

# Collective Efficacy and Crime

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## Abstract

In this article, we explore the literature on collective efficacy and crime, but pay attention to three major challenges that confront this literature, and researchers moving forward with the concept in studies of neighborhoods. These challenges are (1) precisely defining and measuring the concept of collective efficacy; (2) determining whether the notions of general cohesion and trust in neighborhoods are really components of collective efficacy, or determinants of it; and (3) whether neighborhood crime can have feedback effects on the level of collective efficacy.

Collective efficacy is a construct that originally comes out of the psychology literature and the writings of Bandura (1982, 1986). Although the psychology literature has explored the empirical effects of collective efficacy for various relatively small groups, arguably its largest impact on social science literature comes from the introduction of the concept to the neighborhoods and communities literature by Sampson et al. (1997). A voluminous literature that is largely sociological and criminological has explored the effect of collective efficacy on a number of community processes, including neighborhood crime rates.

In this article, we explore the literature on collective efficacy and crime, but pay attention to three major challenges that confront this literature, and researchers moving forward with the concept in studies of neighborhoods. These challenges are (1) precisely defining and measuring the concept of collective efficacy; (2) determining whether the notions of general cohesion and trust in neighborhoods are really components of collective efficacy, or determinants of it; and (3) whether neighborhood crime can have feedback effects on the level of collective efficacy.

## A Brief History of the Concept of Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy was initially introduced as a concept by Bandura (1982, 1986). Building on his notion of self-efficacy, Bandura noted that “Perceived collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results” (Bandura, 1982: p. 143). His early consideration of the idea mostly conceptualized collective efficacy as a property of very large groups, such as nations and social movements (Bandura, 1986: pp. 449–453). This spawned a number of studies in the psychology literature in the 1990s and into the 2000s focusing on collective efficacy as a property of small groups, such as sports teams and work organizations (Zaccaro et al., 1995). Collective efficacy is conceptualized in this literature as a fundamentally group phenomenon that “... fosters groups’ motivational commitment to their missions, resilience to adversity, and performance accomplishments ...,” and an emergent phenomenon in which “the locus of perceived collective efficacy resides in the minds of group members” (Bandura, 2000: p. 76)

The key twist in the trajectory of collective efficacy as a concept in the social sciences arguably came when Sampson and colleagues introduced the concept to the neighborhoods and communities literature. In what has since become a citation classic, their study in *Science* introduced the concept as a property of neighborhoods that might be able to reduce the level of violence (Sampson et al., 1997). This seminal study focused on neighborhoods in the city of Chicago, and proposed defining collective efficacy as the combination of a general sense of residents’ willingness to provide informal social control along with high levels of trust and solidarity among residents. They argued for the plausibility of this broader conceptualization of collective efficacy compared to that developed in the psychology literature because “the willingness of local residents to intervene for the common good depends in large part on conditions of mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors” (Sampson et al., 1997: p. 919). The cross-sectional study indeed found that neighborhoods with higher levels of collective efficacy exhibited lower levels of violence (whether measured as perceived violence, violent victimization, or homicide events). This single study has fostered an army of subsequent research.

Sampson himself has further refined the concept of collective efficacy in subsequent work. In particular, he has argued that it is a concept that helps focus on social mechanisms, and moves away from a risk-factor approach (Sampson, 2006a,b). In this sense, he considers it a mediating variable between neighborhood structural characteristics and crime. He emphasizes that this concept is fundamentally about repeated interactions, which then impact expectations about the future (residents’ beliefs about the actions of their fellow residents) (Sampson, 2006a,b). Sampson’s work on collective efficacy and neighborhood crime can be seen in his recent book that chronicles the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) as a large study of neighborhoods in Chicago (Sampson, 2012).

## Collective Efficacy: Challenges of Measurement

Measuring informal social control in neighborhoods is actually quite a challenging problem. The challenge is that informal social control activity is only on display in moments in which there are challenges to the social order. This potential response on the part of residents is typically hypothetical, or *latent*.

Thus, attempting to measure the behavior of informal social control is difficult because of its rarity. This is both a methodological challenge (for measurement) as well as a theoretical challenge. More commonly, studies have relied on questions that are hypothetical about how the respondent would behave in a particular instance (Warner, 2007). In the case of studies measuring collective efficacy, the hypothetical questions ask respondents how they believe *their neighbors* would behave in various situations (Sampson et al., 1997). Answering such questions will sometimes be difficult if residents have never seen their neighbors be confronted by situations requiring informal social control behavior and require them to speculate on the answer. This speculation is particularly likely in neighborhoods with low levels of crime or disorder (St. Jean, 2007: p. 211). Besides these issues around uncertainty is the challenge of measuring a group concept by surveying individuals. This issue remains unresolved in the literature, as Zaccaro et al. (1995) note, "... a more useful approach to defining collective efficacy is to consider both judgments of members' abilities and perceptions of how well group members work together in achieving collective outcomes" (p. 309).

