

# Neighbourhood and community

## Collective efficacy and community safety



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'Community' has been prescribed for much of what allegedly ails modern society. Indeed, calls for a return to community values and neighbourhood governance are being heard from across the spectrum. Whether from politicians (on both the left and right), private foundations, real estate developers, government officials, communitarians, or social scientists, the appeals to community seem ubiquitous. Even the World Bank has jumped on the bandwagon, mining concepts of community to alleviate poverty around the globe ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

Intellectual interest in the idea of community is, of course, quaint. The very discipline of sociology was founded on the upheavals of the late 19th century widely thought to have frayed the social fabric of local communities. In the mid-20th century, Robert Nisbet (1953) noted what he called the 'ideology of lament' – a widespread concern that something has been lost in modern society, and that a return to community is in order. Yet again, Robert Putnam (2000) has bemoaned the loss of community and

decline of civic society as we enter the 21st century.

There is, however, a problem, one that presents us with a deepening array of ironies, paradoxes, and fundamental questions. For starters, the 'loss of community' thesis was wrong 100 years ago and remains so today.

For another, if community has come to mean everything good, then as a concept it loses its analytical bite and therefore means nothing. The current appropriation of community rhetoric also tends to elide connotations to the dark side of communal life, and the clear evidence that a generation of community-building efforts came up largely

empty. One might ask, what do we stand to lose by a return to community and the idea of neighbourhood governance and control – what does such a communal life potentially deny? Does the current drumbeat of community values beseech a mythical past, raising the paradox of returning to nowhere? Or to a suffocating yesterday?

Academic fashions have not helped matters either. Facile debates about globalization have blinded many social scientists and politi-

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cians to the persistence of local variation, concentration, and place stratification. We are said to live in an era of globalization that renders place irrelevant – the internet, cell phones, and planes are the coin of the global realm, not neighbourhood difference. Yet serious globalization theorists suggest that, if anything, the reverse is true. The traditional stratification of resources by place remains entrenched despite the advance of globalization. Paradoxically, in fact, inequality among neighbourhoods in life chances has increased in salience along with, and perhaps has been exacerbated by, globalization.

In short, neighbourhood and community remain important but mired in myth. In this essay I consider the nature of neighbourhoods in modern society, attempting to separate fact from fiction, and policy relevant theory from ideology. I discuss in particular the promises and perils of neighbourhood governance, with a special focus on public safety and community well being. My position is that neighbourhood and community do matter, but not for everything. I present a theory of collective efficacy and its implications for neighbourhood-based governance – what appears to work, what doesn't, and what might with proper guidance.

Before I begin a little truth in advertising is in order. My background means that much of what I say is based on research from the United States. I fear this might be a handicap for a British audience, but then again it may provide a fresh perspective that has generalizable import. I also plead guilty to radical condensation and make no claims to be comprehensive. I specifically focus my attention on policy-related ideas that are (a) tied mainly to crime and public safety, and (b) do not rely excessively on formal mechanisms of control (for example mass incarceration) that may ultimately erode the foundations of social capital and lead to the de-legitimation of government institutions in disadvantaged communities.

### Neighbourhood inequality

As way of background I think it is important to underscore the durable inequality that defines neighbourhood-level phenomena. A long history of research in the United Kingdom and United States has established a reasonably consistent set of findings relevant to the community context of crime, safety, and general well-being. I would summarise these facts as follows.

- First, there is considerable social inequality between neighbourhoods in terms of socioeconomic and racial segregation. There is also clear evidence on the connection of concentrated disadvantage with the geographic isolation of racial and ethnic minority groups.
- Second, a number of social problems tend to come bundled together at the neighbourhood level, including, but not limited to, crime, adolescent delinquency, social and physical disorder, low birthweight, infant mortality, school dropout and child maltreatment.
- Third, these two sets of clusters are themselves related – neighbourhood predictors common to many child and adolescent outcomes include the concentration of poverty, racial isolation, single-parent families, and rates of home ownership and length of tenure.
- Fourth, the ecological differentiation by factors such as social class, race, and health is a robust and apparently increasing occurrence that emerges at multiple levels of geography. The place stratification of local communities is seen for both smaller neighbourhoods and larger community areas – even cities.
- Fifth, the ecological concentration of poverty appears to have increased significantly during recent decades, as has the concentration of affluence at the upper end of the income scale.

Taken together, these findings yield an important clue in thinking about why it is that communities matter for well-being and hence public governance. If multiple and seemingly disparate outcomes are linked together empirically across communities and are predicted by similar characteristics, there may be common underlying causes or mediating mechanisms. For example, if 'neighbourhood effects' of concentrated poverty exist, presumably they stem from social processes that involve collective aspects of neighbourhood life, to which I now turn.

