Dynamic Geography: The Changing Definition of Neighborhood

Marc S. Buslik
Chicago Police Department
University of Illinois at Chicago

The concept of place matters to the police. This article describes how the police use geographic semantics to define neighborhoods and form practical solutions to resource deployment. It also addresses the nebulous concept of neighborhood and how that term connotes different meanings to citizens, elected officials, and the police, all of which form the basis for deploying police resources that meet the needs of all constituents and community stakeholders.

Perspective From the Ground

As a captain in the Chicago Police Department, I appreciate that the city plays an important role in creating the history of place as a criminological concept. Although Guerry (1833) and Quetelet (1831) presented the first sociological perspective on place, it was the Chicago school of sociology that provided an empirical analysis of how place and crime bore a meaningful correlation (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Other research confirms Chicago's role in the study of place and crime (Liberman, 2007; Maltz, 1995; Maltz, Gordon, and Friedman, 1991; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1995; Thrasher, 1927), including the numerous publications on neighborhood effects from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN).[1] Without presuming scholarly equivalence to these works, I offer a police officer's perspective of the influence that differing definitions of neighborhood have on place and crime.[2]

My experiences and views are not markedly different from what research and policing have provided during the past five decades. I recognize how poverty, joblessness, racism, gangs, drugs, political corruption, police misconduct, and societal neglect correlate into crime rates. This article examines the term neighborhood, however, and explores how neighborhoods affect crime and disorder.

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[1] An extensive listing of research articles about PHDCN is available on the Inter-university Consortium on Political and Social Research (ICPSR) website at http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/PHDCN/biblio/series/00206/resources.

[2] This article is the author's opinion and does not represent the viewpoints of the Chicago Police Department or the University of Illinois. In addition, the circumstances described using the Chicago police as an example are far from unique. Rather, Chicago is used here as a generalization for the difficulties police across the country face and work toward resolving.

Neighborhood? What Does That Mean on the Ground?

Researchers define the term *neighborhood* based on the objectives of their research. For researchers, a neighborhood can be defined by many variables, such as the area lying within a census tract, ZIP Code, or physical boundary, or such as the grouping of citizens who fall into a demographic category (for example, those who have a certain income level, educational attainment, or other socioeconomic status). Regardless of neighborhood characteristics, the associated geography of the neighborhood remains constant in analyses.

Police, however, interpret a neighborhood's geography more dynamically when considering it a unit of analysis to translate the factors that more fully define a neighborhood as a physical location that demands patrol crime prevention or response resources. Police are less concerned with defining neighborhood characteristics than with the results of public safety efforts in a neighborhood: reduced crime, fear of crime, and calls for service. Results are the translation outcome from research to practice—for example, research suggesting where to send the officers, how to respond to community concerns, or how to service an elected official's requests.[3] Essentially, although criminologists are interested in the factors that create criminogenic neighborhoods and lead to crime and disorder, police think about a neighborhood as a "place" to deploy resources. For this reason, a police perspective of place is less prone to subjective interpretations and decisions.

This perspective does not mean that defining place is not important for police. Criminology theory helps to define what police do and how and where to do it, and the term *place* now has a role in everyday policing as a unit of geographic analysis. Weisburd (2008) is responsible for illuminating how police need to interpret the concept of place; he shows that, for police, a criminologist's view of a neighborhood is simply not an accurate description of geography. A scholarly perspective defines a neighborhood as a piece of geography that is usually too big or, in some cases, too small for police purposes.

Police view a neighborhood through the rubric of routine activity theory, in which the victim and offender converge in time and place. Whether through problemsolving in a community-policing environment, a more direct problem-oriented approach, hotspot policing, or intelligence-led policing, law enforcement officers use place or geography to focus limited resources on what needs their attention. The police look not at what constitutes a neighborhood but instead look at neighborhoods as the output of numerous factors and how these factors interact to produce an effect that requires police resources.

Understanding the Neighborhood From a Police Perspective

The various types of boundaries represented in Chicago illustrate the police perspective. Neighborhoods change over time both by boundary and by demographic. Neighborhoods are organic—they grow, divide, merge, decline, and regenerate.

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[3] In particular, a police department operating under a community-policing philosophy will account for a wider range of inputs to the deployment process. Decisionmaking will incorporate feedback from the community, rather than being based solely on a police perspective.

Chicago is often called a city of neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have been formalized into 77 community areas used to identify local history and characteristics. The Chicago Police Department does not formally use these community area boundaries, nor do the boundaries represent formal city-service boundaries. Although these pieces of geography can be as small as informal neighborhoods, they remain too broad to serve police patrol needs.

The police department uses districts[4] and their included beats to deploy patrol resources. With approximately 275 beats, the Chicago Police Department can respond to local community concerns well. Beats can encompass various sized areas and are designed to help average police workloads, but beats often divide multiple census tracts, ethnic groupings, and other demographic variations.

In addition, Chicago is divided into 50 political subdivisions, called wards. An elected city council member, called an alderman, represents each ward. Wards are drawn based on federal decennial census data that are distributed to provide equitable political representation. Police districts and wards criss-cross each other so that one district commander may work with multiple aldermen, or an alderman may work with multiple district commanders, to serve the needs of citizens. As with districts, wards provide no better sense of serviceable neighborhoods. The final account of these overlapping boundaries is a map that shows the difficulty the police have when defining neighborhoods to apply crime prevention services and deploy patrol resources.

Understanding these conflicting boundaries helps to shape effective partnerships with citizens and other community stakeholders. Police strive to deploy resources to resolve the effects of crime on neighborhoods, not to resolve the effects of neighborhoods on crime.

Bringing Definitions Together

Defining neighborhoods involves integrating the perspectives of police administrators, local government personnel, and community members to create working neighborhood boundaries for deploying police resources that capture the essence of the place, yet effectively serve all constituencies involved. This task is by no means easy, nor is it finished once achieved. The research community, in particular, needs to continue to help the police understand what neighborhood characteristics can be used to inform the police planning process within boundaries that best represent a serviceable neighborhood.

Police, in turn, need to apply information technologies[5] to capture local ground truth that leads to the subtle characteristics of place that researchers need to differentiate associated factors to crime and disorder, as well as—potentially—cause and effect.

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[4] The Chicago Police Department divides the city into 23 patrol districts for deployment and administrative purposes. Detective and specialized units operate citywide or by grouped (that is, multiple districts) geographical distributions. Each district has between 9 and 15 beats, each staffed by one or two police officers 24 hours a day. The beat is both a unit of analysis and a response unit. Workload variations based on the time of day require additional patrol units within a district. Chicago's district is equivalent to the New York Police Department's precinct and the Los Angeles Police Department's division.

[5] That is, they need to use Geographic Information Systems.

Static geography used for responses and reporting can now be made more dynamic because of near-realtime information about police workloads and community needs. The beat may be passé. Incorporating geographic data when making resource deployment decisions enables the police to become more responsive to each neighborhood's particular needs. This approach is a useful component of intelligence-led policing (Ratcliffe, 2008), a broad, strategic approach to making deployment decisions for the provision of public safety.

Still, police continue to struggle with decisions of resource deployment based on need. I would suggest that the police listen to both researchers and citizens when trying to understand what elements define a neighborhood. The differences in definitions of neighborhood are not in conflict, but are rather the same landscape viewed through different lenses.

Acknowledgments

Author

Marc S. Buslik is a captain with the Chicago Police Department and an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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