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Macro-Level Social Forces and Micro-Level Consequences: Poverty, Alternate Occupations, and Drug Dealing

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Abstract

This article is an empirical examination of the ways in which macro-level social forces have had micro-level consequences in the New Orleans drug market. The article illustrates a clear connection between poverty and entrance into the drug market, as mitigated by race, lack of societal opportunity, lack of social capital, distressed families, and closed neighborhoods. Specifically, the research illustrates the mechanisms by which macro-level social forces intersect to legitimize drug dealing as a viable alternative method of acquiring money and social capital. These intersecting macro-level social forces, such as poverty, race, family structure, and neighborhood characteristics, ultimately constrain the life chances of those living in the inner city irrespective of personal traits, individual motivations, or private achievements.

Keywords

Hurricane Katrina; illegal drug markets; illicit drugs

INTRODUCTION

This article examines macro-level social forces and their micro-level consequences in the New Orleans, Louisiana, drug market. New Orleans is in many ways a reflection of inner cities across America. Macro-level social forces, such as economic decline, unemployment, housing, homelessness, and ineffective public education, affect the inner city economy in general (Dunlap & Johnson, 1992). At a micro-level, such forces impact the inner city street/drug subculture and the residents who participate in illicit drug use/sales. The impact is strongest in poor communities but is particularly problematic in poor, minority communities (like much of New Orleans).

Numerous economic, sociological, and psychological studies have documented the decline of America's inner cities, while paying particular attention to the increase in drugs and violence and the general worsening of quality of life (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Grusky & Szelenyi, 2007; Ludwig, Ladd, & Duncan, 2001; South & Baumer, 2000; Wilson, 1987, 1996, 2007). New Orleans has experienced this decline, and has even faced significant new difficulties in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. This article examines the lives of New Orleans residents who are caught up in this macro-

level syndrome. Our findings suggest that illegal activities, both before and after Hurricane Katrina, are increasingly the only viable micro-level methods of acquiring money.

BACKGROUND

Macro-Level Social Forces: Poverty and Race

As much literature indicates, America's inner cities are inundated with problems that are interrelated in complex ways. An overwhelming number of inner city households are severely distressed by unemployment, lack of education, family dissolution, overcrowded housing, drug abuse and crime (Dunlap, Johnson, Golub, & Wesley, 2002). In this article, we will focus on economic conditions in the inner city and how they influence individuals' behaviors, specifically related to entrance into the drug market.

Smeeding et al. (2007) noted that poverty and inequality are higher in America than in other countries with similar average incomes. They contended that a high proportion of workers are in poorly paid full-time jobs, and that there is a strong association between low pay and national poverty rates. Not all poor individuals can earn their way out of poverty. However, those who do not work are at even higher risk of life-long poverty. There is a high concentration of joblessness in inner cities. Wilson (2007) found that, in the inner city of the nation's 100 largest cities in 1990, there were only six working adults for every ten unemployed adults. Thus, inner city neighborhoods contain many impoverished individuals, including those who work at low-paying jobs and those who are unemployed. Wilson (2007) argued that the problems of the inner city are a direct consequence of the disappearance of work. He claims that job prospects for inner city workers have diminished because of the decreasing relative demand for low-skilled labor in America.

Massey and Denton (2007) argued that African Americans occupy a uniquely disadvantaged position in American cities. The reason is that African Americans are concentrated in inner cities due to intense segregation unlike that experienced by any other racial or ethnic groups past or present. This segregation leads to extreme racial isolation, which the authors contend reduces employment opportunities (Massey & Denton, 2007). Stoll (2003) supported this argument, noting that significant job shortages are prevalent in African American communities.

Stoll (2003) also pointed to the importance of education and subsequent "work-readiness." Specifically, "work-readiness" includes being on time, coming in every day, avoidance of problems, such as drug abuse and crime, basic cognitive skills, and credentials, such as a high school diploma or certified job training. Thus, the high rate of high school drop-outs among inner city African Americans is a further disadvantage because they are even less "work ready." Consequently, employers are reluctant to hire young, less-educated Black males. In addition to lacking "work-readiness," due primarily to racism in the Society at-large, these young, Black males are often perceived to be threatening. Combined, these factors greatly reduce employment opportunities for African Americans.

