

**Residential Mobility as an Adjustment to Perceptions of  
Neighborhood Crime: The Influence of Resources and  
Opportunity among Residents in Central Cities**

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Statement of the Research Problem

As central city neighborhoods continue to change in the wake of structural and spatial transformations, social workers face greater challenges for understanding the ecological interactions between person and place. In this context, understanding the impact of exposure to a perceived environmental stressor such as neighborhood crime, and the role of adequate resources in influencing one's ability to cope is significant for social workers engaged in community practice.

The problem examined in this study relates to the consequences of spatial disadvantage which exposes individuals to environmental stressors stemming from the inequitable distribution of social and economic resources across a geographic area. From an ecological perspective, these stressors are believed to interfere with interactions between individuals and their social and physical environment. In this study, the availability and perceived adequacy of community resources is posited to influence an individual's tolerance threshold for coping with exposure to a stressor.

Research indicates the roots of urban neighborhood change are varied (see Schwirian, 1983). This study adopts a dual focus on ecological forces and perceptual forces for understanding individual decisions as one dynamic of neighborhood change. This supports the idea that neighborhood change is in fact "the consequence of large numbers of individual decisions" (Taub, Taylor, & Dunham, 1984, p. 11). Deciding whether to remain in a community or to relocate is recognized as a driving force behind neighborhood stabilization (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). The desire to move is acknowledged as a starting point for the process of psychologically disinvesting from a community (Jacobs, 1989; Skogan, 1990). In this study, the desire to move is being viewed as one alternative for coping with the environmental stressor neighborhood crime.

Research Background Questions/Hypotheses

The conceptual framework for this research rests upon the development of an Opportunity and Resource Model that integrates two key theoretical perspectives. Briefly, environmental stress theory (Wolpert, 1966) posits that person and place are connected through an ecological relationship that attempts to match needs of the individual with locational resources. A greater presence of environmental amenities over

individual demands increases one's threshold for satisfaction thereby buffering the individual from experiencing stress. A mismatch between person and place however, can escalate stress beyond an acceptable threshold level leading to a desire to move as a coping alternative.

Similarly, geography of opportunity theory (Galster & Killen, 1995) recognizes the integral role of resources available within the community to satisfy the needs of individuals. Life choices are believed to be influenced by spatial resources that serve to constrain or promote individual social and economic mobility.

### Conceptual Model

The Opportunity and Resource Model supporting this study centers primarily on the relationship between an environmental stressor and the adjustment response of the individual exposed to that stressor. We define a stressor in the model as a stimulus from the social or physical environment that has exceeded an individual's tolerance threshold, and is perceived as a threat. The model reflects the three possible adjustment responses identified by environmental stress theory: altering the needs of the individual, altering the environment, or relocating (Wolpert, 1966).

Finally, the metropolitan opportunity structure represented in the model consists of systems, markets, and institutions that are believed to influence residential environments through the availability of resources to meet individual demands. When the environment (opportunity structure) provides increased access to resources, we argue that the individual is offered more alternatives for coping. Similarly, perceptions of community resources are used in the model as subjective reflections by the respondent as to how well individual demands are met in terms of the perceived adequacy of resources within the residential environment. We posit that perceiving community resources to be adequate or satisfactory is an indication that personal needs are being met.

### Hypotheses

The overarching research question guiding this study asks: What is the effect of perceptions of community resources, individual characteristics, and social and economic characteristics of the metropolitan opportunity structure on an individual's adjustment response to an environmental stressor such as neighborhood crime?

Our conceptual model was used to generate hypotheses which assert that access to opportunities and resources serves as a buffer to protect an individual's tolerance threshold toward stimuli in the residential environment perceived to be stressful. The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Indicators of social and economic opportunity at the metropolitan-level should negatively effect the likelihood of perceiving neighborhood crime to be objectionable enough to desire to move.

2. Perceiving neighborhood conditions to be bothersome should increase the likelihood of perceiving neighborhood crime to be objectionable enough to desire to move.

3. Perceiving community services to be satisfactory should decrease the likelihood of perceiving neighborhood crime to be objectionable enough to desire to move.

### Methodology

This study is based on a cross-sectional research design using secondary data collected from the 1993 National file of the American Housing Survey (AHS), and the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The sample for the study consists of 2,967 cases located within central cities of metropolitan areas. Statistical methodology includes the use of factor analysis as a variable reduction strategy, and logistic regression to analyze the data.

The AHS is a national longitudinal sample of housing units containing indicators of housing and neighborhood quality, along with socio-demographic information on household characteristics. Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) codes were available for Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) with central city populations greater than 100,000. Contextual data, in the form of metropolitan-level variables, were extracted from the 1990 census and merged with the AHS data files.

