



Local gangs and residents' perceptions of unsupervised teen groups: Implications for the incivilities thesis and neighborhood effects



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current work responds to calls for more conceptual clarity in disorder and incivility models, and for closer ties between gang and neighborhood effects research. Focusing on the perceived incivility that is pivotal to the dynamics of several theories in community criminology—unsupervised teen groups—and adopting Messick's (1995) unified perspective on construct validation, the current work examines ecological and psychological impacts of street gang set spaces on these perceptions.

Methods: Survey responses of over 900 residents in 55 census block groups in the northeast quadrant of the District of Columbia were combined with census data and expert assessments of gang set spaces.

Results: Residents living in closer proximity to gang set spaces, within and beyond their neighborhood, reported more problems with unsupervised teen groups. This held true even after controlling for social integration.

Conclusions: Results support Hunter's (1978) distinction between general social disorder and specific correlated manifestations thereof, like incivilities, and Thrasher's (1926) view of gangs as consequences of social disorder, furthering our understanding of this key social incivility.

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The incivilities thesis, first articulated by the late James Q. Wilson (1975) in the mid- 1970s to explain then-novel high fear of crime levels, states that symbols or signs of incivility—a set of neighborhood physical conditions reflecting a lack of care or maintenance and neighborhood social incidents where residents or public space users engage in behaviors that are either inappropriate for the time and setting, physically or verbally aggressive, or suggestive of alcohol, drug, or mental health concerns—cause a range of unwelcome consequences for individual residents and public space users. The incivilities thesis has evolved in several directions over the past four decades. Although the broken windows version (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) of the incivilities thesis is perhaps the best known, other versions (Garofalo & Laub, 1978; Hunter, 1978; Lewis & Salem, 1986; Skogan, 1990) have taken the thesis in different directions: added new outcomes, multileveled it, added ecological as well as psychological forces, and created dynamic longitudinal components. In addition to this “conceptual drift,” there has been confusion about the label for this central construct (Taylor, 2001, p. 94). “Researchers have not arrived at a common vocabulary” (Kubrin, 2008, p. 205) when discussing incivilities.

Beyond symbols of incivility, signs of incivilities, and incivilities, terms applied have included “neighborhood problems,” “disorder,”

and “signal disorder.” In the past two decades the vocabulary has shifted to include labels that are just “disorder” (Skogan, 1990), some type of disorder such as “public disorder” (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999), “signal disorder” (Innes, 2004), or umbrella labels signifying a wide range and scale of social and physical environmental cues such as “the disorder continuum” (Ross & Mirowsky, 1999, p. 414). The earlier noted “conceptual drift” persists. “Variability in how disorder is understood and conceptualized across studies is the rule rather than the exception” (Kubrin, 2008, p. 205).

In addition, variability in how incivilities are operationalized across studies is problematic. Some studies include non-Part I but “serious” crimes, such as selling drugs in public or using drugs in public (for a partial list of specific incivilities across studies see Gau & Pratt, 2008). This problem, and the consequent theoretical challenges introduced, was first pointed out by Rosenfeld (1994) while reviewing Bursik and Grasmick (1993):

Disorder theory predicts that fear is elevated and community controls are eroded by neighborhood conditions that are not ‘intrinsically crime-related’ ... however, the conditions of disorder mentioned by the authors ... are criminal offenses or carry legal penalties ... We are left, at best, with an explanation specifying that small crimes can lead, directly or indirectly, to bigger crimes. The logical problem underlying this approach is underscored by the magnitude of the empirical association ... between [ecological] indicators of incivility

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and disorder on the one hand and community crime rates on the other. This degree of measurement redundancy renders the development of meaningful causal models nearly impossible. (pp. 1388–1389)

Kubrin (2008) succinctly reiterates this concern when she asks “should researchers conceptually distinguish, if at all, between disorder and crime?” (p. 205)

The current investigation takes up a focused variation of Kubrin's (2008) important question. It reframes it in light of Hunter's version of the incivilities thesis which distinguished between disorder as a broader condition and more specific manifestations of this disorder, including symbols of incivilities and crime. It focuses Kubrin's (2008) question by centering on one specific perceived incivility: residents' perceptions of the degree to which rowdy or problematic (and thus presumably unsupervised) teen groups create problems in their neighborhood. This is a crucial incivility for several reasons. It is not a crime, thus avoiding Rosenfeld's (1994) concern. Second, it is a pivotal indicator not only for the incivilities thesis, but also for the basic systemic model of crime (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Finally, it is an indicator about which substantial questions of meaning persist (Veysey & Messner, 1999), including questions of construct validation. Kubrin's (2008) question is also focused in a second way here: the relationship between local street gangs and this incivility, rather than crime and this incivility, is highlighted.

Previous work has examined cross-sectional connections between this perceived incivility and both delinquency and violent crime (Taylor, Harris, Jones, Garcia, & McCord, 2011). That work supported widely shared scholarly expectations that individuals living in higher violent crime or higher delinquency prevalence neighborhoods would report more local trouble with unsupervised teen groups, even after controlling for community structural features. But when gang impacts on this key incivility indicator are considered, theoretical expectations may diverge in two ways. First, is the connection ecological or psychological? Street gang set spaces are spatially delimited and census block groups, the neighborhood units used in this study, are of a similar small scale. Thus, street gangs present in a neighborhood could affect residents generally in that locale if the dynamic is ecological. Alternatively, what might matter is the context for each individual resident, how he or she is positioned spatially relative to street gang set spaces both within the neighborhood and beyond; the individual's specific spatial context in relation to gangs may affect perceptions of troublesome teen groups. Second, given the literature on gang presence in stable neighborhoods (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Pattillo, 1998; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Taylor, 2001) it is not clear whether the impact of gang context would be variable across neighborhoods. The current study examines both theoretical expectations.

