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Potential Models for Understanding Crime Impacts of High or Increasing Unoccupied  
Housing Rates in Unexpected Places, and How to Prevent Them

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## **Statement of the Problem**

The current work considers how spatial and temporal variations in the rates at which residential housing becomes unoccupied are likely to affect community crime rates. To figure out how this might work, current theoretical approaches to understanding community crime rates are examined to learn how they would view the relevant dynamics. If the goal is to prevent adverse impacts of unoccupied housing on community crime rates, the best prevention program will be the one that is based on the clearest and most strongly supported theory. That examination will reveal significant different advantages and disadvantages associated with each perspective. But more importantly, different theoretical perspectives considered suggest different ways to approach community crime prevention initiatives, [87] co-produced public safety, [14, 73, 76] and third party policing roles [64, 65]. Stated differently, the theoretical vantage point suggests different logic models for intervention and orients practitioners toward potential intervention points and strategies [88]. The focus is on neighborhood level or community level dynamics.

The relevant context is the current US mortgage crisis. Starting sometime in 2007, sections of the US started experiencing dramatic increases in mortgage foreclosure or home abandonment rates as the crisis in sub-prime mortgage markets spread. That has led to concerns about the potential crime impacts of these increases.

By way of introduction it is recognized that the processes of mortgage defaults, foreclosures, bank possessions and re-sales are extremely complex and varied phenomena. Because of that complexity and the range of processes and actors that may be involved, the focus

here is just on patterns of and increases in unoccupied housing. These changes in the unoccupied rate or UR arise from many sources including but not limited to: changes in the rates at which defaulting borrowers walk away from their properties pre-foreclosure; changes in the rates of post foreclosure proceedings which force residents to move out; and other market dynamics leading to houses being unoccupied, perhaps while for sale or rent, for extremely long periods. Although these properties in some instances can be taken over by criminal elements, the focus is how the levels, changes in levels, and patterning of unoccupied residential houses affects later crime and how we can prevent those effects.

The paper simply takes as starting points two considerations. First, that these interrelated phenomena are going to lead to some communities experiencing much higher prevalence rates of unoccupied single unit houses than previously experienced in those locations. Second, that although these higher URs have a range of economic, social, political, economic and cultural impacts, the concern with such impacts is only insofar as they might connect to later crime changes.

The first portion briefly compares and contrasts the current housing crisis with a preceding period of rapid shifts in house values: rapid housing turnover and associated neighborhood racial change in large cities from the late 1950s through the 1970s. This was one relatively recent time where neighborhoods in many sections of the country experienced sizable significant neighborhood demographic changes [47, 71, 72]. It also places the current crisis in the context of an emerging field, contributed to by several disciplines, on increasing suburban poverty.[62, 68] The case will be made that one of the limitations of most of the available

theoretical alternatives for understanding the dynamics around URs is their failure to theoretically integrate with these perspectives.

The next part moves through a number of theoretical perspectives on communities and crime. Each is briefly summarized. Each points to different key features of the current situation and different dynamics, and each suggests different intervention points and strategies. Each has a different idea of how or why increasing URs might lead to increasing crime or disorder. Depending upon the intervention point or intervention type, different roles are suggested for law enforcement, police community relations, housing authorities, and municipal and metropolitan governance structures. Broadly speaking, the relevant prevention initiatives connect to several areas of policy research: problem oriented policing [42, 43], co-produced public safety [74], collective crime prevention efforts [87], third party policing [65] and neighborhood economic preservation policies [1].

A short closing segment suggests there are serious limitations in the ability of **any** of the current communities and crime perspectives to guide future intervention efforts. All are to some degree inadequate or incomplete. It outlines some of the things we need to learn if we are to develop sound, empirically supported intervention logics.

### **The Same or Different?**

Recent reports in the popular press suggest that numerous suburban counties in the United States are experiencing unprecedentedly high or dramatically increasing rates of home abandonment and mortgage foreclosure [75]. Of necessity, these foreclosures and abandonments before foreclosure can dramatically shrink community household populations. Over time,

foreclosure and abandonment rates may contribute independently to declining community house values even in a time when house values in many regions of the country are already broadly declining.

Traditionally, declining house values have been interpreted as an indicator of broader community decline, usually linked to dramatic changes in socioeconomic or racial composition of neighborhood residents, the willingness of businesses to locate in those places, and attendant increases in social problems more generally [49, 117]. Rapid neighborhood structural change can link to changing fear and changing relative crime rates.[103, 104] Rapid neighborhood house value decline, especially in the context of declining services, can lead to powerful conflicts between local community organizations and local governmental agencies, and has the potential to dramatically undermine public authority [32, 33].