### Sample

The sampling frame used to select cases from the American Housing Survey was constructed based upon three criteria: geographic location, interview type, and exposure to neighborhood crime. First, the study sample was limited to housing units located within central cities of metropolitan statistical areas. This decision is based upon empirical findings that report this population to be most at risk for exposure to environmental stressors stemming from the social problem of spatial disadvantage (Kasarda, 1993). The AHS identifies metropolitan areas that contain a population greater than 100,000. The sample in this study represents 99 metropolitan areas within the United States.

Second, only households completing surveys designed for "occupied homes" were included in the study. This eliminated surveys completed by respondents who indicated they "usually reside elsewhere."

Finally, since exposure to neighborhood crime is used in this study as an operational definition for the environmental stress construct, only those cases in which the respondent acknowledges that the problem of neighborhood crime exists and that s/he is bothered by it are included in the sample.

Descriptive data on sample characteristics reveal that males comprise 54% of the sample, the mean age of respondents is 44.3 years, and approximately 59% of respondents fall into the poverty status category of non-poor meaning their annual household income is greater than 200% of the poverty line. In addition, homeowners comprise 42.6% of the sample, and average length of residence in current housing unit is reported to be 9.5 years. The proportion of respondents spread across census regions is relatively even. With regard to perceptions of community resources, 27.5% of sample respondents report other people in the neighborhood as being a bothersome condition, followed by 18.9% who report noise in the neighborhood to be bothersome. Approximately 87% of respondents report being satisfied with shopping facilities in the neighborhood.

### Measures

The dependent variable in this study is referred to in brief as the respondent's desire to move, and is formally defined as perceiving the condition (stressor) neighborhood crime to be objectionable enough to desire to move. Studies on residential mobility have distinguished between the use of prospective residential mobility (i.e. a desire to move), and actual mobility as dependent variables (Speare, 1974; Landale & Guest, 1985). The use of mobility desire has been reported to be a valid indicator in predicting actual moves (Speare, 1974). It is important to note, however, that we are not interested here in measuring actual mobility, nor in directly predicting the desire to move. Instead, this study is concerned with mobility thoughts solely as an adjustment response to the environmental stressor neighborhood crime.

Three sets of predictor variables are used in the study to reflect indicators of individual characteristics, perceptions of community resources, and the metropolitan opportunity structure.

Because we draw on a number of contextual variables as indicators of the metropolitan opportunity structure, the factor analytic method of principle components analysis (PCA) was used to identify combinations of variables that reflect underlying dimensions of a similar construct or "factor." This process helps to reduce bias associated with multicollinearity. Results of the PCA reduced our contextual data from 16 variables to three factors and six unique covariates. The three extracted factors are defined as: economic stress, housing constraint, and social stability. Each of these factors contains at least three variables for meaningful interpretation (Norusis, 1994), and have factor loadings greater than 0.5 (Norusis, 1994). Together, the three factors derived from this data reduction process account for 76.6% of the total variance.

### Data Analysis

The multivariate statistical technique of logistic regression was used to analyze outcomes based upon the dichotomous dependent variable (i.e. coded desire to move/not move). Logistic regression predicts the probability that an event or condition will occur.

The analytic strategy for this study estimated a series of hierarchical logistic regression models to determine the significance of contributions from predictor variables. In addition, interaction effects for the variables race and poverty were examined. The model chi-square was used to assess the overall fit of each model to the data. The statistical significance of each model tested was examined in conjunction with its explanatory power regarding the conceptual framework of spatial disadvantage developed through our Opportunity and Resource Model.

## Results

Bivariate relationships between the dependent variable and independent variables from the American Housing Survey are presented in Table 2. Using the Pearson chi-square statistic for categorical variables, statistically significant relationships ( $p \leq .001$ ) were found between the desire to move and sex ( $\chi^2 = 10.73$ ,  $df = 1$ ); race/ethnicity ( $\chi^2 = 118.24$ ,  $df = 3$ ); marital status ( $\chi^2 = 38.67$ ,  $df = 3$ ); poverty status ( $\chi^2 = 82.62$ ,  $df = 3$ ); welfare receipt ( $\chi^2 = 56.51$ ,  $df = 1$ ); housing tenure ( $\chi^2 = 71.53$ ,  $df = 1$ ); presence of children ( $\chi^2 = 65.53$ ,  $df = 1$ ); and census region ( $\chi^2 = 17.19$ ,  $df = 3$ ).

At the multivariate level, both the model chi-square and the improvement chi-square statistics were used to determine the goodness of fit of the data to the hierarchical logistic regression models. No statistically significant results were found for the metropolitan opportunity structure, however, results from this research do suggest that certain neighborhood conditions and various individual characteristics have a significant effect on perceiving neighborhood crime to be bad enough to desire to move.