The remainder of the introduction is organized as follows: Hunter's (1978) version of the incivilities thesis is briefly reprised. It makes an important distinction between general social disorder and specific manifestations of it, such as symbols of incivility and crime. This version of the incivilities thesis thereby suggests incivilities and crime are separate but connected. Then three recent works examining connections between perceived incivilities and perceived crime or reported victimization are examined. Inconsistent findings, potential reasons for inconsistent findings, and limitations of these studies are noted. Framing these findings in a broader context pinpoints remaining construct validity questions. Two approaches to the latter, the multitrait-multimethod matrix (MTMM) approach, and the total construct validation approach, are sketched. Following the latter, the relevance of the gang-rowdy teen group incivility link for gauging the meaning of the incivility indicator is described. To specify a conceptual frame for linking this incivility to street gang presence, recent empirical gang work is outlined next, highlighting two particularly relevant threads of gang work—fear of gang crime, and gang presence in stable neighborhood contexts. The implications of that work for shaping expectations

about the gang-incivility link are noted. The section closes with specific statements of the two research questions addressed.

Hunter's symbol of incivility framework, and implications

Disorder, symbols of incivility, and crime represent three distinct but related concepts. Both crime and symbols of incivility may arise from a broader structural condition called disorder. Different residents in different communities may assign different causes to observed symbols of incivility in various ways. Another interpretation is local institutions, either within or outside the community, are either unwilling or unable to remediate these conditions. Both symbols of incivility and crime may arouse or elevate residents' fear of crime, but the former pathway is likely more influential—for many urban residents, symbols of incivility are far more prevalent than crime (Hunter, 1978; Taylor, 1999).

Important implications follow. First, if broader conditions of disorder represent macro-level causes of crime and symbols of incivilities, then we would expect a relatively close degree of ecological co-variation. Later work confirmed this (Skogan, 1990; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Turning to the key incivility examined here, work similarly revealed ecological impacts of unsupervised, troublesome teen groups on crime (Lowenkamp, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003; Veysey & Messner, 1999), and ecological impacts of crime, even net of community structure, on this incivility (Taylor et al., 2011). Male serious delinquency prevalence rates also influence unsupervised, troublesome teen groups (Taylor et al., 2011). Second, impacts of symbols of incivility depend on who is interpreting them and what that interpretation is. This symbolic interactionist theme, introduced originally by Wilson (1975) and Hunter (1978), has been highlighted by others (Harcourt, 2001; Innes, 2004).

Perceived crime and perceived incivilities

Three recent studies examined connections between perceived crime and perceived incivilities, empirically assessing at the individual-level a challenge foreseen by Rosenfeld (1994): are incivilities and crime clearly separable? Worrall (2006), using city-centered but not neighborhood-centered survey data from 12 cities, found that neither physical nor social incivilities could be separated from perceived crime in a confirmatory factor model, but perceived physical incivilities could be discriminated from unbounded reports of previous victimization.

Gau and Pratt (2008), using survey data from Eastern Washington, found that perceived social and physical incivilities and perceived crime problems both contributed to one, broad underlying construct. Armstrong and Katz (2010) using survey data from residents in multiple neighborhoods in Mesa, Arizona, found somewhat stronger discriminant validity than seen by Worrall (2006) for perceived incivilities relative to victimization reports. But the results gauging the discriminant validity of perceptual incivilities indicators relative to respondents' perceptions of crime proved inconsistent.

Putting these differences and limitations aside, these works highlight two broader, important points. First, these studies align with Hunter's (1978) symbols of incivilities model. It expects covariation between incivilities and crime both across places, and given its symbolic interactionist frame, across individuals. Whether the studies find that one broad factor provides the best fit (Gau & Pratt, 2008) or that two factor solutions with correlated latent factors work best for some subset of incivilities (Armstrong & Katz, 2010; Worrall, 2006), the underlying constructs are related (Gordon, 1968). Whether they are related strongly enough to create the modeling difficulties anticipated by Rosenfeld (1994) remains to be determined.

Second, these studies highlight the limitations of focusing on patterns of convergent and discriminant validation for establishing construct validity. The MTMM approach to convergent and discriminant validities was originally offered in the context of psychological testing where it might be feasible to obtain assessments from multiple sources

(e.g., self-ratings, peer ratings, behavioral assessments) (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). This is not feasible for either perceived incivilities or perceived crime as individual level indicators. For incivilities, it is possible to match-up specific perceived incivilities and specific assessed incivilities at micro-ecological scales like urban streetblocks (Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992). But this approach is not sensible at the individual level when the individual is reporting about neighborhood conditions; extremely low base rates of most social incivilities make reliable on-site assessment extremely challenging (Furr-Holden et al., 2008). Further, the symbolic interactionist perspective, along with Innes's (2004) notion of signal disorders, argues against even expecting multi-method matchups in ratings. Confidence that these recent studies examining mono-method patterns of convergent and discriminant validities are a warm-up for more robust MTMM-based studies, which will more fully advance construct validation efforts on incivilities, may be misplaced.

