The Spearhead: Assessing Gangs and Community Vulnerability to Gang Infiltration

by

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Abstract

There is an increasing amount of literature detailing how gangs coopt communities. Gangs often seek to infiltrate communities for the purpose of expanding criminal markets or creating safe-havens for other gang-related activities. Despite the problems created for the residents of these gang-infiltrated areas, community infiltration by gangs can also produce damage at the nation-state level. Protracted gang infiltration has been shown to erode the sovereignty and stability of nation-states. Despite the increasing awareness of the gang threat to communities, there is no empirically valid method of assessing community vulnerability to gang infiltration. This study attempts to create an empirically valid method of assessing community vulnerability that can be used as an early risk indicator. The Community Vulnerability Index is designed to be used as a standardized metric by which community activists, law enforcement or political leaders can accurately measure the level of vulnerability that exist in various communities. The Community Vulnerability Index can also be used to evaluate community re-building efforts.

Introduction to the Problem

Communities are an important aspect of social life and essential to the quality of life of individual citizens. The community is a place where social networks are formed and where interactions with others help foster a sense of social identity for all its members. As a site of social and individual development, the community is perhaps a particularly important space for juveniles, one where juveniles are exposed to different situations that require them to make choices (Kelly & Anderson, 2012) and ultimately form their character by acting on those choices.

Gangs have infiltrated neighborhoods as a means of securing territory for many decades. Once inside a neighborhood gangs act as a spearhead for, many negative outcomes impacts, including violence and the overall degradation of the community seem to follow. Several gang researchers (Kelley, 2010; Hagedorn, 2008; Curry & Spergel, 1997) have examined the role of gangs in the community. Some researchers (Burbidge, 1994) have even attempted to curb gang violence by taking an inclusive perspective and attempting to include gang members in developing solutions to community problems.

Despite our awareness of the negative impact of gang infiltration on communities, there is no empirical method of accessing community vulnerability to gang infiltration. In this paper, we contend that without some means of determining the vulnerability level of a location, it is impossible to create preventative measure that may assist local residents in their attempts to repel gang infiltration. Additionally, it is more difficult to adequately assess community re-building efforts without having a means of determining the impact of intervention strategies. Identifying a community's vulnerability to gangs and gang violence thus requires an examination of those factors contributing to the health of particular neighborhoods.

Healthy Communities and Crime

The relationship between crime and community is by now axiomatic in the criminological literature. Since the earliest studies of social disorganization by Shaw and McKay (1942), a large body of empirical research has focused on the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and crime. Findings consistently demonstrate several physical and social characteristics of a neighborhood that contribute to an increased probability of crime and thus affect the safety and security of individuals within a given neighborhood. The physical environment, the way in which people interact, share common goals and values, and trust one another are all associated with levels of crime and violence in a neighborhood. The level of criminality in any given neighborhood, it seems, is highly reflective of the social health of a community. A strong indicator of both social health and crime is physical disorder.

Perhaps the most well-known theory addressing the relationship between physical disorder and crime is the "broken windows" theory developed by Wilson and Kelling (1982). This theory suggests that even the smallest acts of deviance and social disorder, such as uncollected garbage, graffiti, and loitering, will, if ignored, lead to more serious crimes in any given neighborhood. In short, it is physical disorder that makes a community vulnerable to crime and violence.

According to Wilson and Kelling (1982) signs of physical disorder send out messages about resident's investment in a neighborhood. Signs such as graffiti signal to potential offenders that local residents are not invested in the community and would be unlikely to intervene in or report any crime. In short, it is physical disorder that signals the vulnerability of a community. Preventing neighborhood crime under a broken windows model requires a focus on small forms of physical disorder to keep larger forms of disorder,

such as crime, from occurring.

The focus on improving the quality of life, or well-being, of residents in a neighborhood is an important aspect of this theory. Proponents argue that in removing signs of physical disorder, a number of positive outcomes will emerge including residents feeling safer, happier, and physically healthier. In addition, businesses are more likely to move into neighborhoods adding to the economic development of neighborhoods - a development that would arguably assist in fostering the social support needed for the development of a healthy community.