With regard to community resources, logit coefficients for noise ( $B = .535$ ), litter/housing deterioration ( $B = .553$ ), and people ( $B = .619$ ) were found to have statistically significant positive effects on the desire to move ( $p \leq .001$ ). Specifically, perceiving noise in the neighborhood, or litter/housing deterioration in the neighborhood to be bothersome increases the odds of desiring to move by 71% and 74% respectively. While perceiving people in the neighborhood to be bothersome increases the likelihood of wanting to move as an adjustment to perceived crime by 86%.

In addition, access to adequate neighborhood grocery and drug stores ( $B = -.499$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) results in a 39% decrease in the likelihood of desiring to move. Similarly, satisfactory public transit services and public schools all seem to reduce the impact of the environmental stressor neighborhood crime, significantly decreasing the likelihood of the desire to move. These results add support to the body of research that posits a negative relationship between satisfaction with the neighborhood and perceptions of crime.

Results related to individual characteristics suggest that personal assets filter perceptions of the stressor neighborhood crime in significantly different ways. Individuals who are sixty years of age or older ( $B = -.459$ ), have more years of education ( $B = -.073$ ), or own a home ( $B = -.452$ ) are less likely to want to move based on perceived crime ( $p \leq .001$ ). In contrast, those who are thirty years of age or younger ( $B = .297$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ), have a child present in the household ( $B = .333$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), or have

lived in the neighborhood a longer period of time ( $B = .171, p \leq .001$ ) are more likely to desire to move. This distinction in the role of individual characteristics raises interesting questions with regard to influencing one's adjustment response toward an environmental stressor. One tentative conclusion suggests that certain personal assets act as buffers to enhance an individual's ability to find alternative ways to adjust to forms of spatial disadvantage other than wanting to move from the neighborhood. For example, those who are older may have access to more resources developed over time through ties at work and in the community. These individuals may not perceive crime in the neighborhood to be bad enough to want to move if doing so would force them to cut those established connections. Similarly, more years of education may open more doors to opportunities to better meet one's needs.

Finally, results from the interaction between race and class are particularly noteworthy. Considering economic status alone, only those individuals with a household income less than fifty percent of the poverty line were more likely to desire to move ( $B = .554, p \leq .001$ ). When race was considered, non-whites across all categories of economic status were significantly more likely to perceive neighborhood crime to be bad enough to want to move compared to non-poor whites. In addition, extremely poor non-whites (i.e. household income below fifty percent of the poverty line) were two and one half times more likely to desire to move compared to non-poor whites ( $B = .887, p \leq .001$ ). Based upon these results, race appears to play a significant role in adjusting to the environmental stressor neighborhood crime.

#### Utility for Social Work Practice

Implications for social work practice stem from two contributions made from this research. The first is understanding the important role that access to adequate resources plays in impacting an individual's tolerance threshold; and second is the impact of perceptions in determining the utility of a resource, regardless of the actual condition. Although this study limits consideration to mobility intentions rather than actual migration behavior, results help to inform thinking about adjustment strategies at an earlier point on intervention – when one desires to move. In this vein, implications are discussed from an empowerment context, as an alternative adjustment response to exposure to the environmental stressor neighborhood crime.

Resident empowerment can be viewed as an important factor in shaping one's perceptions toward conditions in their local environment, and ultimately their adjustment response to those perceptions. Results from this study suggest that regardless of actual conditions, it is one's perception of those conditions that most influence the coping strategy they select. Therefore, an important implication from this research is the need to place individuals at the center of community building initiatives (Weil & Gamble, 1995). We believe this study lends support to the existing, but limited, empirical literature focused on developing communities from a strengths-based perspective (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). When social workers begin to understand the perceived utility of resources in the community to meet residents needs, then they can begin to

understand what it is that individuals value about their local environment that allows them to find ways to adjust to negative conditions within the situation. This research provides evidence that, whether actual or perceived, when an individual has a resource to draw from, they are less likely to want to move. And reducing residential mobility is one step toward building a more stable neighborhood.

Finally, this study illustrates the need for social workers engaged in community practice and interested in building sustainable neighborhoods to develop cross-disciplinary partnerships. In order to improve access to resources and reduce the negative impact of spatial disadvantage, social workers must join with urban planners, economists, geographers, demographers, and other professionals committed to empirical research in this area. Social work, through its ecological paradigm, is uniquely suited to integrate these perspectives into a model of practice that simultaneously is concerned with the mutual well-being of the individual and the collective well-being of the community. At the core of this multi-disciplinary model, the roots of traditional social work practice are found. The emphasis is placed on empowering communities to overcome the structural and spatial constraints that result in disadvantage.

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