An Exploratory Examination of Social Ties and Crime in Mobile Home Communities

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Abstract
Guided by the systemic model of social disorganization, the purpose of this study was to explore the nature of social ties in mobile home communities and examine how that relates to rates of violent and property crime. Interviews with a small sample of mobile home residents, owners, and managers in Omaha, Nebraska, indicate a wide spectrum of communities, from those characterized by an atomized population to those with strong social ties. Fear of crime, ethnically heterogeneous populations, and lax management were cited by respondents as factors that undermined relationships. Proactive management and a desire to help neighbors were cited by respondents as factors that helped strengthen relationships. Violent and property crime rates for the mobile home communities were largely consistent with the interview data, providing support for the importance of social networks and a systemic model of social disorganization. The implications of these findings for research and policy are also explored.

Keywords
mobile homes, trailers, crime, social disorganization, systemic model

Mobile homes began to dot the American landscape in the 1920s and 1930s as trailers morphed from travel accessories to permanent residences for some people (Wallis, 1991). Initially an option for those who wanted to be unencumbered by neighbors and landlords, mobile homes slowly became a housing choice made by many Americans who sought lower cost living options that still afforded many of the conveniences of traditional home ownership. Despite having been around for almost a century, mobile home communities (also known as manufactured housing communities or trailer parks) have received little attention by researchers, especially in criminology. This inattention is surprising because criminological studies have been situated in urban neighborhoods, rural areas, and public housing complexes, all of which share similarities with mobile home communities. Rooted in a systemic model of social disorganization, the goal of the current study was to use interviews with a small sample of mobile home residents, managers, and owners, supplemented with official police reports in Omaha, Nebraska, to explore the nature of social ties in mobile home communities and examine how that relates to rates of violent and property crime.

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge in multiple ways. First, its focus on mobile home communities, characterized historically by a lower income Caucasian population, located in a medium-sized city complements the vast majority of ecological studies of crime that are focused on lower income and predominantly minority neighborhoods (e.g., McNulty & Holloway, 2000) and/or situated in large metropolitan cities (e.g., Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Warner & Pierce, 1993; Wilcox, Quisenberry, Cabrera, & Jones, 2004). Second, many ecological studies of crime have relied on closed-ended survey questions to operationalize social ties and relationships among residents in a neighborhood (e.g., Barnett & Mencken, 2002; Bellair, 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Smith & Jarjoura, 1988; Warner & Pierce, 1993). In contrast, the current study uses open-ended interviews to explore the nature of social ties in mobile home communities.

Theoretical Underpinnings
Situating crime within an ecological context has been an enduring theme in criminology. Shaw and McKay (1942) argued that poor, constantly changing, and ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods lacked the regulatory capacity to allow residents to achieve their common goals. People in these areas struggled to establish social networks, instill norms for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and fortify informal social control mechanisms. These factors combined

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to create an environment that was conducive to high levels of delinquency and crime (see also Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974).

The work of Shaw and McKay (1942) and the subsequent empirical examinations of the social disorganization perspective have been critiqued in multiple ways. As Bursik (1988) explained, a common criticism of this perspective is that the outcomes of social disorganization (e.g., delinquency) are not differentiated from disorganization itself. In essence, the perspective does not clearly articulate the process through which economic deprivation, population turnover, and ethnic heterogeneity lead to delinquency. Current research has responded to this criticism by focusing on how informal social control in a neighborhood is largely based on the affiliations, interactions, and communication among local residents (Bursik, 2001). This is generally referred to as the systemic model of social disorganization (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Taylor, 1997).

The systemic model is based on the idea that the neighborhood represents a system of friendship and kinship networks and associational ties among residents (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). These assorted social ties are viewed as the foundation of informal social control because they provide the mechanism through which shared values are articulated and support for enforcing those values is fortified (Warner, 2010). As such, those neighborhoods with stronger social ties have the ability to come together to solve problems, supervise neighborhood youth, and subsequently decrease crime (Warner, 2010).

Bursik and Grasmick (1993) expanded this model by specifying the types of relationships that are important in neighborhood social control (see also Hunter, 1985). The private level of control is grounded in relationships among family members and extremely close friends who can provide control through caring support and the threat of withdrawing that support. The parochial level of control is based on ties between neighborhood residents who can provide control by reacting strongly to displays of inappropriate behavior or reacting positively to displays of appropriate behavior. Finally, the public level of control links neighborhoods to outside actors such as the police, other neighborhood organizations, and local politicians (Taylor, 1997). These ties can help a neighborhood secure resources and services that are essential in affecting control within the neighborhood. Ultimately, the systemic model proposes that if these relationships are strained or nonexistent, the ability of the community to activate private, parochial, and public social controls is inhibited and crime, delinquency, or other social maladies are often the result.

Empirical examinations of systemic model have produced mixed results with some researchers finding support for this perspective (Bursik, 1999; Capowich, 2003; Sampson & Groves, 1989) and others suggesting that social ties may be insufficient to decrease neighborhood violence (Sampson et al., 1997) or may be unnecessary to activate informal social control mechanisms (Carr, 2003). The lack of empirical consistency for the importance of social ties has caused some researchers to develop a slightly different model of social disorganization that introduces the concept of collective efficacy (Sampson et al., 1997).