The broken windows theory of crime is arguably the most popular theory guiding much criminal justice practice, yet the theory has been widely criticized for ignoring the underlying social factors that weaken a communities ability to informally control forms of disorder (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). A substantial body of literature offering insights into the particular social forces and mechanisms that both support healthy neighborhoods and thus obstruct the development of negative neighborhood conditions, including crime, has emerged in recent years. Studies on social cohesion (Hirschfield & Bowers, 1997; Uchida, Swatt, Solomon, & Varano, 2013) and collective efficacy (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Pratt and Cullen, 2005; Sampson 2013), in particular, have shown great promise in identifying the particular mechanisms protecting vulnerable communities from crime.

Studies (Hirschfield & Bowers, 1997; Uchida, Swatt, Solomon, & Varano, 2013) have found a significant correlations between crime and social cohesion. Social cohesion is defined in terms of the solidarity of a community or as the ties that bind members of a particular geographic or social location. No matter the conceptualization, the emphasis of social cohesion is often on shared values and to "an emotional and social investment in a neighborhood and sense of shared destiny among residents" (Uchida et.al, 2013: 2). While there is no one accepted definition, Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2129) provide a useful summary of the domains of social cohesion:

* Communities with common values and a civic culture,
* Communities with social order and social control,
* Communities with social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities,
* Communities with social networks and social capital,
* Communities with "place attachment" and identity.

An integral feature of community cohesion is a sense of belonging. As Uchida and colleagues note, "this sense of belonging comes from an increased emotional, social, and economic investment into the neighborhood – areas where people own homes, send their kids to local schools, and "put down roots" tend to have higher social cohesion" (2013: 3).

In neighborhoods with high social cohesion, residents know one other and interact forming strong social bonds. They may share the same church, their children may attend the same schools, frequent the same local businesses, and they may make use of the same recreational areas - all lending to stronger connections among residents and ties to the

neighborhood as a whole. In neighborhoods where individuals know one another, they are more likely to trust other residents leading to a sense of belonging. The shared connections leads to an overall sense of shared identity further fueling a sense of inclusion and bond to a neighborhood (Uchida et.al, 2013).

Residents who live in high crime areas are more likely to lack the social ties necessary for the development of healthy communities (Oliver & Mandelberg, 2000; Laurence & Heath, 2008). In neighborhoods with low social cohesion, residents appear to be more anxious and fearful, to lack trust in their neighbors, and to be suspicious toward out-groups in general (Laurence & Heath, 2008). High levels of crime in a neighborhood can exaggerate residents feelings of fear - feelings that undermine the trust required to build the vital neighborhood connections central to the social cohesion of a community (Oliver & Mandelberg, 2000). While social cohesion is an important guard against gang infiltration, communities also need a sense of collective efficacy.

While the positive social connections and feelings residents associate with their neighborhoods is certainly important to the development of healthy communities, scholars have also noted that communities differ in their capacity to create and enforce pro-social behaviors (Bursik, 1988; Morenoff, Sampson & Raudenbush, 2001; Warner, 2007). In order to identify the mechanisms that both inhibit the development of negative neighborhood conditions and promote healthier communities, considerable attention has been given to the concept of collective efficacy. As Sampson (20014) notes, "collective efficacy captures the link between cohesion, especially working trust, and shared expectations for action." (108). Research on collective efficacy and the role it plays in protecting vulnerable communities against crime continues to accumulate and suggests that collective efficacy might have stronger effects on crime than many traditional social structure variables (Sampson, 2012).

Collective efficacy is defined as the cooperative ability of residents to produce social actions to meet common objectives and maintain shared values (Uchida et.al, 2013). Collective efficacy includes not only a sense of trust and belonging, but also a working trust among residents and the willingness to intervene to achieve social control. Researchers of collective efficacy stress the importance of not only identifying the existence of social connections and trust, but also how residents generate and maintain vital social connections and trust in their communities (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Sampson, 2013).

In neighborhoods with high collective efficacy, residents participate in a variety of ways. Residents are directly involved in identifying public safety concerns and priorities and work with local institutions and organizations to create positive outcomes. They might volunteer with local organization, attend local council meetings, or directly intervene when trouble occurs in a neighborhood. The key to collective efficacy is participation and community agency - taking responsibility and engaging in activities that directly lead to healthy alternatives.

