

Concentrated Disadvantage, Economic Distress, and Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships

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Criminologists long have known that crime rates tend to be higher in neighborhoods that are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Bursik, 1988; Sampson and Groves, 1989). Neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage also appears to be related to rates of intimate violence (Miles-Doan, 1998). Studies of calls to the police indicate that domestic violence calls tend to come disproportionately from disadvantaged areas (Sherman and Berk, 1984; Miles-Doan, 1998). But the significance of these findings is not clear. The association of intimate violence with neighborhood socioeconomic conditions may result from the structural features of neighborhoods, the composition of their resident populations, or finally, reporting differences between advantaged and disadvantaged communities.

Although intimate violence is found among all social classes, rates tend to be higher in families of lower socioeconomic status who are experiencing underemployment or unemployment (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Recent research has found that economic distress predicts individual and family outcomes, including marital dissatisfaction and family conflict (Conger et al., 1990; Fox and Chancey, 1998; MacMillan and Gartner, 1999). The significance of the connection between economic distress and intimate violence, however, is uncertain. Does economic distress motivate intimate violence as some have hypothesized (Fagan and Browne, 1994) or are economic distress and intimate violence simply different manifestations of some underlying individual characteristic such as low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990)? Longitudinal research on violent street crime indicates that cross-sectional correlations between violence and other individual-level characteristics, such as employment status and educational attainment, often are substantially reduced in size if prior propensity to violence is controlled (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972; Nagin, Farrington, and Moffitt, 1995).

Social disorganization theory suggests a number of reasons why neighborhood context may be related to patterns in intimate violence against women. Disorganization theorists argue that ecological correlations between neighborhood characteristics and violence result from variation in the relative effectiveness of neighborhood informal and formal social control mechanisms (Sampson and Groves, 1989; Bursik, 1988; Kornhauser, 1978). Disadvantaged areas are thought to have low levels of informal social control, and this condition may provide a fertile soil in which violence against women can flourish. Abusive men who reside in these areas are not constrained by strong normative expectations against violence. Hence, they are free to commit violence against their spouses and cohabitators without fear of social disapproval. Residents of disadvantaged areas also are more likely to have weak social bonds to their neighbors (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). Thus, women involved with potentially abusive partners are more likely to be isolated and at greater risk of violent victimization (Stets, 1991). Women in disadvantaged areas are likely to live in overcrowded households, which often leads to pathological consequences for family relationships (Gove, Hughes, and Galle, 1979). Finally, official forms of social control are thought to be weaker in disadvantaged areas (Stark, 1987). Despite suggestive empirical findings and theoretical plausibility, little is known about how community context affects intimate violence and even less about how community context interacts with economic distress to influence the risk of intimate violence against women (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994). This project was designed to investigate these issues.

Study Design

Research Questions

This report focuses on three specific research questions:

- ◆ Does the correlation between neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage and intimate violence represent a contextual effect or is it the result of compositional or reporting differences between neighborhood populations?
- ◆ Does the correlation between economic distress and intimate violence against women represent a causal effect or is it a spurious association?
- ◆ Do community context and economic distress influence the likelihood of intimate violence in a relationship over and above the effects of other known individual and household-level correlates of intimate violence?

Research Methods

This project is a secondary analysis of data drawn from wave 1, completed in 1988, ($n = 13,007$) and wave 2, completed in 1994, ($n = 10,005$) of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and from the 1990 U.S. Census. NSFH is a nationally representative sample of households and is an extremely rich data source, containing literally thousands of variables on a broad range of individual, couple-level, and household characteristics, events, and experiences. For this project, the authors abstracted variables from NSFH relevant to our research questions. The variables were grouped into three major categories: (1) indicators of conflict and violence in the couple, (2) indicators of the economic status of the couple, and (3) individual-, couple-, and household-level sociodemographic characteristics.

To assess violence, NSFH asks a series of questions of both members of the couple. Both the male and the female are asked if during the past year arguments became physical and, if yes, how often during the past year fights resulted in the male hitting, shoving, or throwing things at the female. Response categories range from zero to four or more times. Followup questions ask whether the female was “cut, bruised, or seriously injured” in a fight with a spouse or partner (yes or no). Because the distribution of responses is highly skewed, the authors constructed dichotomous measures of violence against the female for both waves (0 = no violence, 1 = violence). They also constructed a measure of the severity of violence (0 = no violence, 1 = one-time violence without injury, 2 = violence with injury or repeated violence).