Data on the unemployment rate among African Americans support these arguments because they generally experience higher risk of unemployment than other races. In fact, only 52% of young African American men are employed, and unemployment among young Black men is considerably higher in inner cities than in suburbs (Offner & Holzer, 2002). This situation was present even during the economic boom of the 1990s (Holzer & Offner, 2001). In fact, after the boom, the unemployment rate among African Americans increased faster than that of other groups and topped 10% in 2003, over 5 percentage points higher than that for Whites (Stoll, 2003).

New Orleans

New Orleans is a productive location to study the intersection of these two major macro-level social forces—poverty and race—due to the high percentage of people below the poverty level and the high concentration of African Americans in the area. The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey found that the state of Louisiana had the highest percentage of people below the poverty level in 2003 (20.3%). Looking specifically at New Orleans, more than 38% of the people living in New Orleans in 2000 lived in neighborhoods of extreme poverty (Brookings Institute, 2009). Additionally, one in five (21%) households in New Orleans do not have a car (9% U.S.); 8% of households in New Orleans have no phone service (4% U.S.); more than half (53%) of New Orleans residents are renters (33% U.S.); 41% of renting families spend more than 35% of their income on rent (36% U.S.) (Fass & Cauthen, 2005); 80% of children are raised in single-parent families (17% U.S.); 60% of working-age residents participate in the labor force (65% U.S.) (Brookings Institute, 2009); and the metropolitan area unemployment rate is 6.4% (6.4% U.S.) (Census, n.d.a; Fellows et al., 2006). Those displaced by Hurricane Katrina face even more difficulties because the unemployment rate for displaced adults is approximately 4 times higher (24.9%) (Fellows et al., 2006).

Additionally, high rates of extreme child poverty are found in all the Gulf Coast states, with 13% of all children in Louisiana living in extreme poverty (Fass & Cauthen, 2005). The problem is even more pronounced in New Orleans, where 38% of all children live in poverty (more than double the U.S. child poverty rate of 17%) (Fass & Cauthen, 2005).

Compared to other cities with populations greater than 100,000, New Orleans ranked first in percentage of population living in poverty areas, second in portion of households headed by single women with children, and third in lowest median household income. They were also ranked the third highest in a measurement of the portion of the workforce that is unemployed (Wagner & Edwards, 2006). Additionally, residents of New Orleans and Louisiana were more likely to lack a high school education (Wagner & Edwards, 2006).

Understanding the level of poverty in New Orleans helps explain much of what occurred in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, those people left behind were trapped because they were trapped in poverty long before the disaster (Fass & Cauthen, 2005). In fact, on the day that the levees broke, the U.S. Census Bureau released a report on poverty in the nation and reported that Orleans Parish had a poverty rate of 23.3%, the seventh highest among the 290 largest U.S. counties. These data highlight the extreme level of poverty that existed in New Orleans before the catastrophe.

Also noteworthy is the fact that African Americans comprise 32.5% of the population of Louisiana and 67.3% of the population of New Orleans (Census, n.d.a, n.d.b). The intersection of poverty and race results in multiple levels of disadvantage. For example, in Louisiana 44% of Black children live in poverty whereas only 9% of White children live in poverty (Fass & Cauthen, 2005). Additionally, the Brookings Institute (2009) found that concentrated poverty was higher for African Americans on almost every social and economic indicator in New Orleans.

MEIHODOLOGY

The analysis in this article is derived from a 4-year National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) study of the reformulation of illicit drug markets during times of disaster. The research was designed to provide improved scientific understanding about what happens to illegal drug use/sales practices during and immediately after a major disaster and in the ensuing time period. The study methodology was primarily qualitative and employed three major data

collection activities: (1) ethnographic observations of the situations and interactions in drug dealing locations; (2) in-depth interviews with drug users and dealers; and (3) focus groups assembled in terms of the various drug markets (e.g., heroin, crack, marijuana, and other drugs). Data collection was conducted in two cities. New Orleans was chosen because it was the site of a major natural catastrophe (Hurricane Katrina in September of 2005). Houston was chosen because it served as host city for a large proportion of Katrina evacuees. Interview data obtained in Houston that were included in this report focused on respondents' recollections of life in New Orleans before the storm.

Study Demographics

Analysis

This manuscript draws on data collected during the 4-year study period in both New Orleans and Houston. Both interview and focus group respondents' reports are included in the analysis. Excerpts are used to highlight how issues at the macro-level, specifically race and poverty, are played out in the micro-level among our respondents in their everyday lives in New Orleans as they become enmeshed in the drug market due to a lack of legitimate job opportunities.