Made up of measures of social cohesion and trust, along with measures of perceived willingness of neighbors to intervene in disputes, collective efficacy has been found by some researchers to have a stronger mitigating influence on crime than dense social ties. For example, in their study of 343 “neighborhood clusters” in Chicago, Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush (2001, p. 547) found that collective efficacy is an important factor for understanding variation in neighborhood homicide rates, with those neighborhoods with low levels of collective efficacy having high homicide rates. Dense social ties, in contrast, were not associated with neighborhood homicide rates after controlling for collective efficacy.

A part of this empirical confusion may be based on methodology, as many of the studies use surveys to tap into the strength of social ties among residents or the ability of neighborhood residents to activate informal social control mechanisms. The use of survey methodology to measure any of these intervening concepts is difficult because the nature of social ties and informal social control mechanisms may vary across neighborhoods and populations (Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003). Relatedly, another aspect of the empirical confusion may center on the similarity in where these studies are situated as most take place in urban communities in large cities. Exploring these issues in different types of neighborhoods, such as mobile home communities, with a different methodology, such as semistructured interviews, may help clarify some of this confusion and lead to a better understanding of the role of social ties in affecting informal social control and subsequently crime. The next section will detail why mobile home communities are an appropriate context in which to use this theoretical template and methodology.

**Mobile Home Communities: A Closer Look**

Traditionally, mobile home communities have been characterized by a transient and predominantly Caucasian population of people who are, or were, employed in blue-collar occupations (Edwards, Klemmack, & Hatos, 1973; Johnson, 1971; MacTavish & Salamon, 2001). When compared with other types of neighborhoods, residents of these communities often have lower levels of formal education and income (Edwards et al., 1973). Despite this economic disadvantage, many of the early mobile home communities were characterized by strong social ties among residents. Residents of mobile home communities often established bonds with fellow residents and adopted an “us-versus-them” mentality toward the outside community. The establishment of these ties was aided by the homogeneous nature of the population,
in terms of race and class. Cowgill (1941), for example, found that many early mobile home communities had a recreation center, which housed organized activities such as dances, card games, and shared meals (see also Fry, 1979; Michelon, 1954). In those mobile home communities without recreation centers, residents would interact and converse, expressing interest in a new resident’s home town and the extent of his or her travels (Cowgill, 1941). Johnson (1971) found a similar sentiment in Idle Haven, a permanent mobile home community located outside of San Francisco, California, that housed mostly retired individuals.

More recently, however, the limited body of research that exists on mobile home communities has shown that this communal spirit may be dissipating. In a study of two trailer parks in Garden City, Kansas, Benson (1990) found that relationships among residents became strained as an influx of immigrant workers moved into the community. MacTavish and Salamon’s (2001) study of a large mobile home community in Illinois found that residents felt alienated from other residents, and a strong sense of community was virtually nonexistent (see also MacTavish, Eley, & Salamon, 2006). If these communities are found to be more heterogeneous or atomized, private and parochial levels of control may be compromised and higher rates of crime may result. To this author’s knowledge, only one study has examined the prevalence of crime in mobile home communities. McCarty’s (2010) study found that residential blocks with mobile home communities had higher average frequencies of violent and property crime than other types of residential blocks, but those differences disappeared when population-based crime rates were analyzed.

Social ties and informal social control in mobile home communities may also be hindered by the negative stigma that is affixed to this form of living. Disputes over taxation rates (Cowgill, 1941; Hager, 1954) and falling housing values in surrounding neighborhoods (Munneke & Slawson, 1999) commonly arise when mobile home communities are present. Municipalities have responded to this outcry by adopting aggressive zoning policies that have limited the number of mobile home communities and relegated them to undesirable locations on the peripheries of cities (Shen, 2005). The site of the current study, Omaha, Nebraska, has faced similar problems, which has resulted in the City of Omaha Planning Department not granting approval for the development of a single new mobile home community in the last two decades.

The negative stigma and restrictive zoning practices have implications for the overall quality of the community and the mobile home residents. Viewed from the systemic perspective, this reality may make it difficult for mobile home communities to secure goods and services located outside of the neighborhood, hindering the public level of control. Shen (2005), for example, found that manufactured housing communities had been placed farther away from hospitals, health care clinics, and police and fire stations than any other type of housing. This isolation is also figurative because the antipathy toward this type of neighborhood has made it difficult for residents of these communities to have any political clout that might elicit any change in the existing zoning policies (Shen, 2005).

Viewed through the lens of the systemic model, these factors create several broad avenues of inquiry for the current study. First, are the strong ties that characterized mobile home communities in the past eroding as new and more diverse populations turn to this way of life because of the dwindling supply of affordable housing? If so, residents may be less inclined to look out for one another, supervise children, or watch each other’s property thereby hindering private and parochial levels of control. Second, are mobile home communities and their residents isolated from the broader community, either physically or due to the negative stigma associated with this type of living? If so, residents may face greater difficulty securing services from outside agencies or be less inclined to join community organizations thereby undermining public levels of control. When these social ties are compromised and informal social control in a community is lacking, higher rates of crime may ultimately result. These lines of inquiry served as the foundation of a semistructured instrument that was used with a small sample of mobile home residents, owners, and managers. Supplemented with official crime data, the interviews were used to explore the nature of social ties in mobile home communities and examine how that relates to rates of violent and property crime. A specific discussion of the data and methods used in the study appears below.