The authors’ conceptualization of *economic distress* was guided by the work of Voydanoff and Donnelly (1988) and reflects both subjective and objective aspects of employment and income. Preliminary analyses revealed that two types of economic distress—employment instability and subjective financial strain—are particularly potent risk factors for intimate violence against women. Hence, this report concentrates on them. *Employment instability* was operationalized as the number of periods of unemployment for the male between waves of the NSFH. *Subjective financial strain* refers to perceptions of financial inadequacy and was operationalized by

combining responses to questions about satisfaction with finances and questions regarding worry about money.

To measure community context, the authors merged the NSFH data with census tract data abstracted from the 1990 U.S. Census. The conceptualization and measurement of community context was guided by recent work on the structural sources of collective efficacy (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997). An index of neighborhood disadvantage was created based on where the respondent was living in wave 2 of NSFH. The index includes five census tract measures that reflect *concentrated disadvantage*. It is defined by the percentage of single parents, percentage nonwhite, percentage unemployed, percentage of families on public assistance, and percentage below the poverty line. After transforming the items to z-scores, the authors took the mean of the items to form the index, which has an alpha reliability of 0.92.

Sampson and Wilson (1995) argue that the crime-related effects of community disadvantage are not linear across levels of disadvantage. Rather, they tend only to appear in the most distressed neighborhoods as “concentration effects” (Sampson and Wilson, 1995). The same appears to be true with respect to concentrated disadvantage and the risk of intimate violence. In NSFH, rates of intimate violence are significantly higher among respondents who were located in neighborhoods that score in the upper 30 percent of the index of concentrated disadvantage. Accordingly, the authors collapsed the index of disadvantage into a dichotomous measure at the 70th percentile. Consistent with a long line of research in the social disorganization tradition, a measure of residential instability was included in the analyses.

As control variables in these multivariate analyses, household income-to-needs ratio, number of children under age 18 in the household, age of primary respondent, race, male drinking problems, and violence in wave 1 were included.

Findings

At the bivariate level, neighborhood disadvantage is associated with increased prevalence and severity of intimate violence against women. The rate of violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods is 8.7 percent compared with 4.3 percent in advantaged neighborhoods. Similarly, the rate of serious violence, defined as repeated violence or violence with injury, is more than twice as high in disadvantaged as opposed to advantaged neighborhoods (5.8 versus 2.4 percent). These results confirm those obtained in studies of calls to the police. They indicate that the higher rate of calls to the police for domestic violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods is not simply the result of reporting differences between neighborhoods. Rather, they reflect real differences in the risk of intimate violence against women.

Two indicators of economic distress also are related to the risk of intimate violence against women. First, the rate of violence increases as the number of periods of male unemployment increases. In couples in which the male is always employed, the rate of violence is 4.7 percent. The rate rises to 7.5 percent when the male experiences one period of unemployment and to 12.3 percent when he experiences two or more periods of unemployment between waves. Second, a strong relationship is found between subjective feelings of financial strain and the likelihood of

violence against a woman in an intimate relationship. The rate of violence among couples with high levels of subjective financial strain is roughly three and a half times as high as it is among couples with low subjective strain (9.5 versus 2.7 percent).

The results presented above indicate that in the NSFH, rates of intimate violence against women vary with community-level socioeconomic disadvantage and individual-level economic distress. It is important to keep in mind, however, that individual economic distress and community economic disadvantage are also related to one another, because access to financial resources influences housing decisions. Financially advantaged couples are more likely to live in well-to-do neighborhoods than financially disadvantaged couples. The correlation between couple-level and community-level economic disadvantage raises the possibility that the higher rate of intimate violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods merely reflects a compositional effect. By definition, disadvantaged areas are populated mainly by disadvantaged people.

To investigate this possibility, the authors constructed three-way contingency tables to examine the effects of economic distress in advantaged compared with disadvantaged neighborhoods. For couples with low levels of subjective strain, there is little variation in rates by neighborhood type. Couples with low levels of subjective strain who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods report violence in 3.8 percent of the cases, but only 2.3 percent of the low-strain couples in advantaged neighborhoods report violence. For couples with high levels of subjective strain, however, neighborhood location appears to be much more important. Among couples with high levels of subjective strain, the rate of intimate violence is 13.8 percent in disadvantaged neighborhoods compared with 7.3 percent in advantaged neighborhoods. Within neighborhood types, the relative increase in violence across levels of subjective strain is roughly similar. For couples in disadvantaged neighborhoods, those with high levels of subjective strain report violence at a rate 3.63 times higher than couples with low strain. In advantaged neighborhoods, the violence rate increases 3.17 times between couples with low compared to high levels of subjective strain.