A growing body of work, however, suggests structural economic changes in suburban communities may come about in ways that are different from the rapid demographic shifts seen in large central city neighborhoods in the 1960s and 1970s. Rapid population shifts in urban communities were often accompanied by and seen as driven by racial changes in who moved in versus who moved out. Changing racial composition foreshadowed for many residents declining neighborhood economic and service delivery levels [27, 28].

The linkages may be working differently in many places, however, in the last two decades. Pre-foreclosure crisis increases in suburban poverty prior to say 2005, as well as post-crisis dynamics appear to be different [96]. Following a political economy model (see below) researchers have suggested that patterns of capital circulation within and across communities are



changing dramatically without accompanying widespread changes in who moves in and who moves out [96]. Looking at the “Camden syndrome” Smith et al. (2001: 524) argued that

The historical experience of Camden County [NJ] suggests that the cyclical nature of economic expansion and recession is vital in this understanding, as regional economic shocks are localized in vulnerable neighborhoods. Yet evolving patterns of chronic capital flight also underscore the role of class and race. Racial change is not an independent variable “explaining” decline but instead reflects the uneven geography of opportunity created in large part through the operation of urban and regional housing markets.

Stated differently, the current crises altering suburban communities arise from – and presumably can only be fixed by altering – the uneven circulation of available capital across these communities. Housing market dynamics, and the unevenness within and between those community-level housing markets, appear to be more central than race or cultural differentials, although obviously related to the latter. In cities, however, race differentials continue to be key [4].

If current pre- and post-foreclosure crisis increases in URs are primarily a result of how much money is available on reasonable terms to support homebuyers, and not about impacts of

social problems, racial change, or economic changes spreading out from central cities, then this also calls for a radical reinterpretation of abandoned houses.

Empirical work on the incivilities thesis has shown that urban residents' perceptions of problems like abandoned houses covary with their perceptions of other physical problems like poorly maintained houses, and of other social problems like unruly teen groups [105].

In contrast, the mortgage foreclosure crisis may be creating a situation leading to different interpretations of and impacts of increasing numbers of unoccupied houses in suburban neighborhoods as compared to urban neighborhoods

It is not argued that a specific incivility like a boarded up, vacant house is interpreted in the same way in different urban neighborhoods, or even by different people in the same neighborhood. Interpretations of incivilities are complex [48, 51, 53]. But in urban locations the prevalence rates for vacant housing are likely to covary closely with a range of other neighborhood social problems and with neighborhood economic and perhaps racial and ethnic structure. It is in part because these different problems covary closely over space that vacant houses are interpreted as part and parcel of broader societal ills [78].

Since high or increasing URs in suburban locales connect differently with social problems and demographic structure than they do in urban, core city locales, the presence of these unoccupied houses may be interpreted differently. There are very few data bearing directly on this question. At its simplest, do suburbanites in the US, given the current mortgage crisis, interpret high URs in their community as a signal disorder [53] foretelling imminent community

decline? Or is the interpretation that the URs reflect an ongoing national crisis? Or does the suburban interpretation depend on the temporal pacing of the UR increase, or its spatial concentration, or other factors? It will be important to learn more about how suburban residents interpret increasing numbers of unoccupied houses in their communities, and whether or how those interpretations link to intentions to move, current community engagement, or willingness to maintain or improve their own properties. If perceptions of an appreciating local and national housing market drive reinvestment [98], perceptions of depreciating markets may drive under-investment.

Looking at the current mortgage crisis more broadly, there are several features of the context which may reduce the applicability of previous community and crime models for understanding crime and related impacts.

1. It may be happening in many places all at once. Many communities within a county, or within a metropolitan area or within a region of the state may be experiencing roughly comparable economic disruptions of circulating capital simultaneously. If this is true, perhaps the capabilities of the current crisis to generate localized crime concerns, or highly localized crime increases, may be blunted.

2. If all of the communities in one jurisdiction or in one part of jurisdiction are being affected similarly the relative ordering of communities may not shift. In other words, there may not be implications for cross community shifts in relative crime levels in the long-term, presuming that the economic changes are happening at comparable rates across communities.

Spatial patterning of URs is key.