FINDINGS

Entrance Into the Drug Market

Poor families and distressed neighborhoods together provided the context in which young males and females in New Orleans were introduced to the illicit drug subculture. Whereas the family generally provides the foundation of children's normal socialization, it can also serve as a training ground for deviant and criminal behavior (Johnson, Dunlap, & Maher, 1998). This was evident in many of our respondents stories.

Family & intergenerational drug influence—This study reveals the intergenerational elements of drug dealing as a career. A large body of literature documents how drug abuse, sexual exploitation, and violence tend to run through generations of families (Dunlap et al., 2002). Specifically, Dunlap et al., (2002) documented how conduct norms for unconventional behaviors are transmitted across generations to children through different mechanisms. Children are taught the prevailing conduct norms and to accept various relationships and ways of living through their households and family life. This generational training process initializes and normalizes the intergenerational transmission process of drug abuse and drug use (Dunlap et al. 2002). Several respondents in the current study reported that they were introduced to dealing through family members. For example, Red (a pseudonym, as are all names in this report) stated:

My family always did it. My family, they sold marijuana. They had businesses and stuff like that back in Mississippi so it was kind of like I was kind of brought up in the environment. And I always wanted to be just like that. As I got older I said this was something I wanted to do and I pursued it . . . I went through the whole phase from use—from dealing it to using it to-to support my habit.

Harry indicated a similar experience as a teenager: "I [have] been selling heroin since, um, 16. I got started, uh, with a, uh, a uncle of mine. Cause see, you know, he was a big time heroin dealer."

Slim told a similar story, noting:

I started selling drugs when I was, like, 13. First drug that I started selling was crack cocaine. And I started selling that up under one of my family members. I was

hustling for 'em at first . . . [Now] I sell that [weed] to support my habit and buy things for me and my family. And you know to do other things with.

These accounts illustrate how adults shape illegal behaviors and integrate children into them. Growing up in such households and being routinely exposed to adults' participation in the drug market, as both users and sellers, is prominent in inner cities (Dunlap, 1995; Dunlap, Johnson, & Tourigny, 2000; Golub, Johnson, Dunlap, & Sifaneck, 2005; Johnson et al., 1998). Because the household and family are the primary influences on children, the behaviors of parents, other relatives, and household members define the standards that the child adopts. Thus, the child who grows up among illicit drug users and sellers begin to see drug use and sales as normal and accepted at a young age and as a viable and attractive means by which money and social capital can be acquired.

Neighborhood drug influence—Similar to family life, neighborhoods are important in passing along conduct norms for illicit drug use and sales, especially when such neighborhoods are prime areas for drug selling. Yonas, O'Campo, Burke, and Gielen (2007) stressed how neighborhood factors, such as employment opportunities, local businesses, trash management, vacant housing, and street lighting, influence deviant behavior. Research also indicates that neighborhood characteristics, such as poverty, crime, drug use/sales, and violence, impact household/family life and children (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006; Peibly & Sastry, 2007). Such neighborhoods are seen as socially disorganized and are more difficult, dangerous, and “closed” places to live. Adults and children in these neighborhoods are more likely to participate in deviant behavior (e.g., drug use/sales, crime, and violence).

Segregation by race and by income is pervasive in New Orleans. Poor, minority neighborhoods have a high level of violence, much of which is related to the drug market. Massey and Denton (1989) found that residential segregation undermines the social and economic well being of African Americans in America. A significant number of African Americans are relegated to environments with high unemployment, many families on welfare, poor educational facilities, and prominent physical deterioration. Such communities can be seen as closed and as such few people are able to escape. Prolonged exposure to such environments renders African Americans little chance for social and economic success because educational and economic opportunities are greatly limited.

Respondents indicated that the neighborhood and neighbors, in addition to the family, served to introduce many of them into the drug market. For example, Bo said: “Well, I'm from New Orleans. I come up [grew up] bein' around a lot of drug dealers. That's all I knew. Every time I come around outside . . . nothin' but drugs I been around it all my life. That's all I knew.” Similarly, Mo explained:

It's the neighborhood you're in, you know. You see it. You see a way to make money. Yeah. Yeah, instead of going out and, um, and getting no job, you're gonna get a hundred dollars, three hundred dollars and stand right there on the corner. And make that in one, two, three hours, like I said. Two thousand dollars in a day.