One key sign of incivility

Messick's (1995) unified perspective on construct validation¹ was adopted recently in work examining the ecological correlates of the key incivility considered in the current work: troublesome, unsupervised teen groups (Taylor et al., 2011). In a reverse form (i.e., would residents do something if an unsupervised teen group was troublesome late at night?) it also is key to the collective efficacy model (Sampson, 2012). Taylor et al. (2011) investigated the ecological impacts of violent crime and delinquency on this incivility, using separate data sources for crime, delinquency, and troublesome teen groups. They found, net of community demographic structure, that "high violent crime or delinquency rates set in motion or maintain endogenous processes within communities, making it harder to supervise, suppress, redirect, or caution independently operating groups of teens" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 313). Such results align with expectations based on Hunter's (1978) incivilities framework. Impacts of delinquency and crime net of community demographic structure could mean many things, but in his model it would suggest that underlying social disorder is not completely structurally determined. Or, in Rosenfeld's (1994) framework, cultural as well as structural elements may be relevant.

Gang impacts?

The current work, following Messick's (1995) unified perspective on construct validation, and continuing within Hunter's (1978) framework, examines impacts of gang presence on perceptions of troublesome unsupervised teen groups.² Previous work on gangs and fear of gangs suggests several theoretical threads leading to such an expectation. Starting with an outcome focus on fear of gangs (Lane & Meeker, 2000, 2003), findings have linked fear with perceived incivilities (Lane & Meeker, 2003). The strength of such a link, however, may depend both on whether the individual whose fear is reported has been in a gang (Lane & Fox, 2011), and whether the individual is White or Latino/a (Lane & Meeker, 2005). The implication of this work, albeit not yet directly tested, is that gangs contribute to the troublesome nature of some teen groups, which is why the latter inspire safety concerns.

A second theoretical entrance point is through the basic systemic model (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Papachristos & Kirk, 2006). The theoretical connection between gangs and local social control was first highlighted by Thrasher. "Ganging is merely one symptom of more deep-lying community disorganization, which frees the boy from ordinary controls and thus makes possible the development of the gang" (Thrasher, 1926). "The extension of social disorganization theory to gang behaviors is straightforward: Gangs arise either to take the place of weak social institutions in socially disorganized areas, or because weak institutions fail to thwart the advent of unconventional value systems that often characterize street gangs" (Papachristos & Kirk, 2006, p. 64). If this thought is combined with a recognition that

gangs, like concentrations of delinquents (Shannon, 1981), have self-propagating qualities, it leads to an expectation that residents living nearer to more gang set spaces, whether the gangs hang-out inside or outside their immediate neighborhood, should be more afflicted with troublesome, unsupervised teen groups. Early work by Miller (1975, 1976) suggested residents link rowdy neighborhood youth to gangs, though subsequent work has not directly tested this connection.

And yet, "the traditional systemic models of Thrasher, and Shaw and McKay" are unable "to account for the existence of stable neighborhoods with extensive histories of gang behavior" (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, p. 134). Recent and more dated qualitative work finds street gangs operating in stable lower class ethnic, or stable middle class African-American neighborhoods (Pattillo, 1998; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Suttles, 1968), and sometimes playing important roles in maintaining neighborhood safety (Taylor, 2001, p. 286–288). These findings support the idea that delinquent groups or gangs can operate in different types of areas which vary in "the degree to which integration between the conventional and criminal value systems is achieved," these differences forming a "continuum" (Kobrin, 1951, p. 657; see also Bursik & Grasmick, 1993).

Turning for a moment to location matters, street gangs often have small-scale group-based home ranges (Lee, 1970), recently named set spaces (Tita, Cohen, & Engberg, 2005), within which they routinely hang out. These are smaller spaces within the larger territories of the gangs (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974). If these smaller set spaces are identified, it is possible to determine the proximity of where gangs congregate within their territories relative to individual neighborhood residents.

The implication of Kobrin's (1951) "continuum" idea is that the impact of street gangs on social incivilities like unsupervised teen groups may be variable across neighborhoods. In other words, the proximity of gang set spaces in relation to residents may influence residents' perceptions of these groups more strongly in some locations than others. Where the two value systems are better integrated, the impact should be weaker (Kobrin, 1951). Specifically, in less stable neighborhoods the relationship should be moderately strong and negative, as predicted by fear of gang work and Hunter's (1978) version of the incivilities thesis. By contrast, in more stable neighborhoods where street gang members are more integrated with conventional residents, the impacts should be weaker or perhaps even positive.

It is possible that the impacts of street gangs on perceived incivilities, here troublesome teen groups, could be mediated or moderated by variations in local social climate. If gang impacts, at either the neighborhood or individual level, are largely attenuated after controlling for social integration, the incivilities thesis, at least for this outcome, may be theoretically superfluous. Models built on more generic informal social control or local social integration (Taylor, 2002) may be sufficient.

Summary of key questions

Recent investigations of the incivilities thesis have conflated disorder with signs of incivility; the former construct is broader and more multi-faceted than the latter. Further, work on perceived incivilities pursuing conventional approaches to construct validation and focusing on patterns of mono-method convergent and discriminant validation have generated confusing results about the separability of perceived incivilities and perceived crime. One key incivility is residents' perceptions of the degree to which local unsupervised groups of teens are troublesome. This is a pivotal item for the broken windows version of the incivilities thesis (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), and for ecological work examining the systemic model (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Yet, at the same time, important questions about the meaning of this item remain (Veysey & Messner, 1999).