## **Will Higher Foreclosure and Abandonment Rates Lead to Higher Crime, and If So How?**

This section considers how currently available theoretical models would expect current or future URs due to the mortgage crisis to affect later crime rates. Different models suggest different ecological pathways of influence.

The different models are presented to attune the reader to the range of dynamics which are potentially relevant. Different dynamics in turn suggest alternate prevention pathways and logics.

No claim is made that one model is better than another. What will become clear, however, is that none of the models are sufficiently contextually sensitive and nuanced, or sufficiently steeped in the relevant regional science, community change, or political economy scholarships that they could provide a roadmap for anticipating crime-related consequences or for planning crime prevention.

As the reader will see below, all of these models are to a considerable extent contextually naïve. If there is one lesson to be learned from both the previous work in urban renewal and the current work on increasing suburban poverty, is that local dynamics are complex mixes of contextual features and broader, more global operating forces [39, 68, 96, 118]. A second emerging lesson seems to be that suburban residents today, like those fifty years ago, sought security [40, 55], viewing it as a key part of achieving “the American dream” [67]. A generation earlier in the 1920s and 1930s their parents had sought the same goals by leaving large cities’ crowded central districts for those cities’ outer sections [29, 111].

## Political Economy

### What it says

Political economy models focus on the economic value of communities to outside interests, the functional value of communities for insiders, and the conflicts arising from potential contrasts between these two. For example, in one model the concept of exchange value captures the economic value of investments, rents, land, businesses and tax revenues potentially available to public agencies outside the community, and to outside private investors. The concept of use value captures the functional and symbolic utility of the neighborhood for the residents themselves [59, 60]. The focus is on how capital circulates into and out of communities. These circulations depend on how external investors' and public agencies' perceptions of potential capital gains are weighed against resource requirements.

All these shape the treatment of communities by outside powerful interests. Conflicts arise when actions toward communities undercut with the functional [35], social [39] and symbolic benefits [36, 85] of these communities for residents and local business owners.

### Ways the perspective may be useful

The model focuses on capital flows. The model assumes that the current state of local and regional political economies will be among the most critical determinants for the futures of neighborhoods at risk. The factors, actors, and institutions driving capital into and out of locations of course are multi-faceted and extremely complex.

In addition, the model focuses attention on the discrepancies between the views of two groups: current residents, and outside agents, the latter including both public and private agencies. It's likely, especially as the national economy continues to crater in coming months and perhaps years that these differences will grow significantly.

For example, it makes sense for residents able to afford to continue living in their homes in neighborhoods experiencing increasing URs to lobby heavily for maintained or increased levels of local public services: more police patrols, better housing code enforcement, parks and playground maintenance, and the like. Those households which can afford to stay will want to maintain or increase current services despite visible evidence of declining community value. They will want this even though public agencies are probably experiencing declining revenues and even initiating service cuts, both of these driven by state and national as well as local changes. In short, exchange values in some communities may be declining due to more foreclosures and public agencies with fewer resources, but for the remaining financially healthy households some neighborhood use values may remain relatively high – at least in the short term. Those healthy households are likely to demand constant or increasing services in order to help sustain their use values. Conflicts around service delivery, including public safety, are likely to intensify dramatically, and these intensifying conflicts have significant implications specifically for co-produced safety initiatives [74] and more broadly for views about the legitimacy of public institutions [58].

On the positive side, however, the model suggests why residents in financially healthy households may be increasingly willing to contribute significant time and effort to community

improvement efforts such as maintaining grounds around unoccupied properties, and safety co-production efforts such as community crime prevention, especially if they receive some symbolic or tangible support from local public agencies. Residents in healthy households will find it in their best interest to engage in collective action which in the long run will help shore up neighborhood use values. It's easy to imagine efforts, and they are happening [41], where resident-based associations work with not only police but local public officials and local banking officials so those organizations are fully aware of which properties are unoccupied. The groups can maintain grounds around those properties and detail members to keep an eye on them hoping to keep vandals, in-migrating criminal elements and metal scavengers away. Suddenly, in a new and different context, neighborhood watch [86] may be relevant again. Once the ratio of financially healthy households to unoccupied houses gets too low, however, these efforts may sputter.