**Data and Method**

**The Sample**

A snowball sampling approach was used to recruit individuals to participate in the study. The author’s preexisting relationships with two mobile home residents helped enable this approach. After that avenue was exhausted, managers and/or owners of all mobile home communities in Omaha were called for two purposes. First, they were invited to participate in the study to help determine any additional factors that could be affecting the quality of relationships among the residents in their mobile home communities or with the broader community. Second, they were called to help identify any of their residents who might be willing to be interviewed for the study. These efforts resulted in the author of this study, a Caucasian male, interviewing a total of 20 individuals. These individuals included 14 mobile home residents, three park managers, and three park owners. Clearance for the interview questions and overall methodology was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC).
The 20 individuals represented 6 of the 15 mobile home communities in Omaha, Nebraska. The 6 communities were quite diverse, ranging from utilitarian developments where residents rent the land and the unit to upscale communities where residents own newer and spacious units (Hart, Rhodes, & Morgan, 2002). Three of the mobile home communities, in particular, accounted for 15 of the 20 interview subjects. The first community, hereafter fictitiously called Sunny Acres, is an upscale community with space for approximately 130 units and comprised predominantly of Caucasian residents. The other two communities, hereafter fictitiously called Oak View, with space for 90 units, and Park View, with space for 130 units, represent more utilitarian communities that are located directly adjacent to one another. The populations in Oak View and Park View are more heterogeneous in that there are more young families mixed in with retirees. Oak View and Park View are more ethnically heterogeneous, with a sizable number of Hispanic residents. The other 3 mobile home communities accounted for the remaining 5 subjects. Nebraska Court is a mix of roughly 50 utilitarian and upscale units and consists of a predominantly Caucasian population of young families mixed in with retirees. Cedarwood, with space for roughly 200 units, and Spring Valley, with space for approximately 100 units, consist predominantly of Caucasian retirees. Cedarwood represents an upscale development, whereas Spring Valley is more utilitarian. The list of all respondents, their respective mobile home communities, and length of residence or tenure can be found in Table 1.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews with the 20 subjects were conducted in a variety of locations. When possible, the interviews took place in the mobile home residence or business office. When this was not possible, the interviews were conducted at restaurants or coffee shops. If neither of these options were feasible, interviews were conducted over the phone. Informed consent documents were distributed or mailed to participants and signed prior to the beginning of the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 15 min to 1 hr and took place over a 2-month period from February to March, 2008.

A semistructured instrument, found in the appendix, was used to help guide the interviews. Respondents were first asked a series of background questions about how long they had lived in the community, the reasons why they lived in the community, and the stability of the community. As the purpose of the study was to explore the nature of social ties and informal social control in these communities, the majority of the questions then shifted to how residents got along with each other, how they looked out for each other, and their perceptions of and engagement with community- and city-wide initiatives and service providers. These questions were generated from prior research and the literature on the systemic model of social disorganization (see Bellair, 2000; Taylor, 1996). Ostensibly, many of the closed-ended survey questions used in prior empirical examinations of the systemic model were amended to an open-ended format in the current study. Park managers and owners were interviewed using a slightly reworded version of the same instrument. For example, instead of asking how long the respondent had lived in the community, managers or owners were asked how long they had managed or owned the community. Subjects were not compensated for their participation in the study.

The conversations were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Those audio files were kept on a password-protected computer and transcribed in Microsoft Word to facilitate data analysis. All identifying information was stripped to protect the respondents. Given the exploratory nature of the current study, the findings are organized by mobile home community, which allows insights into how the strength and nature of social ties compare or contrast across these developments. Furthermore, organizing the findings by community allows a clear and direct comparison with the crime rates, described below, that were calculated for each. It is hoped that organizing the findings in this manner will help clarify neighborhood dynamics within these mobile home communities and generate hypotheses for future research.

### Table 1. Interview Subjects, Their Mobile Home Communities,* and Length of Residence (or Tenure if Manager or Owner).

| Subjects | Mobile home community | Length of residence (years) |
|----------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Resident 1 | Sunny Acres | 4 |
| Resident 2 | Sunny Acres | 2 |
| Resident 3 | Nebraska Court | 20 |
| Resident 4 | Nebraska Court | 23 |
| Resident 5 | Sunny Acres | 4 |
| Resident 6 | Sunny Acres | 4 |
| Resident 7 | Sunny Acres | 11 |
| Resident 8 | Sunny Acres | 8 |
| Resident 9 | Sunny Acres | 8 |
| Resident 10 | Oak View | 3 |
| Resident 11 | Sunny Acres | 4 |
| Resident 12 | Park View | 10 |
| Resident 13 | Oak View | 17 |
| Resident 14 | Cedarwood | 2 |

| Subjects | Mobile home community | Tenure (years) |
|----------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Manager 1 | Sunny Acres | 4 |
| Manager 2 | Spring Valley | 27 |
| Manager 3 | Cedarwood | 3 |
| Owner 1 | Park View | 21 |
| Owner 2 | Park View | 21 |
| Owner 3 | Oak View | 28 |

*Mobile home community names are fictitious.
To supplement the interview data, violent and property crime rates were calculated for each of the mobile home communities using official police reports from the Omaha Police Department from 2000 to 2002 and population data from the 2000 U.S. Census (http://www.census.gov). The violent crime rate consists of homicides, assaults, sexual assaults, and robberies, and the property crime rate consists of auto thefts and burglaries. MapInfo Professional 9.5 was used to geo-code all violent and property crimes, respectively, that had been reported and recorded by the Omaha Police Department in 2000, 2001, and 2002. The data from that 3-year period were aggregated to the block-level and combined to avoid any short-term fluctuations. The locations of the 15 mobile home communities were then geo-coded on a block-level map, where it was determined which specific blocks each community encompassed. Merging those layers allowed a total frequency of violent and property crimes to be calculated for each of the mobile home communities from 2000 to 2002. The number of violent crimes and property crime, respectively, were then divided by the total population of the street block(s), derived from the 2000 U.S. Census, in each community and then multiplied by 1,000. The following section will detail how social ties vary across the 6 mobile home communities for which respondents were interviewed and the extent to which that information is consistent or inconsistent with the crime rates calculated for each community.