Other approaches have instead attempted to measure collective efficacy using behavioral measures. For example, one study suggested that parental monitoring may represent collective efficacy in action (Rankin and Quane, 2002). Another study used the presence of registered voters as a proxy for the collective efficacy in a streetblock (Weisburd et al., 2012). One unique and clever approach to measuring collective efficacy in neighborhoods constructed a website that allowed residents of neighborhoods to start webpages, and then assessed the usage of the pages as one measure of collective efficacy (Hampton, 2010). An interesting finding was that there were two extremes of neighborhoods that generated such webpages – new middle-class suburban neighborhoods and truly disadvantaged neighborhoods – suggesting that such a measure may be tapping some different processes than the more conventional measures of collective efficacy.

### **Distinguishing between Cohesion and Informal Social Control: One Construct, or Causally Related?**

Although Sampson and colleagues defined collective efficacy in neighborhoods as being a combination of both cohesion/trust and expectations of informal social control, there is debate about this strategy. It is worth noting that the psychology literature has typically conceived of cohesion and collective efficacy as two separate constructs, which may separately impact one another in a causal fashion (Zaccaro et al., 1995). Empirical evidence in the communities and crime literature suggests that these may indeed be distinct constructs in many locations. Horne (2004) notes that the two measures are not always highly correlated and that high levels of cohesion do not necessarily increase norm enforcement. A study in Chicago suggested that informal social control attitudes mediated the relationship between neighborhood cohesion and crime (Rhineberger-Dunn and Carlson, 2011). A study of Tianjin, China found a correlation of just 0.43 between neighborhood cohesion and informal control, suggesting that they are in fact distinct constructs (Zhang et al., 2002). A study that split cohesion

and expectations of informal social control found that while cohesion had a negative effect on perceived incivilities in the neighborhood, expectations of informal social control had no impact (Reisig and Cancino, 2004). A study of Mesa, AZ found minimal factor analysis evidence for combining these two constructs, and also found that only cohesion had a negative effect on violent crime when both were included in the model simultaneously (Armstrong et al., 2010). A study of Brisbane neighborhoods using a confirmatory factor analysis strategy also found no evidence for combining these two constructs; furthermore, this study used measures capturing collective efficacy for three distinct tasks, and all of them were distinct from a measure of cohesion (Wickes et al., 2013). Another study measured neighborhood attachment rather than cohesion, and found that higher levels of attachment led to higher levels of expectations of informal social control (Burchfield, 2009; Silver and Miller, 2004).

A key assumption of the neighborhood collective efficacy literature is that these norms and attitudes within a neighborhood that lead residents to perceive higher levels of collective efficacy then translate into actual higher levels of informal social control behavior. Thus, "Social movements and collective efficacy theory share a common orienting framework – a focus on the mobilization of action for an intended purpose" (Sampson et al., 2006: p. 4). As Steenbeek and Hipp (2011: p. 839) noted: "expectations that others will intervene (potential social control) need not necessarily result in people actually intervening more (actual social control behavior), even though this is implicitly assumed by social disorganization theory." However, only a few studies have addressed this question empirically, and the evidence so far appears somewhat weak. For example, one study in the Netherlands did not have a robust measure of collective efficacy, but did use longitudinal data to test and find that the potential for social control (measured by a single question asking about residents' willingness to improve the neighborhood) in fact did *not* increase social control behavior two years later (Steenbeek and Hipp, 2011). A study of neighborhoods in Brisbane focused on residents who reported a high level of disorder in the neighborhood, and found that higher levels of reported collective efficacy did not in fact lead to more actual informal social control behavior (Wickes et al., 2012). Instead, this study found that higher levels of neighboring increased the likelihood of engaging in informal social control behavior. As another example, a study using an experimental design concluded that norms are more likely to be enforced when there are benefits that increase social interaction, which suggests that cohesion might be more important for fostering action than residents' perceptions of informal social control potential (Horne, 2004).

### **Studies Assessing the Consequences of Collective Efficacy in Neighborhoods**

A number of studies have assessed the cross-sectional relationship between neighborhood collective efficacy and crime, with studies almost always finding a negative relationship. The seminal study of Chicago found such an effect (Sampson et al., 1997), and subsequent studies in Chicago have also detected this negative relationship (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Morenoff et al., 2001;

Schreck et al., 2009). This relationship has also been detected in other locations, including Stockholm (Sampson and Wikstrom, 2008), Los Angeles (Burchfield and Silver, 2013), Tianjin, China (Zhang et al., 2007), and Brisbane (Mazerolle et al., 2010). A challenge with some cross-sectional studies is the use of victimization reports as the outcome measure; in such studies the independent variable of collective efficacy is measured at one point in time but the dependent variable of victimization is assessed based on incidents that occurred during the previous year, introducing a temporal problem.