### Collective efficacy

Rejecting the outmoded assumption that neighbourhoods are characterized by dense, intimate, emotional bonds, I define neighbourhoods ecologically and highlight variations in the working trust and shared willingness of residents to intervene in achieving social control. The concept of neighbourhood *collective efficacy* captures the link between cohesion – especially working trust – and shared expectations for action. Just as self-efficacy is situated rather than general (one has self-efficacy relative to a particular task), a neighbourhood's efficacy exists relative to specific tasks such as maintaining public order. The key causal mechanism in collective efficacy theory is social control enacted under conditions of social trust.

Viewed through this theoretical lens, collective efficacy is a task-specific construct that draws attention to shared expectations and mutual engagement by residents in local social control. To measure the social control aspect of collective efficacy, we have asked residents about the likelihood that their neighbours could be counted on to take action under various scenarios (for example, children skipping school and hanging out on a street corner, or the fire station closest to home being threatened with budget cuts). The cohesion dimension has been measured by

items that capture local trust, willingness to help neighbours, and shared values.

Controlling for a wide range of individual and neighbourhood characteristics, including poverty and the density of friendship ties, collective efficacy directly predicts lower rates of violence (Sampson *et al* 1997). In one example, a two-standard deviation elevation in collective efficacy was associated with a 40 per cent reduction in the expected homicide rate in Chicago neighbourhoods. The link to crime holds ups even where earlier experiences of violence may have depressed collective efficacy because of fear.

Moving away from a focus on private ties, my use of the term collective efficacy is meant to signify an emphasis on shared beliefs in a neighbourhood's capability for action to achieve an intended effect, coupled with an active sense of engagement on the part of residents. Some density of social networks is essential, to be sure, especially networks rooted in social trust. But the key theoretical point is that networks have to be activated to be ultimately meaningful.

Distinguishing between the resource potential represented by personal ties, on the one hand, and the shared expectations for action among neighbours represented by collective efficacy, on the other, helps clarify the dense networks paradox. Namely, social networks foster the conditions under which collective efficacy may flourish, but they are not sufficient for the exercise of control. Thus the theoretical framework proposed here recognizes the transformed landscape of modern urban life, holding that while community efficacy may depend on working trust and social interaction, it does not require that my neighbour or the local police officer be my friend.

The natural question that follows is: What are the kinds of neighbourhood contexts and policies that promote collective efficacy? Inequality in resources matters greatly for explaining the production of collective

efficacy. Concentrated disadvantage and lack of homeownership, in particular, predict lower levels of collective efficacy. In one recent study, we showed that both initial levels of concentrated poverty and unexpected increases in poverty over the course of a 20-year period led to the erosion of collective efficacy in Chicago neighbourhoods (Sampson and Morenoff 2004), supporting the inference that collective efficacy is causally related to structural inequality. Moreover, the associations of disadvantage and housing instability with violence are significantly reduced when collective efficacy is controlled. These patterns are consistent with the inference that larger neighbourhood constraints influence violence in part through the mediating or more proximate role of collective efficacy (Sampson *et al* 1997).

Although beyond the scope of this essay, I would also argue that a strong institutional infrastructure and working trust among organizations help sustain capacity for social action in a way that transcends traditional personal ties. In other words, organizations are at least in principle able to foster collective efficacy, often through strategic networking of their own. Whether garbage removal, choosing the site of a fire station, school improvements, or police responses, a continuous stream of challenges faces modern communities, challenges that no longer can be met (if they ever were) by relying solely on individuals. Action depends on connections among organizations, connections that are not necessarily dense or reflective of the structure of personal ties in a neighbourhood. Our research supports this position, showing that the density of local organizations and voluntary associations predicts higher levels of collective efficacy, controlling for poverty and the ethnic composition of the population.

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### Governance implications

Collective efficacy theory suggests first of all that information is a tool of neighbourhood governance. The tradition has usually been for government and local organizations to hoard information that bears on evaluation. Take the area of crime, where it was not until recently that advances in computer mapping technology permitted the identification of ecological 'hot spots' of trouble. By plotting homicide incidents and using sophisticated mapping and clustering procedures, researchers have pioneered the use of 'early warning systems' that can identify neighbourhood areas at high risk for suffering a spurt of violence. By responding proactively to neighbourhoods and places that disproportionately generate crimes, intervention strategies can more efficiently stave off epidemics of violence and their spatial diffusion.

I would argue, however, for a more comprehensive and bolder strategy. To date, information technologies have been used as tools mainly and perhaps only by 'experts'—namely the police. True to the notion that collective efficacy is fundamentally a leveling process that entails civic participation, such information should not just be available to the police or researchers alone. With the rapid spread of technology, dissemination of crime data and the mapping of hot spots could, in principle, be made available to local residents and community-based organizations. If residents knew when and where incidents were occurring—in more or less real time—innovative and effective mobilization might occur in ways that go well beyond police power.