The third key feature of this model is its attention to external political dynamics as a separate arena. How a neighborhood conducts its “foreign relations” [24] is critical. A neighborhood’s capability to engage in successful foreign relations, to gain political leverage with outside political or economic interests, is distinct from a neighborhood’s degree of internal social and political integration and organization [24]. This idea contradicts both the revised systemic model [17] which incorporates three levels of social control [52] and the fundamental assumptions embedded into the most widely used collective efficacy indicators [90]. External political capabilities appear to be somewhat separate and distinct from internal self-regulatory and organizational capacities.

*Ways the perspective may not be useful*

The political economy perspective privileges economic dynamics above all other possible dynamics: political, social, cultural, historical, and contextual. In its strongest form this perspective may be too deterministic. Although this is line with some suburban economic work on the “Camden syndrome” [96] and some other work on suburban poverty growth [62, 68] its rejection of potentially relevant cultural [34] or racial [4, 32, 33] or safety related dynamics [55] may be too strong.

Second, if political economy is the key engine driving both URs and degree and type of crime impacts, it will be extremely difficult for resident-based interest groups to convince outside agencies to maintain levels of resource commitment in the current economic context. If rent prices, housing values, and business and property tax returns drive all subsequent dynamics, there is little that can be done to help cushion communities from the adverse effects, crime and otherwise, arising from increasing URs; this model predicts that external private and public agents will progressively withdraw services and investments in such a situation. These agents will be unlikely to contribute in any material way to these communities or these community efforts unless they can be convinced such actions or resources will help maintain exchange values or at least substantially slow their slide.

Third, although the model concentrates on the conflict between use values and exchange values, its meta-orientation implies that the economic dynamics usually win. Numerous counterexamples, however, describe situations where organized local interests successfully defeated investment decisions supported by local politicians, thereby preserving neighborhood



quality [3, 29, 70, 112]. In short, it is not clear if the broader economic determinism assumed by the model is correct.

### The Incivilities Thesis

The incivilities thesis refers to a family of models connecting observed and perceived physical and social indicators of slipping neighborhood quality with changing community crime rates, community reactions to crime, and community structural changes [105, 107]. Despite staunch defenders [56] and vociferous critics [48], long-term longitudinal work in at least one city over a decade has suggested that incivilities may shape prime community structure and residents' safety concerns, although the same incivilities are not as powerfully influential as many had thought [107]. More recent elaboration's of this thesis [53, 77] have returned to an earlier symbolic interactionist perspective on incivilities [51] highlighting the varying meanings residents and others may attach to such incivilities.

### *Ways the perspective may be useful*

Two of the most widely used assessed and perceived incivility indicators have been vacant houses and graffiti. In short, this model has identified abandoned or under-maintained houses and properties as key reflections of the quality of neighborhood life and as key determinants of perceived and unfolding neighborhood futures. Therefore, in a time of dramatically increasing URs, this model may help us understand the community dynamics and crime consequences emerging as part of the mortgage foreclosure crisis.

The implication of this first point is that keeping houses occupied may be critical to stabilizing neighborhoods, keeping crime rates from accelerating, and allaying residents' safety concerns. The leverage point suggested here is that financial institutions, local government, and local neighborhood organizations would want to work together to find ways to keep houses occupied and maintained, even if the original owner walks away, or if the houses in foreclosure proceedings. Creative occupancy solutions would seem to be required if the prime goal is forestalling potential community crime rate increases or structural declines. This same point comes up again after considering territorial functioning [102].

Second, the longitudinal versions of this perspective paid close attention to the rate of change of incivilities. The rate of changing incivilities may be as or more important than the level per se [95]. Focus on the rates of change aligns closely with several other ecological models which also have been applied to communities and crime [106] and the human ecology framework more generally [50]. In short, some versions of this thesis highlight the *rate* rather than the degree of change.

If one assumes that it is residents' perceptions of the rate of change, and that their perceptions are driven by marginal rate changes, then this perspective also helps direct efforts. More specifically, it would direct attention to those communities where URs or abandonment rates historically been at or close to zero. It would suggest that it is in *those* locations specifically where public and financial institutions would want to work hardest to avoid increasing URs. It will be the first unoccupied houses in a previously fully settled community that will be most

unsettling to residents. In other words, this perspective suggests focusing attention on preventing initial changes in community URs, especially if they have been historically extremely low.

Not enough is known currently to speculate on what changes in URs will draw the attention of potential offenders from outside the community in question.

Third, at least in some forms the incivilities thesis highlights issues of interpretation. Critical to unpacking structural, crime, and reaction to crime impacts of changing URs is understanding how those are interpreted [53, 100, 102]. This issue was alluded to earlier.