These messages are even promulgated through the public schools, where young people introduce each other to the drug market. For example, Daryl told us:

We called 'em drug lords then in our hometown . . . Guys that's rich. They're, like, sellin' all the drugs. They bring dope into town . . . And then I went to school, we was in high school with their sons and daughters. So that's how I got into it.

Evidence then suggests strongly that people are locked into “closed” communities with few legal/legitimate opportunities, high unemployment, poor education, a desperate need for money, and in general a bleak outlook for the future. Unfortunately, in these closed

communities with limited legitimate opportunities to obtain money and social capital, drug dealing is frequently seen as a viable alternative. The family and the neighborhood and neighbors play a critical role in perpetuating the cycle and introducing new individuals into the “business” of drug use and dealing.

Starting Early

In light of the fact that residents of New Orleans frequently reported being initiated into the drug market by family members, the neighborhood, and neighbors, it is not surprising that many of our respondents became familiar with the drug market at very young ages. The early age of initiation into the drug market is also largely a result of the fact that drug participation is one of the earliest means to obtain valuable social capital (Dunlap, 1995). Thus, when living in extreme poverty, young people often see the local drug dealer as the only, and often most glamorous, model of economic success. Not surprisingly, the current study indicates that numerous drug dealers began their careers while still very young.

For example, Short Stuff explained: “I started selling weed at the age of fifteen because I needed some money. And I had gone to one of my little partners and he had fronted me a quarter pound. And ever since that I just started smokin’ weed and selling weed. I still do it.” Will also started early, stating: “I was like twelve years old. And then it was just after that to get money. All I need is to get money. I just had to get money. I was still going to school, playin’ football . . . but I was supporting me, just had to get me out there. So I sold weed and crack. I had both ‘em . . . in middle school.” Similarly, Joe Blow said: “I was a little kid, fifteen, fourteen years old, going to ten, fifteen cars a day. I mean, that was change in my pocket to go to school with, you know.”

Reasons Given for Dealing

Respondents’ stories about their initiation into drug use illustrate the theme of poverty as a catalyst for drug participation. Respondents’ contend that poverty remains the prime reason for continued drug dealing. Specifically, dealers often related that they were unable to find employment that would pay them sufficiently or simply could not find employment at all.

The lack of employment and subsequent need for money to support a family, maintain a lifestyle, or allow for the purchase of drugs and other goods is a prevalent theme. For instance, Ray noted: “I sell heroin. I’ve been selling heroin for the last ten years or so. And I sell it to, to take care of my family . . . [I started because] I was out of a job . . . and then I had to, to sell something. You know, heroin was just what I did to . . . maintain . . . my lifestyle.” And Saturday Night told us, “I lost my job and, you know, started using . . . [I] started selling to support my habit. And then from that point on, I started supporting my family.”

In these cases, respondents lost their employment and were without any means of economic support for themselves and their families. This pushed a few respondents into using drugs. Being without a job also pushed Saturday Night to using and from there he went into sales. Once he started using, he became familiar with the drug market and began to sell drugs to support his habit. In selling to support his habit, he found that he could make enough money to not only support his habit but to also help support his family.

Dealing as a Business

Because the poor are unable to engage in legitimate businesses, the drug market presents an alternative means of making money through the development of illicit business practices. In fact, many dealers perceive themselves as businessmen, learning about the market, devising business plans, and hiring others to work for them. The apprentice experience functions to

train the next generation of drug dealers. All dealer respondents related that they had someone who taught them and brought them into the drug business. Whether taught by family or friends, being brought into the business of dealing enables a person to move into a different and higher or better position. If they evolve into “successful” businessmen, and women, they report that they do less work and make more money. Whether these low-level drug users in fact accumulate wealth, however, is questionable. In interviews, they give little visible or verbal evidence of wealth. Other research has found that their money cannot be deposited in the bank, cannot be invested, and generally goes back into the drug market to support the dealers’ own drug use or to replenish supplies of drugs and inventory. Fredo spoke eloquently of his understanding of dealing as a business:

You [have] got to be organized. And this, this is a business. And it take[s] more than one person, you know. And, um, you have maybe, in my group they have three investors, you know. And they have three, four people that run in little crews. They have a day shift; they have a night shift; they have watch outs.