Studies have also assessed the relationship between neighborhood collective efficacy and various other outcomes, typically in cross-sectional designs. For example, studies in Chicago have found a negative relationship between collective efficacy and partner violence (Browning, 2002; Wright and Benson, 2011), risky sexual behavior by adolescents (Browning et al., 2008), sexual initiation by adolescents (Browning et al., 2005), self-control by children (Gibson et al., 2010), self-rated physical health (Browning and Cagney, 2002), and mortality during a heat wave (Browning et al., 2006). However, one study in Chicago found countervailing evidence, as impulsivity had an even stronger effect on offending in neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy (Zimmerman, 2010). This negative relationship between collective efficacy and various outcome measures has also been detected in other cities, including such outcomes as substance use by adolescents (Erickson et al., 2012) and bullying in school (Williams and Guerra, 2011). A longitudinal study found that collective efficacy increased authoritative parenting, which reduced delinquency among adolescents; it also found that authoritative parenting had the strongest effect in high collective efficacy neighborhoods (Simons et al., 2005). One study explored how school social controls were weakened in low collective efficacy neighborhoods when measuring the outcome of suspensions and arrest (Kirk, 2009). However, a study in England only found a negative relationship between collective efficacy and adolescent delinquency in economically deprived neighborhoods, but not in more economically advantaged neighborhoods (Odgers et al., 2009).

Sampson (2006a,b) points out that a distinction can be made between a theory of neighborhood crime rates and one of individual development, which is a distinction between enduring effects and situational effects. In this framework, collective efficacy may be more appropriately considered a situational theory. Indeed, a study in Chicago found no relationship between collective efficacy and violence committed by specific racial group members (Sampson et al., 2005), suggesting that collective efficacy may operate as a situational factor impacting crime events, and not as a factor creating offenders. Other research has found that robbers are less likely to offend in a high collective efficacy neighborhood, again emphasizing the role of collective efficacy in situational theories (Bernasco and Block, 2009).

### The Possible Feedback Effect from Neighborhood Crime to Collective Efficacy

Relatively understudied is the possibility that crime may have a feedback effect on neighborhood-level collective efficacy. This feedback possibility has been discussed by Sampson

(2006a,b) and Sampson and Raudenbush (1999). Indeed, St. Jean (2007: p. 211) argued that research needs “to pay close attention to the reciprocal relationship between high collective efficacy and low crime rates” because “... under conditions of low crime, neighbors are quite likely to report high estimates of trust and solidarity among themselves, and of the willingness of others to intervene” even though we do not know if they will actually intervene.

Nonetheless, studies have rarely accounted for this likely endogenous relationship between collective efficacy and crime, and instead often simply assume a one-directional causal relationship from collective efficacy to crime. One study tested and found such a negative feedback effect from crime to collective efficacy in a cross-sectional analysis utilizing instrumental variables (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999). A cross-sectional study of neighborhoods in Mesa, AZ also used instrumental variables and found a negative feedback effect from crime to collective efficacy (Armstrong et al., 2010), and a cross-sectional study of 100 urban neighborhoods found a similar feedback effect on residents’ expectations of informal social control with the use of instrumental variables (Bellair, 2000). Occasional research has ignored the possible effect of collective efficacy on crime and simply tested the reverse posited causal path; for example, one study found that violent crime had a negative relationship with neighborhood collective efficacy (Duncan et al., 2003), whereas another study found that violent crime was associated with lower levels of trust in a neighborhood (García et al., 2007).

### Social Networks and Collective Efficacy

Another thorny theoretical and methodological issue concerns disentangling the effects of the social network of residents in a neighborhood, the level of cohesion, and the level of collective efficacy. Besides the considerable conceptual overlap in these concepts, there is also a considerable overlap in how they operate in neighborhoods. An additional challenge is that actually measuring the social network of ties among residents in a neighborhood is extremely difficult, and studies are typically constrained to proxying neighborhood ties by asking a sample of residents to report how many neighbors they know. Such measures are simply estimates of mean degree in a neighborhood and do not capture any richer information about the full network (Bursik, 1999). Therefore, one recent study adopted the novel approach of *simulating* the networks existing in neighborhoods based on certain well-understood properties of network tie formation, and detected strong negative relationships between various structural network measures and crime in micro-units (Hipp et al., 2013).