Employment instability is related to intimate violence regardless of neighborhood type. Couples in which the male experienced two or more periods of unemployment between waves have notably higher rates of violence against women than couples in which the male had more stable employment. In advantaged neighborhoods, the rate of violence increases dramatically from 4 percent for males with stable employment to 10.6 percent for males with unstable employment. In disadvantaged neighborhoods, the percent reporting violence increases from 8.2 percent to 15.6 percent. The results of the three-way analysis of community context, economic distress, and intimate violence indicate that higher levels of individual economic distress in disadvantaged neighborhoods do not account entirely for the association of neighborhood economic disadvantage and intimate violence. Rather, the association appears to represent in part a contextual effect of neighborhoods on intimate violence.

Other compositional differences between neighborhood types that are unrelated to economic distress, however, may account for the higher rate of intimate violence in disadvantaged neighborhoods. To test for this possibility, the authors used logistic regression to analyze a model that included concentrated disadvantage, residential instability, male employment instability, subjective financial strain, and a comprehensive set of known precursors of intimate

violence, including age, race, education level, alcohol use, and number of children in the household.

The effects of concentrated disadvantage and economic distress remain significant even after all of the control variables are included in the model. Thus, the aggregate correlation between concentrated disadvantage and intimate violence appears to reflect a contextual effect. The measures of individual economic distress—subjective strain and employment instability—also are significant in the full model. At both the aggregate and the individual levels, then, socioeconomic disadvantage increases women’s risk of intimate violence.

It is possible that prior violence may account for the apparent effects of community context and economic distress on intimate violence. If men with prior histories of intimate violence are more likely to locate in disadvantaged neighborhoods and to experience economic distress, then the correlations observed in this study may yet be spurious.

To test this possibility, the study focused on continuing couples, defined as those who were married or cohabiting in wave 1 and who were still together in wave 2. The authors knew whether the men in these couples were violent in wave 1; hence, they added violence in wave 1 to the model tested above. As expected, violence in wave 1 has a sizable and positive effect on the likelihood of violence in wave 2. Concentrated disadvantage, employment instability, and subjective financial strain, however, continue to have significant effects on the likelihood of violence against women. This result confirms the importance of both neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage and individual-level economic distress for the problem of violence against women.

Implications for Researchers

This project is the first ever to conduct contextual and individual-level analyses of intimate violence against women in a longitudinal framework. Despite its uniqueness as a data set, NSFH has several problems that researchers should seek to correct in the future. One general shortcoming of NSFH for longitudinal analyses is the relatively long gap of 6 years between waves 1 and 2. Couples may have exhibited violence between waves that the survey items did not detect. In addition, NSFH focuses on physical violence related to arguments and does not capture violence by men that does not arise out of arguments, for example, when a male gets drunk and attacks his partner without provocation. The NSFH items also are poorly suited to identifying nonphysical forms of violence against women, such as verbal or emotional violence.

In addition to improving the measurement of violence, researchers should also try to investigate whether the connection between neighborhood characteristics and intimate violence is mediated by the same social organizational processes that appear to mediate the effect of neighborhood characteristics on street violence. Concentrated disadvantage may be related to intimate violence through the processes associated with collective efficacy; unfortunately, the data available in NSFH are insufficient to construct measures of this intervening concept. Hence, the exact nature of the mechanism that connects neighborhoods and intimate violence is unclear.

Implications for Practitioners

A long tradition of research shows that community socioeconomic disadvantage and economic distress can have pathological consequences for couples and individuals across a broad range of personal outcomes. With respect to intimate violence, however, little is known about the effects that community context and economic distress can have on victimization risks. Little is known about the ways in which community context may influence the reasons why women stay in abusive relationships or why they leave them. This project was designed to shed light on these issues and to help articulate the relationship between community context, economic distress, and intimate violence. While the nature of our data and analyses do not lend themselves to specific policy recommendations, we hope our results will enable policymakers to better target the types of communities in which intervention and prevention programs are most likely to be needed.

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