One of the things that research has taught us is that even in high crime areas, most areas are safe most of the time. Although knowledge about the realities of crime's distribution and frequency would be alarming

at first, such knowledge could ultimately lead to a sense of increased collective efficacy on the part of residents, and perhaps demands that ameliorative efforts be undertaken by the appropriate authorities. In short, mine is not simply a plea for devolution of control to neighbourhoods, but rather an argument for analytic information sharing.

A second implication for neighbourhood governance concerns visible symbols of public disorder and the viability of the so-called 'broken windows' strategy of policing. Recent research in Chicago indicates that the relationship between public disorder and crime is largely spurious (Sampson and Raudenbush 2001), undermining a major assumption of the 'zero-tolerance' policing strategies that now dominate the public agenda in many large cities around the world. If these results are right, not only is the effectiveness of disorder-based policing likely to be overstated, such policies may well lead to a crisis of legitimacy in poor, minority communities—despite the fact that these communities are desperate for crime reduction. Indeed, if concentrated disadvantage is by far the major predictor of disorder, as the data clearly suggest, then at the end of the day, policies to eradicate disorder are ultimately strategies of policing poor people.

Such a combination is potentially explosive. To the extent that trust in the police is undermined by the excessive use of force and a siege-like mentality in policing disorder (poverty?), the ability of the police to work with the local community is undermined. For example, heavy-handed attempts by police to reduce disorder through mass arrests for minor offenses, or aggressive search-and-frisk stops in the absence of probable cause, may breed cynicism among inner-city residents toward the very idea of private-public cooperation. There is mounting evidence that a strict police crackdown on minor disorder offenses may jeopardize the ability of the police to work as a partner with minority

neighbourhoods. There is also evidence that among marginalized groups in European cities, alienation from police authority undermines the ability of the community to aid in their own protection through mutual cooperation.

The perceived legitimacy of law enforcement is thus crucial, for what citizens appear to want are not fewer police, but *police of a different kind*. The evidence has long shown that more than nine in ten police-citizen encounters derive from citizen calls. This is a fact with deep implications, for it exposes the centrality of citizens as the engine of crime control. That citizens are behind the demand for police services is especially true in low-income, minority neighbourhoods where crime rates are high. Yet residents of the inner city do not want racist police, or a hierarchical form of policing from the top down that treats residents merely as passive recipients of a crackdown. The implications of collective efficacy theory for policing turn on the need to proffer innovative strategies that bear on legitimate and procedurally just partnerships.

### **From policing community to community policing**

A popular question in neighbourhood governance these days is the proper relationship between community policing and 'broken-windows' policing—are they one in the same? I think not. At least in theory, community policing emphasizes the establishment of working partnerships between the police and the community to reduce crime and enhance security. Most community policing efforts have focused their attention on co-identification of problems that lie behind crime incidents (for example drug markets; disorderly bars; abandoned housing), rather than on crime only. Although sparse, there is some evidence that community-policing efforts to help residents solve local disorder and crime problems are working in many large US cities.



Community policing is most relevant to present theoretical concerns with regard to its explicit goal of fostering greater civic involvement by residents in the social life of their neighbourhoods. One logical implication is for the police to act as a catalyst in sparking a sense of local ownership over public space and greater activation of informal social control. A key organizational tool designed to accomplish this outcome in the United States is the 'beat meeting' – regularly scheduled meetings of the police with residents of their beats, usually in local institutions with public access (for example church halls, schools). The idea is to ensure community input in the problem-solving process. Does it work? Evidence from the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy suggests that beat meetings were one of the most visible and unique features of community policing (Skogan and Hartnett 1997). The beat meeting is of particular interest because it can trigger the sort of civic involvement that has been problematic in many poor communities. In this sense I see the value of community policing not so much in cops walking the beat, but in the institutionalization of forums for input and social control by citizens.

At the same time, to the extent that the police are mistrusted in the predominantly minority communities that bear the brunt of violent crime, cooperative efforts will fail even though all residents share a desire for lower crime rates and perhaps even a latent willingness to get involved. An intriguing example of inner-city community partnerships with the police that address the problem of legitimacy is found in Boston. Although not developed under the rubric of community policing, the 'Ten Point

Coalition' was formed by a group of inner-city Boston ministers in the early 1990s to deal with a sharply increasing problem of youth violence.