Extending the work of Taylor et al. (2011), following Papachristos and Kirk's (2006) suggestion to better integrate gang and neighborhood effects research, and responding to the call from Decker, Melde, and Pyrooz (2013) to include a multi-level focus in gang research, the current work examined the ecological and psychological impacts of

gang proximity, whether the gangs hang-out inside or outside their immediate neighborhood, on residents' perceptions of troublesome teen groups. Hunter's (1978) symbols of incivility model, as well as Thrasher's (1926) original work, would classify gangs as aspects or consequences of broader neighborhood disorder, which should elevate residents' perceptions of this social incivility. The question, however, is whether this impact is ecological, or psychological. If the former, simply living in a neighborhood where more gangs have their set spaces will result in more widely shared perceptions of troublesome unsupervised teen groups. If the latter, the density and proximity of local and extra-local gangs, relative to the residence of a particular respondent, will shape this perceived incivility. Of course, the impact could operate via both pathways. The second question addressed emerges from the gang literature, finding gangs operating in stable neighborhood contexts. This work suggests that the psychological impacts of gang density and proximity may depend on neighborhood stability and social integration, stoking perceptions of troublesome unsupervised teen groups more strongly in less stable locales, and perhaps even dampening perceived incivilities in more stable, integrated locales. Previous work has shown that "gang-neighborhood dynamics both hinder and foster various levels of social control (Papachristos & Kirk, 2006, pp. 65–66).

Method

Location and survey procedures

The study locale comprised 55 contiguous block groups in the north-east and southeast quadrants of the District of Columbia. The area was bordered on the west by South and North Capitol Streets, on the north by New York Avenue, on the east by the Anacostia River, and on the south by Virginia Avenue. The selected block groups provide a mix of the District's disadvantaged, gentrifying, and middle and upper class neighborhoods, a mix of racial and ethnic groups, and natural boundaries around the target area borders.

The 2000 census block group data showed the mean percent of households in the target area with income below the Federal poverty level as 19.98 ($SD = 12.77$, range = 1.56 to 56.98). The percent of owner-occupied housing units within the 55 census block groups was 49.79 ($SD = 17.58$, range = 3.72 to 62.88), and the percent of households that comprised Black residents was 67.84 ($SD = 32.89$, range = 4.74 to 97.84).

Occupied housing units within the 55 block group target area were identified through property tax assessment data for the District of Columbia; non-vacant, residential housing units were selected. Next a random sample, geographically stratified by block group, of 1,375 housing units was selected (25 random addresses for each of the 55 census block groups). Selected households were visited and interviewers asked the head of household or another adult who lived at the address to complete a short survey. If no contact was made after four visits to the home a survey was mailed to the address. Respondents were paid five dollars for participation (see Roman, 2009 for a full discussion of sampling procedures).

Surveys were completed by an adult head of 901 households; 618 were completed in person and 283 via mail. Completed surveys per census block group ranged from 9 to 22 (average = 16). Following the standardized definitions promoted by the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers (AAPOR, 2011), the survey response rate ranged from 60.8 percent (RR1: Minimum response rate) to 66.6 percent (RR5: Maximum response rate).

The sample

As shown in Table 1, a majority of survey respondents identified as Black (58.7%) and were female (68.9%). Their mean age was 45 years ($SD = 14.29$) and a majority also owned their homes (53.9%). Of the

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	M or Percent	SD	Min	Max
Outcome ^a				
Rowdy Teens	1.66	0.76	1.0	3.0
Individual-level ^a				
Age	43.0	14.29	19.0	93.0
Female	47.8	-	0	1.0
Black	67.0	-	0	1.0
Social integration	2.65	0.48	1.0	4.0
Gang proximity	1.10	0.99	0.01	3.9
Neighborhood-level ^b				
Residential stability	-0.01	0.57	-1.3	1.1
Racial heterogeneity	0.27	0.18	0.04	0.6
Percent Black	67.1	-	4.7	97.8
Concentrated disadvantage	0.01	0.74	-1.0	2.3
Gang count	0.84	1.18	0	4.0
Spatial lag	15.79	12.72	0	44.9

Note: Survey data are from a 2005 Neighborhood Survey conducted in Washington, D.C. by the Urban Institute. Gang count and proximity were calculated from focus group data. SD = Standard deviation.

^a N = 55 census block groups.

^b N = 901 survey respondents.

sample, approximately 35 percent were married and 42 percent lived in their neighborhood five years or less. Nearly 70 percent reported at minimum some college education. There were no significant differences between survey respondent characteristics and those of all residents residing within the study area.

Gang data

Gang location data were collected by one of the authors for a focused deterrence law enforcement initiative. Following similar procedures outlined by scholars contributing to the development of the Boston Gun Project (Kennedy, Braga, & Piehl, 1997), researchers in the District of Columbia led focus groups with law enforcement staff representing local and federal agencies. Participants were representatives of the following agencies: Metropolitan Police Department (i.e., the local police department in DC), Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency for the District of Columbia (CSOSA), U.S. Marshall's Office, Federal Bureau of Investigations, and the U.S. Attorney's Office. Line staff and all levels of law enforcement management were represented. Focus group participants were considered to be knowledgeable of the street gang activity and community at the time of the research. During the meetings, the precise locations where gangs hung out and operated were systematically recorded using an enlarged map containing the ortho-photography of each police service area. Participants discussed, on a street-by-street, block-by-block basis, the "gang set space," of each gang while researchers recorded the information. A gang set space is the area where the gang hangs out or congregates within the designated territory (Tita et al., 2005). Set spaces, as compared to gang territories or turfs, are smaller geographic areas (e.g., one house, one block, an intersection). Because not all gangs are active all of the time, and there is differential activity across gangs, the focus groups documented only gangs that were active in the last year; active included some police action (e.g., arrest of a gang member) or known violent or drug selling activity. Similar qualitative approaches have been used by others in the collection of gang data (see Block & Block, 1993). Law enforcements reports of gang measures have proven reliable and valid in prior studies (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010).

