are in large part identical in sign and magnitude to those for blacks. Therefore, the evidence strongly suggests that the effect of family disruption on black crime is independent of commonly cited alternative explanations (e.g., poverty, region, urbanization), and cannot be attributed to unique cultural factors within the black community (e.g., a black subculture of violence). Instead, high rates of black crime stem in large part from the concentration in public housing of high levels of family disruption.

CODE ENFORCEMENT AND REHABILITATION

Another noncrime policy that seems to have contributed indirectly to crime is municipal code enforcement and governmental policies toward neighborhood deterioration. In an important recent study entitled *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960*, Arnold Hirsch²² argues that lax enforcement of city housing codes played a major role in neighborhood deterioration. During the height of public housing construction and slum clearance, Chicago had about 10 inspectors. Responsibility for inspection was fragmented and many inspectors acquired their jobs through political connections. Moreover, a Metropolitan Housing and Planning Council study of the city's worst housing code violators revealed that it was more profitable for slum operators to go to court even if they lost than it was to repair their properties. And in New York City today things appear much the same—according to Daly and Meislin,²³ inadequate city code enforcement and repair of city properties have led to the systematic deterioration of the housing stock and, consequently, of entire neighborhoods. When considered in conjunction with “red-lining” and disinvestment by banks, and “block busting” by cagey real estate agents, local policies toward code enforcement have contributed to neighborhood deterioration.

As we know, neighborhood deterioration has important negative consequences for crime. Neighborhood conditions provide readily observable evidence of the extent of local decline. Visual signs of physical deterioration and social disorganization—what has been termed “incivilities”—include junk and trash, boarded up housing, and stripped or abandoned cars. Incivilities and disorder may actually spawn more serious crimes because of perceived reduction in local social control by residents.²⁴ Hence, while city code enforcement may seem to be a policy arena far removed from crime, the evidence suggests otherwise—lax enforcement of municipal codes leads to neighborhood deterioration, which in turn encourages crime.

CONCLUSION

What seem to be noncrime policies—e.g., where (or if) to build a housing project, enforcement of municipal codes, rehabilitation of existing residential units, dispersal of the disadvantaged—can have important effects on crime. And, unlike so many criminogenic factors we hear about, many of these factors are policy manipulable. At a minimum such policies would appear to include: residential management of public housing (increases stability), tenant buy-outs (increases home ownership and commitment), rehabilitation of

existing low income housing (preserves stability), dispersal of public housing (vs. concentration), and strict code enforcement (to fight deterioration).

Fortunately, inroads are being made in these areas. Two excellent examples are the Bromley-Heath project in Boston on resident management²⁵ and the Beethoven project in Chicago.²⁶ Tenant management and resident buy-outs in Boston seem to have increased community stability, while the Beethoven project provides for parental assistance in child care and family planning in one of Chicago's worst housing projects. Moreover, such policies seem to increase family stability as well—reports from the Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation in Washington suggest that resident management is associated with fathers returning home and participating in child rearing.²⁷ These trends suggest that family disruption and housing projects need not be synonymous.

There is also evidence that new funds for public housing are being spent in a creative and "crime-wise" manner. *The New York Times* recently carried two articles on important new community-based efforts to improve housing. First, the Boston Housing Partnership—a consortium of 10 neighborhood-based community development corporations, private sector institutions and state and city governmental agencies—just completed the renovation of 700 low-income apartments (a \$38 million project) and has begun rehabilitation of another 950 units.²⁸ Second, Newark is currently renovating 1,632 vacant apartments and has agreed to study the long-term feasibility of fixing up rather than destroying public housing. Perhaps more encouraging, Newark officials have agreed that replacement housing be spread throughout the city to achieve racial balance.²⁹

In sum, instead of destroying existing communities and concentrating low income persons in projects, efforts such as these serve to revitalize and preserve a sense of community. This speaks to a need for continued or more coordinated efforts of community crime prevention and criminal justice agencies to work with policy makers in the so-called "noncrime" area, especially housing authorities.

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