**Findings**

The interviews began by querying respondents about how long they had lived in mobile home communities. At the low end of the spectrum, two residents had lived in a mobile home community for 2 years (Resident 2, Resident 14). At the high end of the spectrum, one respondent had lived in Nebraska Court for 23 years (Resident 4). The tenure of the managers and owners ranged from 3 years (Manager 3) to 28 years (Owner 3).

The motivation for choosing to live in a mobile home centered on cost-efficiency. One retired Sunny Acres resident lamented the “ridiculous” cost of a traditional home as the reason for choosing to buy a used trailer (Resident 1). A 20-year Nebraska Court resident explained,

> Once you get your mobile home paid for, you have an asset. You also have a place where you can throw your grill out or have people over. And you own it. And it might not be worth a ton, but at least you have something to sell. (Resident 3)

In addition to the allure of cost-efficiency and property ownership, many of the elderly respondents lauded the advantages that mobile homes can provide for people who are at an advanced age. Mobile homes allow elderly residents freedom of movement because they do not have to traverse stairs or multiple rooms (Resident 5). Younger residents may see the mobile home as a stepping-stone to owning a more traditional home. As one of the co-owners of Park View explained,

> We have families who live here, but they eventually grow out of it [mobile home living]. It becomes difficult to handle a family of four or five people in such a small space. If they [the families] can afford it, they will [move out of here and] buy a house. (Owner 1)

Interviews then shifted to the dynamics within the various communities and how residents, managers, and owners related to one another and to the broader community. Respondents from the mobile home communities described different neighborhood environments from those characterized by strong social ties and a corresponding ability to activate mechanisms of informal social control to those characterized by weak ties and a corresponding inability to activate mechanisms of informal social control.

**Sunny Acres**

The community in which social ties were the strongest was Sunny Acres, which consists of residents who expressed their readiness to help one another in a variety of situations. As one resident detailed,

> Some people are not able to mow grass or shovel snow. People usually help one another do that. I used to be that person who would mow the grass before I got sick. Now, every Saturday, I have a neighbor that takes me to the store since I have been sick. (Resident 6)

This willingness to help seems to translate into an element of trust that has developed among the residents in this community, even among those who are not close friends or acquaintances. Virtually every subject residing in this community expressed a willingness to ask a neighbor for help and to help if a neighbor requested it. As one resident explained,

> For example, the guy across the street . . . if he is going to be gone, I watch his house. He watches mine. [It is the] same with [the people] next door. (Resident 5)

Other residents echoed this sentiment. One couple (Resident 8, Resident 9), for example, detailed their penchant to ask for help and to help their neighbors. The husband explained,

> Yeah, I think people here look out for one another. When we are leaving or are going to be gone for any length of time, I always call both the manager [of the park] and my neighbors. I know the people across the street would look out for stuff. I know people watch [our property when we are gone]. We certainly do. We see what is going on [in the neighborhood]. (Resident 8)
Residents of this community also socialize with one another. These events further strengthen social ties among residents in the community and fortify the private and parochial levels of control. One resident described having cook-outs and inviting neighbors when the weather is nice (Resident 2). Another resident talked about her neighbor hosting dinner parties nearly twice a month (Resident 11). An active neighborhood watch that met multiple times a year also provided an opportunity for residents to interact and socialize (Resident 6). The management company also sponsored various events, including an annual picnic that was well attended by the residents (Manager 1).

Residents of Sunny Acres lauded other elements of their park management. In particular, residents described two components of effective management that strengthen social ties and informal social control. First, good management entails strong and consistent rule enforcement. A Sunny Acres resident related a story about having a check stolen from the community mail center. After the incident was reported, the management company acted quickly:

They evicted the individual who stole my check. They [the management company] said they would not tolerate stealing. (Resident 1)

Another Sunny Acres resident echoed a similar sentiment after reporting illegal drug activity in an adjacent unit. He explained that the guilty parties “... get evicted really quick...” (Resident 5).

While a fast response when dealing with criminal activity is important, residents are also adamant about management responding when other problems arise. One of the biggest issues involving management is controlling the clutter, trash, and other debris within the park (Resident 1). Because the units are in such close proximity, trash or clutter on one person’s property quickly begins to affect the adjacent units. Management at Sunny Acres has taken a hands-on approach in keeping the amount of trash and clutter under control. One Sunny Acres resident, addressing this issue, explained,

They [management] won’t allow us to put old furniture out in the yard. If you need something discarded, you can call [the management company] and they will take it away. They [management company] don’t want it [the park] to look messy. They [management company] will pick it up for nothing. (Resident 11)

While effective management entails strong rule enforcement, its second component involves dealing with interpersonal problems among residents. The manager of Sunny Acres described his actions when a problem persists:

I would rather have neighbors talk their own problems out and I don’t want to get involved. It makes for a better neighborhood and neighbors if they talk their problems out among themselves. I try to encourage this [neighbors talking out their problems] when they move in [to the community]. I don’t want to evict people unless it is greatly needed, but if it gets to that point, I have to intervene. (Manager 1)

