National Institute of Justice
R e s e a r c h   P r e v i e w

June 1999

Attitudes Toward Crime, Police, and the Law: Individual and Neighborhood Differences

Summary of research by Robert J. Sampson and Dawn Jeglum Bartusch

Fifty years ago, criminologists argued that traditions of delinquency and crime were powerful forces in some communities but were only a part of the community's system of largely conventional values. Recently, ethnographic studies of urban neighborhoods in New York and Philadelphia suggest that in certain disadvantaged communities, conventional values clash with a "street culture" in which crime, disorder, and drug use are accepted. However, national surveys have generally shown no difference among social classes, races, and ethnic groups in their attitudes toward violence. What explains the discrepancy?

The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) examines human development in its neighborhood context. Racial and ethnic differences in attitudes toward social deviance, the police, and the law were studied in 343 urban neighborhoods in Chicago. The neighborhood context is important in understanding differences in attitudes toward crime and the law. The study revealed that blacks and Latinos are less tolerant of deviance (including violence) by teenagers than whites. Yet, residents of economically disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to tolerate smoking, drinking, and fighting among youths and in general to feel negative toward the police and laws.

Research in Chicago neighborhoods

An ongoing research program sponsored in part by the National Institute of Justice, the PHDCN is being conducted through intensive interviews with about 6,000 children and their primary caregivers over a period of 8 years. Of particular interest is how neighborhood characteristics influence behavior, including potential delinquency, substance abuse, and violence.[1]

Chicago's long history of having distinctive neighborhoods, and its extensive class, racial, and ethnic diversity were major reasons the city was selected for the study. Neither whites, blacks, nor Latinos represent a majority of the population. The project's aspect focusing on attitudes toward violence, law, and the police used face-to-face interviews conducted in 1995 among 8,782 residents.

Teenage deviance is not tolerated

Residents were asked: "How wrong is it for teenagers around 13 years of age to a) smoke cigarettes, b) use marijuana, c) drink alcohol, and d) get into fistfights?" The questions were repeated for teenagers "around 19 years of age."

Overall, Chicago residents are rather *intolerant* of such behavior, with average responses of "very wrong" to "extremely wrong" for all questions about 13 year-olds. Even for older teenagers, residents overall are highly intolerant of social deviance (except for smoking). But broken down by racial and ethnic groups, the response dispelled common stereotypes about the link between attitudes and socio-demographics. Blacks and Latinos are significantly less tolerant of deviance than whites: 42 percent of blacks and 47 percent of Latinos show little tolerance for deviance among 13 year-olds, but only 31 percent of whites do. Most notable were the race/ethnic differences with respect to fighting, reported as "extremely wrong" by 42 percent of whites, 54 percent of blacks, and 63 percent of Latinos.

People whose socioeconomic status (SES) is low are less tolerant of deviance than those whose SES is high. Males are more tolerant than females, and younger residents are more tolerant than older residents.

Cynicism toward the law

"Legal cynicism" measures how much neighborhood residents consider laws or societal rules not binding. Residents were asked how much they agreed with such statements as: "Laws were made to be broken;" "It's okay

to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone;" and "To make money, there are no right and wrong ways anymore, only easy ways and hard ways."

Racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups differ substantially in their beliefs about the legitimacy of law. Higher proportions of blacks (29 percent) and Latinos (31 percent) than whites (19 percent) view legal norms as not binding. Residents whose SES is low are twice as likely as those whose SES is high to report high levels of "legal cynicism" (36 percent, compared to 18 percent).

Residents' attitudes about police are similar to those about the law. Blacks and Latinos and people with low SES are much less satisfied than are whites and people with high SES.

Neighborhood structure and attitudes

The neighborhood itself affects attitudes. In neighborhoods where there is poverty and instability, people are more tolerant of deviance, although not of teen fighting. At the same time, minority group members in these neighborhoods are more *intolerant* of deviance than whites are, even taking into account poverty and instability.

Perhaps most striking is the revelation of a neighborhood-based explanation for the high levels of legal cynicism and dissatisfaction with the police among blacks. Once neighborhood economic disadvantage is taken into account, blacks' views are found to be similar to whites'. Blacks appear to be more cynical toward or dissatisfied with the police only because they are more likely to live where disadvantage is concentrated. Even in neighborhoods where the rate of violent crime is high, there is no difference between the races in attitudes toward the police. Racial differences disappear when neighborhood context is considered. Thus, residents' estrangement from the police is better explained by neighborhood context than race.

A promising arena for study

If there is a system of values that tolerates deviance and violence and turns a cynical eye toward the law and agents of the justice system, it is not linked in a simple way to race. Put simply, there is no race- or ethnicity-based subculture of violence. Neighborhood context—not race—appears to be the crucial factor influencing attitudes and beliefs about crime and the law. This suggests that to design more effective crime control strategies, policymakers and agents of the criminal justice system would do well to consider the role of community social norms.

Note

1. See *Linking Community Factors and Individual Development,* by Felton Earls, Research Preview, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, September 1998 (FS000230).

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FS 000240

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