While the focus of collective efficacy is often on direct resident action and trust between community residents, high collective efficacy also requires that residents feel they have the

capacity to act and trust in local institutions. This means that local organization and institutions are also responsive to the needs of the community. In neighborhoods where residents feel their voices are heard and that concerns are taken seriously, they are more likely to feel safe and secure in the knowledge that they do indeed belong to a larger community (Loader, 2006). While prosocial processes such as collective efficacy and social cohesion can help create a more stable environment, not all communities have these qualities. For communities that lack the necessary safeguards, gangs have the ability to infiltrate communities and create substantial problems for the residents who live there.

Gangs in the Community Context

When gangs are introduced into a community, the dynamics of the community are changed in a variety of ways. Research (Katz, Webb & Armstrong; 2003) suggests that while the fear of gangs has been increasing over that past several years, policy-makers are only now beginning to consider the cost to the community. Fear of gangs may be increasingly prevalent due to the types of disruptions created by gangs in the community. The relationship between gangs and crime is well-documented. The 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment estimates that gangs commit an average of 48% of the crime in communities around the United States and as much as 90% in some locations (FBI, 2011). While crime may be the most obvious disruption to the community, it is hardly singular. Gangs also add to public disorder by engaging in behaviors such as drinking, harassment and drug dealing, which adds to a community's fear of crime (Vogel & Torres, 1998). These gang-induced community disruptions have the ability to not only harm the lives of residents but may also lead to more complex problems such as sovereignty loss.

Some scholars (Hazen, 2010; Manwaring, 2007) have discussed the ability of gangs to substantially harm sovereignty of the nation-state. While not all scholars (Hazen, 2010) believe that most gangs have the ability to directly challenge nation-state sovereignty, there is a growing understanding of the subtle process by which gangs can damage nation-state sovereignty. Essentially, sovereignty is the ability to command the allegiance of citizens (Niezen, 2003: 198) and can be achieved simply through the use of force (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 98). Manwaring's (2007) research discussed the process by which gangs subvert loyalty to the nation-state by replacing the government as the legitimate authority in impoverished locations. A high degree of collective efficacy in a community makes it more difficult for a gang to supplant legitimate authority due to pre-existing relationships between the community and local political officials. The community-political partnerships are the catalyst that make various community-based projects possible.

Gangs have the ability to infiltrate a community and provide job opportunities through illegal drug sales and other financial crimes while simultaneously imposing its own form of governance; most notably seen in the "Stop Snitching" campaigns started in urban areas across the United States. Ultimately, it is possible for community residents to become more reliant on and fearful of gangs than the government. It may be more accurate to refer

to this process as sovereignty conversion. This sovereignty conversion may also be exacerbated by feelings of alienation, neglect of animosity toward mainstream society. The community can be seen as an ungoverned space.

Some scholars (Preston, Carr-Stewart & Bruno, 2012; Sobel & Osoba, 2009) not only point to social marginalization as a catalyst for gang growth but also conceptualize gangs as the result of community dysfunction and violence. The increased gang membership in-turn generates more violence in the community (Sobel & Osoba, 2009). The community becomes trapped in a vicious cycle of gangs and violence especially once additional gangs form as protective measure against preexisting gangs. In situations where communities have multiple gangs, the violence increases in relation to rival groups in neighboring communities (Tita & Radil, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Many forms of criminality and violence, including gang violence, appear to thrive in neighborhoods beset by physical neglect, social isolation, and powerlessness. Traditional community-based intervention strategies, such as those based on Broken Windows Theory, tend to focus on obvious signs of social disorganization as the primary indicator of community dysfunction. However, this analysis uses collective efficacy as a theoretical framework in which to situate the Community Vulnerability index. Understanding the role community vulnerability plays in the proliferation of gangs and gang violence requires criminal justice agents to not only focus on identifying and targeting the signs of physical disorder, but also to identify threats to the social cohesion and collective efficacy in neighborhood. By including a focus on the social cohesion and collective efficacy of a neighborhood and the underlying dynamics making certain communities more vulnerable to gangs, agencies will be better equipped to develop meaningful prevention efforts.

Methodology

The format for the Community Vulnerability Index (CVI) combines both individual and structural level measures in the same instrument. This multilevel composition was necessary to capture the impact of both resident perceptions and structural-level indicators of social cohesion and collective efficacy. The CVI contains a Community Perception Scale, a Defiant Individualism Index, a Collective Efficacy scale, Structural Weight Matrix and demographic questions. The first component is the CVI is a Community Perception Scale.

