

Beyond Collective Supervision of Youth: Informal Social Control, Pro-social Investment and Delinquency in Urban Neighborhoods

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Abstract

The concentration of delinquency in certain neighborhoods represents a pervasive social inequality in the United States. Today, the distribution of urban delinquency is perhaps best described as “pockets of crime,” largely confined to urban blocks with unique characteristics (Jean 2007). An expansive amount of scholarship has addressed neighborhood responses to this persistent social issue, including collective neighborhood efforts to control rates of delinquency. It is generally accepted that to fully achieve social control of public space, neighborhoods must not only intervene in problem behavior, but must also socialize youth to avoid deviance (Bursick 1988). We currently have a strong body of research on neighborhood supervision and monitoring of delinquent behavior. Yet, we are left with a paucity of work on the association between delinquency rates and pro-social investment in youth at the neighborhood level. The purpose of this study is to begin to address these gaps in the literature by simultaneously investigating collective supervision of and pro-social investment in youth.

The data for the analyses focus on one urban area in Indianapolis spanning 92 census block groups. The dataset combines census and county court data with 603 interviews of local residents. The results of the analysis indicate that the meaning of collective supervision and investment seems to be context - specific. Areas with high levels of supervision over youth have fewer incidents of relatively moderate forms of delinquency such as truancy, underage drinking, curfew violations, etc. However, this same connection between supervision and slightly more serious offenses (i.e. misdemeanors) is only evident in neighborhoods with strong collective pro-social investment in youth. Areas with high levels of this pro-social investment also experience fewer juvenile felony charges, but these same areas are weaker in the supervision of youth behavior. Overall, the analyses indicate that neighborhoods dealing with minor delinquency among youth may be able to deal with the problem by monitoring and intervening in adolescent behavior. However, investment in youth organizations, positive intergenerational relationships, and informal mentoring may be a more effective option for neighborhoods facing more serious forms of juvenile delinquency.