This process revealed 17 gang set spaces operating within the surveyed area for the current study, and an additional 96 gang set spaces operating outside of the target area but within the District of Columbia. Of the 55 block groups, slightly more than half (56.4%, $n = 31$) did not have gang set spaces operating within their borders, whereas 21.8% ($n = 12$) had one, 7.3% ($n = 4$) two, 10.9% ($n = 6$) three, and 3.6% ($n = 2$) four gang set spaces.

Outcome variable

Residents were asked: “How much of a problem are groups of rowdy teenagers hanging out in the neighborhood?” (3 = a big problem, 2 = somewhat of a problem, 1 = not a problem). Because a focus of this study is to provide conceptual clarity to a potentially important indicator within the incivilities literature, the outcome variable comprises one item within a typically longer scale, but hence, can be justified (Taylor et al., 2011). Of the sample, 17.3 percent ($n = 148$) reported groups of rowdy teenagers hanging out were a big problem, whereas 30.9 percent ($n = 264$) reported they were somewhat of a problem, and 51.8 percent ($n = 442$) indicated they were not a problem.

Individual level (Level-1) variables

Demographics

Respondent gender (female = 1, male = 0), race (Black = 1, non-Black = 0), and age were included.

Social integration

A nine-item index measuring residents' self-reported perceptions of social integration was created by combining items used to represent social cohesion and reciprocated exchange (Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004) with items used to capture the frequency of interaction and network mediated exchange (Browning, Feinberg & Dietz, 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). Respondents were asked whether they strongly agreed (= 1), agreed (= 2), disagreed (= 3), or strongly disagreed (= 4) with: (a) “people around here are willing to help their neighbors”; (b) “people in this neighborhood generally don't get along with each other” (reverse coded); (c) “people in this neighborhood do not share the same values” (reverse coded); (d) “people in this neighborhood can be trusted”; and (e) “this is a close-knit neighborhood.” Respondents were also asked: (a) “how often do you and people in this neighborhood have parties or other get-togethers where other people in the neighborhood are invited”; (b) “how often do you visit in each other's homes or on the street”; (c) “how often do you ask each other advice about personal things such as child rearing or job openings”; and (d) “how often do you do favors for each other.” Response options for the items were (1) never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, or (4) often. Each of the nine items were z-scored and then averaged to create the “social integration” index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$).

Gang proximity

The weighted inverse linear distances between each respondent's home address and the nearest edge of each gang set space in the city (not simply the surveyed area, but rather all gang set spaces in the District) were summed using the Localized Inverse Distance Weighted Density Calculator (LIDWDC; Ratcliffe, 2006) (the construction of this sum is explained in McCord et al., 2007, p. 304–306). All gang set spaces in the District of Columbia, whether within or outside the resident's block group, contributed to the resident's proximity score. Note that the operationalization of this variable also captures density, but we refer to the construct as “gang proximity.”

Neighborhood level (Level-2) variables

Neighborhood variables included two demographic indices—residential stability and concentrated disadvantage—and a racial heterogeneity indicator. The residential stability index represented the average of two z-scored census block group items: (a) percent living in the same house since 1995, and (b) percent of houses occupied by owners in the block group (Taylor et al., 2011) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$). The concentrated disadvantage index averaged four z-scored census block group indicators: (a) percent of all households receiving public assistance; (b) percent of the population with income below the federal

poverty level in 1999; (c) percent of civilian population age 16 or older in the labor force who were unemployed; and (d) percent of households with children headed by a woman (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$). This index excluded race given concerns about forms of this index which conflate SES and racial composition (Massey, 1998). Racial heterogeneity was calculated by taking one minus the sum of squared proportions of each of five races: (a) Black/non-Hispanic, (b) White/non-Hispanic, (c) Asian/Pacific Islander, (d) Hispanic, and (e) American Indian/Other (Bellair, 1997; Blau, 1977).³

The number of gang set spaces within each census block group also was used as a neighborhood indicator of gangs to capture the ecological presence of gangs. If a gang set space straddled or touched more than one census block group, it was counted in each block group. The count of within-census block group set spaces ranged from zero to four.

To control for potential spatial autocorrelation related to the outcome variable, a spatially lagged version of the outcome variable aggregated to the neighborhood level was created by rook contiguity.⁴ This was needed because the Global Moran's I value (0.5056) suggested there was statistical significance in clustering of neighborhoods where individuals reported groups of rowdy teens were a big problem in the neighborhood ($p < .001$).

Model specification and analytic plan

Hierarchical Linear Generalized Modeling (HLGM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was used because the outcome was ordinal, and respondents were nested within neighborhoods. Social integration, gang proximity, and respondent age were grand mean centered at level-1. All level-2 variables were grand mean centered.