The Community Perception Survey is comprised of 15 questions: a 10-question scale and 5 demographic questions. The survey contains a 10-question community perception scale which is designed to assess an individual's perception of structural inequality within their community. The residents' perceptions of marginalization, mistreatment or disadvantage may play an important role in the resistance or acquiesce to gangs having the ability to successfully take over a community. The community perception scale is comprised

of 10 questions coded on a 3-point Likert scale. The range of the scale is from 10, having a low perception of structural inequality to 30 having the highest perception of structural inequality (See Appendix-A). The second step in the community vulnerability assessment is to weight the mean perception scores by the structural indicators that have been found to correlate with reduced collective efficacy.

The CVI differs from other multilevel analyses in that individual-level predictors are not conceptualized as nested components of structural locations. The CVI assumes a true symbiotic relationship between resident perception and structural indicators of poverty, crime and gang presence. The symbiotic measure was created by examining T-DNA Binary Vectors found in Botany; which provide a method of creating new strains of plants. The CVI uses a similar procedure to mathematically combine resident perception of the community with the structural indicators of reduced collective efficacy. The mean perception score functions as a scalar to the structural inequality vector.

The mean community perception score is subjected to a binary weighting process for Poverty Rate (v), Crime Rate (c) and Gang Presences (g). The analysis weights the Mean Perception Score (p) either by 0 or a proprietary value, depending on whether or not the community meets the structural inequality threshold for each of the three structural inequality factors. In cases where mean perception scores are highly skewed (Sd > 3.000), the median perception score will be used. For example, if the community has a Poverty Rate (v) at or above the national average, the mean perception score for that community is weighted (x 1.1). If the poverty rate is below the national average, the perception mean score is weighted (x 0). This same weighting process is computed for Crime Rate and Gang Presence. The following structural weights will be applied to the mean perception score:

Community Poverty Rate (v) > national average = x [1.1]

Community Crime Rate (c) > national average = x [1.5]

Community Gang Presence (g) = x [2]

The structural inequality weights progress in order of the factors that may have greater impact on creating community vulnerability. While poverty has been shown to impact community efficacy, crime presents a greater strain by introducing harmful elements and activities into the closed system of the community. The presence of gangs has the highest weight simply because it represents the introduction of the specific entity that would ultimately seek to subvert the community. Neighborhood that already have gangs are

therefore conceptualized as having a higher vulnerability. The following formula produces a scale with a range from 10, having the least vulnerability to gang infiltration to 99, having the greatest vulnerability to gang infiltration:

box here

Discussion and Recommendation

The Community Vulnerability Index's (CVI) weighting system allows researchers to examine the impact of individual-level perceptions within the structural community context not as nested correlations but as a symbiotic binary vector. The community vulnerability index (CVI) is a multi-level assessment tool specifically designed in to that it measures both structural and individual factors simultaneously. The Community Vulnerability Index's (CVI) weighting system allows researchers to examine the impact of individual-level perceptions within the structural community context not as nested correlations but as a symbiotic binary vector. However, the CVI does not use the traditional nesting methodology whereby individual correlations are then correlated to structural locations. CVI uses the community perception score and the structural inequality weights as a co-terminus binary vector. It is important to remember that traditional multi-level modeling can still be conducted using the CVI scores in that the CVI scores, once computed, could then be correlated various locations. The CVI also provides a mathematical comparative function.

There are several applications for the Community Vulnerability Index (CVI) which could help reduce the ability of gangs to infiltrate local communities and effectively create strongholds of crime. The CVI score could be used to determine the effect size of the vulnerability by using a statistical test such as Cohen's d. This would effectively allow researchers to determine the difference, in standard deviations, between various communities located in the same jurisdiction of anywhere in the nation.

The CVI could be used as a pre-planning assessment instrument. Community activists, law enforcement and other public administrators could use the CVI to assess areas where more immediate intervention was required within their respective jurisdictions. By having a standardized empirical measure of community vulnerability, public administrators could focus on areas that had higher degrees of vulnerability in order to achieve greatest impact of their recovery effort. Having an empirical foundation from which to begin recovery efforts can greatly improve the success of community-based intervention. While the CVI can be used effectively as a pre-planning assessment instrument, it may be even more useful as an

evaluative tool.

