

COMMUNITY COMPOSITION, DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, AND THE IMPACT OF PROXIMITY TO DISADVANTAGE ON VIOLENCE AND GANG PRESENCE IN NEW JERSEY MUNICIPALITIES AND SCHOOLS

Neighborhood composition, change, and disadvantage have been shown to influence crime and gang presence in communities. There is a dearth of research, however, that explores whether spatial proximity to disadvantaged areas affects crime and gang presence in nearby locations. Through maps and spatial analysis, this study investigated how neighborhood demographics may vary and may have changed by type of built environment in New Jersey municipalities. Through quantitative analysis and interviews with school and law enforcement officials, the study then analyzed how such community-based phenomena, coupled with proximity to disadvantaged areas, may affect crime, violence, and gang presence in towns and schools.

Findings indicate that: (1) From 2000 to 2010, suburban and rural municipalities in New Jersey have experienced significant demographic changes, while urban areas remained relatively static; (2) neighborhood characteristics are stronger predictors of crime, school violence, and gang presence than proximity to disadvantage; and (3) school administrators and law enforcement officials in four municipalities have noticed that community change and proximity to disadvantage tend to encourage the presence of gangs, gang wannabes, and urban culture there. The study points to: (1) the implementation of more intensive community-based investigations of how demographic change, proximity to disadvantaged areas, school size, and school uniform policies affect gang-related behavior, urban culture, and violence among youth and (2) the establishment of empirically-based and assessable violence and gang prevention measures targeted at the most at-risk youth.