A long-standing problem in the minority communities of Boston (and most cities in the United Kingdom, no doubt) was a lack of trust between the police and residents. When violence began to rise, residents faced a profound conflict—they wanted safe streets for their children but they also objected to having their sons hauled off to jail en masse. Heavy-handed police tactics (for example aggressive search and frisk procedures targeted at black males) only made matters worse. As a result, it became difficult in Boston and many other communities of concentrated disadvantage to reach a consensus on what constituted legitimate and constructive police activity.

The key to Boston's Ten Point coalition was to create what Berrien and Winship (2002) term an 'umbrella of legitimacy' for the police to work under. Rather than shut out the police, religious leaders in Boston's black community demanded change and essentially became an inter-

mediary institution between the police and the community, adjudicating between conflicting goals and providing legitimacy for proper police activities. Again, the issue turned on the assertion that inner-city residents want not fewer police, but a different kind of police. The ministers took responsibility by insisting on social order among local youth and non-abusive, non-racist methods on the part of the police; only with the latter came the former. Apparently the religious leaders had the legitimacy in the eyes of inner-city residents to lead this high-stakes effort. Evaluation of the success of the Ten Point Coalition is still ongoing, but Berrien

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and Winship (2002) make a convincing case that much of the large drop in the youth violence rate in Boston in the mid 1990s was attributable to the working partnership between the police and the public that was brokered by the local ministers.

### Constructing the 'good' community

The promise of collective efficacy theory, in my view, is that it reaffirms the importance of thinking about social ways to approach social problems. Too often our policies are reductionist in nature, looking to change or incapacitate individuals, usually in a hierarchical fashion with State controls dominant. The perspective here suggests nearly the opposite, although it is not that individuals are unimportant, or that State controls are unnecessary or necessarily unjust. Rather, my goal has been to articulate how we might enhance public safety from theoretical perspectives on community-level change, especially policies that involve government-community intersections.

Although some insights were hopefully gained, I nonetheless think it is important to caution against falling too far into the trap of local determinism. The ideal of residents joining forces in order to build community and maintain social order is largely a positive one, but what happens within neighbourhoods is shaped to large degree by extra-local social forces, the wider political economy, and citywide spatial dynamics. In addition to encouraging communities to mobilize via strategies of informal social control, strategies are needed to address the larger social-ecological changes that have battered many inner-city communities – especially the constraints imposed by resource inequality, racial segregation, and concentrated poverty. Aggressive policies to reduce concentrated poverty and encourage home ownership appear especially important.

There are also obvious limits to community, which can be drawn upon for negative as well

as positive goals. In the pursuit of informal social control, there is the danger that freedoms will be restricted unnecessarily – that individuals will face unwanted and even unjust scrutiny. For example, surveillance of 'suspicious' persons in socially controlled communities can become translated into the interrogation and profiling of racial minorities. Consider further that many a community has come together to block the residential entry of ethnic minority groups.

Furthermore, the mere existence of local institutions does not ensure that their interests coincide with that of the neighbourhood. Much effort in the area of neighbourhood governance seems to imply that we just need to get local organizations to work together to solve local problems. But in many cases organizations, such as churches, are in the neighbourhood but not of the neighbourhood (McRoberts 2003). There is good evidence, in fact, that local organizations often have as their primary goal organization survival at the expense of the wider community.

These cautionary notes suggest that we must balance concerns for the collective with a concern for the realization of truly public goods. To judge whether neighbourhood structures serve collective needs I apply the non-exclusivity requirement of a social good. I would argue that safety, clean environments, quality education for children, active maintenance of intergenerational ties, the reciprocal exchange of information and services among families, and the shared willingness to intervene on behalf of local safety all produce a social good that yields positive externalities potentially of benefit to all residents – especially children.

It seems fitting to close, then, by reflecting on the essential features that go into making the 'good' community. The good community, at least with respect to public safety, is one that is created not through marginalization, exclusion of outsiders, and the singular reliance on threat by agencies of formal control. Rather,

the good community is one where the legitimacy of social order comes in part from the mutual engagement and negotiation among residents, mediating institutions, and agencies of law enforcement. Inevitably this means we have to come to terms with constructive opportunities for conflict resolution in the production of social goods.

It is instructive to recall Albert Hirschman's (1970) classic work on the options available to persons in organizations – exit, voice, and loyalty. Residents of neighbourhoods have long employed the exit option, often depleting the social capital of abandoned areas.

Loyalty has been used as well, but often in an exclusionary manner – infamously in the case of racially defended neighbourhoods. The success of a collective efficacy approach to neighbourhood governance is tied ultimately to the equitable implementation of 'voice' in the process of building legitimate state and community authority, while at the same time redressing the durable economic and racial stratification by place that pervades modern cities. Communities are, after all, socially constructed, and so the process of constructing them should form the building block of our theories and policies ■

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