An ANOVA or null model with no predictors except the random effect for neighborhoods confirmed significant outcome variation across neighborhoods ($p < .001$; $r_{icc} = .21$). The strong average neighborhood inter-rater reliability (.81) suggested substantial intra-neighborhood agreement on the severity of the teen group problem. A second model added all fixed effects except local social integration and the spatially lagged outcome. A third model tested for possible random effects of individual-level gang proximity. The latter was geared specifically to testing the idea that gang impacts could range from more detrimental to less detrimental to beneficial depending on neighborhood context. A final model contained all fixed effects, including local social integration and the spatially lagged outcome.

A test of parallel-line assumption revealed no significant differences in coefficients ($\chi^2 = 6.30, p = .28$) across outcome values. As such, the outcome was treated as ordinal rather than categorical (Long & Freese, 2006). Coding of the outcome was reversed so “not a problem” became the reference category. Therefore odds ratios below one for a predictor indicate that an increase in the predictor was associated with the respondent being more likely to say the teen groups were not a problem, and an odds ratio above one indicated higher scores on the predictor being associated with the respondent being less likely to say the teen groups were not a problem. Stated more simply, an odds ratio above one indicated a predictor linked with a more problematic view toward rowdy teen groups.

Results

The model with all fixed effects, except social integration, and controlling for neighborhood context, appears in the left-most section of Table 2.⁵

Individual gang proximity was associated with more negative views toward teen groups. A unit increase in the gang proximity indicator was associated with 91 percent higher odds of saying that local teen groups were problematic to some degree ($p < .001$). It appears that how individual residents were situated relative to where gangs regularly spend time affected views about this social incivility. Gang presence in

Table 2
Residents' Perceptions of Problematic Teen Groups

	Fixed Effects: Gang Variables				Random Effects: Gang Proximity Varies				Fixed Effects Social Integration Added			
	Coeff.	S.E.	O.R.	p =	Coeff.	S.E.	O.R.	p =	Coeff.	S.E.	O.R.	p =
Individual-level												
Age	-0.02	0.01	0.98***	.001	-0.01	0.01	0.98***	.012	-0.01	0.01	0.99*	.020
Female	0.12	0.16	1.13	.443	0.13	0.15	1.14	.357	0.10	0.14	1.11	.462
Black	0.08	0.12	1.09	.436	0.09	0.12	1.09	.483	0.13	0.13	1.14	.297
Gang proximity	0.65	0.19	1.91***	<.001	0.69	0.22	1.99***	.011	0.57	0.23	1.78**	.013
Social integration	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-0.52	0.20	0.59**	.009
Neighborhood-level												
Residential stability	-0.06	0.19	0.94	.737	-0.01	0.21	0.99	.967	-0.04	0.21	0.96	.836
Racial heterogeneity	0.34	0.79	1.40	.673	0.41	0.74	1.50	.582	0.16	0.71	1.17	.824
Concentrated disadvantage	1.13	0.22	3.10***	<.001	1.15	0.26	3.15***	<.001	1.01	0.30	2.75***	.001
Gang count	-0.23	0.16	0.79	.152	-0.24	0.15	0.79	.134	-0.20	0.15	0.82	.177
Spatial lag	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.003	0.01	1.00	.762
Variance Components	Variance		χ^2	df	Variance		χ^2	df	Variance		χ^2	df
Between Neighborhoods	0.29**		98.29	50	0.24**		68.54	50	0.28**		94.41	50
Gang Proximity Slope	-		-	-	0.02		62.97	54	-		-	-

Note: Outcome is perceptions of rowdy teens as a problem; ordinal model with higher scores driving perceptions towards the reference group (reference group: 3 = not a problem). Results from HGLM, residents (N = 901) nested within neighborhoods (N = 55). Individual-level variables grand mean centered, except for Black and female, which were uncentered. Neighborhood level variables grand mean centered. O.R. = Odds Ratio. S.E. = Standard Error.

* p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.

the neighborhood, however, did not affect residents throughout the neighborhood (odds ratio [OR] = .79, p = .152).

As might be expected from close to a century of work on gangs back to Thrasher (1926), residents had about two times higher odds (OR = 3.10, p < .001) of seeing teen groups as problematic to some degree for every unit increase in concentrated disadvantage. But what makes this finding of interest is that the social incivility-disadvantage link persists even after controlling for gangs in the neighborhood and beyond. Stated differently, there are economic/household disadvantage linked dynamics, net of where gangs in the neighborhood are located and net of how close the perceiver is to how many gangs, that make unsupervised teen groups more problematic in some neighborhoods than others. What these disadvantage-linked processes might be remains to be determined.

The only other significant factor (OR = .98, p = .001) was age. Respondents older than the average respondent (43 years) had lower odds of seeing rowdy teen groups as problematic.

Varying effects of gang proximity

The middle columns of Table 2 reports model results when gang proximity effects varied across neighborhoods. This tested the idea that gang impacts depend in part on neighborhood stability. The random effect, however, did not prove significant (p = .192), and so was dropped from the last model. Allowing this random effect did not alter the pattern of significant fixed effects seen in the previous model.

Controlling for social integration and spatial lag

The last model, presented in the rightmost columns of Table 2, controlled for social integration.⁶ Social integration demonstrated the expected impact. The odds of seeing rowdy local teen groups as problematic to some degree were about .60 times smaller for each unit increase in social integration measure (p = .009). Residents who perceived themselves as more integrated than the average respondent, even after controlling for gang presence and gang/proximity, saw local unsupervised teen groups as less disturbing. This may be because more integrated residents were more likely to know, or recognize, individual members of different teen groups, and/or to know, or recognize, parents of those teens. This may make the behavior of these groups more interpretable and therefore less threatening.