Little C offered an explanation of how he entered the business of dealing:

I knew some guys and I cut into 'em. And when I cut into them, they knew that I was a good, um, I had been a good customer. So the only question was, um, could they trust me to do what I said I was gonna do? So I had to start small The products that they gave me were in small quantity. And once I proved Then I get another one. Sell that, come back. And I had to build it that way.

Joe Blow explained how he began dealing by learning the ropes and getting supplies from someone already in the business of selling illicit drugs:

You got to prove yourself. Now, he ain't just called me off the street and say, come on, sell this heroin. And then me hangin' around and a lot of times he ran me, you know what I'm saying, before I got started. But I was, I was diligent, you know.

Dealers tend to expand the scope of their work by attracting help. Many neophyte dealers begin by running for some known dealer and gaining his trust, which is beneficial both for the person trying to break into the market and for the dealer. The person trying to break into the market is given the opportunity to prove himself or herself. Additionally, the dealer is always willing to train individuals because he moves up into the higher role of supplier when he trains a person. As one respondent reported: “When he see I'm ready, you know, I can buy from him and he don't have to stand on the corner no more, I'll be coming to him.”

Hurricane Katrina

African Americans comprise 67% of New Orleans’ residents and they live largely in concentrated poverty. This situation was made worse by Hurricane Katrina. Reports indicate that approximately 30% of people in New Orleans live below the poverty line. For young, distressed Katrina victims, it is an even more depressing picture.

Our research found that many of the poor could not evacuate because they simply did not have the means to do so (e.g., an automobile, gasoline, and money). Fass and Cauthen (2005) reported that 134,000 individuals could not leave New Orleans because they could not afford transportation. Many respondents also indicated that they did not believe the hurricane would cause such immense damage. Dr. Nancy Cauthen, Deputy Director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, noted: “We are seeing systemic poverty of the worst kind. The families left behind by Katrina were physically trapped because they are also trapped by poverty.” She went on to explain: “Many of the affected families had no transportation, and many didn't even have telephone service to call for help” (NCCP, n.d.).

Such reports highlight the extreme level of poverty that existed in New Orleans even before the catastrophe.

In line with this, many of our participants reported that they did not leave New Orleans prior to the hurricane. For instance, one participant said, “We went through the storm . . . on top of the roof for like three days. We didn't evacuate.” Similarly, another respondent explained: “I was there for the storm, me and my mother and my son Ain't nobody think it was gonna come up Like ain't nobody really think it was gonna tum out the way it did We thought it was just gonna be like Like heavy rain and strong winds.” Interestingly, some of our respondent') also pointed out that drugs were not their central focus in the immediate aftermath of the storm. For instance, one individual was asked whether he had any drugs with him when he was stranded on his roof. He simply replied, “Nope. Nothin'. That was the last thing on my mind.”

CONCLUSION

This article has looked at macro-level social forces and examined the micro-level consequences that are being played out in the lives of New Orleans residents. We have shown a clear connection between poverty and entrance into the drug market, as mitigated by race, lack of societal opportunity, lack of social capital, distressed families, and closed neighborhoods. Specifically, our research illustrates the mechanisms by which macro-level social forces intersect to legitimize drug dealing as a viable alternative method of acquiring money and social capital. These intersecting macro-level social forces, such as like poverty, race, family structure, and neighborhood characteristics, ultimately constrain the life chances of those living in the inner city irrespective of personal traits, individual motivations, or private achievements. What respondents reveal is that the macro-level social forces prevalent in the inner city place a strain on the individual by limiting their legitimate opportunities to acquire money and social capital. Thus, these residents of the inner city sought alternatives. Often their search for alternatives led them to participate in the “business” of the illicit drug market because the drug market is visible and apparent in both families and neighborhoods in New Orleans and is often portrayed as a viable way to obtain much-needed resources like money and social capital.

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TABLE 1

Focus Group Participant Demographics

	New Orleans		Houston		Total
	NO users	NO dealers	NOE dsers	HOU dealers	
Male	27	33	25	20	121
Female	11	14	19	6	50
Total	38	47	44	26	171

Note. NO = New Orleans Resident; NOE = New Orleans Evacuee; HOU = Houston Resident.

TABLE 2

Interview Participant Demographics

	New Orleans	Houston	Total
Male	72	73	145
Female	53	69	122
Total	125	142	267