Previous work on incivilities and on human territorial signage has indicated that residents and outsiders often perceive the situation somewhat differently [51, 102]. That may prove true here as well, as outside forces and residents construct different interpretations of increasing URs.

#### *Ways the perspective may not be useful*

There are some ways in which the incivilities thesis may not prove helpful for understanding crime related consequences of increasing URs. Perhaps most importantly, the incivilities thesis implies that a range of assessed or perceived physical and social problems will cluster together and feed one another in urban settings. Residents in hard hit urban neighborhoods often implicitly or explicitly make these connections [78, 107]. Problems with more unsupervised teen groups go hand-in-hand with graffiti problems; higher rates of vacant housing go hand-in-hand with drug and gang problems because vacant buildings create opportunity spaces for gang activities including indoor markets, and places to shoot up [2, 25, 94].

The situation may be very different, however, in suburban settings. In these places, abandoned or foreclosed homes may not co-occur, at least in the short run, with other social and physical problems. Instead, the unoccupied houses symbolize severe market dysfunctionality rather than high local problem rates. Of course whether or not the connection occurs may depend on local factors.

To put the point differently, many incivilities researchers have assumed that high rates of assessed or perceived incivilities reflect higher rates of underlying disorder [56, 95, 116]. Although these assumptions have not been substantiated [105], and indeed work on convergent and discriminant validation suggest these assumptions may be in error [107], given the current housing crisis it seems highly unlikely that residents are likely to make inferences following the disorder → incivilities logic. We have the same observed condition but in a different time and with a dramatically different economic context compared to the situations to which this thesis was initially applied.

A second way the incivilities thesis may not prove helpful arises from the increasing attention [53, 77] to an old idea [51]: the importance of subjective interpretations of observed incivilities. If we accept this symbolic interactionist perspective on incivilities, public agencies, including those involved in neighborhood stabilization and law enforcement, will be unable to prioritize communities more deserving of interventions for maintaining neighborhood stability and safety. Tracking abandonment or delinquent tax or foreclosure rates, given this view, is not a reasonable way to identify the highest priority communities for intervention. Rather, this perspective suggests that it would only be through extensive interview work with residents and

leaders that one could determine the communities most at risk. Those most at risk will not necessarily be the communities with the highest URs, but rather would be the communities where the recent changes in URs are having the most sizable impact on residents' and key stakeholders' views of the community. This is probably too labor intensive a requirement to feasibly link to intervention strategies.

### Crime Pattern Theory

Crime pattern theory [5, 8-10] combines the assumptions of the rational offender perspective [20, 19, 21, 23] with behavioral geography [83, 82] and information about the spatial distributions of various land uses. Some of the latter at certain times may, depending upon offender motivation and how these locations intersect with potential offender activity spaces and search areas [80], serve as crime targets.

The rational offender perspective contributes to crime pattern theory by assuming that potential offenders are constantly evaluating potential targets and victims, and weighing a range of benefits and costs associated with various types of offending [30]. Behavioral geography concentrates attention on potential targets within potential offenders' activity spaces; the latter are often anchored by nodes such as residence, work and recreation locations [9]. It further suggests that locations adjacent to activity spaces will be entered when the potential offender seeks additional potential targets. Land use becomes relevant because it is a broader environmental back cloth against which these dynamics operate. Crime pattern theory assumes that offenders are simultaneously sensitive to both spatial and temporal variations in risks [101] and opportunities [69, 81].

Ways the perspective may be useful

Reports in the popular press have described how both vandals and burglars seeking valuable scrap metals target unoccupied homes in suburban communities [41]. Crime pattern theory is useful insofar as it offers specific predictions about the abandoned locations most likely to be chosen by vandals and burglars. This perspective draws attention to the geographic *positioning* of unoccupied houses, rather than the UR itself. Some examples follow.

(1) A dense cluster of abandoned houses is more likely to draw scrap metal burglars than are the same number of abandoned houses spread out over a greater area. The cluster presents more of a lure. The cluster also presents a location where the density of people keeping a watch on empty houses is lower. Research suggests burglars are sensitive to surveillance opportunities [7, 12].