**Park View**

While respondents from Sunny Acres generally described strong social ties among residents and an ability to activate informal social control mechanisms, respondents in other mobile home communities, such as Park View, described a more tenuous environment. Respondents explained that relationships among residents were becoming more complicated because of the increasing number of Hispanic residents in the community. The residents and owners say that the more ethnically heterogeneous population has created tension in the park that has undermined social ties and made it more difficult to activate mechanisms of informal social control, especially those at the private and parochial levels. The tension has become even more acute because of the close proximity of the mobile home units. As one of the co-owners of Park View explained,

I have one [tenant] who is surrounded by Hispanics. Their [Hispanic] way, some of them, is not [civil]. They use their fence as a clothes line. They play their music loud. Sometimes, the cultures don’t mesh. People are people and sometimes there are some that just don’t mesh. (Owner 2)

The increasing ethnic heterogeneity has undermined social gatherings among residents, according to the subjects interviewed. For example, one of the co-owners of Park View remembered a time in which large barbecues and other celebrations took place in the park and involved virtually all the residents. He recalled,

There was just more people knowing their neighbors back then. One guy put on a pig roast. He invited everyone. That’s the kind of neighborhood it used to be. Like I said, it changed. Part of that is due to the friction with Hispanics. (Owner 1)

This isolation has even manifested itself in the seemingly simple task of picking up a neighbor’s mail or watering plants when the resident is out of town. When queried about
whether she would ask her neighbors to perform those tasks when she was out of town, a Park View resident replied,

Heck no. The only one who I would think about asking is [the manager]. The manager would be the only one who I would trust getting my mail and looking after my place. He would be the only one. If he couldn’t do it, I would ask my relatives from Iowa. You can’t trust nobody. (Resident 12)

Despite this tension, the co-owners of Park View have tried to consistently enforce rules and deal with the interpersonal problems when they do arise. With regard to rules concerning clutter and other incivilities, a co-owner of Park View explained,

You talk to them [residents with trash or junk in their yards]. If they don’t want to do it [clean it up], you talk to them some more. If people have a chair or other trash, I’ll come take it away. I have a truck. This helps keep the clutter away. (Owner 1)

With regard to dealing with interpersonal problems among residents, the co-owners of Park View try to maintain a good rapport with residents to reach solutions to their issues. As a co-owner of Park View explained,

I think they [the residents] are comfortable with me. They have known me and my family our whole lives. If they have problems, then I try to take care of those people. You got to keep up. It is a lot of work, but you have to keep it up. (Owner 1)

They have also implemented new strategies to help improve relations within the mobile home community. For example, the co-owners of Park View have attempted to decrease tensions among residents by grouping them together based on shared experiences and characteristics. A co-owner explained,

One of the things we have done in the park is to keep some of the areas the same. Some areas are kid-less. Some are for [the] elderly. This makes it easier for residents. We try to keep people where we think they will be most accepted and comfortable with one another. You throw certain people together and that starts the problem. Here you have an elderly [person] and you put that person next to someone with three kids and there will be problems. (Owner 2)

The owners of Park View hope that such measures will help ease tensions among residents and help them form strong social ties based on those shared characteristics.

**Oak View**

Respondents from Oak View, located directly adjacent to Park View, described a similarly tenuous environment characterized by weak social ties and even antipathy among Caucasian residents toward the Hispanic residents. As a retired resident of Oak View explained,

Well, for right now, they [my neighbors] are moving out. Some of them have died and then well, I hate to say it, but they have moved a lot of Mexicans in here. Now, the community in here is not what it should be. And you get some troublemakers who don’t take care of their yards, leave their garbage out. I don’t like it. I am nice and neat. Then, the ones [residents from the park] across the street are over in here and they are terrible, terrible, terrible. They are dirty and everything else. And, they are an all Mexican community. Before they moved them in, it wasn’t too bad. (Resident 13)

The owner of Oak View concurred,

I have owned this community for 28 years. The manner in which we keep the park has not changed. We are having difficulty keeping it intact because of the Hispanic population in two of the parks between us and the [other park]. It is killing my business. I have over one-third [of my units] vacant because they don’t want to live in or near that element. (Owner 3)

The owner of Oak View also lamented a gang presence that has made residents more fearful about getting involved in their neighborhood or even calling the manager or authorities if a problem arises. He explained,

When you have a gang element throughout the area, people are afraid to make those phone calls [to the manager or the police] because they don’t want retaliation. People don’t want to go out and do anything because they are scared. Criminals know that no matter what the law is, no one is standing here to stop me [from committing a crime]. Since there is no one there to stop him, as soon as the officer drives away, they go right back out. People need to stand up for themselves, but they [the residents] are afraid. (Owner 3)

This reality has had a twofold effect on the owner of Oak View. First, the element of fear has affected him to the point that he is reluctant to informally police his own community. In the past, he had walked in his community at night “. . . chasing people out . . .” (Owner 3). Once the gang element became more pervasive, his nightly surveillance stopped. As he explained,

Once the gang bangers came out, my wife told me to quit [going out at night]. I have two kids I have to worry about. (Owner 3)

Second, the fear has made it virtually impossible to find residents willing to participate in the neighborhood watch association. As the owner of Oak View continued,

When [I tried to start] the neighborhood watch [again], I was going to get radios, [but] nobody else wanted to join in on that. Once that happened [gang activity], I figured I wasn’t the officer.
Now, when they call me, I tell them to call the cops. [Now], when I tell my tenants [that] they have to get involved, they don’t care. (Owner 3)

This reality has also made it less likely that residents will assist each other or informally watch one another’s property. Responding to a question about whether and how fellow residents look out for one another, an Oak View resident replied,

