

Gang Homicides in St. Louis, Missouri

Contemporary researchers interested in issues related to crime and criminology have access to more sophisticated computer technology that allows the creation of more enhanced crime maps. The purpose of crime maps, however, remains the same: to illuminate the relationship between some category of crime and corresponding characteristics such as poverty and disorganization across given locations. After the early work of the Chicago School, Rosenfeld, Bray, and Egley (1999) were some of the first researchers to use crime mapping to examine basic research questions in the discipline. Using GIS software, Rosenfeld and his colleagues examined the mechanisms through which gangs facilitate violent offending in St. Louis, Missouri. The primary purpose of this research was to study whether gang membership pushes members to engage in violence or merely exposes them to violent persons and situations. Rosenfeld and colleagues compared gang-affiliated, gang-motivated, and nongang youth homicides occurring in St. Louis. In one part of their analysis, they examined the spatial distribution of gang and nongang youth homicide in relation to attributes of the neighborhood context (e.g., economic deprivation or the inability to obtain resources to establish a lifestyle comparable to those around you) in which the incidents occurred.

To examine the spatial relationship between these three types of homicides and the relationship they had to neighborhood disadvantage (such as economic deprivation or social disorganization) and instability (such as residents moving in and out of the neighborhood), the researchers used the census block group as their unit of analysis. Exhibit 9.3 displays the map of block groups where gang-affiliated and gang-motivated homicides occurred, along with the extent of neighborhood disadvantage in each block for 1990–1995 (Rosenfeld et al., 1999).

From this map, you can see that gang homicides were concentrated in disadvantaged areas. Other maps revealed a similar finding with regard to neighborhood instability: Homicides were concentrated in neighborhoods with moderate levels of instability regardless of whether they were gang-affiliated, gang-motivated, or nongang-related. Rosenfeld and colleagues (1999) concluded,

Our results offer powerful evidence of the clustering of both gang and nongang youth homicides in areas characterized by high levels of social-economic disadvantage and racial isolation. Although the accumulated evidence for gang facilitation of violence is quite compelling, our results serve as a reminder that concentrated disadvantage and racial isolation remain the fundamental sources of lethal violence in urban areas. (p. 514)

These conclusions echo those made over half a century earlier by Shaw and McKay (1942). As such, we are compelled to note Ernest W. Burgess's words in the introduction of Shaw and McKay's original work:

We must realize that the brightest hope in reformation is in changing the neighborhood and in control of the gang in which the boy moves, lives, and has his being and to which he returns after this institutional treatment. . . . We must reaffirm our faith in prevention, which is so much easier, cheaper, and more effective than cure and which begins with the home, the play group, the local school, the church, and the neighborhood. (p. xiii)