(2) Burglars put a premium on moving into an area quickly and moving out equally quickly, while maximizing gain from their forays [82, 99]. Foreclosed or abandoned houses closer to high volume traffic routes are more likely to be attacked either by vandals or burglars. Foreclosed or abandoned houses deeper in the neighborhood and farther away from high-volume traffic routes are probably less likely to be targeted [6, 46]. Unoccupied houses in neighborhoods with less permeable neighborhood boundaries are probably at less risk of burglary or vandalism from those outside the neighborhood [113, 115].

(3) Earlier work on suburban home burglary has confirmed that burglars are sensitive to the relationship between the targeted house and other nearby houses which might hold people

watching what the offender does [13, 12]. Information about layout plans and occupation patterns can help create target risk profiles.

Putting this last point more generally, crime pattern theory can help law enforcement and prevention partnerships better allocate resources and watchfulness in a situation where a large number of unoccupied houses may draw burglars or vandals. Simple point mapping of unoccupied homes on map layers clearly describing the different capacities of the road system, regularly updated, combined with some guidelines about the determinants of target attractiveness may be sufficient to help both law enforcement and preventive partnerships allocate efforts both across communities and even within communities.

Second, crime pattern theory, at least as it applies to burglary, places a premium on offender knowledge [109]. That knowledge helps to explain both burglary repeat victimization patterns and burglary near-repeat victimization patterns. Therefore, in addition to the information mentioned in the above paragraph, additional information about the timing and location of burglarized and vandalized abandoned homes can help create a rolling risk profile for nearby communities hosting sizable or increasing numbers of unoccupied homes but where burglary or vandalism rates have not yet accelerated. This too, will help more closely target community-based or co-produced prevention efforts.

*Ways the perspective may not be useful*

To my (admittedly limited) knowledge, the applicability of crime pattern theory to a situation where target density is rapidly increasing in unpredictable ways is not yet known. Most of the studies using crime pattern theory and addressing property crimes have assumed a relatively constant or only slowly changing environmental back cloth. Rapidly increasing URs in some areas may represent a challenge to this model. How vigilant are potential offenders in keeping track of increasing numbers of abandoned or foreclosed homes in their vicinity, i.e., intersecting with their activity spaces or awareness spaces? I know of no work specifically addressing this question.

#### Social Disorganization Theory / Collective Efficacy Theory

Social disorganization theory and collective efficacy theory are addressed together. They both rely upon the same underlying dynamic. The many complexities, questions, and strengths of this theoretical perspective are not considered here [57, 108]. Each assumes that key community demographic features make it more or less likely that there will be strong local social networks and/or strong cohesiveness among residents, and each assumes that these social dynamics will lead to more or less willingness to intervene in situations where community norms of acceptable behavior are being flouted; those local social variations then link to variations in both offending and victimization rates. Classic social disorganization theory anticipates that willingness to intervene shapes subsequent delinquency prevalence and incidence rates [92] but may be less applicable to serious crime [17]. Newer versions of the theory have nonetheless expanded to consider offending and victimization rates [17, 89]. Further, as mentioned above collective efficacy theory treats internal social dynamics and the ability to leverage extra resources as



closely covarying even though these are distinct levels of informal control. Substantial neighborhood work, by contrast, suggests public control may not be closely linked to intra-neighborhood, secondary control capabilities.

*Ways the perspective may be useful*

Social disorganization theories, since they are at heart ecological theories [50], highlight the critical importance of rapid community changes [16]. Thus, this perspective may prove particularly useful in a time of rapidly changing community fabrics arising from marked local and national economic shifts.

Second, the theory directs attention to specific features of community demographic structure that make it more or less likely that residents will be willing to intervene. More specifically, generally these models assume that low SES, unstable, racially or ethnically heterogeneous, or primarily minority occupied communities are the least likely to demonstrate strong willingness to intervene [17, 61]. There is mixed empirical quantitative support for these expected connections depending on the community element in question [79]. Nonetheless, to some degree background easily-obtainable demographic information could be used to better target communities at risk and in need of more prevention services, law-enforcement or third-party policing [65] around housing issues. Given two communities, both experiencing comparable rapidly increasing URs, this perspective suggests which of those communities will be more likely to experience increased crime problems because of weaker internal capacities to mount informal small group [52] or more organized collective prevention activities [87].

Demographic structure, of course, connects only weakly with actual internal capacities, but at least it provides a non-random way to allocate resources if the latter are scarce.

*Ways the perspective may not be useful*

In its classical form the social disorganization model has been embedded within a particular understanding of urban growth dynamics now recognized as most historically appropriate for the first half of the 20th century [15, 16]. If we are thinking about metropolitan areas or suburban locations more generally that embedding is probably no longer appropriate.