I don’t think so. Nobody around [here] talks to one another. We see one neighbor every now and then. There is nobody here that we want to associate with. (Resident 13)

Despite these problems, the owner of Oak View is still an active manager, trying to improve the quality of life in the community. As he explained,

I have had a couple of people who are shit starters [living here]. I had one guy who was a shit starter and I lost five tenants from him. Whenever I hear someone saying something, I act fast. I tell him/her that if you don’t shape up, I will evict you. I am not going to lose tenants over another shit starter. I cannot afford to let a shit starter stick around when I lose two or three other tenants. (Owner 3)

Nebraska Court

While social ties were strained in Oak View and Park View, management was at least present in the day to day operations of the community, trying to implement strategies or willing to intervene if problems persisted. In Nebraska Court, management was not present, according to respondents, which then exacerbated problems in the community and undermined social ties and informal social control even further. In particular, respondents decried the lack of response by management concerning the trash and other incivilities in Nebraska Court. As one resident complained,

Nobody is doing anything [about the trash]. The owner has been called. They are getting mad at me [for calling] so I just call [a neighbor] and have [that person] complain. The onsite manager is only onsite from 10 [a.m.] to 2 [p.m.]. That’s not when the shit happens. (Resident 3)

Another Nebraska Court resident accused management of having an overall ambivalence about the appearance of the park:

I will tell you exactly what the [biggest] issue is. The primary problem is that the owners of the park just want rent. They don’t care about maintaining, managing, or running a nice park. They just want their rent. They are happy if they get their rent. That is the foremost problem with the park. (Resident 4)

Unresponsive management has fed into an overall decline in the sense of community in Nebraska Court. A resident, in detailing the deterioration of her community over 23 years, alluded to an element of fear that now plagues many of the older residents. In response to a question about the sense of community that exists in the park, the resident replied,

We used to have one [a sense of community] and now there is not one. (Resident 4)

Taking the conversation further, the resident was asked why the sense of community has dissipated. Her response.

They have moved in a lot of young people for one thing. Many of these young people don’t care about the old lady living next to them. They don’t care how much racket they make. We have three places in [our mobile home park] where the people are doing drugs. They have pit bulls in there now. The old ladies are scared to death. Two people have moved out because they are afraid of their neighbors. (Resident 4)

The behaviors that residents adopt to help placate their fears also inhibit the ability to establish and maintain ties among residents, which may ultimately reduce the possibility of activating informal social control mechanisms in the neighborhood. Many mobile home residents talked about adopting measures to protect themselves that increase the amount of isolation they have from their neighbors. One Nebraska Court resident explained how she responded to her fear that emanated from the neighborhood:

I just stay in my house now. I had to put deadbolts on my door [to feel safe]. We used to sit outside, grill, talk … not anymore. (Resident 3)

Other Communities

Interview data from respondents representing Spring Valley and Cedarwood were less clear or inconsistent, making it difficult to discern the strength of the social ties therein. The manager of Spring Valley, for example, described her community residents as willing to “watch out for one another” and “come to our (management’s) office to report a problem or issue” (Manager 2). However, she would not allow the author of this study to approach residents of the community with interview requests, making it impossible to corroborate or contradict her assessment of the neighborhood dynamics in Spring Valley.

The two respondents from Cedarwood provided markedly different assessments of how residents related to one another in the community. As the manager of Cedarwood explained,

It is pretty much you are close to your neighbor, and mobile home residents always seem to watch their neighbors close. We have organized card games in here [community center] twice a week. Weight Watchers also meets in here [community center] once a week. We also have a Christmas party every year in here [community center] for community residents. (Manager 3)
A resident of Cedarwood, however, described a more tenuous environment characterized by a “down spirit” among community members and labeled management as “… too controlling, acting as if they [management] are the judge, jury, and the executioner for all problems and issues that go on [in the community]” (Resident 14).

**Other Issues**

The role of management in enforcing rules and dealing with interpersonal problems among residents was an important issue described by virtually all respondents. Management can also play an important role in strengthening the public level of control by establishing links to outside actors and agencies, such as the police. Currently, routine police patrol is lacking in some of the mobile home communities in Omaha. As an Oak View resident stated,

> As far as just [routine] patrol, they do not [come into the park]. Very seldom do you see a police car in here unless they have business. (Resident 10)

The issue of police patrols is somewhat complicated in mobile home developments because the streets are private property. As the manager of Sunny Acres explained,

> They [police officers] are more than welcome to come in and patrol it and we willingly let them do this. Usually, they [police officers] don’t drive up and down [the streets]. (Manager 1)

This has caused some mobile home residents to comment about the lack of a visible police presence in their communities. As one Oak View resident lamented,

> They [police officers] don’t come around like you want them to. I don’t know about anyone else, but that’s what I think. They come up and down [the adjacent street outside of the park] and sometimes they will look into things in [the mobile home community]. I don’t approve. I think they should be around here more [often]. (Resident 13)

To placate the concerns of the residents, the manager of Cedarwood has called the Omaha Police Department directly to request an increase in patrols on the streets within the mobile home community:

> No, it was not difficult [to get more police patrol]. I just called down there and told them to do it. Now, they come in and patrol the area [within the park]. They shine their lights between units to see if anything is happening. (Manager 3)

Measures such as these may help mobile home communities strengthen the level of public control while also making residents feel more secure in their communities.