Beyond these measurement challenges, there are at least three perspectives on how the social network of a neighborhood and the level of collective efficacy might be related: (1) a dense network of ties in a neighborhood leads to more collective efficacy; (2) a dense network of ties is necessary for, but not sufficient for, neighborhood collective efficacy; (3) there is no consistent relationship between the network of ties and collective efficacy. The first perspective builds on the insights of systemic theory and the importance of the network of ties among residents for fostering behavior (Kasarda and Janowitz,

1974). It is difficult to conceive of a neighborhood with high levels of cohesion but lacking dense social networks. Indeed, a study focusing on the actual provision of informal social control behavior in response to observed problems among residents of Brisbane neighborhoods found that the most important predictor of such behavior was a higher density of neighborhood ties, and not assessments of collective efficacy (Wickes et al., 2012).

In the second perspective, social networks are a necessary, but not sufficient, characteristic for a neighborhood to develop collective efficacy. Sampson (2006a,b) argues that the relationship between dense networks and informal social control capability in neighborhoods is more tenuous, and that in some neighborhoods dense ties can actually inhibit social control behavior. Empirically, Sampson (2006a,b) showed that indicators of friendship ties loaded on a different factor than the collective efficacy indicators. In short, networks may provide social capital for offenders, as well as others in the neighborhood (Browning et al., 2004). For example, Browning (2009) suggested that dense networks can bring together offenders and conventional residents, which then weakens the effect of collective efficacy in this 'negotiated coexistence' model.

In the third perspective, there is enough inconsistency in how neighborhood networks and collective efficacy relate that no pattern can be distinguished. For example, a study using in-depth interviews in two high collective efficacy neighborhoods found that strong social ties were not necessary: instead symbols of community and collective representations generated higher levels of collective efficacy (Wickes, 2010). Notably, this same study noted that key neighborhood institutions and organizations were crucial for responding to problems, suggesting that formal organizations may be understudied in this literature.

### Theoretical Extensions of the Collective Efficacy Construct

There have been various theoretical extensions to the collective efficacy model in recent years. One important direction is recent research that has emphasized the importance of the *task-specific* nature of collective efficacy. Just as self-efficacy is in respect to a specific task, likewise collective efficacy is fundamentally in respect to a specific task. Despite the importance of the task-specific nature of the collective efficacy construct, nearly all studies in the communities and crime literature have tested it as a unitary phenomenon. Thus, researchers often refer to the 'collective efficacy' of a neighborhood as if it is a unitary phenomenon, rather than the 'collective efficacy regarding X specific task.' Not only does this lose the conceptual richness of the construct, but it also increases the risk of allowing the concept of collective efficacy to slide into a measure of 'everything good' about a neighborhood, a charge sometimes leveled against the concept of social capital (Portes, 1998). In response to this lacuna, a study of Brisbane neighborhoods measured collective efficacy for three distinct tasks and not only found important differences in the determinants of each of these, but also found that these tasks were distinct from the more global construct of cohesion and trust (Wickes et al., 2013). Thus, making a distinction between residents' collective

efficacy regarding addressing violence in the neighborhood, vs. addressing confronting misbehaving children, and vs. addressing political/civic matters demonstrated that neighborhoods and individuals differed regarding these particular tasks.

There are also other developments. In an example of theoretical integration, some research has attempted to integrate the legal cynicism literature with collective efficacy. For example, one study found that collective efficacy mediated the relationship between highly cynical neighborhoods and the probability of arrest (Kirk and Matsuda, 2011). Another strand of research has developed the notion of 'street efficacy' for residents. In this view, adolescents with high street efficacy choose the streets that they frequent in order to avoid violence, which has consequences for the environments in which they find themselves (Sharkey, 2006). Another research strand focuses on how perceptions of collective efficacy might impact the perceptions of other neighborhood characteristics – even the neighborhood's boundaries. For example, a study suggested that residents in neighborhoods with higher levels of collective efficacy perceive their neighborhoods to be larger in size (Coulton et al., 2013).

### Conclusion

Collective efficacy is clearly a hugely important concept in the communities and crime literature, which has spawned considerable theoretical and empirical excitement. There is a large body of literature that has detected a negative relationship between the level of collective efficacy in a neighborhood and the crime rate. However, important directions need to be explored. One important direction is distinguishing whether collective efficacy operates differently in high versus low disorder neighborhoods. St. Jean argued that collective action is only necessary if the block is attractive to offenders: if the block is not desirable to offenders, there will not be crime regardless of what residents do (St. Jean, 2007: p. 164). A second important direction is longitudinal research of this relationship. Given the very plausible expectation of a feedback effect from neighborhood crime to perceptions of collective efficacy, as well as the suggestive evidence from cross-sectional studies, there is clearly a strong need for longitudinal research to determine whether the collective efficacy and crime relationship is robust.

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