What is needed is a model recognizing that most metropolitan areas in the US currently are highly differentiated poly-nucleated structures [44, 45]. Suburban communities currently experiencing distress due to high foreclosure rates are nested within and shaped by those complex structures. Rethinking may be needed about how a specific suburban community's risks reflect its position within that broader structure. This is part of what the "Camden syndrome" is about [96].

For example, in 1990, among the 27 largest metropolitan areas, Charlotte's suburban poverty levels were closest to the poverty levels observed in corresponding central cities [62]. In other words, the way this MSA was organized economically *before* the housing crisis made the suburban communities' poverty rates more closely match those seen in the central city of the MSA. I do not know enough about this locale to offer a guess about why that might be true.

What this finding does suggest, however, is that the seeds of Charlotte's very intense mortgage foreclosure crisis [11] were nested in part within the unfolding structure of this MSA

over the last 20 years. If our focus is on understanding differential risk of crime and related outcomes due to high URs across MSAs, the social disorganization/collective efficacy model is of little use. Elaborations of the social disorganization/collective efficacy model are needed to clarify how such contextual variations affect local capacities across MSAs. Stronger integration with the regional science work is needed.

Also limiting this model's utility is its emphasis on endogenous social dynamics. Debates about whether local social capacities can be built with the assistance of outsiders, or must rely solely on local native talent date back to the beginning of the 20th century and differing views about the settlement house movement [18]. If the long-term viability of local social dynamics does depend primarily upon local residents and leaders, then this would suggest that efforts to build community policing partnerships geared to enhancing social capital and thereby crime prevention capabilities may prove fruitless.

Finally, and this is not a limitation but rather a question: the spatial scale of the dynamics described by social disorganization/collective efficacy may not be appropriate for units of analysis above the community level. The social dynamics described may be outweighed by other dynamics when MSAs are the unit of analysis.

### Routine Activity Theory and Related Territorial Concerns

Routine activity theory (RAT), like the incivility thesis and like social disorganization/collective efficacy, comes in many different variations. The model idea has been

progressively elaborated over the last quarter-century. Some versions of this theory apply to national trends [22]. Others suggest the theory only applies to crime situation dynamics that are a matter of seconds and feet [26].

These disagreements aside, core concepts in RAT include: volume of motivated nearby potential offenders, intensity and proximity of valuable targets, the absence of capable guardians, and, in recent elaborations [31], place managers and intimate handlers who can control potential offenders.

*Ways the perspective may be useful*

Routine activities theory proves helpful in several ways for thinking about impacts associated with high URs. To start with the obvious point, unoccupied homes and the surrounding grounds have no capable guardians.

If multiple nearby targets are under consideration, then we could say a place like a street block now has fewer place managers. The place manager idea incorporated into RAT has its origin within territorial models. In the framework of human territorial functioning a significant gap in the overlapping geographies of resident-based control has been created [102: 320]. RAT tells us this is inherently problematic. RAT, in contrast to the incivilities thesis, does not care about what the house or the grounds look like as long as those conditions are unrelated to target attractiveness. What's important is that there is someone inside.

RAT and territorial functioning both, therefore, suggest a simple policy prescription for preventing increasing crime in the context of increasing URs. Have someone responsible live in the property. The incivilities thesis would add – and take care of the surrounding grounds.

Second, RAT like crime pattern theory suggests clustering of attractive targets may prove relevant. If there are several unoccupied homes close together all of which can provide some aluminum and copper to a foraging burglar, suddenly each home becomes somewhat more attractive. So we are directed again to the spatial relationship between potential targets, i.e. unoccupied homes. The prevention implication is that agencies and community organizations will want to survey more carefully and organize their activities more closely around clusters of unoccupied homes rather than widely separated ones.

Third, if adjoining renting or homeowners residents are viewed as potential place managers, RAT sensitizes us to daily migration patterns within communities. A neighborhood with more mothers or fathers staying home to watch small children is at less risk of increasing vandalism or burglary than another neighborhood which empties out during the day because of dual income earning households, even though the number or density of unoccupied properties may be comparable across the two communities.