**Table 2. Violent and Property Crime Rates From 2000 to 2002 for Mobile Home Communities in Omaha, Nebraska.**

| Community name        | No. of street blocks | Violent crime rate (per 1,000 population) | Property crime rate (per 1,000 population) |
|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Cedarwood             | 6                    | 9.43                                     | 26.21                                       |
| Nebraska Court        | 3                    | 78.13                                    | 250.00                                      |
| Sunny Acres           | 1                    | 12.05                                    | 68.27                                       |
| Park View             | 1                    | 20.17                                    | 57.64                                       |
| Oak View              | 2                    | 6.76                                     | 128.38                                      |
| Spring Valley         | 1                    | 29.59                                    | 71.00                                       |
| Park Estates          | 6                    | 9.43                                     | 26.21                                       |
| Ash Grove             | 1                    | 18.52                                    | 50.93                                       |
| Mobile Terrace        | 1                    | 0                                        | 90.91                                       |
| City and State        | 2                    | 3.10                                     | 3.10                                        |
| Big Lake              | 1                    | 55.56                                    | 250.00                                      |
| Rockbrook Park        | 11                   | 5.13                                     | 12.82                                       |
| Sweet Stream          | 1                    | 21.66                                    | 111.91                                      |
| Trackside             | 1                    | 21.66                                    | 111.91                                      |
| River Creek           | 1                    | 37.04                                    | 74.07                                       |
| Average               |                      | 21.88                                    | 88.89                                       |
| SD                    |                      | 21.29                                    | 75.08                                       |

*Cedarwood and Park Estates are directly adjacent to each other and together occupy a total of six street blocks. The communities overlap on some of those blocks, making it impossible to calculate unique crime rates for each community. The crime and population data, therefore, were combined, resulting in one violent and property crime rate being calculated for the two communities. (Manager 1)*

**Crime Rates**

The marked differences in the environments described by residents, managers, and owners are also reflected in the violent and property crime rates, as shown in Table 2. Crime rates for all 15 communities are shown, with the 6 communities represented by interview subjects located at the top of the table. The average violent crime rate for the 15 communities was 21.88 offenses per 1,000 people, while the average property crime rate was 88.89 offenses per 1,000 people. Of those six communities, Cedarwood, where the manager had communicated with local police to increase routine patrols, had the lowest overall crime rates, with 9.43 violent offenses per 1,000 people and 26.21 property offenses per 1,000 people. Nebraska Court, where residents detailed a deteriorating community marked by weak social ties, fear, and distant management, had the highest crime rates among mobile home communities in Omaha, at 78.13 violent offenses and 250 property offenses per 1,000 people. In Sunny Acres, where respondents described strong ties, social activities, present management, and a lack of clutter, the violent and property crime rates were below average, with 12.05 violent offenses and 68.27 property offenses per 1,000 people. Park View,
characterized by strong and active ownership and an increas-
ingly atomized population, had below-average rates of vio-
cent crime, 20.17 offenses per 1,000 people, and property 
crime, 57.64 offenses per 1,000 people. Oak View, helped by 
its active owner and hindered by its gang issues and weak 
social ties between its increasingly diverse population, had 
one of the highest rates of property crime, 128.38 offenses per 
1,000 people, and one of the lowest rates of violent crime, 
6.76 offenses per 1,000 people. Finally, Spring Valley, where 
the nature of social ties was unclear, had an above average 
rate of violent crime with 29.59 offenses per 1,000 people and 
a below-average rate of property crime at 71.00 offenses per 
1,000 people. The next section will explore the implications 
of these findings for research and practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using interviews with a small sample of mobile home resi-
dents, managers, and owners, supplemented with official 
police reports, the goal of this study was to explore the nature 
of social ties in mobile home communities and examine how 
that relates to rates of violent and property crime. Interviews 
with individuals representing 6 of the 15 mobile home com-

d\n
unities in Omaha, Nebraska, demonstrated a wide spec-
trum in the nature of social ties among residents and their 
ability to activate different levels of informal social control. 
Sunny Acres, for example, consisted of residents who social-
ized with one another and described strong ties among com-
munity members and with management. These strong ties 
helped activate informal social control mechanisms, espe-
cially at the private and parochial levels, in the form of 
watching each other’s property, maintaining a neighborhood 
watch, and engaging with management to maintain order in the 
community.

In contrast, the residents of other communities, Nebraska 
Court for example, were atomized and expressed a high level 
of fear about the presence of crime and other incivilities, 
which made improving life in the community a difficult 
effort. These efforts were also hindered in Nebraska 
Court by the absence of strong and present management, 
which made it even more problematic to activate mecha-
nisms of informal social control. An increasingly heteroge-
nous population also seemed to hinder social ties among 
residents of Oak View and Park View, despite their assertive 
owners. Respondents from multiple communities also 
described a detachment from city services, in particular rou-
tine police patrol, which they attributed to the physical iso-
lation of their communities and confusion over the public/
private property divide.

Viewed from the systemic model of social disorganization, 
these issues are important because they have the potential to 
exacerbate or mitigate opportunities for crime to occur. As 
Skogan (1986) theorized, elevated levels of fear can cause 
people to withdraw from community life. Withdrawal may be 
in a literal sense, as residents remain in their homes and avoid 
contact with neighbors. Withdrawal may also occur in a psy-
chological sense, as residents cease to believe that they have a 
stake in the success or failure of the neighborhood. In either 
sense, residents become atomized, and informal social con-
trol mechanisms are weakened, thereby increasing the oppor-
tunities for criminal activity while also contributing to the 
decline of the neighborhood (Skogan, 1986).