   Once community rebuilding efforts are completed, it is imperative that community leaders and public administrators be able to accurately assess whether or not various interventions have been successful. The Community Vulnerability Index (CVI) contains a variety of measure that address most of the salient change-issues found in at-risk communities. Using the CVI in this way would allow researchers, public leaders and community activists a means of evaluating the impact of their respective community interventions. It would also be possible to correlate funding to objective program outcomes because there would be an easy to use, empirically valid, standardized way to assess change within the community. The CVI represents an incremental step toward more scientific study of the community.

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APPENDIX-1

Community Vulnerability Index

The following survey is designed to measure people's feelings about life in their community. You do not have to answer these questions unless you choose to. There is no penalty for not answering these questions. If you choose to answer these questions your answers will be completely secret and you may stop answering question anytime you wish. If you have any questions or concerns about the survey, please ask for help from the researcher. Thanks you.

Community Perception

1a.   The police response time to this community is about the same as it is in other communities.

__Agree ___About the same as other neighborhoods ___Disagree

2a.   The city leaders' response to problems in this community is about the same as it is in other communities.

__Agree ___About the same as other neighborhoods ___Disagree

3a.   The police understand the people in this community.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

4a.   The community leaders understand the people in this community.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

5a.   The police are concerned about the well-being of the people in this community.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

6a.   The city leaders are concerned about the well-being of the people in this community.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

7a.   People in this community have similar job opportunities as people in other communities.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

8a.   People in this community have access to the same emergency health care as people in other communities.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

9a.   People in this community have access to the same preventative health care as those in other communities.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

10a. People in this community have the same ability to be elected to public office as people in other communities.

___Agree ___Somewhat Agree ___Disagree

DII- Baseline
11b.   A person should be strong enough to take back money when friends won't pay it back.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

12b.   The amount of conflict you handle shows how strong you are.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

13b.   If someone looks at you too long, you should confront them
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

14b.   If a person who stares at you is challenging you.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

15b.   You should be willing to help a true friend get back at an enemy.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

16b.   Hanging out with weak people will hurt your reputation.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

17b.   If people think you are weak, you will have more problems.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

18b.   You should not give information about anything to the police.
__Strongly Agree __Agree __Disagree __Strongly Disagree

Collective Efficacy

19c.   How likely would you be to correct a child who is misbehaving in your community?
___Very Likely ___Somewhat Likely ___Not Likely

20c.   How likely would you be to call the police on a person who is committing a crime in your community?
___Very Likely ___Somewhat Likely ___Not Likely

21c.   How likely would you be to try and stop a person from committing a crime in your community?
___Very Likely ___Somewhat Likely ___Not Likely

22c. How likely would you be to attend neighborhood planning meetings in your community?

___Very Likely ___Somewhat Likely ___Not Likely

23c. How likely would you be to volunteer on service projects in your community?

___Very Likely ___Somewhat Likely ___Not Likely

24c. How concerned are you about juvenile delinquency in your neighborhood?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

25c. How concerned are you about burglaries in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

26c. How concerned are you about larceny (Theft) in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

27c. How concerned are you about car theft in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

28c. How concerned are you about robbery in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

29c. How concerned are you about assault in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

30c. How concerned are you about shootings in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

31c. How concerned are you about drugs in your community?

___Very concerned ___Somewhat concerned ___Not concerned

32c.   How concerned are you about gangs in your community?

___Very concerned   ___Somewhat concerned   ___Not concerned

Demographics

33d. **Age**_____

34d. **Total years of education** _____
 (HS Diploma= 12. BA Degree= 16)

35d.   **Ethnicity**
___ Asian
___ Black/ African American
___ Hispanic
___ White
___ Other

36d. **Sex**
___Female
___Male

37d.   **Marital status**
___Married
___Single (Never married)
___Co-habituating
___Divorced
___ Other

38d.   **Number of Children** _____

39d. **Total Household Income**

___Less than 10,000	___50,001 - 60,000	___100,001 - 110,000
___10,000 - 20,000	___60,001 - 70,000	___110,001 - 120,000
___20,001 - 30,000	___70,001 - 80,000	__120,001 - 130,000
__30,001 - 40,000	__80,001-90,000	___130,001 - 140,000
__40,001 - 50,000	__90,001 - 100,000	___140,001 - Above

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