*Ways the perspective may not be useful*

RAT is fundamentally about a three-way relationship: if there are lots of potential offenders nearby, and if there are lots of attractive targets, and if capable guardians are scarce, then under these conditions crime rates will be higher. Thinking about how to translate this

contingent relationship into a workable policy and practice framework for preventive partnerships or for law enforcement personnel presents considerable complexity. Thinking about solid indicators for each concept with acceptable construct validity rather than rough proxies has been and continues to be problematic for this theory.

### Race-Based Models of Neighborhood Preservation and Change

Substantial research considering rapid urban neighborhood change has highlighted the importance of racial residential patterns, segregation patterns, prejudice, and tolerance for diversity [33, 63, 66, 117]. This literature is enormously complex. One general finding emerging from this work, however, is that there is no one racial tipping point [38, 37, 91, 97, 114]. Rather, different people have different sensitivities and different contexts can shape those sensitivities.

In general the suburban poverty work suggests as noted above that white flight is unlikely to drive the differential growth of poverty in suburban locations. Rather, proximity to the core city in the MSA and differential capital circulation patterns are probably more relevant. I am not saying that racial or cultural dynamics are completely irrelevant; rather, given the structure of the current crisis, racial and ethnic issues may be less prominent than they have been historically.

### Sense of Community/Attachment to Place/Defended Neighborhood Models

Communities where residents share a stronger sense of cohesion and a stronger attachment to the locale in general are likely to be more stable neighborhoods [54, 93]. Stability feeds attachment and attachment in turn feeds stability [84]. Although attachment and stability

can create political insularity [24] they also create high density webs of local knowledge and awareness of local events [39]. The implication for prevention is that in highly attached communities, groups of residents are more likely to respond more quickly to increasing URs, more likely to take collective action, and will be more effective partners with public agencies which can provide them with information about current and future foreclosure locations.

### **Implications for Research Agenda Setting**

The various models reviewed represent some of the most widely used for understanding community crime differentials. Community is used loosely here to mean anything from street blocks to MSAs. It appears that no one model would be a better guide than another for thinking about how to prevent increasing crime, how to encourage the most effective community crime prevention, or how to structure the most effective partnerships to co-produce public safety. All models have substantial deficiencies. The current foreclosure crisis may represent in its pacing and spatial patterning a substantial challenge to several of them. Only models securely grounded in an ecological framework seem designed from the ground up for modeling impacts and responses to such challenges.

But even these frameworks are lacking in some ways. Most importantly, all of these models save for the political economy one are inadequately connected with current scholarship on the growth of suburban poverty and the connections between economics and MSA structures. Both these latter streams of scholarship point up key themes of contextual variation and historicity.

One idea presented in the suburban poverty work is the Camden syndrome. This idea highlights the importance of circulating capital pattern differentials and downplays the importance of who is moving in versus out or who is moving where. This idea seems particularly relevant to the current mortgage crisis and the attendant rapid shifts in URs and (potentially) crime rates. It will be a challenge to integrate these ideas with the more micro level dynamics more familiar to most communities and crime researchers. The integration is essential, however, if we wish to be able to provide policy guidance to various officials and agencies whose responsibilities may range from a state or metropolitan area to a municipality to a community.

The incompleteness of all the considered models aside, however, there is one obvious but perhaps critical point on which several theories seem to agree: there may be some communities whose safety would benefit substantially were it possible to keep foreclosed or pre-foreclosed but abandoned properties occupied and perhaps maintained. The occupants could be original owners or other responsible householders. Is this feasible to pursue as a policy intervention point? Structuring such a policy, were it pursued, would need to give careful attention to the differential community stabilization and safety benefits likely to be generated by such occupancy and target post-abandonment or post-foreclosure sites carefully. Crime pattern theory, RAT and territorial models all strongly endorse such a notion.

Finally, the timing of this suburban crisis follows by about two years a significant retrospective on the work of Herbert Gans [110]. Gans made many contributions to sociology, planning and other disciplines. He was ahead of his time in wanting to learn more about suburbs



[40]. Gans' seminal contribution to suburban sociology, the Levittowners, proved so informative because it was based on careful ethnographic observation [68]. Understanding how the current mortgage crisis and attendant high URs may link to local organizing efforts, to offending patterns, to co-produced safety, and to potential neighborhood instability may require not only substantial work with archival records and resident-based surveys, but also ethnographies carried out in a range of MSAs and a range of communities. Given that the cratering of the economy is likely to continue for some time, and the consequences emerging from that to continue for even longer, now is probably an opportune time to plan how to do the research to understand what is happening; only if we do this can we most effectively prevent the most adverse consequences.

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