Perhaps the most important result from this last model was that the fixed effects of gang proximity (p = .013) and economic disadvantage (p = .001) both remained significant. The odds that residents would see that rowdy teen groups were problematic to some degree increased about 78 percent for each unit increase on gang proximity after controlling for social integration. For the incivilities-neighborhood effects-gang theoretical nexus, the latter is particularly important.

Discussion

Following Papachristos and Kirk (2006) suggestion to more closely link gang and neighborhood effects research, the current work examined impacts of gang presence on a perceived social incivility that has proven crucial for several models in community criminology, including social disorganization (Sampson & Groves, 1989), the basic systemic model of crime (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993), and versions of the incivilities thesis (Taylor, 1999; Wilson & Kelling, 1982): problematic teen groups. The most important finding appears to be that net of neighborhood demographic structure, social climate, and nearby perceptions of troublesome teen groups, individual residents living closer to more street gang set spaces, within and beyond their neighborhood, perceived rowdy teen groups within their neighborhood were more problematic.

The gang proximity indicator proved influential while the neighborhood count or presence of gangs did not. There may be two reasons for this finding. First, the proximity indicator took gang set spaces beyond the immediate neighborhood into account. Some studies suggest that “modern” or “hybrid” street gangs are not commonly tied to a particular neighborhood; members may come from different neighborhoods to hang out in particular set spaces (Tita & Ridgeway, 2007). This cross fertilization may be partially captured with the indicator used here. Second, gang set spaces were positioned relative to the individual resident. Greater proximity to (and density of) gang set spaces with reference to individual places of residence, and thus by implication individual daily orbits, means the interference of gang set spaces with daily routines could perhaps be better captured with this indicator. Beyond the problem of gangs, findings from the current study suggest future research should review past operationalizations of constructs of neighborhood problems and consider new or innovative measures associated with the density and proximity of various neighborhood “problems.” Advances in geographic information systems and mapping routines, as well as video and imaging technology, provide new

opportunities to revisit the overall measurement of these variables and increase the likelihood that studies will use both survey measures of perceptions and other sources of data such as trained group ratings, objectively-derived official/administrative records, or law enforcement data.

The gang-perceived unsupervised teen group connection seen here further clarifies the meaning of this particular perceived incivility, advancing our understanding of its construct validity (Messick, 1995). Previous work has linked this perceived social incivility to violent crime rates and delinquency (Taylor et al., 2011). The current work links it to the degree to which locations routinely occupied by street gangs are likely to affect the daily rounds of individual residents. Because these results control for local social integration, this connection suggests that the incivilities thesis is most likely adding something to our understanding of neighborhood disorder sequelae beyond what is offered by models built around informal social control and other local social climate dynamics. Regardless of whether gangs are interpreted as an indicator of incivility or social disorganization, findings suggest neighborhood researchers should reconsider the meaning of unsupervised or problematic teen groups in the existing inventory of community research.

The results also provide insight into the disorder-incivility link. Thrasher (1926) and perhaps Hunter (1978) would accept that the presence of street gang set spaces reflects aspects or consequences of broader neighborhood disorder. By contrast, Kobrin (1951), Bursik and Grasmick (1993), and Pattillo-McCoy (1999) probably would say the link depends on broader neighborhood context because under some conditions gangs can be well integrated into neighborhood dynamics and supportive of neighborhood stability. The results here seem to support the former view, revealing a psychological impact of gang set space proximity on residents' assessment of problematic local teen groups. Stated differently, results show how one attribute emerging from neighborhood disorder adversely affects one resident-perceived social incivility. Support for the former (i.e., Hunter, 1978; Thrasher, 1926) view would have been stronger had results also shown an ecological impact of neighborhood gang presence. Support for the latter (i.e., Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Kobrin, 1951; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999) view would have been stronger had results shown a significant random effect of gang set space proximity across neighborhoods. The endorsement of the "gangs reflect disorder" perspective is made cautiously here since the number of neighborhoods examined was limited, and that limitation may be partially responsible for the lack of significance associated with the gang set space proximity random effect, and the lack of a significant ecological impact of gang set spaces.

Bearing the cautions in mind, we return to Kubrin's (2008) "call for conceptual clarity." She asked "How is disorder similar to and different from incivility and neighborhood problems? Are these terms interchangeable?" (Kubrin, 2008, p. 205). Hunter's (1978) framing is helpful with these questions. He argued "that incivility and crime are both correlated manifestations of more general social disorder" (Hunter, 1978, p. 2). Thrasher (1926) would argue for adding gangs to the list of manifestations. Bursik and Grasmick (1993) would argue for adding delinquency prevalence rates. This distinction between more general social disorder and specific manifestations, including assessed and perceived social incivilities seems important conceptually, and worth maintaining in future investigations and conceptual frameworks. Further, given this frame, substantial correlations between perceived crime and perceived incivilities, especially when taken from the same instrument and gathered in a cross-sectional study (Armstrong & Katz, 2010; Gau & Pratt, 2008; Worrall, 2006), are to be expected. Given Hunter's (1978) framework, it would be shocking if strong links failed to emerge.