Physical incivilities may have a similar effect. As they 
begun to mount, residents may become increasingly fearful 
and alienated, and informal social control mechanisms may 
be further eroded. Wilson and Kelling (1982) stressed the 
power of physical incivilities to break down a community 
and create an environment that is conducive to crime. 
Although subsequent research has not found a strong and 
direct empirical link between physical incivilities and crime, 
these visual cues are potentially important inhibitors of ties 
among residents and convey information about the overall 
viability of the community (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999).

The ethnic heterogeneity identified by some mobile home 
residents in Omaha, Nebraska, can also increase the potential 
for crime to occur. As Merry (1990) argued, ethnic heteroge-
nity inhibits the formation of social ties in the sense that 
distrust may exist between different groups. As a result, 
neighborhoods with a great deal of racial or ethnic heteroge-
nity may lack the capacity to activate effective private, 
parochial, and public informal social control mechanisms 
(Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Crime in areas with a great deal 
of racial or ethnic heterogeneity, therefore, may occur at 
higher rates than in areas with homogeneous populations.

The crime rates from 2000 to 2002, in conjunction with 
the issues described by residents, managers, and owners, 
were largely consistent with this logic and the underpinnings 
of the systemic model. Generally, those communities that 
were characterized by strong ties among residents, a homo-
geneous population and a clean aesthetic and proactive man-
agement, as typified by Sunny Acres, had low-, or 
below-average, rates of crime compared with other mobile 
home communities. Conversely, those communities charac-
terized by weak social ties, a fearful population, increasing 
ethnic heterogeneity, gang activity, and distant manage-
ment, as typified by Nebraska Court, had higher rates of crime.

While not the primary purpose of this study, the results 
are also consistent with the collective efficacy model, which 
argues that social cohesion and trust are more important miti-
gating influences on crime than strong social ties or friend-
ships among neighbors (Morenoff et al., 2001). Oak View 
and Park View represent examples of communities that 
seemingly fit this model with lower than average rates of 
crime, despite the weak social ties among the residents, due 
partially to the ethnically heterogeneous populations. Despite 
a high rate of property crime, the rate of violent crime in Oak 
View was 6.76, which was well below average and one of the 
lowest among all 15 mobile home communities in Omaha. 
Similarly, Park View had violent and property crime rates 
that were below average. These crime rates may have been
lower because of higher levels of collective efficacy, which seem to originate from assertive and involved owners who are willing to intervene in disputes, respond to complaints, and place similar residents together in an effort to preserve their business and the quality of the community. Contrast the roles of management in Oak View and Park View with that in Nebraska Court, where management is around only a few hours a day, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. In essence, an “urban village” of residents with strong social ties and a high reliance on one another may not be necessary to reduce crime (Sampson, 1999). In contrast, a working trust and shared expectations for local social control, catalyzed by a strong owner and effective management, may be sufficient to overcome an atomized population and other structural disadvantages to keep crime rates lower than what would be expected.

To this end, a policy recommendation that would help bolster the effectiveness of mobile home community management would be to require training for all individuals in these positions. Oregon, for example, requires each manager of a manufactured housing community to participate in 6 hours of training every 2 years. Although this training delves simply into interpersonal and communication skills, elevating those basic qualities may substantially decrease some of the concerns outlined by residents, strengthen social ties, and help activate mechanisms of informal social control. An effective manager may also attempt to reach out to local agencies, such as the police, to increase the frequency of patrols to help mitigate fear among residents.

While this study has produced insights into the nature of relationships in these unique neighborhoods, multiple limitations need to be acknowledged. First, a snowball sampling strategy is a nonprobability technique, which means that all mobile home residents, managers, and owners in Omaha did not have a chance to be included in the final sample. With this in mind, the sample of 20 individuals is not perfectly representative of the entire population. Second, the crime rates are not directly contemporaneous with the interview data. Efforts to calculate updated crime rates were hindered by the decennial nature of the U.S. Census. Finally, the sample is devoid of Hispanic mobile home residents. Because the increasing ethnic heterogeneity in these communities represented such a major concern among the respondents, attempts were made to recruit and interview Hispanic mobile home residents. These efforts were hindered, mostly because of the language barrier. Despite these limitations, it is hoped that this study will encourage other scholars to explore mobile home communities, which are fascinating environments in which to explore the nexus between neighborhood conditions and crime.

Appendix

Semistructured Interview Questions

1. How long have you lived in a mobile home community?
2. What was the appeal of living in a mobile home community?
3. Have most people (in your development) lived there a long period of time, or is there a lot of population turnover?
4. How do people get along with their neighbors in your mobile home community?
5. Who are you closest to in the mobile home community?
6. Are there any sorts of organized activities that take place in your mobile home community?
7. What are the sources of friction between residents? Examples?
8. How do fellow residents look out for one another?
9. Scenario: You or your family is going to go out of town for a week. Would you alert your neighbors? Would you ask your neighbors to collect your mail or watch your property?
10. How are children supervised in the neighborhood?
11. Do you feel that crime is a problem in your mobile home community? Why or why not?
12. Would you like a neighborhood watch program in your mobile home community? Why or why not?
13. What community organizations are you involved with or members of?
14. Are you satisfied with the city services your mobile home community receives (snow removal, police, fire, etc.)? Why or why not?
15. Scenario: A group of kids is being loud in the mobile home community at 11 p.m. How would you handle such a situation? Would you call the police? Would you attempt to intervene? Or would you talk to the parents?

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