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Neighborhood Collective Efficacy—Does It Help Reduce Violence?*

By Robert J. Sampson, Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Felton Earls

For most of this century, social scientists have observed marked variations in rates of criminal violence in the neighborhoods of U.S. cities. Violence has been associated with low socioeconomic status and residential instability. Although the geographical concentration of violence and its connection with neighborhood composition are well established, the question remains: Why? What social processes might explain why the concentration of disadvantage is linked to violence?

In a major report of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, published in a recent issue of the journal *Science,* the researchers found that rates of violence are lower in urban neighborhoods characterized by "collective efficacy." Extending the concept of community cohesion, collective efficacy refers to mutual trust among neighbors combined with willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good, specifically to supervise children and maintain public order. The finding is important because it challenges the prevailing wisdom that crime is the direct result of such factors as poverty, unemployment, the predominance of single-parent households, or the concentration of certain minority groups. These factors do play a role, according to the study. But some Chicago neighborhoods that are largely black and poor have low crime rates. In these neighborhoods, the researchers found that collective efficacy is the most powerful influence keeping violent crime low.

The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

Part of a major, ongoing research program sponsored in part by the National Institute of Justice, the study has been conducted in all areas of Chicago since 1990. The researchers are investigating how children and adolescents develop in many of the city's neighborhoods, as well as the antecedents of criminality, substance abuse, and violence at the level of the individual. A principal aim is to understand the impact on behavior of such factors as neighborhood characteristics, changes in social services, and the influence of the family, peer relationships, and individuals' personal characteristics.

For this aspect of the study, the research team divided Chicago into 343 "neighborhood clusters," each home to about 8,000 people, and each defined by specific geographic boundaries and internally homogeneous on a variety of census indicators. To obtain a complete picture of all the city's neighborhoods, 8,782 Chicago residents representing all 343 areas were interviewed.

How to measure "collective efficacy"

The questions asked of residents were intended to elicit their views of how much informal social control, social cohesion and trust, and violence exists in their neighborhood. Thus, in one set of questions they were asked about the likelihood their neighbors would intervene in a number of situations, particularly to discipline neighborhood children (for example, if children were painting graffiti or skipping school). They were also asked how well they thought several statements about social cohesion and trust described their neighborhood. Examples of the statements were: "People around here are willing to help their neighbors," "This is a close-knit neighborhood," and "People in this neighborhood can be trusted."

The level of neighborhood violence was calculated three ways—by asking residents about their perceptions, by asking them about their own victimization, and by reviewing data in police reports of homicide. For each neighborhood, the average homicide rate for the period 1988 to 1990 was included in the calculation to adjust for previous levels of violence. Finally, 1990 census data on several demographic characteristics were combined to create a multidimensional picture of social composition comprising measures of disadvantage, ethnic/immigrant concentration,

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and residential stability. Once the concepts of collective efficacy and social composition were defined and measured, they were analyzed to assess their relationship to each other and to the levels of neighborhood violence.

Collective efficacy acts as an intermediary

Past research has consistently reported links between neighborhood social composition and crime. In the current study, the researchers found that in neighborhoods scoring high on collective efficacy, crime rates were 40 percent below those in lower scoring neighborhoods. This difference supported the researchers' basic premise—Crime rates are not solely attributable to individuals' aggregate demographic characteristics. Rather, crime is a function of neighborhood social and organizational characteristics.

The researchers found that various dimensions of social composition influence the level of neighborhood collective efficacy. In neighborhoods where concentrated poverty (or "disadvantage") was high, collective efficacy was low. Ethnicity/immigration was another important dimension, because areas of ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity may have less capacity to realize common values. Where this dimension was high, collective efficacy was low. In contrast, neighborhoods where residential stability was strong also tended to be strong on collective efficacy.

One key finding was that collective efficacy helps to explain the relationship between neighborhood social composition and crime levels. When the researchers analyzed residential stability and concentrated poverty, they found that a substantial portion of the links between these factors and violence could be attributed to neighborhood differences in collective efficacy. In predominantly black neighborhoods, this was also the case. In other words, disadvantage is the driving force, not race. Among other things, disadvantage is likely to mean large numbers of single-parent households, which may mean fewer adults to adequately supervise children. When this and other factors are taken into account, the effects of race and poverty on crime are much smaller. Collective efficacy, not race or poverty, was the largest single predictor of the overall violent crime rate.

Beyond the understanding of collective efficacy

What happens in neighborhoods is shaped partly by socioeconomic factors linked to the wider political economy. Nevertheless, communities can be encouraged to mobilize against violence through self-help strategies of informal social control. These strategies can perhaps be reinforced by partnerships with agencies of formal social control (for example, community policing). In addition, strategies to address the social and ecological changes that beset many inner-city communities need to be considered. Understanding collective efficacy can shape these efforts, better equipping planners, policymakers, and community service organizations to work with residents in addressing community problems. For this reason the research is of particular interest to members of the law enforcement community involved in community policing. However, recognizing that collective efficacy matters does not imply that inequalities at the neighborhood level can be neglected.

Robert J. Sampson, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Research Fellow with the American Bar Foundation; Stephen W. Raudenbush, Ed.D., is Professor of Education at the University of Michigan; and Felton Earls, M.D., the study director, is Professor of Human Behavior and Development, Harvard School of Public Health. The study was sponsored in part by NIJ grant 93–IJ–CX–K005. Also supporting the project are the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and the National Institute of Mental Health.

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