Nonetheless, questions remain: what happens to these links when: (a) changes over time are examined; (b) ecological and individual outcome variation are separated; (c) victimization surveys are bounded; (d) local social climate is assessed; and (e) archival indicators of crime, delinquency, and gangs are *all* used—along with (f) perceptions of these three manifestations and concerns or fears about them (Lane

& Meeker, 2003)? The conceptual clarity that Kubrin (2008) seeks is likely to emerge only from studies with these features.

Limitations and conclusion

The current study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Results are cross-sectional, and may not inform longitudinal patterns (Lieberman, 1985). As noted earlier, the statistical power to test ecological impacts of fixed and random cross-neighborhood effects was limited because there were only 55 census block groups. The operationalization of the gang set spaces used in this research could have two limitations. First, the measure represents the consensus of a large group of law enforcement officers across all levels of administration in the District of Columbia and across various law enforcement agencies intimately familiar with criminal behavior within District neighborhoods. Although law enforcements reports of gang measures have proven reliable and valid in prior studies (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010), it should be noted that the gang data have not been validated by gang members themselves, an approach used in prior research (Tita et al., 2005). Second, the fact that gang data are derived from a third-party could be deemed a weakness because respondents may or may not distinguish gangs from other groups. Also, prior work suggests gangs are not equally active and visible across neighborhoods (Papachristos & Kirk, 2006; Tita & Ridgeway, 2007). As such, residents' awareness of less visible gang activity may not be captured via third-party gang set space data. An additional point to consider is that this research is limited to measuring proximity to gangs within only the District of Columbia. Data on gangs across the District border were not collected. However the city (at least the areas where gangs are concentrated) is mostly bounded by physical features such as the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers that would minimize the likelihood that Maryland gangs would be of concern to District residents.

Nevertheless, these and other study limitations may be partially offset by study strengths including: an analytic approach appropriate for the nested data (Decker et al., 2013); using a method to capture the key gang predictors which was separate from the methodology used to capture the outcome (Block & Block, 1993; Kennedy et al., 1997); a study setting containing diverse neighborhoods in a crime-ridden urban core; and the use of extremely localized gang presence indicators. The latter responds to Tita et al. (2005) concerns that gang studies often result in diverse findings in part because gang data are aggregated to spatial units which are too geographically extensive.

In sum, the current work responded to two concerns: recent calls for more conceptual clarity in models of disorder and incivilities, and for stronger integration between gang and neighborhood effects research. A unified construct validation approach was used to learn more about a critical perceived social incivility, troublesome local teen groups, by exploring its connection to the ecological patterning of street gang set spaces, and to the geographic positioning of these spaces relative to individual residents. The most important result was a significant impact of the proximity of gang set spaces on individual residents, suggesting geographically organized psychological impacts of street gangs rather than broader gauged ecological impacts. The current work extends what is already known about the troublesome teen group-crime connection, a key social incivility, by uncovering a connection between residents' perceptions of unsupervised teen groups in their neighborhoods and proximity to gang set spaces. The research also suggests that policies and programs seeking to enhance neighborhood safety and residents' perceptions of their safety may fare better if they focus on gangs and their elimination rather than building neighborhood cohesion and encouraging social integration.

Notes

¹ The unified approach to construct validation provides an alternate arena for formulating these questions. Messick (1995) argued that beyond links reflecting convergent,

discriminant, and criterion validities, links between key indicators and other parameters are relevant to construct validation. Framed in the context of psychological testing, he put the argument for a broader perspective this way: Historically, primary emphasis in construct validation has been placed on internal and external test structures—that is, on the appraisal of theoretically expected patterns of relationships among item scores or between test scores and other measures. Probably even more illuminating in regard to score meaning are studies of expected performance differences over time, across groups and settings, and in response to experimental treatments and manipulations (Messick, 1995, p. 743, emphasis added). Different types of validity, such as criterion and content validities, and other observed differences, are themselves part of construct validity. Investigations of these validities could provide evidence relevant to the two major threats to construct validity: “construct underrepresentation” and “construct-irrelevant variance” (Messick, 1995, p. 742).

² Empirical and theoretical work on gangs is substantial. Given space limitations, only the gang work touching most directly on the research questions examined here is highlighted. For reviews of gang work see Huff, 2002; Maxson, Egle, Miller, & Klein, 2013; Short & Hughes, 2006.

³ Multicollinearity tests revealed a VIF of 5.6 for percent Black due largely to its strong link to the racial heterogeneity score. Therefore racial heterogeneity was included and percent Black excluded in the models shown. Additional analyses substituting racial composition for racial heterogeneity showed the same significance patterns as the results shown here.

⁴ The rook contiguity captures polygons (neighborhoods) that are truly neighbors; whereas, the queen continuity matrix may include neighboring polygons that are farther away because they only touch by a small point. Therefore, we erred on the side of parsimony and used a rook contiguity matrix to ensure all polygons included in our spatial lag measures were “true” neighbors. All models were also run using queen contiguity. Those results are available by request. The substantive conclusions of our results were the same regardless of which spatial weights matrix was used.

⁵ Significance patterns did not differ from the results shown in Table 2 when cases were weighted.

⁶ Given the effect of the individual level gang proximity variable does not vary across neighborhoods, there was no possibility of testing a moderating effect of social integration. Further, a cross level interaction effect (social integration at the neighborhood level X gang proximity at the individual level) is de facto testing the idea of a gang proximity moderating effect—but the statistical chi square test ($\chi^2 = 68.54$; Table 2) says such neighborhood to neighborhood variation in that effect is no more than noise.

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